

SUBJECT	AUTHOR	TEXT	YEAR	MON	No
Jesus – The Final Discourse.	Marsden, Bob	John 13 to 17; Jn 12:27-28;1 Jn 4:7-	2008	Jan	1
Persecution Of Christians.	Diggle, John H	1 Pet 4:12-16;	2008	Jan	6
Blood, Idols & Fornication.	Worgan, F	Acts 15:20, 29; Gal 2; 1Sam 14:32;	2008	Jan	8
Birds, Some Words On.	Davidson, Ian	Gen 1:2-21; Psa 102;7; Isa 40:31;	2008	Jan	10
Why Do We Have Preaching?	Grant, Ian	Acts 2:47; 2 Tim 4:2; Heb 10:19-25;	2008	Jan	12
Thoughts On Being A Christian.	Sujatha, V	1Pet 1:18-19; Phil 2:8;Rom12:17-21	2008	Jan	14
Winter, Eric	Obituary		2008	Jan	15
Christian Practice Face Tragedy.	Marsden, Bob	Jimmy Mizzen / Mr Gordon Wilson	2008	Feb	1
What Happened After A.D.100?	Diggle, John H	Barnabas/Clement/Polycarp/Ignatiu	2008	Feb	4
Contradictions In Scripture	Worgan, F	Gen 6:6;1Sam15:29; Mal 3:6;Psa55	2008	Feb	7
Speak & Accept Mistakes.	Sujatha, V	Jam 4:17;1 Tim 4:2,11-12;Jam 5:16;	2008	Feb	8
1950's – And Back.	Davidson, Ian		2008	Feb	10
Holiness Of God.	Grant, Ian	Rom1:1-4;5:19;Tit2:11-15;1Pet 1:16	2008	Feb	12
To Run The Race.	Marsden, Bob	Heb 12:1; 1 Cor 9:24-25;2 Tim 4:7-8	2008	Mar	1
Sinfulness of Mankind.	Grant, Ian	1 Jn 4:9-10; Heb 10:25;10:19-25;	2008	Mar	2
Biographies	Davidson, Ian	Jn 20:30-31; 1 Thess 1:7-9;	2008	Mar	5
Early Heresies (1).	Diggle, John H	Gnosticism 1Jn 4:13; Col 2:9-23;	2008	Mar	7
Canon of N.T. Scripture.	Worgan, F	Col 3:16; 1 Cor 11:23;	2008	Mar	10
God and the Environment.	Payne, Rose	Gen 8:22;Exod 14:21;Gen 41:57;	2008	Mar	12
Frank, Lavern	Obituary		2008	Mar	15
Sinclair, Elsie	Obituary		2008	Mar	15
Restore Joy Of Thy Salvation.	Marsden, Bob	Rom 8:1; 1 Cor 1:8; Rom 14:17-20;	2008	Apr	1
Marriages in Church Building?	Worgan, F	Prov 26:7; Jn 2:16; Acts 12:12;1Co5	2008	Apr	5
Outstanding Bravery.	Davidson, Ian	1 Tim 6:12; 1:18;2Tim 4:7-8;	2008	Apr	8
Early Heresies (2).	Diggle, John H	Eph 4:11ff; 2 Tim 2:2;	2008	Apr	10
Does The Bible Say So?	Sujatha, V	Mrk 16:1-6; 1 Cor 4:6; Jn 12:48;	2008	Apr	12
How Wise was Solomon?	Payne, Rose	1 Chron 28:6; 1Kin 4:21,29-34;Eccl	2008	Apr	13
European Xian Workshop 2008.	Ferrie, Alastair		2008	Apr	14
Craik, Isabella Davidson	Obituary		2008	Apr	15
'Credit Crunch' in Perspective.	Marsden, Bob	Matt 6:19; Lk 12:13-15;1Pet 1:18-21	2008	May	1
Memorising The Scriptures.	Davidson, Ian	Matt16:19;Matt 5; Rom 8 Tit 2:11-15	2008	May	5
Increasing Holiness.	Grant, Ian	2Tim3:16-17;Eph 4:11-;1Thes5:23	2008	May	7
Non-Biblical Evidences / Jesus.	Diggle, John H	Mrk 15:33Tcitus /Pliny/Suetonious	2008	May	10
Faith or Work?	Sujatha, V	Lk 6:29;9:26;Heb 11:1-6; Jam 2:17-	2008	May	11
Great Expectations.	Sharp, Andrew	Heb 4:16;	2008	May	14
Resume of Jesus	Unknown		2008	May	14
Confidence In The Resurrection.	Marsden, Bob	1 Cor 15:32; 1 Cor 1:8-10	2008	Jun	1
Lord's Return & Signs Of Times.	Worgan, F	Matt 12:38;16:1 21:23; 24; Rom1:4;	2008	Jun	2
Tiberius Caesar.	Davidson, Ian	John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:12; Heb 4:15;	2008	Jun	6
Other Contemporary Religions.	Diggle, John H	Diana Acts 28:4;	2008	Jun	8
Purpose of Scripture.	Grant, Ian	2Tim 3:16-17;3:1-9; 3:10-17;Acts 21	2008	Jun	11
Why Worship Mary?	Sujatha, V	Lk1:27-28;Rom3:23;Matt9:6; Heb12	2008	Jun	14
Evangelism Post Xian Culture.	Ferrie, Alistair		2008	Jun	15

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

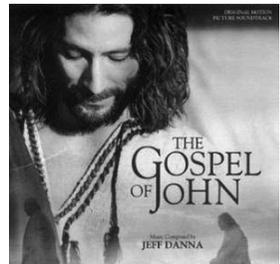
Understanding the Life of Jesus The final discourse

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)

Introduction

It has been a blessing to write this series of articles about the major events in the life of Jesus. I'm tempted in some ways to continue on through the events surrounding the arrest, trial, death and resurrection of Jesus, but it was always the intention with this series to reflect on how the earthly ministry of Jesus impacted upon the development of the religious world in and around Judea and how John records the conflicts with the Jews. There is of course no more compelling 'event' in Jesus' life than his death and subsequent resurrection and there can be no doubt at all that the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, from the dead remains to this day, and will remain for evermore, the single most important fact in human history and we can all sing in our hearts again, "He arose, Hallelujah, Christ arose". However many, many words have been written about those events and I'm not sure that I can improve at all on those many fine narratives.

I can also think of no more appropriate place to leave these studies than in the intimate atmosphere of Jesus in his final moments with his beloved disciples and in communion with the Father. From the latter part of chapter 13 through to the end of chapter 17 of John's gospel we have the utter privilege of being allowed into the private world of Jesus and His disciples, and even more exceptionally, of Jesus and the Father, as all parties approach what for ever will remain the single most important event in the history of mankind. We



Contents: 1 - Understanding the Life of Jesus; 6 - The Early Church; 8 - Question Box; 10 - Thinking Out Loud; 12 - Why do we have preaching; 12 - Being a Christian; 15 - News & Info.

have at our disposal the longest narrative of Jesus recorded for us and as I sit with the words of deity in front of me I feel genuinely awed and humbled at the prospect of attempting any explanation or commentary on these profound words of Jesus.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the immediate context. Jesus had demonstrated to his disciples the ultimate example of loving service to take forward with them as he performed the task of a servant, even to the extent of washing the feet of his betrayer. That betrayer, Judas, had left the gathering and Jesus is in loving communion with the remainder of his disciples and Jesus' preparation of them, for life without his physical presence, was well underway. There is such a depth of content within the subsequent words of Jesus that it would be impossible to comment on them all, so I will take a number of themes that present themselves as important to me, and offer a few comments on them.

Jesus speaks about His glory

When Paul wrote to the Church in Colossae, he described Jesus as "the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation" (1:15). Speaking of Jesus, the writer of the Hebrew letter declares, "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power" (1:3). Peter, James and John had been the awe-struck witnesses of the transfiguration of Jesus. "When the word glory is used in the New Testament it is used to describe the revelation of the character and presence of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the outshining of the divine glory" (The New Bible Dictionary). Explaining the Greek word for glory, 'doxa', Vine states: "It is used of the nature and acts of God in self-manifestation i.e. what He essentially is and does, as exhibited in whatever way he reveals Himself in these respects, and in particularly in the Person of Christ, in whom essentially His glory has ever shone forth and ever will do."

It has been a regular feature of these studies to point out how often John records the fact that Jesus identified himself with the Father. The Jews in particular needed to hear and to heed this part of Jesus' revelation; they needed to understand that Jesus truly was the Messiah, and Jesus went out of his way to try to open their eyes to this truth. In one of his last public appearances, in the presence of some Gentiles, Jesus implored the Father: "Father, glorify thy name", and in a very public acknowledgement of Jesus the people apparently heard the thundering voice of God saying: "I have glorified it and will glorify it again" (John 12:27,28).

Now, privately, Jesus states again his true nature. "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him." Jesus is God in the flesh; He is the ultimate revelation of God to His creation; He came to show us what God is like – not partially, but wholly as Jesus reveals to Philip when that disciple asks Jesus to "show us the Father". Jesus is the glory of God; he glorifies (reveals the character and presence of) the Father (17:1,4) and the Father is glorified through him (13:31,32; 14:13).

Clearly Jesus wanted his disciples to understand and, even after his departure, to be able to recall His true nature, to know that he was from God, had done the work of God and that it was to God that he was about to return. The fact of his return to the Father seems to have been a truth that Jesus particularly wanted to impress upon his disciples, perhaps on the basis that above all else this was the ultimate confirmation of his oneness with God and the source of real encouragement for the disciples. On five occasions at least Jesus refers to his return to the Father (14:2; 14:12; 14:28; 16:10; 16:28) and on two further occasions Jesus, speaking directly to the Father, and in the hearing of the disciples says, "I am coming to thee" (17:11; 17:13). Jesus is the glory of God.

Jesus speaks about love

Do you recall the new commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples after Judas had left their gathering – the commandment that would be **the** singular mark of their discipleship of him? “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (13:34:35). John certainly did not forget the application of this truth as he passed it on to the readers of his first epistle: “Beloved, let us love one another for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God... Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:7 – 11).

The disciples’ engagement in this commandment was to be no mere sentimental remembrance of Jesus but was to be an essential feature of their continuing and blessed relationship with Jesus and the Father after Jesus’ departure. “If you love me you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth” There are many Christians who are overly fond of reminding other Christians of the ‘do not’ commandments and too few who live by this greatest of all ‘do’ commandments. The command to love is not an optional extra to our Christian lives; it is not what we might describe as a ‘do-gooder’ or empathising characteristic; it is not one of the ‘softer’ Christian skills. Rather it is the very core of our Christian existence and relationship with God through Jesus, the one characteristic of our Christian nature that we dare not forsake. Read John’s epistle again and note: “He who does not love, does not know God; for God is love.”

To his disciples, Jesus put love emphatically at the centre of their continuing relationship. “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” Gloriously, and in response to faithful Judas’ question, Jesus made an eternal promise to the disciples: “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and the Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (14:21 – 23).

Within this final narrative Jesus repeated the command to love to his disciples (15:12). However this time he made the command, and the promise, much more personal than before. Now he talked to his disciples as friends, friends for whom he was preparing to show the greatest expression of love that is possible. It is to these friends that Jesus had opened up and revealed his eternal purposes, and, in his own words, he held nothing back from them that he had heard from the Father.

Dear reader, wherever you are and whatever your condition of life, know this. That Jesus loves you, Jesus died for you and Jesus has, through his love, won for you the blessed assurance of an eternal home with him for those that are faithful. How the disciples must have cherished the love of Jesus.

Jesus promises another Counsellor

The person who called you to be his follower around three years ago is in the process of explaining that he must go away and that he is to return to the Father. Over the intervening three years you have faithfully followed the one who called you and have been privileged to be witness to some of the most extraordinary events that the world has known. The one thing that I suggest you would want to hear and believe is that this is not the end; that despite the impending loss of a leader there would be help forthcoming to enable you to carry out the responsibilities for which you had been prepared. This is precisely what Jesus promised to his disciples.

I'm not skilled enough in the detail of the Greek language to understand all the nuances of the pronouns that are used in this narrative. But in the translations that I have before me what I do see is the engagement of not one, but the three persons of the Godhead enjoined in the support of the disciples as Jesus explains what is in store for them. Consider these passages:

- ❑ 14:16: "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever" Jesus asks the Father; the Father provides; another Counsellor (c.f. Isaiah 9:6), that is a Counsellor 'of the same sort' (Gk. *allos*).
- ❑ 14:18: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you." Jesus has consistently identified himself with the Father and now identifies himself with the Spirit.
- ❑ 14:23: " Jesus answered him (Judas) "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."" It is truly a remarkable promise to the disciples and to those that love God and keep his word that 'we', Son and Father, will have a presence with that person.
- ❑ 14:25: "But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name ..." Once again, Father, Son and Spirit are seen to be working together on behalf of the disciples.
- ❑ 15:26: "But when the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me .." Father, Son and Spirit are engaged in support for the disciples.

What a remarkable reassurance is offered to the followers of Jesus. That God, Father, Son and Spirit, is with them.

Jesus speaks about unity

It has been common within Christian fellowships and amongst different religious bodies to speak of 'creating' unity. The kind of unity that is envisaged in these circumstances can only ever continue for so long as men are substantially in agreement with each other.

The kind of unity that Jesus describes in this narrative with his disciples and the Father is of a different order altogether because it is of divine origin and does not depend on the whim of men for its continuation; it is a unity into which God calls and joins us rather than something that we create; it is a unity that does not depend on a commonality of thought but on a commonality of ownership – and divine ownership at that. Whilst the 17th chapter is regarded as the last word on unity this whole narrative is full of references to that divine relationship that exists within the Godhead and into which, gloriously, first the disciples, then all those who believe in Jesus as a result of their ministry are added.

However it is in the glorious 17th chapter that the unity of the Godhead and of believers finds its greatest expression. Now Jesus spoke directly to the Father and at the start of this prayer to the Father we learn again of the unity of Father and Son in their mutual glorification of one another: "Glorify thy Son, that the Son may glorify thee, since thou has given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him."

Jesus next spoke to the Father on behalf of the disciples (17:6 –19) and the unity of Father and Son is again self-evident. The disciples were the Father's; the Father gave them to the Son; the Son imparted to them the words of the Father and they had received them; the Son's departure is imminent and he gives the disciples back to the Father. "All mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them." The disciples were not perfect – far from it, as events shortly to unfold in relation to the

trial of Jesus would confirm. But so fully had the disciples accepted the words of Jesus and so fully had they acknowledged his Sonship (see 16:29), that Jesus states that he is glorified in them – the disciples were now capable of reflecting the person and work of Jesus. What a wonderful attestation of their position. And the ultimate culmination of this reality is the supplication of Jesus: “Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” Does Jesus here ask that the disciples may be ‘united amongst themselves’ with the same type of unity as Father and Son enjoy? No! Rather he asks that they become **one with them** - an integral part of their divine unity! And the triune nature of the Godhead is once again demonstrated – the Father gave the disciples to the Son; the Son taught and nurtured them relating to matters concerning the Father; on his own ‘going away’ the Son returned them to the Father; the Son promised ‘another Counsellor’. At no time are the disciples left unsupported.

Finally in his prayer to the Father, Jesus asked on behalf of “those who believe in me through their (the disciples) word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (17:20,21). I believe that Christians down the ages have a legitimate interest in this prayer. When John wrote his first epistle he stated the purpose to its readers as being “that you may have fellowship with us”. Wonderfully he reaffirmed the great truth of his gospel record by continuing, “and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Remarkable as it may seem, like the disciples, faithful Christians down the ages are enfolded into the divine unity, and become one with the timeless and eternal Godhead, Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus said to the Father: “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou has sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.” The glory of Christ has been passed on; we are one, perfectly one, with the Father and Son; we are loved as the Son is loved. And Jesus had one final desire to express to the Father, that those that had been given to him would ultimately be with him and behold his glory. Oh the love and the grace that God has lavished upon us.

Jesus’ mission complete

With the cross to be endured it will seem strange to some, wrong even, as Jesus and the disciples now head towards the garden, to use the words ‘mission complete’. But reflect one moment on the words of Jesus during this discourse. “Believe in me”; “I go to prepare a place for you”; “I will come again”; “I will come to you”; “I do as the Father has commanded”; “greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”; “I go to the Father”; “again a little while and you will see me”; “I am leaving the world and going to the Father”; “be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”; “this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent”; “I am coming to thee”; “Father I desire ... that they may be with me ... to behold my glory.” Some have said that in his undoubted agony in the garden, Jesus could have ‘walked away’ and not fulfilled the divine purpose. In the light of Jesus’ own words to his disciples and to the Father and in the reality of the perfect unity of the Godhead, it seems inconceivable that this could be so. “Knowing all that was to befall him ...” Jesus excruciatingly, tragically, agonisingly went forth and, as we have stated so many times, in the greatest act of love ever known, triumphantly brought to bear everything that he had promised so that we might have life ... and have it abundantly. May we be the kind of disciples who honour, respect and cherish such wonderful love.

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 10 – THE persecution of Christians.

Persecution of Christians took a number of forms and tended to come in waves of increased intensity. Until the reign of Nero it was generally the case that little distinction was identified between Christians and Jews, and since the latter were generally at least tolerated, Christians suffered only patchy ill treatment until that distinction became more evident.

In the first instance it is not clear that persecution was so much a policy of the Roman government as a short term expedient under which they were made the scapegoats for Nero's own folly, which I will explain shortly. Under Domitian, the brother of Titus, however, persecution in pursuit of the acceptance of his divinity, became an established empire-wide rule.

It is important, given the purpose of these studies to mention that Nero's persecution of Christians is of direct relevance, as background, to the letters of Peter, and that of Domitian to the book of Revelation.

In 1 Peter 4:12 the apostle speaks of the need for Christians to be aware of the "...fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing..." (NASB). Whilst we need to take some accounts with a modicum of caution, secular historians provide us with a picture of what was probably in Peter's mind here.

Nero, it seems, being appalled at the extent of the slum areas of Rome, hit upon the idea of hiring ruffians to set fire to them. His thinking was that they constituted a disgrace in the capital city of such a powerful empire, and, wanting to seem in control, hatched this plot. Unfortunately it backfired when the destruction spread to the properties of the wealthy and, fearing a backlash from those whom he was intending to impress, Nero cast around for scapegoats to 'put in the frame' for what was really his own recklessness.

By this point, albeit as a result of un-informed slander, Christians were becoming unpopular and made an easy target for that which Nero looked to lay at their door by way of blame:

1. The state, and in some instances the emperor, were regarded as divine, so that refusal to acknowledge either or both as such, was looked upon as both a religious and a civil wrong, amounting to something not far short of treason. Membership of the various trade guilds, without which it was impractical to carry on one's business, required an oath of allegiance which, in its recognition of this principle, proved impossible for Christians to subscribe to without compromise to their own faith. To say the least this made them objects of suspicion, and since Rome was generally willing to accept the worship of other gods, so long as its own were equally respected, led to the perception of Christians as religiously bigoted and narrow-minded.

Since they often spoke of Jesus as their king and King of kings, this was not difficult to twist into evidence of ridiculous ambition for world-domination.

2. Christians also spoke regularly of a day when their Lord would come in fiery judgement upon the world, and since the issue in hand was one that concerned a fiery conflagration in Rome itself, this made it easier still for Nero to persuade its citizens that this was exactly the kind of thing to be expected from such people who seemed deeply interested in, if not obsessed with, such an end for their enemies.
3. Did not Christians also speak quite openly about eating His flesh and drinking His blood? Gross misrepresentation though it was, it is not difficult to see how, for those so-minded, this could be turned into charges of cannibalistic practices, objectionable to a society as sophisticated and

'civilised' as Rome's. Of course this was a 'bit rich' coming as it did from people whose own religious rituals included dabbings in the 'dark arts', orgies and Bacchanalian drunkenness.

4. Romans had heard married Christians refer to one another as brother and sister too, and whilst this perhaps required a rather more malicious kind of imagination, this too became twisted into charges of incest. Again, even had this been true, it was very much a case of the 'pot calling the kettle black', so far as sexual morality was concerned.

Playing to the gallery being very much part of Nero's motives and methods, he looked to deflect the blame for his follies away from himself and onto Christians, and compounded the injustice by seeking further popularity through the rigour of his punishing response. It seems likely that he took sadistic delight in the opportunity of this excuse, to carry out a programme of what was really nothing more than barbaric sport and twisted 'entertainment' at the Christians' expense. Well to do Romans were so sated with pleasure-seeking opportunities that it took more and more to keep them amused. They were always on the look out for the spectacular and the titillating, which came to take increasingly strange and perverted form and had nothing to do with religious, moral or civilised principle.

For 'sport', Nero had Christians sewn into animal skins, released and hunted down by packs of wild dogs. At night, they were coated with pitch, ignited and set in the trees of his pleasure gardens to provide an horrific form of illumination.

Following Nero's suicide, and with the need for greater concentration on the problem of the Jews in Judea, as well as an unstable political situation at home, which saw the coming and going of Otto, Galba and Vitellius in quick succession, some slight semblance of order was restored during the reigns of Vespasian and Titus, of whom we read in the last article. Persecution during this period took less violently physical form, though the times were far from easy for Christians who were unprepared to compromise their beliefs for the sake of gainful employment. Though we are reliant upon tradition as a source for the information, it seems likely that it was during the latter days of Nero's reign, that Peter and Paul met their deaths at the hands of his regime.

Titus' brother Domitian, succeeded him to the imperial throne and proved himself a thoroughly nasty piece of work so far as the persecution of Christians was concerned.

The overall impression that we get from the early chapters of the Revelation is one of rapidly gathering storm clouds; indeed the risen Christ tells John explicitly that he is to be shown what must "soon take place" and things for which "the time is near". Without going into all the supporting evidence for the view here, it seems probable that John was exiled to Patmos during the reign of Vespasian, and the persecution that is the context of the book, is that shortly to be mounted by Domitian.

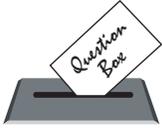
As to the precise forms taken by this persecution, we are less certain than is true of Nero's, but so far as its rationale and extent are concerned, there can be little room for doubt.

More than any other Caesar before him, Domitian took his deity with deadly seriousness, demanding to be known as Lord God, and to be treated as such. The difference between him and Nero was that whilst the latter used the persecution of Christians as a personal expedient, and mainly within Rome itself, Domitian pursued it as an empire-wide policy of determined and fundamental principle.

Further persecutions would take place, as we shall see, in those articles that deal with developments after the end of the first century, but the concentration on Nero and Domitian in this one, has been because they are of most immediate relevance to the period covered directly by the New Testament.

Check this out for yourself.

In case anyone is wondering where this kind of information is to be found, three sources are readily available. The works of Josephus are easily obtainable in the better Bible bookshops, in a variety of editions, including a modern version for those who cannot face the archaic phrasing of Whiston's established translation. Penguin classics offer cheap paperback versions of both Suetonius' "The lives of the twelve Caesars" and "The Annals of Tacitus". If you want to check out what I have been writing and look into it more deeply, these are good places to do so. Jim McGuiggan's commentary on the book of Revelation is excellent for its accessible summary of relevant background history too.



QUESTION:
Please would you give us your opinion
on Acts 15, verses 20 and 29



Let me first remind you of the background to the events recorded in the chapter. Chapter 15 of the book of Acts records the very important meeting of Apostles and Elders, held in Jerusalem in order to resolve a problem which, if it remained unresolved, might very well have resulted in the formation of two separate bodies of believers. In other words, it was a problem that threatened to create a dangerous split the young Church.

The Gospel, first preached to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, had, by this time, reached out beyond the limits of the Jews and Judaism, as the Lord's Commission clearly intended that it should, and Peter's visit to the home of the Centurion, Cornelius, had at first shocked the Church, which, at this time consisted only of Jews and Jewish proselytes. This is clearly shown in Acts 11:1-3.

But the Church's leaders accepted Peter's explanation of his visit and acknowledged that God had '*granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life*' (v.18).

However, certain Jewish Christians who claimed that if Gentiles were to be admitted to the Faith, they must first submit to the Mosaic Law and accept the rite of circumcision did not readily accept this verdict. Acts 15:1 records what they told the Gentiles. They declared that if the Gentiles first accepted Judaism, this would effectively make them 'Jews' and would qualify them to hear and obey the gospel of the Christ, Who was, they claimed, after all, the 'Jewish Messiah'.

In Gal. 2 we read about these 'Judaising Christians', and the robust manner in which Paul dealt with them. Paul and his co-workers vigorously opposed this teaching wherever they found it, but the issue had to be settled decisively once and for all time, and therefore this meeting in Jerusalem, which some theologians like to call 'The First Church Council', was convened.

The verses in Acts 15 referred to by our questioner/s, reveal that there were aspects of Gentile behaviour, which, whilst common enough in the pagan Gentile world, were sure to give offence to Jewish Christians, if they continued to be practised by Gentiles who now claimed to be Christians. Verse 20 mentions '*pollutions of idols, fornication, the eating of things strangled, and, closely related to this last offence, 'blood*'.

1st The expression, '*pollutions of idols*' calls to mind the problem at Corinth with which Paul deals also in chapter 8 of his first letter to the Corinthian Church. Briefly stated, when a sacrifice was brought as an offering to a pagan temple in the city of Corinth, the priests always received a portion of the flesh for their own use, and, because there was always more meat than they could use, the surplus was sold cheaply in the 'Shambles' – the meat-market.

For some Christians, this represented an attractive opportunity, because they understood that an idol is nothing more than a lifeless, helpless, carved or molten image, and they were happy to buy and eat the cheap meat. But there were other Christians who had been brought up in paganism, whose consciences would not allow them to touch such meat. To them it was tainted because of its association with idolatry, and they were deeply offended by the behaviour of fellow Christians who did not feel as they did. And, of course, it is easy to see that this would also be something that would give offence to any Jewish Christians who happened to live in Corinth.

2nd As for '*fornication*', in this connection it probably refers to the sexual activity practised in connection with idolatrous worship, because pagan Temples were invariably served by 'sacred' Temple prostitutes, and it is claimed that, at Corinth, there were one thousand of these women connected with the Temple to Aphrodite, which stood on the Acropolis, towering over the city.

Each night, these 'sacred priestesses' descended on the streets of Corinth, to make their 'sacred' services available to both the native Corinthians and the vast numbers of visitors whom they attracted to the city. Such sexual conduct, which Jewish Christian would certainly regard as sinful and immoral, was very common in non-Jewish cities of that day, and there is no doubt that, for a time, it was a problem among Gentile Christians. This is why Paul reminded those who read his letters that, when they became Christians, their bodies became Temples of the

Holy Spirit, Read 1st Cor.3: 16-17; ch.6: 9, and 6:15-20.

3rd The remaining two subjects, *'things strangled'* and *'blood'* are closely related. The scriptures reveal that, from the very earliest times, God gave explicit instructions on the manner in which blood – all blood – must be treated. In Gen.9, He forbade both the shedding of human blood and the use of animal blood for food. In giving Man permission to eat flesh, God's law was quite clear. *"But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, ye shall not eat"*, and, whether it was human or animal, God decreed that blood is sacred because it is the symbol of life.

Consequently, when an animal was killed to be used for food, He commanded that the blood must allow to drain from the carcass. This ruled out the strangling of an animal, because when the animal was strangled the blood remained in the flesh and is not *'poured out before the Lord'*. In this connection, 1st Sam. 14:32-34 is very revealing and should be read.

The pagans, however, caught the blood of the sacrificial victim and drank it, both as a religious act, and because they believed that in so doing, the life or strength of the animal passed into their bodies.

Turning again to Acts 15 and the two verses, 20 and 29, we should note that, in issuing their decisions, the Apostles and Elders at that meeting in Jerusalem were not imposing special conditions of salvation on the Gentiles, because the Gentiles who were involved in this problem were already Christians.

The problem was one that affected their fellowship with Jewish Christians, since it related to a manner of life which Gentile converts had formerly followed - and, very probably, in some instances, continued to follow – but which needed to be corrected in order to avoid giving offence to their Jewish brothers and sisters, and to enable them to be the cleansed and sanctified people that God intended His people to be.

Is there anything here that might concern present-day Christians? Well, *'meat offered to idols'* is something most of us will never be offered, so we may rule out that problem!

As for *'fornication'*, I remind you again that those early Gentile Christians lived in a culture where, for centuries, such conduct had not merely been permissible, but was actually regarded as normal, when conducted as a religious act. Bear in mind that paganism almost always involved sexual behaviour, and was not regarded as sin. Today it is an act that we Christians readily recognize to be sinful.

The question of *'blood'*. is one which, for some Christians, is not so clear, probably because it is not one to which they have given much consideration.

Most of us know that the followers of the "Watchtower" organization, who mistakenly call themselves *'Jehovah's Witnesses'*, refuse to accept blood transfusions, believing they are obeying the command to abstain from blood. In this they fail to recognize the difference between *'ingesting'* blood - using it as food - and *'injecting'* blood – using it in a medical procedure designed to save life.

They invariably remind any who question them on this matter that *'the life is in the blood'*. They apparently forget that Jesus said *"Greater love hath no man than this; that a man lays down his life for his friend"*. It seems to me that, if *'the life is in the blood'*, and it is permissible for one to *'lay down his life for his friend'* the Lord's words permit the giving of blood transfusions.

But, of course, these verses have nothing whatsoever to do with blood transfusions. What is forbidden is the use of blood as food or drink, and we have no reason to suppose that God feels any different today about the use of blood, than He did in Noah's time and in the subsequent centuries when the Mosaic Law was in operation.

Indeed, since Acts 15 deals with a problem that arose in the Christian Age, the instruction given in the two verses, 20 and 29 should be considered as valid today, insofar as they may be applicable to our own customs.

I have no doubt that some of you have already guessed that I am thinking about what I can only imagine is an acquired taste - the eating of 'black', or 'blood pudding'! I suggest it is something to which we should give serious thought.

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Thinking Out Loud

SOME WORDS ON BIRDS

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

Birds are wonderful. Before commencing this article, I have taken time to admire the woodpigeons, magpies, starlings, sparrows, blue tits, greenfinches, blackbirds, the odd robin and thrush, outside my front and back windows. Many of them are hindered from reaching the bird table and nut-containers because of an intruder – a daring, enterprising and fearless grey squirrel, who is never far away despite my daily efforts to chase him off.

Political parties and religious organisations should like to have the million plus membership that the R.S.P.B. (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) enjoys in the U.K. People all over the country simply love the birds and want to see them thriving. My Reader's Digest book on British Birds runs to 471 pages, which indicates the huge variety of birds found on our shores. I have admired many of them from John O'Groats to Land's End, but there are still loads to see.

DESIGN

Birds are designed for flight. So are aeroplanes. Brilliant minds design aeroplanes and a Brilliant Mind designed all the birds. There is no escaping intelligent design when it comes to our feathered friends.

A few years ago, I went to hear a lecture given by Dr Stuart Burgess of the University of Bristol. He specialises in Engineering Design. He is an opponent of the theory of evolution and a proponent of creation. He sees clear evidence of design in the natural world. In the introduction to one of his books *Hallmarks of Design*, he writes: "Two subjects that feature often in the book are human beings and birds because they both have a particularly high degree of complexity and beauty." He went on to say in the book: "Bird wings and feathers present a clear example of complete optimum design. A bird wing consists of strong and stiff bones together with a precise arrangement of flight feathers. Each individual flight feather is a masterpiece of design and, like the spider's web, is one of the most efficient structures known to mankind. A flight feather...consists of a complex hierarchy of different structures. The main feather stem comes first, then the barbs and finally the barbules." I like the fact that God is not just about complexity, but beauty too. Everything is beautiful in its own way; everything has been wonderfully and beautifully made by the Almighty. So how can anyone reject intelligent design in nature?

NUMBERS

There are well in excess of 8000 living species of birds in the world. They come in all shapes and sizes. We find them everywhere; in mountains, seas, rivers, plains, jungles, deserts, etc. Birds are ubiquitous!

The world would be a sadder place without them. Indeed, the world could not survive without them. There is a balance in nature and that balance includes birds. Remove the birds and the insects would take over – and how!

THE BIBLE AND BIRDS

The Bible could not escape mentioning birds. "The wealth of bird life makes it difficult to identify with certainty some of the birds named in the Bible, and in some cases it is not possible to state whether the Hebrew words refer to birds or other classes of animals" (The Bible Dictionary). We read, for example, of the raven, dove, pigeon, vulture, stork, hawk, eagle, owl, cormorant, swallow, crane, sparrow, quail, kite, falcon, gull, osprey, heron, peacock, partridge, ostrich, pelican and chicken. God created them all (Genesis 1:20, 21).

The Bible uses birds by way of illustration. "I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top" (Psalm 102: 6,7). "But they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings of eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). "Yea, the stork in the heaven knows her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgement of the Lord" (Jeremiah 8:7). "Then lifted I up mine eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came out two women, and the wind was in their wings like the wings of a stork: and they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heaven" (Zechariah 5:9). "And Jesus, when He was baptised, went up straight away out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3: 16, 17). "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be you therefore wise as servants and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent unto you, how often would I gather your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not" (Matthew 23:37). "Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them: how much more are you better than the fowls?" (Luke 12: 24)

BIRDS SACRIFICED

One of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life was kill an injured pigeon that had been struck by a car. I just had to put it out of its misery. I thought later of the countless number of pigeons sacrificed in bygone days. For example, we read: "And when the days of Mary's purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought Jesus to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord..and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2: 22, 24). Incidentally, "the offering of the two pigeons instead of the lamb and the pigeon was technically called *The Offering of the Poor*. It was the offering of the poor which Mary brought" (William Barclay).

Jesus once said: "And fear not them who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10: 28-30). Birds are valuable in God's sight, but human beings more so. Jesus did not die for the birds, but for mankind. But note, His words are addressed to "His twelve disciples" (verse 1) and should, therefore, be read in context. They are words of encouragement in times of persecution. So what eventually happened to those who persecuted Jesus' disciples? For them, one day, the chickens came home to roost!

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING?

(Ian Grant, Corby)

Upon obeying the gospel God could have left us as individuals and we could quite easily have worshipped him in private. But it was not a part of God's plan that Christianity should be a private pilgrimage. Instead, God chose that those who make Jesus their king would be added to the Church (Acts 2:47). Just as under the old covenant God made his followers a people, so too under the New Covenant God has made those who are baptised, a people – a community. It is God's plan that those who acknowledge him as their God and Jesus as their king should be a community of people.

Further, it was God's will that his people meet together to worship him on the first day of the week. That salvation should express itself in worship makes good sense to us. That we should sing, pray, give and remember Jesus' death in a thoughtful, contemplative and reverent manner seems self-evident. But when it comes to the sermon, that sense of awe and reverence can be missing.

Countless brethren listen carefully to sermons every Sunday checking what is said against Scripture, and then they strive to live what they learnt. To some people though, listening to sermons is akin to the Chinese water torture; they see it as something that God dreamt up in order to make us suffer for some mysterious and unknown reason. Yet others would appear to see no good reason for a lesson, for as soon as the sermon starts they close their eyes. I expect some will say that they listen better with their eyes closed, for it helps them to concentrate, and that may well be true for some of the brethren. But I doubt that that is true of everyone who does it, for we have likely all experienced closing our eyes for a moment only to drop off to sleep unintentionally, and sometimes embarrassingly. Others keep their eyes open, but from the blank look on their faces you know that the odds are that they are not listening. Yet others play with their children, or even other people's children; not just on the odd occasion to help keep the children settled, but some adults regularly instigate the play. And then there are some who simply skip the sermon and leave immediately after the Lord's Supper.

DULL AND BORING

To be fair, while many good Scriptural sermons are preached, some lessons are dull and boring, are poorly prepared and show a lack of proper study and no real application. This can be the result of some people wanting to speak simply because of the need, but having more enthusiasm than talent for speaking. Some will see being in the pulpit as putting themselves in the limelight, while unintentionally they are putting the brethren to sleep. Others find some unusual aspect of Scripture of great interest and see preaching as the opportunity to speak on the latest thing that has grabbed their interest, even though it is of little relevance to the lives of their listeners. Yet other speakers appear to see it as an opportunity that God has provided so that they are able to demonstrate their particular gift for eloquent speaking. They do impress the hearers with their oratory, and so in this case, at least more people listen!

WORSHIP GOD?

If sermons can be that painful and difficult to listen to, and also the opportunity for people to serve their own interests, then why have preaching at all? The simple

answer is that God made preaching a part of worship. There is a command that the Church be taught (2 Tim 4:2) and we have an example of Paul instructing the Church (Acts 20:7-12). Further, Paul argued for uniformity of practice throughout the churches (1 Cor. 11:16) and condemned innovation (1 Cor. 14). If we are to be the New Testament Church then, just as preaching was a part of the worship two thousand years ago, so too it must be a part of our worship today. It is God who must determine how he is to be worshipped.

But why would God put preaching in the worship service when worship is supposed to be what is done for God? While the focus of true worship is on God, when we consider what is done in worship we find that while worship has a vertical dimension it has a horizontal dimension as well. What I mean by that is, while worship is directed to God it also involves fellow worshippers. A good example of this two-fold approach is to be found in the Hebrew letter (Heb. 10:19-25) where the writer, who expected the truth he had taught them to be lived out in practice, makes a practical application of what he had written in the letter. He wrote of drawing near to God and then, in the same breath, of Christians needing to consider one another, followed by, in the same sentence, the importance of not abandoning worship. Worship is not merely a personal and private activity that is done in the presence of others; worship involves God as the object of our adoration, and it also involves the brethren. When we assemble as believers our worship is a corporate activity, as opposed to private worship, but it also involves fulfilling the mutual responsibilities of love and encouragement.

That worship includes both a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension can be seen in that our relationship with other Christians must be right before we worship God (Matt. 5:22-24). Also it can be seen in what we do to worship God. Prayer involves both God and the brethren (1 Cor. 14:13-17) for those who lead the prayers speak to God but they speak on behalf of the Church. While we praise God in song we also teach each other at the very same time (Col. 3:16). We are familiar with the fact that Paul used the word "fellowship" for the contribution (Rom. 15:26), and also that very same Greek word is translated "communion" in reference to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16-17). In his first letter, Paul wrote to Timothy that he was to pay serious attention to the public reading of Scripture, along with the exhorting and the teaching that accompanied it (1 Tim. 4:13). Teaching, of course, has to be from the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:1-5) who speaks to us through the Scriptures.

PREACH THE WORD

Having told Timothy to preach the Word, Paul continued, "Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching." (NKJV). Without taking the time to look at the precise meaning of those words it is clear from the context that preaching was to be directed towards the Church. Preaching is not only a way of worshipping God but, as with the others things in worship, it is to include the brethren; it is a means by which God is worshipped but it is also a way by which God communicates with those who worship him. This is confirmed when we consider the purpose of Scripture as explained by Paul just a few verses earlier (2 Tim. 3:16-17) where Paul says, for example, that Scripture is to instruct us.

It is no wonder then that Timothy was told by Paul to "Preach the word!"

Simply giving a lecture on the Bible, for example, is not what is called for. There is much that could be preached about the Bible, that some might find interesting, but that is not necessarily preaching the word. A lesson on the events at Masada would

be interesting but would hardly constitute preaching the word. Those who introduce or conclude their sermon with words such as "I want to share these few thoughts with you" leave one with the uneasy thought that they have missed the point that it is the word that has to be preached and not their thoughts.

Clearly, the lesson will reflect something of the speaker, but it is not some man's thoughts that we need to hear, it is God's word. Equally, showing some beautiful pictures of the creation on a screen and simply saying that God is wonderful is hardly preaching the word, any more than showing one's holiday snaps is. Telling a story, even if it has a religious point to it, again is not preaching the word.

Exactly what is involved in preaching the word is more than I can address in this article, and that is something to look at later. Whatever it does involve, preaching the word is a means by which we worship God when we assemble, and just as reverence and awe, solemnity and joy mark our other acts of worship, so too they must be a part of listening to the sermon. It requires effort on our part to worship God in a way that is worthy of whom he is and what he has done, and perhaps no more so than when the sermon is preached.

While some speakers might see preaching as an opportunity to pursue their own agenda it is God's intention that teaching plays a crucial role in the life of the listeners. Some speakers may not be as well trained as they should be, and some may lack the ability to be great communicators, but God's word is powerful (Heb. 4:12-13) and the Church needs to hear it preached, if for no other reason than that God said it was to be done. Of course, God does not simply weigh us down with needless commands and pointless practices. Preaching is a part of our worship because we need to be taught the word of God; we need to learn from the wonderful life giving words of the gospel.

Thoughts on being a Christian

By V.Sujatha (Darwen)

Being Christians, we are different. We are not just any religious people, we know our God. We know his perfect plan of salvation. We know the great sacrifices that were done for us (Ephesians 5:2; 1 Peter 1:18, 19). We do not live by bread alone but by every word of God (Luke 4:4). It is our duty to obey what the Lord has said. Let the world know you, and through you, know your Father. If anyone hits you on one cheek, do not hit him back. Show him the other cheek (Luke 6:29). Let him think, "What made you do that?" Let him think, "Why is this man not hitting me back?" Do not quarrel, be patient (2 Timothy 2:24). Let them think, "Who is there, that doesn't speak ill of those who speak ill of them?"

Amongst those who boast, drink and are ungodly, you be humble like Jesus, righteous and godly (Philippians 2:8; Titus 2:12). Let them wonder who you are, so that they may become interested in you. Do not overcome evil with evil but with good (Roman 12:17-21). Let your gentleness be known to every man (Philippians 4:5). They will notice you are different and recognise that you are a true Christian, a faithful servant of God. This will enable you to talk to them more freely about God's word. In this way your good work, will glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

New and Information

Obituary Bro Eric Winter

It is with deep regret that we report the death of our brother Eric Winter on December 17th, 2007 at the age of 81. Eric had been unwell over a period of time and had been undergoing tests at Blackpool Victoria hospital when he passed away and died of natural causes. Brethren in many areas of the country will remember him and share the sadness of Roselyn, Claire and Chris. Eric was the mainstay of the work in Cleveleys for many years and refused to give up even when many would have. Roselyn was his constant support in the work of the Lord and in life. Theirs was a life of togetherness friendship and love. The church is reduced to a small number of sisters who need our prayerful support.

Over the years I have spent many happy times with Eric and Roselyn and can speak personally of their love for the Lord and his Church. Their generosity has been a source of blessing to many both here and abroad. I have been personally blessed by their readiness to help in time of need. We are thankful for Eric's dedication and love for the Lord and his Church

Brian Stevens

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

Lancaster University
Thursday 28th August
to Saturday 30th August 2008

REACHING OUT TO TODAY'S WORLD

Confirmed Speakers

Tony Coffey (Ireland) – Keynote
Bob Eckman (England)
Mike Moss (USA)
Ian Cameron (Scotland)
Vladimir Psenko (Croatia)
Gary Holloway (USA)
Eleni Mellirrytos (Greece)

More speakers from the UK to be confirmed.

Song Leader:

Jason Snethen (England)

Early Bird Fee: £99

(before 30th April, 2008)

Contact:

STEPHEN WOODCOCK
11 West Mount, Orrell, Wigan
UK, WN5 8LX.
Tel: (01942) 211 479

E-mail:

stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

Website:

www.europeanchristianworkshop.com

NEWTONGRANGE, SCOTLAND

Our **ANNUAL SOCIAL**
will be held as follows:

Date:

Saturday 11th October 2008
at 1.00pm

Speaker:

Bro. Ian Davidson, Motherwell.

A warm welcome is extended to all.

Conscience

Conscience is like a sundial. During the hours of daylight, and so long as the sun is shining, the dial will have a correct recording of the time; but when the sun is not shining, or when the light comes upon it from a lantern or from the moon at night, its record may be completely inaccurate. So it is with conscience. So long as the light of God's Word shines upon us and directs our decisions the voice of conscience is both correct and helpful; but when it is illuminated by the light of our own imagination, or by the opinions of others, it will not only fail to

give the true direction, but it will make the error all the greater because it claims to speak with authority. A fallible guide, who may lead us astray through wrong information, is worse than no guide at all.

A Practical Religion

The religion of the New Testament is a practical religion. It deals with everyday life. It is for the man of the field and the man of the office. It is for the man at the workbench and for the man in the classroom. It is for the poor man and for the well-to-do man. It is for every man. If I am not a follower of Christ while I am mending shoes then my "Sunday religion" is worthless. I must be a faithful disciple while I am teaching school, working the engine, punching tickets, keeping the books, shovelling cement, or whatever my work may be. I must magnify Christ, I must reflect him in my life.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare wrote. "How far that little candle throws its beam, so shines a good deed in a naughty world..."

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

Editorial **Christian practice in the face of personal tragedy**

I think that a little bit of background information to this month's editorial is relevant for those of our readers who are based outside of the United Kingdom and/or do not have access to the UK's media reports.

Through the early part of this calendar year there has been a spate of knife-related violent crimes in the UK carried out by individuals or gangs, some of them resulting in the deaths of

the victims of such attacks. A number of these assaults seem to have been unprovoked in any meaningful sense of the word and there is even some speculation that some of them are deliberately orchestrated so that the attacks can be videoed on mobile phones and put up for public consumption on internet sites such as YouTube. Quite what kind of warped mind conceives of this kind of brutal and sick behaviour is extremely difficult to fathom, but the reality is that these things are happening within our society. I don't intend to attempt any kind of deep sociological explanation of this type of behaviour here, though I do have my own pet theories, except to say that it is evidence of a serious breakdown of moral values amongst those who perpetrate such crimes. Violence in all of its many guises has been a persistent feature of human behaviour since the beginning of time, and I suspect that it will always remain so, but sometimes the gratuitous nature of criminal violence still has the capacity to shock, despite the fact that, appalling as it is to say so, we inevitably become de-sensitised to the more common occurrences (anyone over the age of, say, 45 will remember the time when **any** kind of murder would be headline national news). Now it is the only the more extreme cases that generate national publicity.

COMPASSION IN GRIEF

A few weeks ago, a young man by the name of Jimmy Mizzen went to his local shop in a part of London to buy a take away. It's a common scene that is repeated thousands of times in our towns and cities. Whilst in the shop 16 year-old Jimmy was confronted by a youth (or youths), and, it is reported, was challenged to a

Contents: 1 - Editorial; 4 - The Early Church; 7 - Question Box; 9 - Courage to Speak; 10 - Thinking Out Loud; 12 - Why do we have preaching; 15 - News & Info.

fight. Jimmy, a regular churchgoer and apparently a peaceable and likeable young man from a loving family, refused and for that refusal was attacked with a piece of glass with such force that his throat was slashed and he bled to death in the arms of one of his brothers who had accompanied him to the shop. Those appear to be the stark facts surrounding the loss of life of a young man with a tremendous amount to live for. It seems that he did not know his attacker but was the victim of another young man who, for whatever reason, flew into a violent temper with the tragic consequences stated above.

Jimmy apparently came from a large, loving family that was thoroughly well respected within their community. Apart from the tragic nature of this murder, the compelling feature of this incident was of Jimmy's family, and in particular his mother, displaying a dignity and lack of bitterness that is unusual in such circumstances and shows the remarkable capacity for compassion that those who love God can bring to bear in the most terrible of circumstances. This is what Jimmy's mother had to say on national television a short time after her son's death:

"I just want to say to the parents of this other boy", she said, "I just want to say I feel so, so sorry for them. I don't feel anger, I feel sorry for the parents. We've got such lovely memories of Jimmy and they will have such sorrow for their son. I feel for them, I really do." She also went on to say: "Anger breeds anger, and bitterness will destroy my family if I'm not careful – and I won't allow that to happen."

Every now and again, someone comes along who expresses the Christian message far more eloquently in a real life situation than many hours of 'preaching' will ever achieve. The adage that it's not what we say but what we do that still holds true. Mrs Gee Walker whose teenage son was murdered in Liverpool in 2005 did it when she said: "Unforgiveness makes you a victim and why should I be a victim? Anthony (her murdered son) spent his life forgiving. His life stood for peace, love and forgiveness and I brought them up that way. I have to practise what I preach. I don't feel any bitterness towards them (his killers) really, truly, all I feel ... I feel sad for the family." Twelve months later she reiterated those sentiments, so her words were clearly not a short-term, unguarded reaction that didn't stand the test of time.

Mr. Gordon Wilson whose daughter was murdered by an IRA bomb in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland in 1987 expressed similar sentiments. In the aftermath of that brutal attack Mr Wilson told the BBC: "I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life." Mr Colin Parry, whose son was killed by an IRA bomb in Warrington, Lancashire in 1993 established a Foundation of Peace, and a few years ago met with Mr Gerry Adams the leader of Sinn Fein, often described as the 'political wing' of the IRA at that time. Many believe that the dignified, public responses of these last two people were instrumental in starting the long process of changing attitudes that ultimately resulted in a large measure of peace being restored to Northern Ireland via the Good Friday Agreement.

CHRISTIAN PRACTICE IN FOCUS

It would of course be very easy at this point in this article to go down the route of trying to argue whether it was doctrinally or even morally correct, in a Christian context, for these people to extend forgiveness without the previous repentance of the perpetrators of these acts. Many would argue that neither the perpetrators, nor their families, are totally undeserving of any shred of compassion, or any statement that gives them any comfort whatsoever – and even a cursory glance at the internet blogs that refer to the Jimmy Mizen case demonstrates that a fair proportion of

people feel insulted that the Mizzen family should feel or offer any kind of solace to the family of the attacker and most certainly not to the attacker himself. It's a tough world when you can't even respond to a deep, personal tragedy without being criticised by other people.

The real purpose of this article is to remind us that the real power of the Christian message lies in the practical expression of that message in the lives of Christian men and women. The chickens come home to roost when we are called to 'practise what we preach' - when all the theological, doctrinal discussions and studies come down to 'What would Jesus do!'

Christianity doesn't 'happen' in its real sense within the four walls of our church buildings when our Christian communities meet together; its best expression doesn't happen in study groups or on those special occasions when we meet together for fellowship. Of course all those occasions are important and we might describe that as our training school where we put in place the foundation stones of our Christian lives. But training is only a preparation for making us 'fit for purpose'. If I can use a simple analogy, those times are like going to the service station to refuel or service our cars - absolutely essential to ensuring that we can continue our journey in the harsh and frenetic environment of our public highways but can hardly be described as 'driving'. Our gatherings for fellowship and remembrance are essential to our Christian well being, but are not the essence of Christianity. Jesus took time out during his earthly ministry to commune with the Father, but he did his 'driving' in the harsh environment of the world around him. He met and ate with the tax collectors and sinners, to the horror of his enemies, because they were the people who needed him most; he healed the lepers because in most people's eyes they were the untouchables; he showed compassion to the woman taken in adultery because he wanted to show that throwing the rule book - and as many stones as could be found - was not the way to turn that woman's life around; he fed 5000 or more people simply because they were physically hungry (and turned the situation to advantage by delivering an astonishing spiritual lesson). However much good he did he was criticised for it, his motives were challenged and his integrity questioned.

I don't know whether Margaret Mizzen and her family, Gee Walker and her family, Gordon Wilson and others fit the bill of 'New Testament Christians' as we would define that. I do know though, that they have all demonstrated remarkable Christian characteristics and expressed the Christian principles of mercy and compassion in their response to unspeakable tragedy and grief. I'm also sure that there is a perfectly valid theological argument that says that you can't truly forgive someone unless and until they have repented but I'm so glad that the people mentioned above didn't stop on the brink of that debate before they made their public statements in the raw emotion of their loss (and stood by them after more considered reflection). I'm glad that they have been able to say what is in their hearts rather than hesitate about what might be doctrinally pure or weigh what the reaction of their brethren or church leaders might be before saying what they did. If all of this sounds a bit harsh and a bit raw it's because that's how Christianity is sometimes - lived in the world outside the walls of our church buildings, physically isolated from our brethren, instinctive and emotional.

Christianity is about "repenting and being baptised for the forgiveness of sins" and then getting on and **living** a life that is filled with that which flows from our training - a knowledge of the love of Jesus - and the vast majority of that living takes place in alien environment. Thank you Mrs Mizzen, because in your own and your families grief you showed us something of the grace and compassion of Jesus.

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 11 – what happened after A.D.100?

The end of the 1st century saw the death of the last of the apostles, probably John, and with it of course, their contribution to the written record of scripture.

Very quickly the burning issue became that of sufficient authority for all that was now taught. There was strong oral tradition, but for those disposed to do so, this was more open to challenge than the written word, and since increasing numbers of Gentiles were being added to the Church, this was not a format as familiar to them as their formerly Jewish brethren.

The impression is sometimes left that, without the apostles to restrain them, the faithless and feckless took early advantage of an opportunity to 'kick over the traces', and that things went down hill very rapidly in terms of apostolic orthodoxy. Of course there were, as there always have been, those who looked to personal ambition and advantage, as the motivation for their self-promotion, at the gospel's expense. But at the same time I think we ought to show better sympathy and understanding of the predicament of the faithful and nobly motivated, than is sometimes the case. They had human failings and made all too human mistakes, but so did the apostles if it comes to that, and so do we all. Lack of a collected New Testament like ours must have proved a significant difficulty and it would be some time before such a thing became anything like widely available. Copies of the letters of Paul and the gospels increased rapidly in number, but circulation of them was far from wide.

Very often it would prove to be the case that it was disputes over doctrine and the requirements of answers to blatant heresies, both from within and without the Church, that concentrated minds on what apostolic authority amounted to. There were undoubtedly some who considered it unacceptable that anyone at all should ever present their teaching as having definite authority, even where it conformed very well indeed with what had been passed down from the apostles as the true gospel.

Initially, such disputes as did arise were more concerned with Church government and practices rather than central issues to do with salvation and again these were largely such as arose out of issues relating to questions of authority. Direct contact with the apostles was a persuasive argument in favour of an individual's right to be heard as speaking with authority, but increasingly this came to be suspected, and we can be sure that some with personally ambitious motives were rather free with their assertions that 'this was what Peter/Paul/John used to say on the matter'. Though it did not always turn out that way, we have little reason to doubt a general strength of commitment to doing God's will in God's way.

Since there are obvious limitations on the space that can be given to our study of this vast field of Church history, this present article will offer a very general sketch of the period between 100 and 460 AD, to be followed by a closer look at some of the more important issues, like the major heresies and the way in which they were handled, in subsequent studies. If my own experience as a member of the Lord's Church is anything to go by, I am inclined to think that this is a rather neglected field amongst us, and it is not necessarily the dry, academic and fruitless area of study it is often

taken to be. I will have to ask for your patience in this section whilst we look at some of the necessary factual background material, but I hope to be able to indicate in later studies that there are some helpful lessons to be learned both from the mistakes that were made, and the wisdom that was shown, as it was delivered through the apostles' teaching, in combating false teaching, false beliefs and deviations from God's will.

Those who assumed the apostles' mantle of leadership are often referred to as the Fathers and are sub-divided into four categories, roughly as follows:

- ❑ The Apostolic or Post-Apostolic Fathers: AD 95 – 150
- ❑ The Apologists: AD 140 – 200
- ❑ The Polemicists: AD 180 – 225
- ❑ The Systematic Theologians: Ad 225 – 460

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Generally speaking, as no major controversy had as yet taken hold, these were men who took on the responsibility of building up the Church. The majority of their teaching was to do with matters like unity, fellowship, Christian growth and the practical dimension's of expressing one's faith in religious lifestyle. For the most part they had little to say about salvation related questions, although **BARNABAS** forcefully revisited the relationship between Christian faith and Jewish Law-keeping in what some regard as almost anti-Semitic fashion.

CLEMENT wrote a letter in response to a request for advice similar to that received much earlier by Paul, asking for guidance on how to restore unity in the face of intensifying divisions amongst the church at Corinth. It seems that division was a perennial problem there, and such was the regard in which this letter was held that, when the time came, there were many who believed that 1 Clement should be included within the canon of scripture.

POLYCARP was a direct disciple of the apostle John who served in Smyrna and concentrated on teaching and writing about the necessity for making faith a living reality in obedience to God's will. Of that which he wrote, the only remaining item is a letter to the Philippians, which contains extensive references to the majority of Paul's letters. He was martyred in AD156 and on being asked to denounce Christ, replied that he was not prepared to be unfaithful to the One who had been faithful to him for 86 years.

IGNATIUS is often the one who is criticised as having instigated the concept of bishops presiding over the affairs of more than one congregation, thus paving the way for the pre-eminence of the bishopric of Rome. Whilst his own step was one too far removed from apostolic teaching on the role and position of elders, it would be unfair to saddle him with responsibility for those excesses to which later leaders went. Nor were his motives necessarily sinister; remember that authority and submission to Godly leadership were the big problems of the day.

Works by the names of **THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS** and **THE DIDACHE** belong to this period also. The latter is known as **THE TEACHINGS OF THE TWELVE** and is still available in Penguin paperback classics today. It is divided into four sections that deal respectively with Christian ethics and morality, baptism, fasting and the Lord's Supper, Church government and the end of the world. The work has acquired a certain notoriety as that which first offered threefold pouring as an alternative to total immersion, but it should be noted that this instruction emphasises the fact that pouring is only to be used where immersion is not practical.

As remains the case today, prominence is not necessarily a guarantee that the views expressed by those who possess them are held by the general mass of Christians, nor for that matter that where certain views are not held by the many, they are

inevitably divergent from divine truth. Unfortunately the numbers stacked up behind any given position have regularly proved to be a poor guide to its reliability.

THE APOLOGISTS

Increasingly the Church was troubled by attacks upon its teachings, for the most part from those outside, and in philosophical terms. These attacks could not be left unanswered and it is perhaps a little disingenuous of those who criticise the apologists for succumbing to the temptation to answer them in similar terms.

JUSTIN MARTYR, TERTULLIAN and **TATIAN** are the three most renowned names amongst the early Apologists. Justin was put to death by the emperor Marcus Aurelius, to whom he had written one of his major defences of Christian teaching, although the best known of these was a dialogue with Trypho the Jew. Although he was widely known as a Christian who had come to faith as a philosopher, he demonstrates a consistent focus on Jesus and on scripture as the final authority being the very Word of God.

Tatian's renown is as the author of a work known as the **DIATESSERON**, the first harmony of the gospels, published between 150 and 160 AD.

Of these three, the most eminent was Tertullian, largely because of the sheer volume of his written work in apologetics and theology and because, as a lawyer and one with diplomatic skills, he played a significant part in pleading the case that being a Christian did not make one a disloyal citizen of the Roman Empire. He also had a great deal to do with the controversy raised by the **MONTANISTS**, to whom we shall return in a later piece on the major heresies.

THE POLEMICISTS

Mainly the Apologists set out to answer the attacks of those who raised them from outside the Church, whereas in the case of the Polemicists, their efforts were directed to the refutation of heresies that developed within for the most part.

These false teachings were many, varied and persistent. Indeed some of them have more than a little to do with some of the major sects, and their beliefs, to this day. One of these heresies, Gnosticism, proved to be so virulent and far-reaching and has such close connections with the New Testament text, that it is intended to devote an entire article to this subject, whilst others will be looked at more briefly.

IRENAEUS devoted much of his life's work to the defence of the one true gospel against the dangerous persuasion and speculative philosophies of the Gnostics, who frequently gained a sympathetic audience amongst some of the churches. As a further dimension to this same concern though, Irenaeus also set down one of the earliest formulations of what he regarded as sound doctrine in an effort to combat error, through plain and positive statement of fact and truth; in this respect at least, it was rather like the method adopted by Paul in the letter to the Colossians, a letter largely concerned with the early and incipient stages of this same Gnostic heresy.

The question of the forgiveness of post-baptism sin was the dispute with which the name of **HIPPOLYTUS** is associated; Tertullian weighed into the Gnostic controversy too, along with further contributions to those over the nature of the soul and the trinity of the Godhead.

THE SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIAN

The names of **OREGEN, ATHANASIUS, JEROME, AMBROSE, AUGUSTINE** and **JOHN CHRYSOSTOM** are the best known in this period and category, but considerations of space mean that we must leave fuller reference to them until we come to deal with the heresies and other teaching requirements to which they responded.



QUESTION:
Can you please give some background
to apparent contradictions in the Scriptures



The question with which I have been asked to deal concerns those verses in the Scriptures that present us with what appear to be plain contradictions.

Here is an example of what I mean. Recording the wickedness of the earth's early population, the Authorized Version of Gen.6: 6 states: **"It repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him at his heart."**

But in 1st Samuel 15:29 of the same version, the prophet Samuel is recorded as saying, **"The Strength of Israel will not repent, for he is not a man that he should repent"**, whilst the later 'Revised Standard Version' of the same verse reads, **"The Glory of Israel will not recant, for he is not a mortal that he should change his mind."**

Furthermore, in the A.V. of Mal.3: 6, God Himself says, **"I am the LORD, I change not"**, which, in the R.S.V, remains virtually unchanged, as, **"I, the LORD, do not change."** This statement is crystal clear, because the Hebrew word 'change' in this verse is 'shanan', which, in other verses, is rendered 'alter' or 'repent'.

1. How, then, do we reconcile these verses?

How can God be said to 'repent', when to 'repent' literally means 'to change one's mind'? I ask this because, in the New Testament, the verb 'repent' is the English translation of the Greek word 'metanoeo'.

Well, the first part of that word is 'meta', which means 'after', and the second part is 'noeo', which means 'to perceive'. Put the two parts together and 'metanoeo' - 'repent' - means 'to perceive after', and implies 'a change of mind'.

But, is not one of the characteristics of Deity *omniscience*? God is 'all-knowing', and because He knows everything He never learns anything new, and therefore never needs to change His opinion, and, therefore, can never be said to 'repent'. Psalm 55:8-9 reminds us that He says: **"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts, than your thoughts."**

This statement reminds me of another fact, namely, that whilst the evidence of order and design that we observe in the natural world around us and the laws that operate with such regularity in our universe, surely must convince a thoughtful person that an intelligent Mind has worked - (and still is at work) - and that God *exists*, the natural world *itself* - alone- does not reveal God's *character*, or His *will*, or the *purpose* He has planned for His creation. This means that we may only understand God's *Mind*, or come to know His *will*, when He chooses to reveal Himself to us.

If we ask the familiar question, "What is God like?" we are compelled to recognize that we have no way of finding out. "Canst thou by searching find out God?" is the challenge issued in Job 11:7.

As Christians, we believe that God has revealed both His character and His will in the Bible, which we rightly call 'the Word of God'.

2. But, since God tells us that His ways are 'not your ways', how can we understand His actions?

In other words, what terms or expressions must God use, to enable us to understand His nature and His mind, at least *partially*? I say, 'partially', because it is utterly impossible for us to understand Him completely. Indeed, if we *could* understand God completely, we would not need Him, because, in that respect, we would be His equals.

God helps us to reach this partial understanding of His nature, His mind and His will, by using language which tells us that, just as *we* are *hurt* when those whom we love are hurt, and are *sad*, when those whom we have tried to help disappoint us, and are *pleased* when our loved ones do well, God Himself is capable of these and all other emotions.

3. This should not surprise us.

After all, God created us '*in His own likeness*'; He made us like Himself. The Mormons teach that He has a body like ourselves and has arms and legs, but our likeness to God is not *physical*, but *spiritual*. He created us moral and intelligent beings, and if you read James 3:9, you will notice the use of the present tense. James says that we '*are made*' in the likeness of God. Although Man is marred by sin, he remains a moral and intelligent being, and, in that sense, retains his likeness to God.

This means that the emotions you and I feel are emotions which God Himself has made us capable of feeling, and – (dare I say it?) – *they are emotions which God Himself also feels*. He is not a cold, insensitive, distant Being who, as some so-called scientists suppose, in the beginning, *wound up* the Universe like a gigantic clock, and then left it to run down, until it stops. On the contrary, He has revealed Himself as a caring Father who remains involved with both His creation and His creatures.

Incidentally, this is one reason why I am not greatly concerned about the depletion of the ozone layer or global warming, matters about which godless and unbelieving men are so greatly concerned in these days. They leave God out of their calculations, and ignore the fact that it was God who created the 'ozone layer', and who is in control of 'global warming'! Therefore nothing will happen to our planet, or our universe, until He calls 'Time'!

4. We should listen to Peter!

In fact, if our fellow-men would read the scriptures they would see that, almost 2000 years ago, through Peter, God gave clear warning about the destiny in store for the Earth, and what might well be called '*real*' global warming! Read 2nd Pet.3.

I repeat; what Peter describes does not worry me, because before that which he so graphically describes takes place, God's children will have been removed from the Earth. We should be re-assured by the knowledge that our Heavenly Father is still in control!

5. The use of anthropomorphic expressions does not deny God's omniscience or influence His actions

Nor, when the Bible tells us that God '*repents*', does it mean that He repents as we ourselves repent. Because our knowledge is limited, we naturally change our minds when we learn something that we did not previously know. But, because God knows everything there is to be known, or that can be known, the same can never be said of Him.

When we read that His behaviour changes in a way that the Bible describes as '*repenting*', it merely means that Man's repentance and change of conduct, has made it possible for God to change His attitude towards Man, and enables Him to treat Man in a different way.

6. "Anthropomorphism"

The great problem that we have to deal with is the fact that, as human beings, we can only explain God's actions in human terms, and his means that anything we say about God can never be wholly accurate.

Please remember that because the Bible is His Word, what we read in it is His own revelation of Himself, and, when He wants us to understand how He feels in any particular situation, He uses words and expressions that lead us to think about Him as though He were a human being. Indeed, we can only understand God and relate to His feelings and emotions, when we think about His actions in a human way and *describe* them in a human way.

These words and phrases that speak of God as though He is a human being are known as '*anthropomorphisms*'

For instance, God conveys His feeling about evil by saying that He '*hates*' sin. He expresses the fact that He is involved with the world which He has created when He tells us, through Jesus, that '*God so loved*' the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16). And, when we read in Genesis 6:6 that God '*repented*' that he had made man, we are meant to understand something of the *pain* He feels when men turn away from Him.

7. An Error of Modern Theology.

Some modern theologians reject the notion of a 'personal God', and prefer to describe God using such expressions as '*the essence of being*', '*primeval force or energy*', etc.

I remember that about 60 years ago, the Bishop of Birmingham at the time, Dr. John Robinson, produced a book entitled, "*The Honest to God Controversy*", in which he described God in such meaningless, abstract terms, that the well-known C.S. Lewis, devastatingly said that all that Dr. Robinson's book did for him, was to conjure up "*a picture of a gigantic tapioca pudding!*"

Such terms, '*God loves*', '*God hates*', '*God repented*', etc., are '*anthropomorphisms*', and their great importance lies in the fact that they reveal that God is not a hard, cold, unfeeling, implacable, distant Being, but a Creator, who cares about His creation and His creatures. He is a *personal* Being, who possesses all the attributes of personality.

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COURAGE TO SPEAK AND ACCEPT MISTAKES

(By V.Sujatha)

People love other people for a reason, often for their selfishness. If someone does something wrong and the other always supports him rather than helping him realise his mistake, the wrongdoer will like him. Maybe they know they are wrong but are not worried about it. One should speak if the other is wrong irrespective of who he is and what the consequences will be. By not correcting him, we are taking part in his fault. James 4:17 says: "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin."

Our age difference can be another hindrance to acknowledging our fault. Older people are reluctant to accept correction from younger people and vice versa. Ego comes in the way of accepting we have made mistakes. Age, experience and knowledge do not guarantee that one is wise. One grows in wisdom by reading the Bible, understanding it correctly and applying it to oneself, prayerfully. Even if scriptural teaching comes from a younger person, it should not be despised (1 Timothy 4:11, 12). Paul told Timothy to reprove and rebuke (1 Timothy 4:2).

Who should reprove and rebuke? The Bible says all brethren should reprove and rebuke (James 5:19,20). However we should strive to be good examples. (1 Timothy 4:12) Even so we all make mistakes but as Christians, it is our duty to correct and accept correction. James 5:16 says: "Confess* *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

It needs courage to admit our faults. Let us try to improve our lives and of others. Let us open our hearts to people when it is our fault. Let us have the courage to accept our faults and learn to improve.

*Greek: *exomologeio* = acknowledge openly and joyfully.

Thinking Out Loud

1950's - AND BACK

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

I was born in 1949. I first went to school in 1954 and left my third primary school in January 1960 for secondary school. My primary school days were some of the happiest days of my life.

Britain in the 1950's was, I think, a better country than it is today. True, there was not the same wealth, but people seemed to be happier and more relaxed. I was out and about a lot playing football with my pals and exploring the countryside around the growing new town of East Kilbride. The summer nights, especially, seemed to go on forever. Our parents had no worries in our being attacked or abducted or anything like that. We were all over the place and it was altogether a wonderful, peaceful time.

Every Sunday we attended three church meetings, including afternoon Sunday school. My father was the Sunday school superintendent. We all learnt a lot from him. The highlights of the year were the Wee Social in February and the Sunday school trip in early June. At the former, we all had to do our individual party piece, which was quite nerve-wracking, and, in addition, sing a number of choir pieces under the direction of "Uncle Willie", who was very talented musically. These days are not forgotten. They helped mould and shape many of us into what we are today.

But the world was changing in the 1950's to explode in the 1960's. I need but mention space exploration, rock 'n roll, the cold war, the birth of the European Common Market, the first parking meters, the contraceptive pill, the hydrogen bomb, atomic power stations, antibiotics, the growth of television, tensions in the Middle East, Suez crisis, Soviet troops in Hungary, Castro in Cuba, desegregation in schools in the southern states of the USA, film - "On the Waterfront", air travel, etc.

950's

But I like to look back and, first, to the 950's AD, a thousand years earlier. What was going on then?

Europe, of course, was in the "Dark Ages". Otto I was the king of the Franks and the Lombards. The Pope from 955 was John X11. He succeeded Agapetus II and reigned until 964. Indulf was king of Scotland. Edwy, son of Edmund became king of England. He succeeded King Edred. In 957 the Mercians and Northumbrians rebelled against Edwy. In 959 Edgar the Peaceful became king of England and reigned until 975. Romanus II became Byzantine Emperor in the same year. In 954, the expulsion of Eric Blodaxe took place. He was the last Danish king of York. Within 50 years of 950, there was a German Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate in Spain, the Fatimid Caliphate in north Africa and the western Middle East, the Byzantine Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, the Principality of Russia, the Duchy of Hungary, the Bulgarian Empire, to name but a few. The history of Europe is long and fascinating.

50's

We now go back nine hundred years to the "genuine" 50's. Now we are not far off the ministry of Jesus and are into the very early days of Christianity. The Roman Empire was, of course, to the fore. The 50's saw two emperors, Claudius, who died in 54 and Nero, who turned out to be unstable and cruel. The apostle Paul probably wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans in the 50's. Mark and

James may also have composed their works in this decade. Paul undertook his second and third missionary journeys in the 50's and was arrested in 56. He probably travelled to Rome in 60 AD. The Roman Procurators of Judea in this decade were Ventidius Cumanus (48-52), M. Antonius Felix (52-59), before whom Paul was tried, and Porcius Festus (59-61), before whom Paul was again tried, which led to his appeal to Caesar. The Jewish high priests at the time were Ananias, son of Nebedaius (c. 47-58) and Ishmael, son of Phiabi II (c. 58-60). The 50's also saw the rise of the Zealots, although they had been around for years. In fact, the Zealot party was founded by Judas the Galilean, who had led a revolt against Rome as far back as 6 AD. They were called Zealots because they followed the example of one Mattathias and his sons and followers, who manifested zeal for the law of God when Antiochus IV tried to suppress the Jewish religion.

REFLECTION

The thing that strikes me about all this is that the Roman Empire is long gone, but the kingdom of Christ is still with us. What pagan Roman back then could have predicted this outcome? Later on, John the apostle saw the decline and fall of the fourth, and last, of the four great world empires in the book of Revelation. His writings should be read in conjunction with those of an unbeliever, Edward Gibbon, who penned the massive work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. History took its course and God, I believe, had a hand in it. God is always interested in His people, His "faithful remnant". They overcame ten major persecutions from the time of Nero (54 - 68 AD) to Diocletian (284 - 305 AD), many of them resisting unto blood.

So in the 50's, the apostles were at work, spreading forth the good news of Jesus and His love. They were, of course, without James, who had been killed around 40 AD. The book of Acts concentrates on the labours of Paul. His second missionary journey took him to places such as Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus. The third missionary journey saw him in Antioch, Galatia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Macedonia, Greece, Troas, Miletus, from where he journeyed to Jerusalem. He, of course, was not always welcomed where he went. For example, he was beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi and faced riots in Thessalonica and Ephesus. His bravery is legendary.

The gospel of Christ was bringing Jew and Gentile together and was having an impact everywhere. The followers of Jesus were telling others that their "religion" was not a way of life, but life in the Way. Jesus was the Way, the Truth and the Life. He brought love, joy and hope to all, including the countless slaves within the Empire. Jesus was not only the promised Messiah of the Jews, but also the Saviour of the world. The man from Nazareth was that big! He had shown by what He had said and done that he was Immanuel, God with us. He had even risen from the dead and there were many witnesses to prove this wonderful fact. He was now back in heaven reigning over a spiritual kingdom that would last forever. Jesus was the real Lord and Master and Saviour. No one, not even Caesar, could compare with Jesus of Nazareth.

The "Nazarene sect" had taken off and there was no stopping its impact and influence. Congregations were springing up all over the place and there were even some in Rome itself. Disciples of Jesus were here to stay, no matter what men would say or do to them. Their faith was strong and uncompromising. Their faith was real and lasting. Their faith was a saving faith from the pollution, power and penalties of sin. The faith would last generations even to the generation of the 1950's. Still people believe in Jesus. Still people trust and obey Him. Still people preach His gospel. If the Lord tarries, I believe they will still be around in 2950, and beyond.

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING?

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: THE Holiness of God

When the good news about Jesus is taught, and the result is that the message is believed by individuals, then those who choose to obey the gospel by being baptised for the forgiveness of sin, God adds to the Church (Acts 2:47). Those whose sins are not forgiven will experience the wrath of God (Rom 2:6-11). Christians who have been forgiven by the grace of God, and have placed themselves under the kingship of Christ, will obtain mercy and receive eternal life.

A CALL TO WORSHIP

God calls individuals, but having been called through the word, God adds those who answer the call to the Christian community; they become a part of the people of God, the Church. The basic meaning of the word church is "assembly". The use of the word church shows the importance of God's children assembling together. In particular, Christians assemble to worship God on every first day of the week for Jesus taught that God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth (Jon 4:21-24). Jesus explained that the time was coming when worship would no longer to be tied to a specific location but rather would be spiritual in nature. Genuine worshippers would worship God in spirit, which is in sincerity in contrast to pretence. Truth is that which conforms to reality, and is that which is genuine as opposed to what is false. Worship that is in truth is worship that is as directed by the word of God.

Thus, the worship of God is no light matter. Worship is not something that can be done with varying degrees of enthusiasm depending upon one's mood and the side of the bed we got out of that morning, and whether what is being done in worship is appealing or not. Neither is it something that we do when we can squeeze in the time; or something we do in part because of time pressures. Genuine worship is the proper response of Christians to God's gracious gift of his Son; it is a recognition of our complete dependence upon God for all that we have and are. God does not need anything, including our worship. But worship is something that God requires of his children; that is genuine and appropriate worship.

A LOVING GOD; A HOLY GOD

In order for sinners to be forgiven, and the Church to become a reality, it took the love of God. God took the initiative, and in His love he did for mankind what man could not do for himself. God acted in history, in that He sent his only son to live in this world. When Jesus, with God's foreknowledge, was put to death on a cross, God raised Him from the dead, proving who Jesus was (Rom. 1:4). While we may have difficulty over some of the specifics, it is clear that God planned that Jesus' death would make possible sinful man's reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:19). Also it brought about the establishment of the Church (Acts 20:28), and made available the gift of eternal life to those who obey (John 3:15-16; Heb 5:9).

When we understand that the love of God has reached out to rebellious mankind, our response to such an expression of love should be one of gratitude and obedience to His commands, and to express such gratitude in worship.

We recognise that the love of God was not the only attribute of God that was at work in the reconciling of mankind to God. Of course, grace was also involved for what mankind needed he did not deserve. It is through God's grace that individuals find forgiveness and the people of God came into being (Titus 2:11-15).

Further, a little thought should reveal that there is more to God's character than love and grace, as great and important as they are. A fundamental fact about God is that God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16; Acts 3:14). The basic meaning of the word is "separation," and so God is totally separate from evil. The holiness of God must come into the picture as well as his love and grace. We make a serious mistake when we see God only as a God of love extending his grace to mankind, and we fail to take account of his holiness. They must not be divorced from each other. That love and holiness are inter-related is to be seen in the need for the atoning work of Jesus in the first place. God stands in opposition to sin and because of sin God is in conflict with the world. The holiness of God will not allow him to look the other way, or simply to wink at sin, shrug his shoulders with some comment like, "What can you do with them?" The need for Jesus to shed his blood for our past sins to be forgiven, before we can be reconciled to God, speaks of the holiness of God. That God in his love sent Jesus to die for us, should declare to us that the holiness of God did not allow him simply to overlook sin.

WRITTEN FOR OUR LEARNING

Moses had hastily fled Egypt after discovering that it was public knowledge that he had killed an Egyptian. After living in the wilderness for some 40 years he was looking after the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, when he came to Horeb the mountain of God. Immediately, we are informed that the Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses, alerting us to the importance of what was about to happen. Moses simply saw a bush burning, but a bush that was not consumed by the fire. Intrigued, Moses checked it out only to hear God speaking to him from the bush. God told him to come no closer and instead to take off his sandals "for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Ex. 3:1-6 NKJV.) Moses' reaction was one of fear. Do you think that he kicked off his sandals so that they flew anywhere, like some petulant teenager objecting to such a demand? Or did he do it rather deliberately, like a husband doing it under protest? How do you think that Moses took off his sandals?

Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10) burnt incense to God as commanded. They were the right people, in the right place, with the right censors. But, they had the wrong fire. The fire they used is described as profane; we are not told why God considered it that. We are told though that it was not what God had commanded. We are also told that Nadab and Abihu failed to treat God as holy and paid the price.

As we try to understand what they did, we know that it was not the first time for Nadab and Abihu to be in God's presence (Ex 24:1, 9-11). They had eaten and drunk in presence of God. We have a saying: "familiarity breeds contempt." Perhaps they got used to the glory and so it was no big deal, and so they got sloppy. Perhaps they had been drinking (Lev 10:9-10). It seems that near enough was good enough, in their eyes; but not in the eyes of a holy God.

SOCIETY TODAY

Here in the 21st century, it would be fair to say that God has little relevance in the lives of most people. It is not that people see themselves as rebelling against God; rather it is that they see him as lacking any importance, and so people do not bother

to enquire about him. Even worse, the righteousness that God calls Christians to is not just ignored, it is disparaged and treated with disdain, with no thought given to its origin. As Christians we live in this world and spend a lot of our time amongst people for whom God is irrelevant and who ridicule his righteousness. In an environment like this, while we might well be believers, it is rather easy to be influenced by those around us, and to think of God as being rather distant and remote. Just as God appears to have no part to play in daily life in this society, so too it is rather easy for us to give God no place in our daily lives either. Also, this society has much to say about personal relationships as it struggles to help people sort them out, but finds talk of morality as abhorrent (conveniently overlooking the fact that a lack of morality is what destroys relationships). In this situation it can be more comfortable for Christians to focus on the love of God and a bit embarrassing to speak of the holiness of God and his righteousness. While God's holiness can prove to be a real inconvenience, God's love can be a whole lot more comfortable.

Where God is predominantly love, not falling foul of the ever increasing multitude of rules and regulations foisted on us by the Government, appears to be more of an immediate cause of unease than failing to keep the commandments of God. The fear of being mugged today can be more of a pressing concern than the fear of being lost in eternity. In this society God can quite easily be pushed in our minds to the periphery of life instead of being the centre of life. In a culture that appears to be running quite well without God it is rather easy to forget that God is running this world. While the majority ignore God, and a few are openly hostile to God because of their sin, we must not forget that God is against this world because of its sin (Rom. 2:6-11), and is involved in and dealing with our society (Rom. 1:16-32; Acts 17:26), regardless of how it looks.

WORSHIP TODAY

In such an environment, it is no wonder that it is much easier to take a relaxed view of God and focus on his love and grace, than to think about his holiness and what that demands from us. It is far easier to take the world's influence with us into worship than it is for us to take God's influence into everyday life.

Nonetheless, the reality is that when we enter into God's presence through prayer or worship we enter into the Holy Place (Heb 10:19-25). The Holy Place is no longer a building (Acts 7:48; 17:24-25) but a place not made with hands (Heb. 9:24), but it is still holy. However, we can enter with confidence and without fear through the blood of Jesus.

However, as with Moses and Nadab and Abihu we can respond to being in God's presence in a number of different ways. We can choose to worship in a lackadaisical, casual, laid back way that takes little account of the awesomeness and holiness of God. We can regularly turn up late, or chat to each other, or play with our children, or daydream during worship. We can choose to worship by simply going through the motions; a little like paying ones dues. Having fulfilled our obligation we can expect a return for having done our duty. In the place of the holiness of God, something else like human need can become the focus. Similarly, we can worship looking to get something out of worship immediately, such as an emotional uplift. I expect that in the main it is not thought through carefully, but when someone complains that they got nothing out of worship, they have shifted the focus from the worship of God to therapy for the self. Today, God does not strike us down when we worship in a way that fails to treat him with due respect, but he must still be regarded as holy.

Having written about the confidence that is the Christians in approaching God through Jesus' shed blood, the writer of Hebrews balanced that with the warning

against sinning wilfully in an ongoing way (Heb. 10:19-30). He also reminds us that in gratitude for receiving the kingdom Christians should "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire." (Heb. 12:28-29). If we allow our confidence to become carelessness our worship can easily become vacuous.

A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

It is probably fair to say that the easy familiarity with God and the lack of awe that we see at times in worship, particularly during the sermon, may well reflect a lack of learning from the word of God about his holiness. That can put us in a downward spiral. Because we fail to study we can lack a real appreciation of the holiness of God. Lacking that appreciation it is easy to slip into not paying that much attention to what he says to us through his holy word (Rom.1:2), especially what is said in the sermon. The less we listen to Scripture then the less we understand about God's holiness. Add to that, the failure to attend Bible classes, and the resulting lack of the knowledge of God, and a lack of awe in worship should be no surprise to us.

God's holy word must be central in our lives if God's holiness is to be central in our thinking. Listening to God's word being preached is a part of our public service to God. When we comprehend the holiness of God it should help engender in us an awe that promotes true worship. Knowledge of God's holiness should bring a desire to learn more about him from his holy word, and encourage us to work at worship.

New and Information

Ghana Appeal

For nineteen years the Ghana Appeal has been assisting our brethren to extend God's Kingdom there, as well as providing medical treatment for brethren in need. Through it brethren have survived to continue their service to our Lord. It is important for this to continue into the years to come, but that depends on much needed donations continuing.

The communal commercial venture that sisters in neighbouring churches inaugurated with initial funding from the Appeal continues to do well. Unfortunately one of these sisters now requires a hysterectomy and we will be helping with her hospital fees. Another medical case is a brother whose efforts have brought many to Christ over many years. He has an ulcer requiring attention and this may require an operation. This is another case we are glad to be able to help.

We have just heard of another gospel campaign where brethren from various congregations gather to declare the Gospel in all its truth. This has had considerable success in establishing new churches, but it does involve some expense, including transport, electric light and food for those taking part. If they do not have a public address system, this would need to be hired.

The nursery school that we helped to establish in a remote village continues to provide basic education and a meal for the children. It also gives them good spiritual training that should stand them in good stead in the future.

Having seen how difficult it is to conduct an evening meeting in darkness with only four or five small paraffin lamps among those present, it is good to hear mains electricity has reached another village where a church has been meeting since before the Appeal started. Your donations will make it possible to meet the costs of connection to the meeting house, as well as internal wiring and fittings. What a difference this will make.

Those wishing to help, please make cheques payable to:
Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to treasurer:

**Mrs. Janet Macdonald,
12 Charles Drive, Larbert,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire. FK5 3HB
Tel: 01324 562480**

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

**Lancaster University
Thursday 28th August
to Saturday 30th August 2008**

REACHING OUT TO TODAY'S WORLD

Confirmed Speakers

Tony Coffey (Ireland) – Keynote
Bob Eckman (England)
Mike Moss (USA)
Ian Cameron (Scotland)
Vladimir Psenko (Croatia)
Gary Holloway (USA)
Eleni Mellirrytos (Greece)

More speakers from the UK to be confirmed.

Song Leader:

Jason Snethen (England)

Early Bird Fee: £99

(before 30th April, 2008)

Contact:

STEPHEN WOODCOCK
11 West Mount, Orrell, Wigan
UK, WN5 8LX.
Tel: (01942) 211 479

E-mail:

stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

Website:

www.europeanchristianworkshop.com

NEWTONGRANGE, SCOTLAND

Our **ANNUAL SOCIAL** will be held as follows:

Date:

Saturday 11th October 2008
at 1.00pm

Speaker:

Bro. Ian Davidson, Motherwell.

A warm welcome is extended to all.

THE SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

BE INSPIRED... To run the race

The 2008 Olympic Games will get under way in Beijing, China in August and we will have the opportunity of watching the very best competitors from around the world compete in a huge range of events and disciplines over a period of 3 weeks. Let's hope that it really is a case of best man and woman winning through their own ability, dedication and preparation.

Today's modern Olympics stand in stark contrast to the ancient Olympics that started in Greece in 776 BC and continued every 4 years through to 393 AD. Then, for the first 13 Olympics there was just one event, the stadion, a 200-yard foot race open only to 'free' Greek men. Eventually boxing, and then by the 18th Games, the pentathlon were added to the schedule. There are number of theories as to the origin of the Games but the most common attribute the games to the great Greek hero Hercules (Heracles), who held the games as a thanks offering to honor his father, Zeus.

Games as major events formed an important part of Roman and Greek tradition and were still held in the early days of the Christian era. In 47 AD Emperor Claudius celebrated the Secular Games to mark the 800th anniversary of the founding of the city of Rome. Domitian also celebrated them in 88 AD. In 67 AD the Emperor Nero is said to have entered the Olympic Games and was named as the winner of every event that he entered!! So much for fair competition! The ancient Olympic games survived as an athletic fixture until AD 393, when they are abolished by a decree of the Christian emperor Theodosius. By then they had been in continuous existence for well over 1000 years - an astonishing record for any sporting event. The 'modern' Olympics were restarted in 1896.

It isn't at all surprising then that Paul, in particular, uses the imagery of games and sport to illustrate that dedication and commitment that Christians should bring to their pursuit of a prize the value of which extends far beyond any piece of transitory sporting glory. "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..." (Heb. 12:1). "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Cor. 9:24,25). Writing to Timothy, Paul summed up his life like this: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7,8). We may not be Olympians in the modern sporting sense, but through God's grace we may yet stand on God's podium and receive the prize. Brother and sister, keep on running!!

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WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING?

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: SINFULNESS OF MANKIND

Becoming a Christian includes becoming a part of a Christian community. As with any community, responsibilities follow. It seems self-evident that God should be worshipped and praised for his great love in sending his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and making possible our salvation (1 John 4:9-10). Jesus confirmed that such is the case and that the time was coming when genuine worshippers would worship God, in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

WORSHIP AND EDIFICATION

That meeting together is important can be seen by the large number of passages in the New Testament about the Church coming together (e.g. Acts 4:31; 1 Cor. 11:17; 14:23; Heb. 10:25). In fact, the first thing that Luke records about the Church was that they persevered in meeting together and in the teachings of the apostles (Acts 2:42).

This should not surprise us for in society all kinds of groups with a common interest meet together on a regular basis for the benefit of the individuals. Even those who subscribe to popular magazines, and form large nationwide congregations made up of readers largely unknown to each other, are finding that actual meetings are both useful and popular.

Thus, Christianity is not simply a private religious experience but is tied up very much with assembling with other Christians. It is clear from the New testament that while those meeting together are to focus their attention on the worship of God in heaven, it is also a time that involves encouragement and the mutual edification of one another, (Heb 10:19-25; Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:26) along with the word of God's playing an important role in each worshipper. But, why the need that the word of Christ should indwell in Christians, and why the need that everything in worship ought to be done for edification?

A HOLY GOD - A HOLY PEOPLE

To say that God is holy is not simply to use yet another adjective to describe God's unique character; it has meaning. The basic meaning of the word is "separation," and being set apart speaks of boundaries and limits. That God is holy means that God is totally separate from evil. Further, to be holy God must also be against sin and cannot simply ignore it. How could God be holy if he simply let sin go on without bothering to deal with it? Turning a blind eye to evil is not being holy.

The word holy is also applied to things, places and persons that are not inherently holy (1 Kings 8:4; 1 Chron. 29:3; Ex.22:31). That which is set apart for service to God is also described as holy. Christians are set apart for the service of God. It is not just that God is holy; he expects Christians to be holy as well. Peter made that plain in his first epistle when he wrote: "as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as he who called you is holy,

you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Pet.1:15-16 NKJV). Christians who are set apart to serve God, then of necessity must separate themselves from the behaviour of those around them and become holy just as God is holy, for God is against all evil and unrighteousness. How can we as Christians be involved in evil when God is against it? It is no wonder that we as Christians are no longer to live as we used to live (1Peter 4:1-6) when we realise, as the first three chapters of Romans make plain, that we all "fall short of the glory of God." (Rom 3:9-26). Being different to those around us is not optional for the Hebrew writer tells us that without holiness we cannot expect to see the Lord (Heb 12:14). In fact he says that holiness is to be earnestly pursued, which is much stronger than simply seeking it from time to time.

Writing to Christians in Rome, Paul, in discussing sin and having explained how God is able to forgive sinners while remaining righteous himself, then asked, "How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it" (Rom 6:2 NKJV)? Paul went on to argue that Christians are to stop serving sin and instead are to live righteous lives (Rom. 6:1-23). Notice in particular his words: "so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness" (Rom. 6:19 NKJV).

A NEED TO LEARN

While the need for the forgiveness of sins brings about the initial calling by God and the offer of forgiveness, baptism alone does not solve the problem of sin in its entirety. While baptism provides forgiveness for all past sins, of whatever kind, it must be preceded by repentance. Repentance involves not only a sorrow for sin but also a change of will regarding sin; the decision to get out of the sinning business and start doing what is right. But a decision to stop sinning is not the same as not sinning for there is still the problem of ongoing sin in the life of the child of God. This is in spite of the fact that God calls Christians to live holy lives (Eph. 1:4).

As holy conduct is rooted firmly in the will of God there is a serious need to learn the will of God; to learn what behaviour is sinful and what is righteous. To continue to practise some things will exclude baptised believers from their reward (1 Cor. 6:9-11). There is also the continued need for forgiveness, which, by God's grace, is freely available upon repentance. But how does one repent of a sin when one has no idea that a particular practice is sin?

A part of God's plan for the Church is that when God's people meet to remember Jesus' death and resurrection, they also meet to hear the word of God taught (2 Tim.4:2). For what purpose does God want us to be taught? What is it that we are to be taught about? Is it that God has in mind an examination on the judgement day and we have to get a pass mark to be allowed into heaven? No, that is not God's intention at all.

God wants us to change our behaviour (Rom. 6:11-14; Eph. 4:17). God wants us to stop sinning and instead to live righteous lives. Just a quick perusal of the New Testament books makes that rather plain. The letters are full of specific, concrete instructions on how Christians are to live, and they spell out the things that Christians must no longer practise.

Naturally, when we first become Christians we know very little about what constitutes righteous living. This is complicated by the fact that we live in a society that chooses to be guided by feelings, and does not look all that bad in our eyes, except in extreme

cases. But the issue is not what we feel is right and wrong, but what God says is sin and what he says is not sin. When he speaks of holiness then clearly there are some behaviours that God accepts and some that he will not accept, and we need to know what they are. It takes time to discover what God is calling us to, and to determine what God says is righteous living and what he says is unrighteous living. And it simply cannot be done without studying Scripture; not just reading it, but studying it.

God wants us to change our behaviour and an indispensable part of achieving that is teaching and learning. God himself has made teaching necessary to the process of change. Even our society recognises the crucial importance of teaching if behaviour is to be changed. Time and time again the government today tries to implement change for the good of society, and, almost without exception, included in that is teaching people. If we are not taught by God through Scripture, how will we know what to change from and what to change to? Without being taught we do not know what is sinful behaviour and what is righteousness (Isaiah 55:8).

THE PURPOSE OF PREACHING IS TO CHANGE LIVES

The purpose of Scripture is to instruct us in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). Instruction in this verse is not simply teaching facts. This can be seen in that the same word is used by the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 12:3-11) where he speaks of God chastening his children and where such chastening is "grievous". This word "instruction" involves strong discipline. As it is Scripture that is to be preached to the Church then we can safely conclude that the purpose of preaching is to change the listeners (2 Tim. 3:14-4:5) and which will involve disciplined training. To the church as Colosse Paul wrote, "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus (Col. 1:28 NKJV).

Was that the purpose of the last sermon you heard preached, or the purpose of the last sermon that you preached? Can you say specifically what change was called for and if any consideration was given to how that change might be brought about? Even if the speaker failed to do that, what change did you yourself determine was called for in the light of the Scriptures to which the speaker referred? Even in the face of less than ideal preaching we all are still individually responsible for our own salvation (Phil.2:12) and can make an effort to make a connection between the Scriptures used in any sermon, and the lives we live, and then make appropriate changes to how we live.

God wants us to be holy and we are not. God intends that preaching change us, in that it will enable us to become holy like he is holy. The biblical alternatives to how we normally think and act have to be both taught and learnt, and the sermon is a part of the method that God has chosen to help us to have the mind of Christ. While we may be tempted to see teaching as just so much hot air, or just something that God has inflicted upon us to make us suffer, it is in fact an essential part of the Christian life. When we fail to make what we preach such that it will change people, and help them to become holy, then we fail to do what God intended preaching to do. When we fail to hear a sermon and learn from it, however poor it might be, we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to grow more like Christ. When we pay little to no attention to a sermon we are rejecting a part of God's plan that is intended to help us to grow more like Christ, to be a holy people. Being holy is not an option; God demands it of us.

Thinking Out Loud

BIOGRAPHIES

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

I like reading biographical books. On my shelves I have works on Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Augustus Caesar, Cicero, Herod the Great, The Apostle Paul, Constantine the Great, William Tindale, William Wallace, Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Drake, Thomas More, John Brown of Haddington, Robert and James Haldane, Charles Darwin, Robert Fitzroy, Robert Owen, Charles Dickens, Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Karl Marx, Adolf Hitler, John Buchan, William Barclay, Agatha Christie, Brian Wilson, and many, many more. One of the great and outstandingly researched biographies I have ever read is that by James Mackay on Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard. Mackay's attention to detail is quite incredible and, as often as he could, he went back to primary sources. He took nothing at face value.

To work on a detailed and lengthy biography must be quite an experience. Take, for example, the words of F.F. Bruce on the apostle Paul: "For half a century and more I have been a student and teacher of ancient literature, and to no other writer of antiquity have I devoted so much time and attention as Paul. Nor can I think of any other writer, ancient or modern, whose study is so richly rewarding as his. This is due to several aspects of his many-faceted character: the attractive warmth of his personality, his intellectual stature, the exhilarating release effected by his gospel of redeeming grace, the dynamism with which he propagated that gospel throughout the world, devoting himself single-mindedly to fulfilling the commission entrusted to him on the Damascus road ('this one thing I do') and labouring more abundantly than all his fellow-apostles - 'yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me'. My purpose in writing this book then is to share with others something of the rich reward which I myself have reaped from the study of Paul."

I think it must be difficult to deal with a personality, who has no redeeming qualities. Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's Chief of the SS, immediately comes to mind. I read Peter Padfield's study of him. It gives a frightening picture of one of the most evil men in history. One thing I learned about Himmler was that, early on in his life, his mind was completely poisoned by reading the wrong books. He soon turned from Catholicism to Nazism, and the rest is history. I always find it rather chilling to look upon the very glasses Himmler wore when he committed suicide. They are on display in a museum at Longleat in England. Longleat, incidentally, also displays many of Hitler's paintings. Interestingly, Churchill, Hitler's great adversary, also liked to paint and a number of his works are on display at Chartwell in Kent, England, where he used to live.

"ISMS"

Nazism is one of the many "isms" Christianity has had to contend with in recent times. Other "isms" include Mormonism, Christian Scientism, Seventh Day Adventism, Russellism, Deism, Darwinism, Marxism, communism, fascism, existentialism, agnosticism, rationalism, naturalism, liberalism, modernism and postmodernism (the list is not exhaustive). In the early days, Christianity had to overcome the likes of paganism, Gnosticism, stoicism, Epicureanism, Aristotelianism, Platonism, and certain aspects of Judaism, etc. "Isms" never seem to go away. They are always with us.

THE GOSPEL RECORDS

There have been many books written about Jesus - some good, some bad and many indifferent. I prefer to read of him from the gospel records of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,

which are the primary sources! These men had different backgrounds. Matthew was a Jew and a tax collector (*publicanus*) for the Roman authorities. Mark also was a Jew and was related to the famous Barnabas. He appears to have been a close companion of the apostle Peter. Luke was a Gentile, a doctor and a fellow-worker of Paul. John was a Jew and a fisherman by trade. He was the brother of the apostle James. Five books of the New Testament are attributed to him, including the large prophetic work, the book of Revelation. The first three gospel records are called the synoptic gospels because they are similar in content. John's gospel, which was written later, is different in style from the other three. Mark you, each record reflects the background of each writer. Luke's writings, for example, clearly reveal a medical background.

Luke is the largest of the records; Mark the shortest. All four are full of facts on the life, work and teaching of Jesus. John, for example, wrote: "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through His name" (20:30-31). He went on to say: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the whole world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen" (21:25). These men wrote that people might believe and obtain eternal life through Jesus. They themselves believed in Him and served Him all their days with all their might. Their love of Him shines through in their writings. They were all humble, sincere men, honest and true. I should have like to meet them all. Perhaps, I will one day.

Their books are wonderful. Their books contain wonderful words of life. They point to Jesus. They reveal He is the promised Messiah, the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Why should anyone doubt anything they have written? They were not into deception, but truth. They told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Jesus. As J.B. Phillips once remarked about the whole New Testament: "It is my serious conclusion that we have...words that bear the hall-mark of reality and the ring of truth." Some, if not all, of the biographical books I have read might well contain factual errors. This is very possible. But I believe the word of God is free from error. I believe the gospel records are true, as true can be. Jesus said exactly what they said He said. Jesus did exactly what they said He did. Why doubt even a word of their writings? What had they to gain in deceiving the world?

PROPER LISTENING

Books presuppose a reader. It is vitally important that people sit down and read these records. If they cannot read, then it is vitally important they listen to what is read. William Barclay has written: "There are many kinds of hearing in the world. There is indifferent hearing, disinterested hearing, critical hearing, sceptical hearing, and cynical hearing. The hearing that matters is the hearing that listens eagerly, believes and acts. The promises of God are not merely beautiful pieces of literature; they are promises on which a man is man is meant to stake his life and dominate his action." In the New Testament the four books of facts (gospels) are followed by the book of Acts. Acts should always follow facts. Sinners must respond to the commands of God. There is nothing complicated about this. We must believe the gospel of Christ and obey it. The apostle Paul wrote: "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them who know not God and who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power..." (1 Thessalonians 1: 7-9). I say to all: You should read about the life of Jesus because Jesus can read you. He knows all about you, your thoughts, your strengths, your weaknesses and your flaws. He knows you to perfection. He can change you for the better and save you from sin and the wrath to come. He is worth reading about. He is worth knowing about. He is worth testifying about. The wonderful thing is this: that the life of Jesus reveals life, true life, and eternal life, in Jesus.

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 12 – Early Heresies 1

It has always been the case that the Devil has attacked the Church by the promotion of his schemes from within the Church as well as without. It may have been the case that those of ill-intent saw the death of the last of the apostles as an opportunity to advance their push for prominence and the winning of disciples to their perverted teachings.

In the early centuries of the history of the Church it was beset by a number of controversies going by names like Ebionism, Novationism, Monarchianism and Manichianism, The Arian Controversy, Pelagianism and Augustinianism. Many of these had to do with the deity of Christ or the character and work of the Holy Spirit.

However one controversy that had shown early signs of emerging well within the lifetime of the apostles advanced rapidly and with deeply harmful effect from the second century onwards. In fact strong elements of it persist to this day in the teachings of some of the sects like New Ageism. Because of the impact that this has had and continues to have, the remainder of this article will be devoted to a consideration of Gnosticism. Paul had a considerable amount to say about this in his letter to the Colossians, as did John in first epistle.

Its name is derived from the Greek word for knowledge – ‘gnosis’. It probably had its origins in attempts to explain the existence of evil since one of its fundamental tenets was that all matter is evil and that only spirit is good. That in turn provoked the question of how a supremely good God could have created an inherently evil world, since it is composed of matter. Their proposed solution was to predicate the existence of a chain of ‘emanations’, sometimes referred to as ‘aeons’ or demigods that linked the one true God, through successively less godlike beings, with creation.

The whole scheme was an amalgam of some elements of Judaism, Greek speculative philosophy and eastern mysticism. This brand of religious philosophy, which takes and combines elements from a number of others, is known by the term ‘Syncretism’ and is becoming ever more popular in today’s pluralistic society, which shies away from the acceptance of anything that declares itself to be the one true faith, and regards it as bigotedly intolerant.

It is common to speak of Gnosticism as if it were a single heresy, whereas it was, in fact, a garbled and internally divided collection of false teachers and teachings some of which, though going under the same heading, contradicted one another sharply. This makes it difficult to write about it in any systematic or coherent way and if you find it confusing, then my apologies – but you are not alone in that.

GNOSTICISM AND ‘EVIL’ MATTER

To return then to the Gnostic’s basic premise about the purity of spirit and the inherent evil of matter, it probably does not take very much imagination to understand that this raised some big problems with regard to the question of Jesus’ deity. Wholly God and wholly man as the apostles taught was simply not an option that the Gnostics could acknowledge. They were prepared to accept him as the

highest of the intervening emanations, but fully God or fully man, certainly not.

Talk about "digging oneself a pit and falling in", their answer to one self-created dilemma merely led to another even deeper set of such dilemmas. It is noteworthy that they never seem to have attempted to deny the historicity of Jesus' existence, but clearly the Biblical accounts of his character as the Son of God, the virgin conception and the nature of his atoning death for the sins of the world at Calvary, refused to sit with what were, for them, inviolable principles of their dogma.

Any assertion that Jesus was truly God, such as that which he made himself and which the apostles taught, was itself heresy as far as they were concerned; how could it be so, when that would be to accept the entry of God into the material world at all, let alone through the material body of Mary. How could a holy God possess a material body of flesh, bear sin or be crucified?

At the same time these were convictions about Jesus that were widely held and, it seemed, required by those who held them to offer some kind of explanation for the legitimacy of Gnostic beliefs in respect of them, if they were to retain any credibility. One branch of the Gnostics, the Docetists, a term taken from the Greek word *DOKEO*, to seem, proposed that Jesus only seemed to be a man, whereas in fact He was an apparition or phantom invested with God-given spirit at His baptism by John, which spirit was removed at the time of his crucifixion. John was without doubt well aware of this strand of Gnostic teaching when he wrote 1 John 4:1-3 and 2 John 7, as was Paul in Colossians 2:9. The words at Luke 24:39 also look too close to the issue to be a coincidence in my eyes. The Docetist position is associated with the name of Cerinthus who is reported to have faced a direct confrontation with the apostle John, who, shall we say, did not offer him warm greetings. The by now aged John, renowned for the gentleness of his spirit, is said to have reverted to his 'son of thunder days' in calling for the roof of the baths where they met to fall in on his opponent's head.

Gnosticism was a religious philosophy that evolved and mutated into a wide range of forms over the first three centuries and we need to careful not to 'read back' what became of its teachings into the New Testament context. It seems that a rather unholy alliance of 'proto-Gnostics' and legalistic Jews, possibly the Essenes, gathered in around the congregation at Colossae and that this was largely what occasioned Paul's letter.

Paul's response is a model of sticking to the facts and not becoming entangled with the highly speculative and shifting ground of his adversaries. His concern was that the Christians should know, believe and follow the truth that sets men free from error and not become embroiled in interminable arguments that really had little hope of resolution. Gnosticism may have been an instance of abstruse philosophising but when and where it was accepted it proved to have enormous practical implications - some of them in matters that are absolutely fundamental to Christian morality, faith and unity.

GNOSTIC VARIATIONS

Separate groups of Gnostics developed over the question of how one ought to respond to the 'spirit is good, material flesh is bad' position. One group, the aesthetes, believed that this implied their liberty to accept the inevitable as they saw it and to indulge themselves in whatever immorality they wished, since the spirit could not be touched by conduct carried out by the body. This group had much in common with the well-known Greek philosophical school called the Epicureans. Their counterparts were the ascetics, who looked to beat their own bodies into submission by harsh treatment in an effort to win spiritual progress out of bodily self-denial,

somewhat akin to the view of the Stoic school of the Greeks. The latter group made reasonably good allies for the Jewish legalists too, especially when it came to the development of a stick with which to beat the Christians who were increasingly paying less attention to Jewish dietary laws and formal religious rituals, though in other respects they had little in common. Refer here to Colossians 2:10 – 23.

Of course their denial of the deity of Christ was by far and away the most sinister and significant of their beliefs and teachings. Had they been correct in this, the whole reality of salvation would be fatally undermined. Not only would Jesus have been a fraud of the worst kind, but also any possibility of faith in the all-sufficiency of His atoning death to bring about reconciliation with our God would have been meaningless. Those who advance the argument that Jesus is nothing more than a good man need to be aware that this is not an option. If He is not who and what He claimed to be then He is not even a good man, but one guilty of an horrendous and blasphemous confidence trick. Yet this is a position still taken by all of the sects, which continue to exist to this day, as well as many of those with no considered religious affiliation.

‘SPECIAL’ KNOWLEDGE

Gnostics were generally fascinated with angels and even worshipped them – c.f. Colossians 2:18. The same was true of esoteric, mystical knowledge that led to a practical outcome of a tendency towards divisiveness. In pretending that a certain elite group had access to desirable knowledge that marked them out as spiritual masters, this tended to provoke a number of dangerous responses in ‘ordinary Christians’. Simply to dangle the carrot of special knowledge that was not commonly available invited the perception that there may be something that was being missed out on and a consequent clamour for their approval. Once again this was a position that sought to undermine the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Jesus and encouraged dissatisfaction with Him in much the same way that the legalist’s over emphasis on the worth of one’s own effort did (Colossians 2:1 –4).

Some men teach because they genuinely want to make the truth of God’s word plain; others because they want to establish a reputation as wise, knowledgeable and erudite. Strange as it seems to be writing this, there are those who quite deliberately make their teaching unnecessarily complicated and unintelligible, simply so that those who are gullible enough to be taken in by it may be overawed by a depth of ‘understanding’ and ‘intelligence’ to which they could never aspire themselves. Such were the Gnostics.

Like many such groups who tantalise with the promise of access to secret knowledge, the Gnostics loved their ‘buzz-words’. They classified people into ‘spiritual’ and ‘fleshy’ and they talked about ‘fullness’ as a state of spiritual superiority. Fullness translates their all-time favourite word – pleroma – that denotes a state of very high spiritual rank indeed, which of course their leading lights possessed, and from which they looked down on the less fortunate with disdain. In their book, an ideal relationship with God was arrived at through the possession of ‘pleroma’ or ‘gnosis’ to which they alone held the key and which they doled out in tantalising dribs and drabs to those whom they considered suitable candidates (see Colossians 1:25 – 29 and 2:1 – 3).

It is simply not possible to do justice to such an extensive subject as this in such a short space but I would encourage you to read Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, John’s epistles and John’s gospel again in the light of what we have learned together and see if you don’t think that it possibly sheds light on the apostle’s intentions in writing some of what they did there.



QUESTION:
Who decided which books should make up
the Canon of New Testament Scriptures,
and how was the decision reached?



This month's subject was suggested to me by a brother who recently watched a TV programme which claimed that certain important books have been deliberately left out of the New Testament. And the reason? Because, it was inferred, they brought the orthodox view of Christianity into question.

Many of you will know, I am sure, that there is nothing new in the claim that there are so-called 'inspired' books' which have been left out of the Book, or that other long-lost or forgotten books have been 're-discovered', so I do not intend to deal with it in this article.

The question that our brother raised is, in my view, far more worthy of discussion. He asked: "*Who decided which books should make up the canon of New Testament scriptures, and how was the decision reached?*"

You will appreciate that this is a subject on which we could spend far more time than is available to us in this issue of the 'S.S.', and so my response must be both as extensive and as concise as possibly, in the space available to us. Before we get to grips with the question proper there are one or two terms in the question that need to be clearly understood.

1. Begin with the term "**The New Testament**". We must bear in mind that Christianity had been in existence for a good number of years before it was first used. In fact, it was first used towards the end of the 2nd Century A.D., as a description of: *'That collection of writings which consists of the narrative works of the Life of Christ and the Acts of Apostles, proceeding to the epistles, and concluding on an apocalyptic note with the 'Revelation'.*

This is the definition, which, about 50 years ago, I heard Prof. F.F Bruce use at Manchester University, in a series of lectures on the documents of the New Testament, and I have never found anything better.

2. The word '**Testament**' itself comes from the Greek word '*diatheke*', and means 'settlement, covenant or agreement'.

3. The word '**canon**' is the English transliteration of the Greek word '*kanon*', and its literal meaning is 'measuring rod', or 'rule'. Therefore, in religious terms, it refers to that collection of writings, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and regarded by Christians as the authoritative rule of faith.

The Compilation of the New Testament.

The volume that we call 'The New Testament' did not make a miraculous appearance on the day the Church began. It was not presented as a blueprint to instruct the early Christians in the formation of the Church. Instead, the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament were written over a number of years after the Lord's ministry, and there were at least two reasons why they were written.

1. The Creation of a Historical Record.

So long as the Lord's personally chosen and personally authorized apostles and other eye-witnesses were alive, their personal testimony was accepted without question, and written accounts were considered unnecessary. It was only when these eyewitnesses began to die that it was recognized that it was necessary to

produce a written record of their testimony, and this resulted in the writing of the four 'Gospels'. As for the 'Epistles', the letters were produced either in response to problems which arose among the young churches, or, as it became necessary to meet particular needs.

2. Apostolic Instruction

As the message spread through 'Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth', in fulfilment of the Lord's Commission, churches were established in parts of the Roman Empire which His twelve Apostles were unable to visit in person. Instead of receiving their *spoken* word some churches received their inspired *written* word. Read Col. 3:16.

This means that many epistles were written even before the four 'Gospels', and this presents us with the fascinating fact, that, whenever the writer of an epistle refers to words or works of Jesus, his account is our earliest recorded account of those words or works. For example, Paul's mention of the institution of the Lord's Supper, found in 1st Cor 11:23, is the first recorded account of what happened in the Upper Room on the night of the Betrayal.

The Collection of the Books

Jesus wrote no books. He taught His disciples and commanded them to teach others. Thus, the earliest written document connected with the faith was probably a collection of the sayings of Jesus, and it was only around A.D.60 that the first 'Gospel', or 'Life of Christ', made its appearance. By this time several of the New Testament epistles had already been written; to mention just a few, Galatians in 48 A.D., 1st & 2nd Thessalonians in 50 A.D., and 1st Corinthians in 54 A.D.

These letters written by Paul were at first preserved by the churches and individuals to whom they had been sent, but around 90 A.D. copies appear to have begun to be circulated among the churches. We know, for instance, that in 95 A.D., Clement of Rome, writing on behalf of the Church in Rome, sent a letter to the Church in Corinth in which he quoted quite freely from Paul's letters to both Rome and Corinth, and possibly quoted from other letters also.

For several years books and letters continued to circulate independently among the churches, but at the beginning of the 2nd century, a collection of the Four Gospels, with 'Acts' possibly being attached to 'Luke' made its appearance. Later, 'Acts' was detached from the Four Gospel volume, and also began an independent circulation.

Then, still in the 2nd century, there existed a collection of 10 epistles, which, a little later, grew to a collection of 13 books, and the circulation of these two collections, constituted the first move towards the establishment of a canon of New Testament books.

The 'Canon' of New Testament Scriptures.

Some years ago, the 'Church of Rome' ran a publicity campaign that claimed that she gave us the Bible - a preposterous claim indeed, considering the fact that, for centuries, Rome hunted, imprisoned and even killed anyone found in possession of a copy of the scriptures! **The Vatican still claims that its 'Church Councils' determined and established the canon of the scriptures, but this is merely another claim that the facts prove is utterly false.**

One of the preposterous stories which Rome's 'historians' ask the world to believe, is that when the matter of the canon of scripture was discussed at one of the Church Councils, the ecclesiastics could not agree which books should be included and which should be excluded. Leaving the books under the table, they all left the room and retired to pray in order to seek divine guidance, and when they returned certain

books had found their way onto the table. This, they claimed, was how God had revealed His will, and therefore they decided that these were the books that should form the Canon of New Testament scriptures.

The truth, however, is much simpler and much more credible. In 367 A.D. Athanasius produced a list of the books that Christians recognized and accepted as divinely inspired, and his list consisted of the 27 books that make up our New Testament today.

Furthermore, the list was endorsed by both Jerome and Augustine, both of whom lived within a few years of Athanasius, and the important fact which must be borne in mind is that these men were merely placing on record the names of the books which were already recognized by the churches in both East and West. The testimonies of Jerome and Augustine should carry weight even for Roman Catholics, because they are two of the four theologians whom the Church of Rome recognizes as 'Doctors of the Church'.

The first Church Council to even *consider* the formation of the canon of The New Testament met in 393, and it was never left to any church council to determine which books should be recognized as inspired scriptures. All that such meetings did - or could do - was to recognize and place on record, the names of the books that were already accepted by the general consent of the entire Church, in both East and West.

And when you consider that many of those early believers lived in times when the possession of a piece of scripture was an offence punishable by death, it is easy to recognize that they would not be prepared to run such a risk in order to possess a counterfeit letter, or a spurious gospel.

For centuries unbelievers, in one way or another, have attacked the Word of God and no other book could have withstood the opposition that has been borne by the Bible. We should not expect it to cease in our own time.

The Protestant Huguenots of France, centuries ago, were cruelly persecuted because of their love of the Bible. They had a banner, which depicted an anvil around which was scattered broken hammers. Their motto read:

***"Hammer away, ye hostile bands!
Your hammers break; God's Anvil stands!"***

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God and the Environment

(Rose M Payne)

Hardly a day now passes without our being warned about global warming caused by the excessive burning of fossil fuels. We are promised flooding and water shortages, high temperatures and strong winds. Meanwhile those of us who lived through the years of wartime rationing and austerity probably feel quite at home with the current exhortations to cut carbon dioxide emissions and recycle all materials that can be so treated. Can we learn anything from the scriptures about this?

God created the Environment

God made the earth as the only place in the universe so far discovered where mankind could exist. It is just the right distance from the sun, neither too hot nor too cold, well supplied with water, protected by an atmosphere and safeguarded in many other ways so as to support life. God made radical changes to the environment

at the time of the great flood, and then he assured mankind that **"while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."** (Gen 8:22)

In addition, God has made the earth to be constantly changing in small ways. Some coastlines are eroded, while others are being built up. Rivers change their courses. Earthquakes occur at intervals as landmasses collide or pull apart. New islands are formed by volcanoes under the sea. The list could go on. It also has wonderful powers of regeneration, for example the First World War battlefields that have now returned to peaceful farmland. Also when all our cities were burning large amounts of coal we had thick fogs that were bad for health, but now that we use other forms of energy, these have largely disappeared.

In the Old Testament

• God has often used the Environment

Throughout the Old Testament there are many instances where God has demonstrated his power by making use of the weather or other natural events. This was especially so when intervening on behalf of the nation of Israel who were all in one place at the same time. One example is the occasion when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea **"And the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided"** (Ex. 14:21).

• God has occasionally changed the Environment as a punishment

An obvious instance of this was the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before this occurred, the plain was said to be **"fertile even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt"** (Gen. 13:10), but the destruction of the cities included **"that which grew upon the ground"** (Gen. 19:25) and the vegetation has never grown back in that area. Perhaps before this event the Dead Sea had an outlet to the oceans, which afterwards became blocked, thus trapping all the minerals that flowed down and keeping the plain a wasteland and a permanent example of God's displeasure.

• Changes to the Environment were not always a punishment

The seven years of famine which descended upon Egypt in the time of Joseph must have been a catastrophic event, for the Nile could usually be relied upon to flood every year and make the land fertile, and the dearth also affected **"all the face of the earth"** (Gen. 41:57). Yet this was not said to be a punishment and the Egyptians were warned so that they could store up food beforehand and avert the consequences. Rather it was to demonstrate the foreknowledge of God through his servant Joseph.

• The Israelites were to care for their Environment

The Law of Moses provided for sensible care of the environment when the Jews entered their Promised Land, and instructions not to overwork the fields. **"But in the seventh year shall be a Sabbath of rest unto the land"** (Lev. 25:4) and **"I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years"** (Lev. 25:21). Also **"thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them"** (Deut. 20:19).

It was, however, foreseen that there would be some industrial processes in **"a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass"** (Deut. 8:9).

• Environmental promises were made to the Israelites

The Israelites were promised **"the first rain and the latter rain"** (Deut. 11:14) if they served the Lord, but if they served other gods then would **"there be no rain,**

and that the land yield not her fruit” (Deut. 11:17). This came to pass when Elijah told Ahab **“As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years,”** (1 Kings 17:1) and there was a three-years’ drought.

- **Man has always been able to modify the Environment to some extent**
There were already irrigation schemes in Egypt when the Israelites were there. **“For the land, whither thou goest in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowest thy seed and waterest it with thy foot, as a garden of herbs”** (Deut. 11:10).

Hezekiah also provided an aqueduct when he **“stopped the upper watercourse of Gihon, and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David”** (2 Chron. 32:30).

In the New Testament

- **God’s power over the whole of nature was demonstrated by Jesus**
God’s power over the weather was most convincingly demonstrated when Jesus caused the storm on the lake of Galilee to come to an abrupt end (Matt. 14:32), and there were many miracles involving food, fish and plants.

- **In the Gentile world**
When the Gospel was taken out into the Gentile world, God was no longer dealing with nations as a whole, but rather with individual believers, so the miraculous signs employed more commonly involved healing or something which was obvious to the bystanders.

In spite of this, when Paul and Silas were in prison in Philippi, an earthquake was sent to convince the jailor (Acts 16:26) and the reason for it could be explained to the other inhabitants of the town.

Jesus said **“He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust”** (Matt. 5:45). Paul also told the Athenians that God **“gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness”** (Acts 14: 17).

- **God does not prevent unwise actions**
In Acts 27 it is told how the captain of the ship in which Paul was travelling decided to put to sea too late in the year, against good advice, and encountered such a storm that the ship was lost. God intervened to preserve Paul and the other people on board, not by stopping the storm, but by causing the shipwreck to take place near an island.

- **The earth will come to a sudden end**
Our earth will not last forever. Peter writes **“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up”** (2 Peter 3:10).

- **Conditions will be fairly normal until that time**
Jesus told us: **“Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left”** (Matt. 24:40).

What should we learn from this?

God has stored the earth with coal, oil, gas and other substances for us to use, but it does not make sense for us to use them all up in one or two generations. It makes even less sense for the atheist, who expects the earth to last for an unimaginable length of time.

We have become very wasteful because of an assumption that we should continually buy new things, since this increases trade and makes employment and is supposed to lead to greater prosperity. But see what Paul writes to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:8) "**And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.**" A simple lifestyle is becoming to a Christian. The advertising slogan "I want it all, I want it now" is nothing but greed and this attitude is the cause of many of our problems.

If the present predictions turn out to be true, then we shall have to suffer the consequences of global warming. But there are things we can do to help ourselves. We should also assist those people who are likely to be impoverished by climate change.

The final outcome is in God's hands. There is a promise in Paul's epistle to the Romans, which seems to relate to the universe in some period after "**this present time**" (Romans 8:18) which says "**Because the creature** (or creation or universe) **itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God**" (Romans 8:21).

Obituary Sis Elsie Sinclair

Tranent, Scotland

It is with great sadness that the Church in Tranent reports the passing of our sister Elsie Sinclair on the 2nd February 2008 at the age of 89 years.

Elsie was born and grew up in the fishing town of Buckie in the N.E. of Scotland. She worked in the fish processing industry where she met and married our late Bro. Jimmy Sinclair. She then moved to Port Seton to live and met with the Church in Tranent. They had three children, John, Freda and Jim who all grew up to become members of the Church.

Elsie was a kind and caring woman, given to hospitality both to those who visited the Church and also the community in which she lived. In her later years Elsie moved into Florabank Residential Home in Haddington after having been looked after by her daughter Freda and son-in-law John. Although she was confined to a wheelchair, with the help of the brethren, she met with the Church in Haddington as often as her health would allow. Her faith never wavering and steadfast to the end, she was an example to all who knew her. We will sadly miss her and commend her family to our Heavenly Father.

Bro. Ian Davidson conducted the funeral service in the meeting place of the Church in Haddington and at the cemetery at Prestonpans.

John Colgan

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

Those wishing to support this ongoing work, please make donations to and send cheques payable to:

Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to treasurer:

**Mrs. Janet Macdonald,
12 Charles Drive, Larbert, Falkirk,
Stirlingshire. FK5 3HB
Tel: 01324 562480**

Sis Lavern Frank

Many readers will know of the recent death, in June, of our much-loved and hugely respected sister, Lavern Frank. Lavern and her surviving husband, HB Frank, were an inspiration to many Christians in the UK over the years that they worked here and they were instrumental in bringing many to Jesus. The following is an extract from a note that the family sent in response to correspondence.

"We miss mom very much, since she was the hub of our family. However, we know the last four years of her life were an even greater struggle for her with the stroke she had suffered. She never thought she was handicapped until she had the stroke and it left her with only one useful limb. But even then she

persevered and tried to overcome her difficulties. She was a fighter to the end.

We know mom would be moved by the outpouring of love that has been shown, just as we are. Thank you so much for taking the time to express your warm sentiments and recalling wonderful memories. It has meant so much to us.

We've enclosed the funeral program, which has a summary of mom's life. Please post this letter and the program for others to see.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." 2 Cor. 1:3-4

All our love and prayers,
H.B., Lisa, Paul and family

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

Lancaster University
Thursday 28th August
to Saturday 30th August 2008

REACHING OUT TO TODAY'S WORLD

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More speakers from the UK to be confirmed.

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Jason Snethen (England)

Contact:

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11 West Mount, Orrell, Wigan
UK, WN5 8LX.
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E-mail:

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Date:

Saturday 11th October 2008
at 1.00pm

Speaker:

Bro. Ian Davidson, Motherwell.

A warm welcome is extended to all.

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The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

Editorial **Restore for me the joy of thy salvation**

Our Christian experience is full of circumstances that create strongly contrasting emotions. To give one simple example, those brothers who 'lead' congregations through the communion generally offer a few words of introduction to the 'breaking of bread' and from my own experience it is difficult to pitch those thoughts accurately because within the congregation there may, at one and the same time, be those who are approaching the

communion with great joy in their hearts because of their overwhelming sense of gratitude towards Jesus for bringing about their salvation, whilst another is reflecting upon, and is perhaps deeply saddened by, thoughts about the savage price that Jesus (and the Father) had to pay for our redemption. Joy and sadness co-existing. We exult and rejoice in the triumph of the resurrection and Jesus' conquering of death, but shudder at the thought of the physical and spiritual atrocities meted out to our Saviour and the fact the He had to become our vicarious sin-bearer.

A suffering Father

I'd like to make a point here that has been on my mind for some time. Whilst we often refer to the suffering of Jesus in terms of our salvation, and rightly so, I can't imagine the Father as a benign and dispassionate onlooker to the events that unfolded at Calvary and it's my personal belief that the Father must also have suffered terribly as His Son went to the Cross. There is of course a school of thought that rationalises that as Jesus had 'become' sin, and because God hates sin, God forsook Jesus on the cross – metaphorically turned his back on His Christ and left him to face death alone. I find it impossible to believe that only a few days after Jesus had talked to his disciples about the unity of the Godhead, and at the very point that Jesus fulfilled the work of the Father in complete

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obedience to Him and performed the act that was to be the means of restoring God's creation to Himself, that the Father 'forsook' His Son. Rather, in my mind's eye, I see a broken-hearted and grieving Father who shared and empathised with the suffering of His Son.

Guilt and Grace

Listening to Christians talk over the years, I think that one of the elements of our new relationship with Jesus and the Father that we have the greatest difficulty in accepting is our freedom from sin and the guiltlessness that flows from the freedom. And in some respects this is quite understandable because culturally we are used to having to earn the 'good things' that come our way. Even at a very mundane level many of us are likely to be embarrassed or very self-effacing if we are fortunate enough to be the object of unsolicited praise or compliments by our family, friends, work colleagues or fellow Christians. If we are the recipient of an unexpected gift, we may feel the urge to 'settle the account' by buying something 'in return' for the one who gave us the gift, even though that may have been the last thing on the mind of our benefactor. The majority of people, and possibly even more so people with Christian principles, have a strong work ethic and work on the basis that in life 'we get what we deserve'. So the idea of grace – unmerited favour – or the 'free gift of God' is something that is quite foreign to us and therefore hard to grasp. And yet the whole point of grace is that our salvation **is** unearned, undeserved, unmerited – nothing at all to do with **our** qualities but everything to do with the inherent divine qualities of God expressed and fulfilled in Jesus. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus ..." wrote Paul to the Roman church. In Jesus we are made free and no longer live under 'the law of sin and death', but by grace live under 'the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus'. And it is that 'spirit of life', essentially the life of God that is without beginning or end that gives Christians the blessed hope of eternal life. The apostle also wrote to the church in Corinth, and, speaking of Jesus the Christ, had these words of encouragement for the Christian community there: "... who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor: 1:8).

Let praise, joy and thanksgiving abound

We need to come to terms with the fact that our guilt has been dealt with. Sometimes I am a little bit envious of some of our more 'charismatic' and 'evangelical' counterparts, especially in the sense that, overtly at least, there seems to be an unbridled joy in their worship – and I'm not referring to music-induced 'frenzy' here, just a much more obvious emphasis on 'praise', 'worship' and 'salvation' rather than the 'nitty-gritty' of doctrine – a freer expression of the joy of salvation than is sometimes evident in our services (I speak of my own experience which may not be shared by all readers). We in 'churches of Christ' have tended to major on doctrinal purity as part of our 'restoration' appeal; we place a considerable amount of emphasis, quite properly, on the communion (breaking of bread) and that naturally leads to a deep reflection on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and we are confronted by the haunting reality of Jesus' suffering, humiliation and death. And perhaps those conflicting emotions that I referred to earlier come to the fore most tellingly here. In view of the sacrificial, selfless, suffering of Jesus, our Saviour who was mocked, ridiculed and spat upon, with the tortuous crown of thorns plaited and

beaten onto his head and cruelly and unjustifiably crucified with common criminals – in view of that terrible cost, just how can we deserve the free gift of grace? And the reality is of course that we can never, ever deserve or earn the right to salvation. That is why, in God's great plan for the fullness of time, our salvation had to be based on the free gift. Paul told the Ephesians that our redemption and forgiveness is "according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us". In God there is grace in abundance that is wonderfully free, and the hurdle that we have to mentally overcome is that we must not allow the fact we don't merit the free gift to be an obstacle to our joy in our acceptance of the free gift. Indeed it is our release from the bondage of sin that, despite the cost, is the source of our joy and we should feel free to express that joy in praise and thankfulness.

God is merciful

God's relationship with the nation of Israel was, at times, a very fraught one. That nation was fractious, rebellious and disobedient toward God to the extent that He turned away from it in anger and threatened it with a 'bill of divorcement'. The nation of Israel was a people guilty of sin before and toward God. Yet at the same time He pleaded for the people to repent and promised them restoration and salvation if that repentance were forthcoming. The nation of Israel played the harlot, yet the Lord still sought 'faithless Israel' to acknowledge her guilt and return. "I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not be angry for ever" (Jeremiah 3:12 ff). So Isaiah was able to speak of the Lord's anger turning away and prophesying of the nation of Israel: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). On the restoration of Israel he was able to speak of 'sorrow and sighing fleeing away', so that "The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness ..." (Is. 35:10); on their confession of sin, they would be acknowledged as "a people whom the Lord has blessed" (Is. 61:9). Perhaps no one epitomises better than David the need to confront wrongdoing and overcome the feelings of guilt and unworthiness that flow from that wrongdoing, but even he had sufficient trust in the mercy and forgiveness of God to seek His help in the creation of a clean heart, the restoration to him of the "joy of thy salvation" and deliverance from 'bloodguiltiness'. Truly our God is a God of far-reaching mercy, compassion and forgiveness to those who acknowledge wrongdoing and repent.

I implied earlier that sheer, joyful expressions of praise, thankfulness and gratitude towards toward God may have, over the years, taken second place to a relentless pursuit of doctrinal purity or even been affected by a residual sense of our guilt at what Jesus had to suffer to achieve our salvation. I suspect that some readers will feel that a focus on hardcore, doctrinal issues is still to be regarded as 'real Christianity', whilst a focus on joy, peace, love and thankfulness is somehow superficial and skirts over the tough, real issues. If that is the case, then please look again at Paul's description of the 'fruits of the Spirit' in the Galatian letter or the characteristics of what is often described as 'the transformed work' in the Colossian letter and I would defy any Christian to realistically claim that they had cracked all of those characteristics. These are not whimsical characteristics that the Christian can choose to overlook, but rather they are the essence of the very nature of God that we should be trying to emulate in our lives. They are at the heart of the new creation that we have become. Paul bowed to no-one in his desire to properly represent the Lord in his ministry but when the passions of the Roman church became distorted

towards the wrong issues he reminded them of the true worth of Jesus' sacrifice: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God" (Romans 14:17-20).

Jesus dealt with our guilt

If our joy in Christ is to find its fullest expression we must become comfortable with the fact if we have 'put on' Christ, then He has acquitted us, rendered us not guilty, and it is in this fact that our joy is made complete. Paul said to the Ephesians that, "we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory". When the gift of grace was lavished upon us we didn't just receive something – rather we **became** something. We became children of God, people born of God, part of his family, enjoined in the glorious unity of Father, Son and Spirit. And we have only become the recipients of such overwhelming blessing because Christ has made us free, righteous and guiltless.

For me the renowned hymn-writer Isaac Watts captured this sentiment correctly in his hymn "Not all the blood of beasts.." Reflecting upon the inadequacy of other sacrifices he writes in the second verse of that hymn:

"But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our guilt away,
A sacrifice of nobler name,
And richer blood than they."

And again in the fourth verse:

My soul looks back to see
The burdens Thou didst bear,
While hanging on the cursed tree,
And knows my guilt was there."

It is the sentiment firstly, that Christ takes all our guilt away, and, secondly that our guilt was dealt with on the cross that is important here. We are meant to live our lives in a manner that is redolent of the joy and thankfulness that we feel for our salvation and that is reflective of the grace and love that has been extended to us by a loving God and his Christ. We must always have in our minds the terrible price of our redemption, but we must also give full value to that redemption by unburdening ourselves from the weight of sin and guilt. Christ dealt with our sin; Christ dealt with our guilt. Whatever we do in our lives we cannot turn back history. We can't rewrite history or do anything that can prevent Jesus from going to the cross. By continuing to carry our own guilt we are attempting to do the impossible. If we are to truly experience the joy of our salvation then we have to learn to leave our guilt behind. For the person with a conscience, guilt gnaws at the mind; it is a constant companion at the feast, a haunting reminder of inadequacy and insufficiency. But that isn't what God wants. "Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 8,9).



QUESTION:
Should, or may, a church building be
used as a venue for a Marriage
Ceremony?



Having served a lifetime - (well! *almost!*) - in the Church, as preacher, teacher and writer, I might be excused for thinking that I have encountered just about every faith-related topic that could possibly be raised. But I would be mistaken, and, in this issue of the 'S.S', I wish to look at a subject, raised by a brother in the U.S.A., about which I have never previously heard.

This brother says that he was brought up to believe that 'Wedding services should not be held in church-buildings', and the question which his statement raises is, 'Should (or may), a church-building be used as a venue for a marriage ceremony?'

I feel that I must also admit that I am not at all sure what lies behind this question, because although I have had contact with congregations of the Lord's people in some 20 different countries, and met brethren who hold widely varying views on a host of subjects, I have never heard of any group that takes the position expressed by the questioner.

Opposed to 'Church Weddings'

There are, of course, groups in society who reject what, for the sake of convenience, I shall call 'Church weddings'.

- There is the 'Atheist', who scorns a 'church-wedding', because he sees no point in seeking the blessing of a God whose very existence he denies, and who would probably regard himself as a hypocrite if he had any part in such a ceremony.
- There is also 'Agnostic', who tells us that he does not know whether God exists or not, and for whom, therefore, there is little point in having a wedding 'in Church'. People who hold these opinions normally opt for a ceremony at the local Registry Office, which, I might add, in many countries is the ceremony that is required and recognized by law. In such countries, after the visit to the Registry Office, a religious ceremony is optional.
- And then there is that apparently growing number of people who regard marriage as 'old-fashioned' and 'out-dated'; who claim that weddings are 'usually just for show, and an unnecessary expense', and who choose to live together without marking their relationship in any formal way.

Now, these are the views of people who have no religious faith, and they do not surprise us. But it does come as something of a surprise to learn that there are Christians who see something amiss with a wedding service in a church-building, and the only explanation I can suggest is that they hold greatly mistaken views about the significance of the 'Church-building' and the purpose the building is designed to serve. What is more, they have not really understood what the scriptures teach concerning the Church itself.

"No place for a Kitchen!"

As I think about our American brother's question I recall that in 1968, when we were planning to erect the meeting-place currently used by the church in Corby, Isobel, my wife, and I gave hospitality to a visiting couple who were members of a small church in the United States.

On hearing that we were planning to build, the wife asked if she might see the plans - a request which I found rather unusual, since she did not seem to me to be the kind of person who would be interested in such matters. The reason for her interest soon became apparent, because the first thing she noticed was that there was to be a kitchen in the building, and she promptly informed us that, in their church, they had 'studied this', and had come to the conclusion that a kitchen in a church-building is 'unscriptural'.

I will not inflict on you the entire story of the ensuing debate. Sufficient to say that this sister apparently thought that, since the church in Corby had been newly established, we also must be

new converts, and she asked how long we had been members of the Church - and was clearly surprised when we told her. Isobel and I had both been Christians longer than she had been alive!

By what Authority?

She then bluntly asked us to show 'scriptural authority' for the kitchen in the building, and I, with equal bluntness, said that the authority for the kitchen could be found in the verse immediately following the one that authorizes toilet facilities, and this proved to be something she had not considered. I might also have asked her what scriptural authority exists for the church building itself, but we did not get that far. The discussion ended rather abruptly!

A year or two later, during the days of the 'Corby Holiday Fellowship', a visiting American evangelist, who was serving a congregation in this country, declined to accept the invitation to share the mid-day meal provided by the Corby sisters, to be served in the classroom section of the building. He chose to find a place in Corby town centre, where he ate, along with the two or three brethren he had brought with him. It was obvious that he shared the view of the sister about whom I have just written. He believed that it is wrong to eat in the church building - although, I might add, it did not prevent him from accepting a cup of coffee that had been prepared in the evil kitchen!

As Proverbs 26:7 tells us, "**The legs of the lame are not equal**".

The Crucial Question

The question that needs to be asked is why do these brethren hold such views? I suggest that it may be because they have come to believe that the church building is 'holy' in much the same way that the Temple built by Solomon was holy. And that is a grave mistake.

A Dwelling Place for God

After the conclusion of the Covenant, at Sinai, in obedience to God's command and according to his explicit specification, the Israelites built a Tabernacle, a portable structure, which was to be the focal point in their new religious system.

That Tabernacle, and especially the room known as 'The Holy of Holies', testified to God's constant Presence with His people, Israel, and it was in that four-square room that the High Priest 'met' God and came closest to God, when, on the Day of Atonement, he interceded with God on behalf of all Israel - priesthood and people alike. The Tabernacle was 'holy', as no other place on Earth was holy, because God chose to be represented there.

Later a Temple, which though not expressly required by God, was built under His permissive will by Solomon. God condescended to 'dwell' in it, so that the Old Testament scriptures repeatedly describe the Temple as '*The House of God*'.

You will recall that Jesus Himself spoke of 'My Father's House', and quoted God as saying, "**My House shall be a house of prayer for all nations.**" (Mark 11:17). To those who were degrading the Temple, Jesus said, "**Make not My Father's House a house of merchandise**" (John 2:16), and, in the next verse He prayed, "**The zeal of Thy House hath eaten me up**".

Eventually, when it had become obvious that the people rejected their Messiah, He said, "**Your House is left to you desolate**" (Matt.23:38). God no longer dwelt among them, and had even abandoned the Temple. It was no longer '*The House of God*'.

We know what became of the Temple. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, it was destroyed - burnt down by a flaming torch thrown into it by a Roman soldier, in disobedience of the command of Titus, the Roman General, the son of the Emperor Vespasian, who had ordered that the Temple should not be damaged. It was never rebuilt, although several attempts were made to disprove the Lord's prediction.

But God is not without a Temple, for a new Temple has been created, though it is not any of the magnificent buildings that, in past centuries, have been erected ostensibly '*to the glory of God*'. Solomon realized something that his father David does not seem to have understood. At the dedication of the first Temple, Solomon said, "**And shall God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven, and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee, how much**

less this house which I have built?"

But the early Christians seem to have understood this, because they erected no Temple, nor did they erect, or use, specially prepared buildings in which to offer their worship. Instead, we read about them gathering in houses, the homes of members of the Church:

- Acts 12:12, tells us that they met for prayer in the house of the mother of John Mark.
- In Rom.16:5, Paul mentions the church in the house of Aquilla and Priscilla.
- In fact, it is almost certain that the early Christians never owned a church building, nor would they have wished to, since it would certainly have attracted persecution and violence.

Constantine's Decree.

No doubt influenced by his mother Helene who was a Christian, the Emperor Constantine issued a series of decrees, of increasing severity, against the traditional pagan religion of the Roman world. After 324 A.D., he banned pagan worship and ordered that pagan Temples and their contents should be handed over to the Christians, and thus the Church came into the possession of buildings designed for worship, and was able to use them without fear of persecution.

The Roman Church 'converted' the images and pictures which pagan Romans had worshipped, turning them into Christian 'saints', whilst pagan holy days became 'Christian' holy days. Christendom obtained its 'church buildings', but we have to say that in making Christianity the official religion of the Roman World, Constantine probably did the Church the greatest disservice that any individual has ever done.

The Real Temple

I said that God is not without His Temple, and this is the reality. To the Corinthian Church, Paul wrote,

- **"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man defiles the temple of God, him will God destroy, for the temple of God is holy, which temple you are"** (1st.Cor 5:16-17).
- Addressing the individual Corinthian believer, in 1stCor.6:19, Paul wrote, **"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, which you have received from God, and you are not your own"**.
- Now add to these statements the word of Jesus in John 14:23: **"If a man loves me he will keep my words, my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and we will make our abode with him."**

Do you see that the Church, as a body, and every individual, obedient believer, has the indwelling Presence of the entire Godhead - Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Hence, in 1st Peter 2:5, we are told that, **"You are living stones, built up a spiritual house, to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God by Jesus Christ."**

Conclusion

Our church-buildings are nothing more than tools - expedients - useful aids, like hymn-books, which help us to obey God's command instructing us to come together to worship Him, and the presence of a kitchen or any other reasonable facility in the building cannot possibly make it 'unholy', because the building itself not holy. The only time it *becomes* a 'holy' place is when the true Temple of God, the Body of Christ meets in it for worship.

As for the question concerning marriages in the church building, it seems to me that, since marriage was instituted by God Himself, the most appropriate place in which Christians should seek His blessing on their marriages is surely the place in which they are accustomed to worship Him.

Sadly, there are misguided souls that are more concerned about the imagined sanctity of their church buildings, than they are about maintaining the holiness of the true Temple, without which "no man shall see the Lord".

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Thinking Out Loud

OUTSTANDING BRAVERY

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

I recently read a book on the history of the Victoria Cross. The Victoria Cross was established in 1856 during the Crimean War and "has remained to this day the highest British reward 'for valour' and is perhaps the most prestigious gallantry medal in the world" (Peter Duckers). Since 1856, well over 1300 VC's have been awarded for bravery in battles fought in the Crimea to Iraq. For example, 182 medals for actions during World War 2; 182 for actions during the Indian Mutiny, 1857-9; and 628 for heroic deeds in the First World War, 1914-18. I once did a special study of the First World War, which led me to the battlefields of Northern France. I shall never forget the rows and rows of gravestones in the huge cemeteries there. The whole experience in France and southern Belgium has had a profound influence on me. No one can leave the World War 1 battle sites unaffected.

Interestingly, four pairs of brothers and three father-and-son pairs have won the Victoria Cross. Incredibly, three men have received a bar to their Victoria Cross (that is, two Victoria Crosses). The latest recipient was a New Zealander, Captain Charles Upham, who fought in the Second World War. Interestingly, 16 Crosses were awarded for actions in the Second Afghan War, 1878-80 and one for heroism in the Iraq Revolt, 1919-20. These are wars long forgotten by many, but from which we should learn lessons today. Do we ever learn?

BRAVERY IN THE BIBLE

We read of many brave people in the Bible. Whom would you regard as brave, dear reader? Let me throw some names your way: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Daniel, Esther, John the Baptist, James, John, Stephen and Paul. I leave you to add your favourites because I think there are many more brave souls worthy of our admiration. Those martyred were especially brave: Abel, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Stephen and James.

I think Jesus Himself showed tremendous courage in all that He did. He had many enemies, who were always scheming against Him to destroy Him, but He bravely carried on, no matter what. He saw it through despite the attacks by Satan. The foreknowledge of His terrible suffering and death never weakened His resolve. In fact we read on one occasion: "...He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9: 51b). Jesus was the bravest of the brave. But for His bravery the reward was not the Victoria Cross, but the cruel cross of Calvary.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

The apostle Paul was an exceptional human being. I never tire of reading about him. He once wrote: "...in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils amongst false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11: 23b - 28). He puts most disciples to shame for their timidity and feebleness.

THE EARLY SAINTS

The early saints suffered much, but were tremendously brave in the face of deadly persecution. I have always been interested in Roman history. I like to read, for example, the writings of Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD c.55-c.117). In his book *The Annals of Imperial Rome* he tells about the dreadful goings-on against the Christians in the days of the Emperor Nero. In his chapter *The Burning of Rome* we read: "...Nero fabricated scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus. First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned – not so much for incendiaryism as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus, at which he mingled with the crowd – or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest." The God whom I love and serve allowed all such things to happen. I am left to wonder why.

VALOUR

The Victoria Cross has to do with valour. The Dictionary defines valour as "the quality of mind which enables a person to face danger with boldness and firmness; courage or bravery, esp. as shown in warfare or conflict." I see from my Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible that the Hebrew word *chayil* is translated thirty-seven times as "valour" in the Authorised Version. It is used, for example, of Gideon (Judges 6: 12); Jephthah (Judges 11:1); Naaman (2 Kings 5:1); Zadok (1 Chronicles 12: 28); and Eliada (2 Chronicles 17: 17). Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, we should be people of valour. We are in a war, the war of the ages, the greatest war the world has seen. It is good versus evil, light versus darkness, God versus Satan. In truth, when we committed ourselves to Jesus, we became His soldiers. Therefore, we have to "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6: 12) and "war a good warfare" (1 Timothy 1: 18). The great thing about this conflict is that we know the final outcome. We are assured of victory. Jesus, for example, is seen in the book of Revelation riding a white horse (19: 11), a symbol of victory. (Robert Wallace Orr entitles his commentary on Revelation: *Victory Pangeant*. I think he was spot-on there.) Knowledge of all this brings new meaning to the hymn: *Onward, Christian Soldiers!*

A CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul wrote: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also who love His appearing" (2 Timothy 4: 7-8). True valour results in our receiving "a crown of righteousness", and true valour has to do with fighting the good fight, finishing the course and keeping the faith. All this takes effort, a mighty effort. But we are not alone in the warfare. We have the support of our fellow soldiers and their prayers, the holy angels, the Father, Jesus our King and the Holy Spirit. Alexander Campbell has written: "Rise up, then, in the strength of Judah's Lion! Be valiant for the truth! Adorn yourselves with all the graces of the Spirit of God! Put on the armour of light; and, with all the gentleness, and meekness, and mildness there is in Christ – with all the courage, and patience, and zeal, and effort, worthy of a cause so salutary, so pure, so holy, and so Divine, determine never to faint nor to falter till you enter the pearly gates – never to lay down your arms till, with the triumphant millions, you stand before the throne, and exultingly sing, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honour, and glory, and blessing!' 'To Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing, and honour, and glory, and strength, forever and forever!' Amen."

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 13 – Early Heresies 2

As well as Gnosticism, a whole plethora of controversies was thrown up by a variety of motivations that were held by those who wished to promote their personal interpretations of available scripture as authoritative. In some cases these amounted to over-confidence in personal intuition, speculation and interpretational insight that stretched inspired scripture beyond what it was able to bear; in others scant regard was paid to the message that God wanted to be heard, in favour of a thesis that was little more than personal preference, coated with a thin veneer of pretended scriptural authority, for the sake of its being lent an apparent authoritative weight to which it was not entitled. Men, methods and means have not really changed very much in two millennia.

It is nevertheless remarkable to note that in almost every case these early departures have retained ramifications that have continued to surface and resurface over the course of subsequent centuries, including some that are still argued over to this day, and some that have even been taken as current expressions of orthodoxy. The length of time for which some have believed a thing is, at best, an unreliable guide to its truth.

The whole concept of conservatism and orthodoxy is one that we need to be a little more careful with than we sometimes show evidence of being. Both terms have a tendency to be used as labels to be stuck onto others with whom we do not see eye to eye, and to be traded, along with their opposite concept, liberalism, as badges of conformity, or otherwise, with our own opinions. That is not to say that there is no such thing as true orthodoxy or liberalism; it is simply that we can be a bit too hasty in dishing out the labels on the basis of criteria that don't always bear the closest of scrutiny.

I make that point because it is very easy to assume a degree of liberal intent amongst our early brethren, which is rather harsh and unfair to them. In matters related to salvation it is my view that God went to tremendous lengths to ensure that these were intelligible with crystal and universal clarity, but in the case of what we might consider orthodox views of, for example, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the trinity of the Godhead, some aspects of Church government, what constituted worship that is "in spirit and truth" and many others like these, I am not entirely sure that a rigid sense of orthodoxy arrived on the scene very quickly at all. We know, or like to think that we do, where true, conservative and apostolic orthodoxy lies in each of these areas, and are able to substantiate our views (hopefully) by reference to scripture, but many, if not the majority of our early brethren, had no such opportunity, and that was the way that it remained for centuries.

Clearly thought out presentations of doctrine, and even the inclination to search out the principles on which such formulations lay in scriptural authority, were more often than not the result of blatant challenges from those of spiritual ill will. To that extent, this was thinking that needed to be done under extreme pressure, and both quickly and emphatically pointed to the great dangers of an "issue-based" formulation of doctrine. The problem with such emotionally charged situations is that they always generate more heat than light. Paul steadfastly refused to get involved in the debating of issues instead of persistently teaching plain truth, and that was also, you may recall, the approach of the first post-apostolic leaders of the Church. The New

Testament nowhere presents us with anything like a systematic theology with each area of doctrine neatly outlined in logical order, because on most matters the apostles never even attempted any such thing. Paul comes close on the question of justification by grace through faith, which is of course a salvation issue, but for the rest it is mostly a case of putting it together for ourselves from what is admittedly a comprehensive stock of constituent parts. Credal formulae are not something with which the New Testament is heavily laden.

With the single but vital exception of salvation-related matters it rather seems open to doubt whether the majority of early Christians would have had much an answer to the question, "what is the Church's teaching on x, y or z?" More often than not, did it really have a 'party line' or 'official teaching' or 'the conservative orthodoxy'? Please, please notice that this is an entirely different proposition from their being unable to "give a reason for the hope that lay within them". If you have doubts about this, and remember that we have the advantage of a New Testament that for the most part they did not, try the experiment of sitting down to write **the** definitive statement of apostolic authority on the person and work of the Holy Spirit or the correct manner of the appointment of elders or the perfectly acceptable act of worship (to God that is). That statement must be absolutely scripturally watertight mind you and able to refute all reasonable arguments offered against it by faithful and spiritually minded brethren, without exception. And notice please that none of these topics that I have proposed are in connection with what could reasonably be called trivial or unimportant matters. I am not saying this in advocacy of a lapse or lurch into sloppy thinking, licence, liberalism or 'do as you please religion', but in a plea for more sympathetic understanding of those who were our early brethren and who deserve our fairness.

When it came to the need for a defence of the truth against the attacks of those who were downright hostile to it, and whether they manifested that hostility within the Church or without, deceitfully or brazenly, those capable of doing so had to marshal arguments, scriptural fact and a high degree of Spirit led logic in that defence of truth.

On the evidence of Ephesians 4:11ff, I firmly believe that God has seen to it, in every generation, that His Church is provided with such men, and 2 Timothy 2:2 implies something of a similar intent. But even at that, we know only too well that the most intense and widespread respect for any man's conservatism and doctrinal orthodoxy is neither proof of correctness, nor guarantee of immunity to vigorous challenge. Whether it is always convenient for us to recognise it or not, it has often been the case in practice that we have relied on responses to previous challenges of the same or similar type, instead of thinking it through again, as we ought to, from scriptural basics, and this is where there are dangers to be aware of in proceeding on the basis of received orthodoxy.

It is always and must always be the apostolic foundations of truth, on which even good arguments are offered, to which we must turn for our reasoning. I almost made the mistake of writing "for substantiation of our beliefs", but that would reflect a very bad habit of interpretational method were it to be applied in that order.

Montanus was one of the Church's first 'charismatics' inviting his brethren to respond to formalism and woodenness of worship with greater 'spiritual' exuberance fed by asceticism, celibacy and rigorous moral discipline. He also proclaimed the imminent arrival of a millennial, earthly kingdom of Christ.

The **Monarchianists** denied the equality of Son and Spirit with the Father. **Novation** preached the impossibility of restoration for those who had once denied Christ and **Mani**, (whence **Manichianism**), was ambassador for an extreme form of Gnosticism, which maximised the elements of eastern mysticism and all but denied the legitimacy of Christianity. This was a form of teaching with which Augustine flirted briefly, as well as exhibiting a tendency to dabble with a number of dubious philosophies, before

settling down to something more like the apparent orthodoxy for which he is generally known.

To be honest I don't have any great enthusiasm for simply cataloguing the huge variety of controversies and heresies that beset the Church, and have only mentioned this very brief sample for the sake of illustrating that they ranged over a number of different areas and held varying degrees of real relevance to the fundamentals of the faith. It should be added that whilst such was not always the case, individuals could and did change their teaching and thinking, even in matters with which their name has come to be associated. Having once held a view does not amount to its permanent tattooing on one's forehead, and repentance from error is surely to be preferred and encouraged over holding those who once espoused it under permanent suspicion and probation.

Without for a moment encouraging sloppy free thinking it is noticeable from this glimpse of early Church history, that doctrinal orthodoxy was a thing in flux; it took time and considerable effort to develop into anything like the form that we know, or believe that we do. God's last word has been spoken, but that is not the same thing as saying that God's last word has been perfectly comprehended, recognised and practised. Even if we have legitimate ambitions of restoring New Testament Christianity, and I'm not entirely sure that is something that is possible, we are still left with the searching question of what **exactly** that entails, and we must certainly not dare even to leave the impression that we have in fact succeeded.

DOES THE BIBLE SAY SO?

(V.Sujatha, Stretford)

Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. These are three well-known festivals that are celebrated by 'Christians' all over the world. But are they important? Did God want us to know about them? Christmas is considered to be the day when Christ was born, but the Bible does not say a word about the day of Christ's birth and there is no religious festival called 'Christmas' in the Bible.

Good Friday is said to be the day when Christ died. Yet, the Bible does not say anything about celebrating Good Friday. People don't celebrate Good Friday as a happy day because Jesus was crucified, but I think Christ would have been happy that day because he had done his Father's will. Also the reason he came on earth and the work that was given to him by his Father was done and he was going back to his Father.

Easter is celebrated as the day when Jesus rose from the dead. Yes, the Bible did say that he arose on the first day of the week but again it says nothing about observing it as a festival (Mark 16 1-6).

Did God want us to attach importance to these days? If yes, then he would have told us so. Any religious practice that is outside the Bible is pointless (Matthew 15:9). We should not think beyond what is written (1Corinthians 4:6). We should go by God's word, the Bible, rather than by what others do. This principle is found throughout the Bible. For example we should not change the gospel. The apostle Paul said "But even if we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8). Also the Word will judge us (John 12:48). We should not add to or take from God's revealed word (Revelation 22:18, 19). The Bible is complete in itself (Jude 3.) It is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16,17) (2 Peter 1:19-21).

We should not encourage people to observe festivals not authorized by God in his Word. However, when they are thinking about these things, we can take the opportunity to talk to people about why Jesus was born, died and arose from the dead.

How Wise Was Solomon?

(Rose M Payne)

Solomon was surely the most fortunate of all the Old Testament kings when he began to reign. God had chosen him out of all David's sons to succeed his father and build the temple. David said to the Israelites **"And he (God) said unto me, Solomon thy son, he shall build my house and my courts: for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father"** (1 Chron. 28:6).

God appeared to Solomon twice. The first time he asked Solomon what gift he would like. Solomon replied, **"Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great people?"** (1 Kings 3:9) God was pleased with this reply and added riches and honour, and also long life if Solomon continued to walk in his ways. So his reputation for wisdom spread far and wide. **"And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore... And his fame was in all nations round about"** (1 Kings 4:29-31). **"And Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the river unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt: they brought presents, and served Solomon all the days of his life"** (1 Kings 4:21).

We are told in 1 Kings 4:32-34 that Solomon wrote three thousand proverbs, a thousand and five songs, and had a great deal of knowledge concerning plant and animal life, and kings came to hear his wisdom. Solomon duly built a magnificent temple and when it was finished he made an excellent prayer to the Lord, recorded in 1 Kings 8. God then appeared to him a second time and, while accepting the temple, warned him against going astray and serving other gods (1 Kings 9:6). Possibly Solomon thought he was the last person to need such a warning on that occasion. So what eventually went wrong?

A long time before Solomon's day, there was a prophecy recorded in the book of Deuteronomy that appeared to relate to him. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20 it was foreseen that the Israelites would one day demand to have a king to rule over them, and some warnings were given. Such a king was not to gather a large number of horses (which would be for his army), nor many wives, nor a large quantity of silver and gold. All these things Solomon did. **"And the king made silver and gold at Jerusalem as plenteous as stonesAnd Solomon had horses brought out of Egypt"** (2 Chron. 1:15-16). **"And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart"** (1 Kings 11:3).

When Solomon asked the Lord to give him wisdom, it was the kind of wisdom he would need when sitting in judgment, as we see from the story of two women claiming the same child. **"And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment"** (1 Kings 3:28). This was not quite the same thing as the inspiration that God gave to the prophets, many of whom were quite ordinary men.

Solomon possibly wrote the Book of Proverbs early in his reign. The theme of this work is **"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding"**, (Prov. 3:13) because, **"Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God"** (Prov. 2:9). Much of his good counsel is addressed to "My son" as if he intended to leave the book to his successor.

Very different in tone is the Book of Ecclesiastes or the Preacher, which is presumably a later work of Solomon, who describes himself as a son of David who was king in Jerusalem and sought after wisdom. Here he records the results of his search for

wisdom. In chapter 1 verse 18, he writes **"For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."** His kind of wisdom was not altogether a blessing to him, but rather a disappointment. Solomon knew all too much about the wicked ways of the world. He was also able to indulge himself in every way and obtain everything he wished for (Ecc. 2:4-10), but in the end found only emptiness, vanity or vexation. His advice is just to enjoy life while you have it, for it will all come to nothing in the end. **'Then I commended mirth because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry'** (Ecc. 8:15). Solomon, with all his wisdom, appears not to be able to offer his readers much hope. He found no satisfaction in the things he had made, because he knew some successor would inherit them. **'Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me'** (Ecc. 2:18). Perhaps by this time he had doubts about the wisdom of the son who was to succeed him. But in the end it was his own fault that his kingdom broke up so quickly.

Finally he tells his readers to **"Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man"** (Ecc. 12:13), but then he fell short of this himself. In his old age, one can imagine him becoming over-tolerant, and reasoning that every wise person knew that idols were only made of wood or stone and had no real power, so if his foreign wives were foolish enough to want them, they might as well be allowed to have them. Then little by little the wives drew him in to build shrines for them (1 Kings 11:4-10). Long life was no blessing to him, for finally the Lord told him, **'Because you have done this and have not kept my covenant and my statutes as I commanded you, I will tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant'** (1 Kings 11:11).

Solomon left a great reputation for his wisdom and glory, his building works, and the peace and prosperity of his country. But he could have served for an illustration of 1 Cor. 2:6, **"Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought."**

Just imagine, all those who have been privileged to hear the Gospel are actually wiser than Solomon, for he never heard the full details of the salvation that God was preparing for his servants. If we feel disillusioned with this world, we know that our treasure is laid up in heaven **"where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"** (Matt. 6:20-21).

European Christian Workshop 2008

Report by Alistair Ferrie

On August 28-30th I was privileged to attend the European Christian Workshop held in wonderful facilities at Lancaster University, England. I would like to commend the organisers of this event. I have attended all three programmes and although each was different in content and different in terms of speakers, each workshop has been a veritable feast. It was a feast in terms of fellowship and it has been a good experience to remind oneself of the strength and wisdom which makes up our fellowship. Sometimes in the midst of our works in various locations we are fooled into thinking that our fellowship can be small and perhaps lacking in vision and resources. Attending such an event explodes this myth.

70 Christians from all over Europe and the USA attended the workshop this year. There were members of the Church from: Austria, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Scotland, Spain, United States and Wales.

The food and accommodation were excellent and the facilities in terms of lecture halls, computer and electronic visual aids helpful. Each speaker brought a wealth of wisdom, insight and information to edify us. There were practical sessions such as those that dealt with the "Friendspeak" programme, and deaf ministry as well as in-depth expository study and two quite different but equally instructive approaches to looking at evangelism in the 21st century. There were other sessions I was not able to experience because I could not be in more than one place at a time. However one of the great benefits of the European Christian Workshop is that all sessions are available to listen to later on CD. I have no doubt that I will be feasting on this for months to come as I listen to presentations I missed. I may get to look forward to being in the car so that I can catch up!

Tony Coffey did a wonderful job as our keynote speaker this year, giving account of his own gracious efforts to share the gospel with those who come from a Roman Catholic background. I believe all of us could learn something from his attitudes towards those who are in need of Jesus, and reflect those attitudes whatever our own background before putting on the Lord Christ. I believe that all of us were uplifted as we came to consider more closely the marvellous grace of our God and Father, and the wonderful love of our Saviour, Jesus.

I am looking forward to next year. The European Christian Workshop has quickly established itself in our calendar and is the only lectureship programme I can think of in this country. It seems to me that we need such a programme among us that we can go and be fed and inspired to learn continually to "raise our game" for the sake of the Master.

Obituary **Sir Isabella Davidson Craik**

Newtongrange, Scotland.

Our dear sister in Christ, Isabella (Isabel) Davidson Craik passed away on 21st July 2008. Isabel was born in Mauchline, Ayrshire on 28th January 1921. Sadly her brothers and sister died in infancy with only one sister, Margaret, surviving until her 56th year. She moved to Easthouses and then to Newtongrange on her marriage to Robert Craik. She had two children, Isabel and Robert, who married Ghislaine, and gave Isabel two grandchildren, Lewis and Simon. Isabel's husband died in 1968. She started going to the Ladies' Class at Newtongrange and soon began coming to the Sunday evening Gospel meetings where the scheme of redemption was being taught. In October 1998 she gave her life to Christ and was baptized at the age of 77. Sadly Isabel suffered a stroke in January 1999 and as a result became a resident in New Battle Lodge in Mayfield. She managed to attend the morning worship services until it became too

painful to travel. She enjoyed her visits from the ladies of the Church. She recently moved to a new home at Newbyres Village in Gorebridge.

The funeral service was held at Mortonhall Crematorium on Monday 28th July 2008 where Bro. John Kneller of Tranent conducted the service.

M Hunter, Secretary.

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

Dear Brethren, the Ghana fund continues to serve the Lord in that country, not only by saving lives of brethren through medical aid, but saving souls through promoting evangelism. Our Ghanaian brethren zealously preach and teach the gospel in all its purity. As the extent of their efforts is limited by lack of funds the Ghana appeal enables them to extend the valuable work they are doing and this has brought even more souls to Christ.

A brother in a congregation near the Togo border has been evangelising in that neighbouring nation and this received a strong impetus when six other congregations joined him in an intensive 4-day campaign of preaching and teaching. The fund contributed £50 to this event to support their efforts.

After being established in this way a congregation will grow and spread the Word to other villages and so the Lord adds souls to His Kingdom. A brother in one such infant congregation has appealed for a bicycle to enable him to travel further afield with the gospel. The fund provided £50 to make this possible for him. In another congregation two brothers, one who is blind and extremely poor due to his inability to work, are preaching the gospel in their local area, £50 was sent to this congregation to assist them.

There was also a congregation struggling to hold daily evening meetings by the light of 4 small kerosene lamps. So when electricity reached that village the fund was used to pay the connection fee allowing them to have mains electricity. A further £50 was sent to complete internal electrical work.

There is a village congregation that uses its meeting place during the week as a school where the brethren educate children of all ages and ensure they are fed both physically and spiritually. This is an invaluable resource to the local community and gives local children hope of a future and the eternal hope that comes from knowledge of the Word of God. £200 has been given to this congrega-

tion to put a roof on this building. On this, and many other occasions our hearts are warmed to see the evidence of the fruit of the spirit growing in the Ghanaian saints to the honour and glory of God.

An expression of deep gratitude comes from an infant congregation who was supported with £200 for benches, a table, black board and signboard to equip their meetinghouse, and one brother in particular who is 80 and had to have surgery that was also covered by the fund.

Many thanks to all who have helped and continue to help in the plight of our spiritual family in Ghana. All donations should be sent to the fund secretary:

**Peter Sneddon, Ochil View,
Keir Street, Dunblane, FK15 9BP
(cheques to be made payable to
Dennyloanhead Church of Christ).**

Dale Meikle

Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund

I wish to inform all those who donate to the above fund of my resignation as treasurer on 22nd August 2008. May I take this opportunity to thank everyone for the support and encouragement I received during my 8 years of service.

Janet Macdonald

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

Editorial Putting the "Credit Crunch" into perspective

Over the last few weeks the so-called 'Credit Crunch' has dominated our news. In fact on the world stage financial matters have moved on rapidly from what might have been regarded as a simple lack of credit, to a full blown, global banking crisis and economic downturn that seemingly has the potential to undermine the world's financial systems and stability. Over a matter of a few short weeks the apparent certainties of the world's economic systems have been revealed as

having all the strength and stability of a pack of cards due to some fearsomely bad practice on the part of those people who have decision-making capacity in these matters. The newscasts that have come into our homes from the trading floors of some of the world's leading financial institutions have shown us the images of the relatively young men and women who work as 'traders' in these institutions with their heads in their hands as their inability to exercise any control over events sinks in. With apologies to any Christian traders who might read this, the poor things are probably wondering where the next multi-million pound bonus is going to come from. Now of course most of the world's economies are moving into recession of one level of severity or another with all of the worries about jobs and mortgages that such a situation entails.

Gaining some perspective?

During the course of this crisis, numbers have come into public consciousness that the vast majority of us find it extremely difficult to relate to in any kind of meaningful way and perhaps the first of these that gave a sense of the scale of the problem was the \$700 billion (USD) rescue package that the United States government was planning to support its banking system. In so far as the financial situation will ultimately affect



Contents: 1 - Editorial; 5 - Memorising the Scriptures; 7 - Preaching; 10 - Early Church; 13 - Faith or Work; 14 - Great Expectations; 15 - Resume of Jesus Christ; 16 - News & Info.

many people in terms of the value of pensions, savings or indeed their job security, the whole matter is serious. However I decided, in an attempt to put some kind of perspective into a figure of the magnitude of \$700 billion, to have a bit of fun with numbers, but decided to base my calculations on the United Kingdom equivalent of \$700 billion – say for sake of argument, £370 billion (British Pounds). (At least it was the equivalent when I started this article – it would be nearer to £450 billion right now – Ed). I've no idea what that kind of money looks like physically, but here's what I came up with assuming that our figure of £370 billion was represented by £1 coins:

1. Assuming that the average African elephant weighs 6 tonnes, our £370 billion in £1 coins would weigh the equivalent of 583,000 African elephants (that is somewhere within the range of the current estimated total population of African elephants). That's some big herd!
2. Piled on top of each other, the £1 coins would reach the height of 730,000 miles – that's roughly equivalent to 133,000 Mount Everest's stood on top of each other; a distance equivalent to 28 times around the Equator; or, believe it or not, 3 times the distance to the moon!
3. Placed end to end in a line our £1 coins would stretch for 5.05 million miles or the equivalent of 203 times around the world's equator.
4. If all of the coins were laid out in a square (difficult I know with round coins but you know what I mean) they would cover an area of 69 miles squared – for UK readers that's something like an area with Liverpool, Sheffield, Coventry and somewhere in East Wales as its corners.

Having done all of those calculations (sad, I know) I'm not sure that they help much in gaining a sense of perspective but I thought I might as well share them with you anyway – you can maybe use them to impress your friends or work colleagues!! What we do know is that these figures are huge and unrelated to anything else in our experience.

After 15 years or so of almost unbroken economic growth and relative well-being most of us had been lulled into a false sense of security. Some had no doubt made plans for retirement carefully nurturing the value of investments to make that a reality, others perhaps to sell a home and downsize to free up some cash, yet others to buy a home and get on to the property ladder. And then almost overnight there is the need to reassess priorities, delay or abandon plans, check whether our money carefully tucked away in those bastions of the financial world, the banks, is in fact actually safe at all.

Lay up for yourselves...

Now it would be silly to say that none of this affects Christian men and women. The Christian that loses his or her job is going to be every bit as concerned about the immediate future as the non-Christian in the same position. Similarly a Christian with deposits in a bank that is reported to be under threat is going to be just as anxious to get that money out as anyone else. I think that more likely represents good stewardship rather than greed or 'the love of money'.

However in these trying economic circumstances there is no doubt that the Christian mind is easily drawn back to a consideration of, and admiration for, the wisdom of God and it remains quite remarkable that despite all of the technological advances that mankind has made over the years, he has still not delivered anything that undermines the wisdom and relevance of what God has revealed to us. It ought to come as no surprise either that Jesus had some astonishingly good advice to offer to

people about how to keep a sense of perspective in their lives. In one of his earliest recorded public teachings Jesus had this to say: **"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"** (Matt 6:19). Now in our recent experience the manner in which our 'treasure' has lost a certain amount of its value may have changed from 'moth and rust', but the reality of the susceptibility of earthly wealth to losing its glitter and value is just as evident today as it ever was. If Jesus were speaking today he might just as easily refer to 'toxic debt' as a problem as he did to 'moth and rust'. But of course the real message here is about an understanding of where true value and true treasure lies and it certainly is not in the uncertainty and temporary nature of earthly riches but rather in the absolute security of the love of Jesus, as He would progressively go on to reveal during His ministry.

Where true value lies...

Luke records other words of Jesus that in some respects mirror the teaching that Matthew records. Living as we do in a world that seems beholden to status and celebrity one aspect of Jesus' teaching that Luke records is particularly appealing. One questioner had invoked the help of Jesus in trying to persuade his brother to divide an inheritance with him and Jesus responded like this: **"Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"** (Luke 12: 13 – 15). Isn't that so true? A man's life is not made up of things that he owns; indeed there are some people around whose lives are extremely rich even though in material terms they may have very little. We shouldn't measure people by what they have, but by what they are and we should be glad when other people apply that criterion to us as well. I'm not big into 'reality' TV programmes but every now and again I will sit and watch an episode of 'The Secret Millionaire'. This is a programme that follows extremely wealthy people as they effectively go under cover to spend a bit of time working amongst disadvantaged groups, or in hostels, or with people who are trying to operate socially advantageous schemes for the elderly or youngsters often working on a hand-to-mouth basis in terms of funding. Very often they scratch around to raise money to continue their projects. Having spent time working with these groups 'the secret millionaire' goes away to reflect on what he/she has seen and then goes back to some or all of these groups to 'come clean' about his/her financial status and to offer some financial help to the groups. Very often the millionaire establishes a long-term relationship with one group or another. OK it's a TV show, but what is encouraging is that the millionaire seems to grow by being exposed to the harsh reality of another person's existence and the struggle to make a difference. It's almost as if there is suddenly a purpose to their wealth and they become bigger and better people and their life becomes, however temporarily, more meaningful for having been confronted with another type of existence. There is a sense of life having a greater meaning in that their 'abundance of possessions' has been put to some worthwhile cause and some of them are visibly moved by the experience. They reflect a little more of what they are, rather than what they have.

Our faith and hope are in God

One of the most regularly used phrases by the economic experts over the last few months has been that matters won't improve 'until confidence returns to the financial markets'. That is until people in general feel that they can once again trust that their

deposits and/or investments are safe. Confidence is an ephemeral quality; it ebbs and flows often without any tangible cause; it happens in financial markets and it happens amongst, for example, football teams. There is a negative change in perception about what the economic future holds and so confidence drains away; or teams lose faith in the way a coach or manager wants them to play and confidence subsides.

Once again Christians are fortunate to have a very different perspective in those crucial areas of our lives that are concerned with our spiritual and eternal well-being. Writing to Christians who were trying to live faithful lives in the midst of a pagan and hostile society, Peter had real words of encouragement and confidence for them. "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake. Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:18-21). There are so many aspects of Peter's statement that are sure. Our restoration is based on the certain foundation of the 'blood of Christ'; God's plan is unchanging and was conceived before the foundation of the world; God is in control of the outworking of that plan and has authority over life and death; our faith and hope are securely vested in God. As Christians, because we have an unchanging God, we have no need to worry about a change in perception of the future and no reason to lose faith in what God requires from us and has promised to us. There is no ebb and flow of confidence, because our confidence is in God.

When Paul wrote to the church in Colossae he had a message of encouragement for the Christians there and for those at Laodicea and that message centred upon the person of Jesus. Paul's heartfelt desire was that they would enjoy true riches, that is, **"all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"** (Colossians 2:1-3). There is a huge difference between the financial, social and moral uncertainties of the physical world that we inhabit just now compared to the 'assured' understanding' that we have about what Christ and God have prepared for us and are, even now, preparing us for. And whilst many of the financial plans that we might have had for the immediate future have suddenly become much more tenuous, we can be absolutely certain that the spiritual realities and aspirations that we have are just as sure now as they ever were. 'God's mystery' is, of course, none other than Jesus Himself and as our knowledge of the work of Jesus grows so too does our conviction about the eternal truths that were revealed in Him.

The Bible is cautionary about the challenges that wealth can bring, but there are rich Christians. Paul had a message for them too and it comes right back to that 'right perspective' that we mentioned earlier in this piece. Paul does not condemn the rich for being rich but he does have something to say about the obligations that come with riches and warns them to have a very clear perspective about where 'real' wealth lies. "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed" (1 Tim 6:17-19).

The equivalent of 583,000 six-tonne African elephants in £1 coins is still not worth comparing to the 'eternal weight of glory' toward which God calls and beckons us!!

Thinking Out Loud

MEMORISING THE SCRIPTURES

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

W.W. Gasque in his article on F.F. Bruce in the book *Major Biblical Interpreters* writes: "Bruce's knowledge of the Bible was prodigious. Those who knew him well believed that he had the whole Bible, both in the original languages and in several translations, committed to memory. When he was asked a question about the Bible, he did not have to look up the text. He would sometimes take off his glasses, close his eyes as if he were scrolling the text in his mind, and then comment in such an exact manner that one knew he was referring to the Hebrew or Greek text, which he either translated or paraphrased in his answer...He also seemed to know all the hymns of the classical and evangelical Christian traditions by heart as well as a large body of secular poetry – English, Scottish, Greek and Latin". Not many people are blessed with such a mind. However, I think it is important that all believers attempt to memorise some portions of Scripture on which they can meditate from time to time as they go about their daily business.

SUGGESTED PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

I myself have tried to memorise a number of portions of Scripture over the years and continue to do so. I wish to share them with you.

The first passage I memorised was Peter's first gospel address delivered on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). We recall that it was to Peter that Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:19). Keys are for opening doors and Peter here is opening the door of the kingdom to his fellow Jews. Later, he would open the door of the kingdom to Gentiles

(Acts 10). When Peter preached the gospel for the first time on this famous day of Pentecost, I believe he preached it in its fullness. The three thousand or so souls were saved that day because they believed and obeyed the true gospel (2:41). The quotations from the Old Testament are, of course, a reflection of the Jewish audience, who believed all these Scriptures to be the word of God. Acts 2 is one of the great chapters of the Bible and I never tire of reading it or studying it. I like to read it in conjunction with Peter's address in Acts 3 in which he says the same thing, but with the use of different terminology.

Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17 is also worth memorising. It is interesting to note that Paul on this occasion does not quote directly from the Scriptures. Again, the content reflects the audience. Here he was in the ancient capital of philosophy, contending with the likes of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, and telling them about *The Unknown God* they ignorantly worshipped there (23). It is a masterful presentation and one of my favourite portions of Scripture. Sadly, we never read of Paul establishing a congregation in Athens. The tragedy is that many of the citizens were influenced by the wrong philosophy – the philosophy of this passing age.

I Corinthians 13 should also be memorised. The chapter is all about love or *agape*. Here is one of the great words of the Greek Scriptures. *Agape* has excited Christian writers for years. So has I Corinthians 13. They continue to excite me.

Matthew 5 is also a wonderful chapter in which we find the Beatitudes. Chapter 5 is part of the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" by Jesus. I say "so-called" because the word sermon is never found in the Scriptures. It is a theological term. Carl Ketcherside once wisely wrote: "The word sermon does not appear in the Bible. Origen has been called 'the father of the sermon' and he was not born until about 185 A.D. When we hear the word 'sermon' we conjure up a mental image of a man trained in the art of homiletics standing behind a rostrum on a raised platform. But Jesus simply sat down on a rocky hillside and

shared with people. He was 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' and what the 'Way- shower' shared was truth and life. There is some evidence that the people in our day have been preached to death instead of taught how to live".

I thought there was not a great deal in the Beatitudes until I read William Barclay on the subject. He wrote: "For most people the Sermon on the Mount is the essence of the Christian faith and life; and equally for most people the Beatitudes are the essence of the Sermon on the Mount. It is therefore not too much to say that the Beatitudes are the essence of the essence of the Christian way of life".

There are many other passages to put to memory: John 1; John 17 (Christ's prayer for unity); Romans 8 (an outstanding chapter in the Bible); Titus 2: 11-15 (a favourite portion of mine); Hebrews 11; 1 John 1; and many, many more you care to add.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 1 is worth memorising. What a chapter! It deals with origin of everything simply, but truly. The first verse of the Bible is quite wonderful: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth". Andrew Wilson in his recent book *Incomparable: Exploring the Character of God* writes: "In the beginning, God. What a way to start! No lengthy explanations or arguments, just a simple few words that show God was always there. Questions like 'Who made God?' or 'What was there before Him?' are shown here to be as irrelevant as they are silly. God is, was, and always will be the beginning of all things".

Exodus 20 contains the Ten Commandments and they are worth repeating again and again. If the Jews throughout their history had stuck rigidly to these commandments then what a difference that would have made to their well being. They ended up in all sorts of trouble because of their rebelliousness and disobedience. Breaking the commands of the Almighty leads to tragedy, inevitably.

The Psalms are something else! We should aim to memorise them all, including the 119th. Now there's a challenge! I began with Psalm 24 (at school) and moved on to Psalm 23 and Psalm 1. Thereafter, one can learn them in order of personal preference.

It is the same with the book of Proverbs. My father drilled into us at Sunday School Proverbs 3: 13-20. Here is good place to start and from which to learn more and more. If I recall correctly, Alexander Campbell always praised his father for urging him to study and memorise all the psalms and the proverbs, which he succeeded in doing. He said that the knowledge of them held him in good stead throughout his life.

Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book and chapter 12 is a highlight for me. It was, of course, written by Solomon, who knew a thing or two about the wisdom of God.

Isaiah 53 is a special chapter. It was this portion of Scripture that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when visited by the evangelist Philip (Acts 8). We read: "Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture and preached unto him Jesus" (35). Isaiah has so many sections worth storing in the mind.

Micah 5:8 is worth recalling again and again. We read: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I could go on and on. Suffice to say that I know, dear reader, you will have additional favourite passages of Scripture. Why not confine them all to memory? Surely, it would be worthwhile to think about them in the quietness of an hour. As the Psalmist says: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His law he meditates day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that brings forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he does shall prosper" (Psalm 1: 1-3). Yes, spiritual prosperity should be the aim of everyone. Knowing God's word thoroughly will surely lead to greater prosperity.

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: INCREASING HOLINESS

I think that it is fair to say that preaching today is often not held in the high regard that it deserves. This can be seen in the number of people who simply leave worship before the sermon is preached. It is also seen in the fidgeting that goes on when the lesson is being presented and the lack of attention that many give it. This can be in marked contrast to the solemnity and thoughtful, reverent manner of the rest of worship. But that is not all the fault of the listeners, for some who preach seem to have missed the purpose of the sermon. Those who introduce or conclude their sermon with words such as "I want to share these few thoughts with you." leave one with the uneasy feeling that they have no knowledge of the real purpose of preaching. It is no wonder then that some sermons lack any real application to everyday life, and that there is no call to righteous living. Yet preaching the word has as its purpose, to change the listeners; Scripture through sermons is to instruct us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16); i.e. how to live life on a daily basis in ways that are pleasing to God.

Equally, those who after a lesson come up to the speaker and say, "That was a nice talk" appear to have missed the point as well. From where do people get the idea that a good sermon is a nice talk? A lesson from the word calling for repentance may not be viewed as "nice" at all, but that does not mean that it was not what was needed by the brethren, and what God intended to be achieved through the sermon.

PREACHING IS A PART OF WORSHIP

Preaching is a part of our worship because God made it so. As an integral part of our worship of God, it has the same goal as everything else we do in worship – edification (1 Cor. 14:26). This word means "to build or construct" and is used metaphorically in the New Testament in the sense of building up the brethren as a spiritual building (Eph. 4:11-16). Thus, the purpose of the sermon in our worship is to build up the Church. It is not for the purpose of building up church numbers, but rather for the maturing of the individual Christians, which will in turn build up the Church. For edification and the spiritual improvement of each member to take place, there must be teaching and also learning.

CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE HOLY

That there is a need for preaching and that there is a need for Christians to learn can be seen in the emphasis in the New Testament on holiness. When we realise that the word "holy" can be translated as "saints" (Rom.1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1) we see that "holy" is a common designation of Christians throughout the New Testament. The word "sanctification" seems to be a word that we use rather infrequently, which may say something more than the fact that we see it as a "religious" word. However, just like the word "saint" and the word "holy" it has the basic meaning of "separation." When someone obeys the gospel by being baptised,

sanctification (separation, being made holy) takes place; "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor. 6:11 NKJV). In other words, at baptism the Holy Spirit makes us holy in the sight of God.

But it does not stop there, for while sanctification begins at baptism it is also an ongoing process. That can be seen in Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica, "Now may the God of peace sanctify you completely" (1 Thes. 5:23 NKJV). Clearly, they had not arrived. Sanctification has to be a process, for Christians continue to sin and God wants us to give up sinning (Rom. 6:1-2), and increase our holiness, which will take time, study, work, and practice.

The Christian's sanctification is God's will: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality ... For God did not call us to uncleanness, but to holiness." (1 Thes. 4:3, 7 NKJV). The intention of the love of Christ for the Church is that the Church should be holy (Eph. 5:27). You as a Christian are expected to "present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness." (Rom. 6:19); in fact, you must pursue holiness for without it you will not see God (Heb. 12:14). To pursue is much stronger than simply to seek. The apostle Peter in referring to the sanctifying work of the Spirit that is going on in the lives of his readers then says that God's purpose for this is "for obedience" (1 Pet. 1:2). In the lives of Christians, while it will never be perfect and complete, there is to be an increasing obedience to Christ. Sanctification is not a one off action but something that is to continue through all of life and that will require ongoing teaching.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS TO BE A LIFE OF GROWTH

Upon becoming a Christian, Christians are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); but it does not stop there. Having become Christians, God's expectation is that the followers of Jesus learn and practise a new way of living (Rom. 6:4). It is a new way in that it is a life of a different nature. For example, before becoming a Christian people live for themselves, but as a Christian's one must deny oneself (Matt. 16:24). That is a dramatic change if it is taken seriously; God expects it to be taken seriously. (But what are the specifics of that?) Notice that Paul does not say that new Christians merely need some rough edges knocked off and to begin attending worship once a week. God is not calling for Christians to continue their old manner of life with a few cosmetic improvements, but a new life altogether. God is calling for far more than a make-over.

The individual believer must grow in Christ in all things (Eph. 4:15). Christians must keep growing in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18); it is not in any old knowledge that will bring growth, but knowledge of the word (1 Peter 2:2).

Why this emphasis on changing lives? That is spelt out (Rom 3:9-26) in detail for us. We need this to be revealed to us by God, just as the Jews needed it to be revealed to them in the Old Testament (Isaiah 64:6), for we tend to see ourselves as basically good people. Such a fantasy is encouraged by our present culture with "experts" insisting that people are basically good and that outside forces are responsible for human failure. The more we are influenced by our culture rather than the word of God, the more difficulty we will have with the idea that we are sinners rather than

basically good people. God's plan involves Christians changing so as to be conformed to the image of His Son. (Rom 8:28); that means getting out of the sinning business and that requires ongoing learning. This is a life-long process.

THAT TAKES TEACHING

Such is the change that God is calling for, that we all need to be taught about what that new life consists of, and then encouragement to pursue it. Unless we are taught what constitutes the new life and the specifics of how that is worked out in everyday life, we cannot know how to live it, or even if we are living it. We need to know in specific, concrete detail just what living the new life entails, and that is impossible unless God reveals it to us through Scripture, and we learn about it from Scripture. That can be done directly through the personal study of Scripture or through a teacher. A part of God's plan for Christians is that it be done in part through the sermon. When done through some person, it is essential to check out what is taught to make sure that it conforms to the word of God (Acts 17:11) and so individual study is essential. Serious study is not simply the domain of the scholarly few.

When the word is preached it ought to change the worshippers; not by knocking off a few rough edges, but in very substantial ways. The need for that ought to be obvious to us when we consider the amount of interpersonal conflict in the Church and within families. When life is akin to a boxing match instead of being filled with love, then there is something seriously wrong. But, encouraged by our culture, we blame everything except ourselves. And if it is not our fault, what need is there for us to change, and what need is there for us to study the Scriptures in more depth in order to discover how we ought to change?

CONCLUSION

God put preaching in the worship service and told us that it is his word that is to be preached (2 Tim. 4:2). God gave us his word to teach us about how to live life and equip us for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17). There is much that could be preached about the Bible, that some might find interesting, but would be of little use in changing behaviour so that the listeners might become more holy. The aim of preaching ought to be to change people so that they become more holy; to change their thinking and to change their behaviour as a result and not simply to impart knowledge that may or may not be of interest to the hearers.

Preaching that helps people to change will of necessity entail hard work. It will require the in-depth study of Scripture and that will require a serious look at the meaning of many of the words used in the Bible that describe behaviour. For example, lessons on the family using Eph. 6:1-4 are not unknown in the Church. Yet how often does that include an explanation of what "training" means and what "admonition" means? If people are to do what this requires, and it is commanded, then we need to know what the terms entail and what the difference is between the two words. If those who preach do not understand exactly what Christians ought not to be doing, and precisely what it is that they must be doing, to be like Christ, then how can sermons achieve their intended purpose? When sermons connect with everyday living, as God intended, then preaching will not have such a bad press and there will be far less conflict in the Church, Christians will be more holy, and God will be honoured.

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 14 Non-BIBLICAL EVIDENCES OF JESUS

Thanks to the thorough and scholarly researches of FF Bruce we have available to us a valuable and impressive collection of material on this subject for which due acknowledgement must be made at the outset. So far as extra-biblical references are concerned Professor Bruce has classified these into two types, those from pagan sources and those from Jewish literature.

PAGAN SOURCES

1. THALLUS

Thallus was a Samaritan historian who lived and worked in Rome around the middle of the 1st century. We only know his words by virtue of references to them in those of Julius Africanus. In speaking of that darkness that fell over the land during the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:33), Africanus gives the following statement – “Thallus, in the third book of histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun.”

Whilst we may be a little disappointed with the fact that Thallus saw fit to ‘explain this away’, there is at least evidence here of the factuality of that event being sufficient to invoke the perceived necessity of his doing so, as an unbeliever.

2. MARA-BEN-SHARON

Bruce also draws our attention to a document held in the British Museum that contains the text of a letter sent by a Syrian of this name to his son. In it the father pleads with his wayward child, now in prison, to avoid the folly of persecuting wise men such as Socrates, Pythagoras and Christ. Having recalled the burning of Pythagoras by the men of Samos and the enforced ‘suicide’ of Socrates, this is how the letter concludes: “What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that their kingdom was demolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good, he lived on in the teaching of Plato; Pythagoras did not die for good, he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching He had given.”

This manuscript dates from a short time after AD73 and by then it is clear that there were those, even amongst pagans, who were prepared to concede Jesus’ fitness to be compared with the ‘great men of the age’.

3. CORNELIUS TACITUS

We have come across this historian before in our studies and this is what he has to say in the “Annals” Book 15 section 44 in relation to the Great Fire of Rome (AD64) started by Nero. “Consequently to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite of tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called

Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate."

Tacitus was no lover of Christ or Christians, but there can be little doubt about his acknowledgement of the historicity of either.

4. PLINIUS SECUNDUS (that's Pliny the Younger to you and me).

Pliny was governor of Bithynia and wrote, on several occasions, to his emperor, Trajan, seeking advice on how to deal with the sect called the Christians, who, in his estimation, were a constant source of trouble in his province. One letter, from AD 112, reveals the content of a confession, extracted under torture: "They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed ... after which it was their custom to separate and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind" (Epistles of Pliny 10:96).

5. SUETONIUS

Suetonius wrote a major and authoritative work called "The Lives of the Twelve Ceasars", a work that is still readily available. We have already seen contributions from this work in relation to some of the topics covered in previous studies, but it is this, from his treatment of the life of emperor Claudius, written in AD120 for which he is best known amongst students of Christian history: "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome." Luke records the same expulsion in Acts 18:1 - 2.

JEWISH SOURCES

6. THE TALMUD

The Talmud is a compilation of two separate books, the Mishnah, which is mainly concerned with Jewish, religious legal practice, and the Gemaras, which consists of commentary and analysis on the Mishnah. Together they are known as the Talmud. As we might expect, given their Jewish origins, they have nothing good or complimentary to say about Jesus, to whom they refer as Yeshua of Nazareth, but the frequency of such references is such as to leave little room for doubt that the Jewish writers were well aware of His existence.

2. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

So regularly did I hear this name when I was a small boy, that I could not help but wonder whom 'Joe Sefas' was. Well, now I know. He began life as a general in the army of Israel, but on journeying to Rome, and becoming a Roman citizen, he took the name Flavius in honour of the Flavian dynasty of its emperors.

Apart from the Bible, his is the major contribution to the recording of history of that period relevant to the first and early second centuries. He speaks of many of the same characters and events as those recorded in the New Testament, including Pilate, Quirinius, the Pharisees and Sadducees, Felix, Festus and Annas and Caiphas. He also refers to the Herods and the death of John the Baptist. Most significant of all though is this reference to Jesus in his "Antiquities" 18.3.3: "And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvellous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He won over many Jews and also many Greeks. This man was the Messiah. And when Pilate had condemned Him to the cross at the instigation of our own religious leaders, those who had loved Him from the first did not cease. For He appeared to them on the third day

alive again, as the holy prophets had predicted and said many other wonderful things about Him. And even now the race of Christians, so named after Him, has not yet died out."

To unbelievers of course, this is a deeply damaging piece of support for the truthfulness of the New Testament accounts, but numerous attempts to discredit it have failed.

Any food scientist, barrister or theologian for that matter, will tell us that 'proof' is not a word to be bandied about lightly and we should be careful, if we are not to appear ridiculous, of making claims that are insufficiently supported by an evidential basis. These references do not prove anything and it would be wise to refrain from suggesting that they do. However, if, as we do, we believe the New Testament to be accurate, reliable and truthful, it would be expected that, as to matters of fact, it would be in agreement with other accurate, contemporaneous accounts.

In another respect too we should be cautious in our handling of the material presented in these references. Their witness is, for the most part, hostile to the inferences that we would draw from the apostolic accounts, yet however grudgingly, the historians who recorded them have had to own their factuality; because they have no supportive axe to grind, they are the more valuable for that.

Over the centuries there have been those in their thousands, if not their millions, who have sought to deny Jesus and the scriptures. Comparatively rarely though, have their been attempts to deny the historicity of His existence; even the most determinedly foolhardy of atheists have generally known better than to attempt that.

Whilst indications like those of the examples quoted have a great deal of corroborative value as to the factuality of Jesus' life, they tell us little or nothing in relation to his deity, and many who would gladly acknowledge the former, refuse completely to accept the latter. Comment has been made in previous articles about the worthlessness of the "just good man" position, and readiness to accept this proposition has saving worth whatsoever. We are just as entitled, on the basis of the available evidence, that Jesus was a real figure of history, as we are to take for granted the same reality of Nero, Josephus or Alexander the Great, but that leaves us still way short of having established that He is the Son of the living God. For that we cannot, and should not attempt to do without, the inspired record of the apostles, that was inbreathed by the spirit of God; having said that, we should never leave the impression that the New Testament accounts are in any way inferior to those of the kind quoted here. A great academic historian himself, Professor Bruce makes the point that, whether on a documentary basis, or that of the personal integrity, as historians, of its human authors, scripture ranks not only as equal with, but greater than any comparable historical documentation. Whilst Bruce was known to be a Godly and spiritually-minded man, who may have been supposed to be a little biased towards this kind of conclusion, others with no such charitable disposition, including even some Islamic scholars, have had no difficulty in recognising, and applauding the acumen of Luke, in particular, as a historian of first rate.

Cynics will frequently tell us that we only have the Bible's word for such and such, and demand to know why, if Christ and his gospel are as important as we say they are, there is not much more, and much better documentary evidence than there is. Generally they are completely ignorant of the type of material that has been offered here, but whether that is so or not, we need never lack any confidence in standing on the Biblical record, both for the support of our own faith and the benefit of those who are at present non-believers.

FAITH OR WORK?

V. Sujatha, Stretford

I was reading Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography. In it was written that, when he was in London somebody told him about Christianity and encouraged him to become Christian. He became interested in the Bible and read it and was very inspired by it. We might have heard and read somewhere that Mahatma Gandhi quoted from it. If you are a Christian, you must have read some of that quotation in the Bible. From these we can see how much Gandhi was influenced by this book. Gandhi's famous quotation: "If someone hits you on one cheek, show him the other." Many people in India believe this famous quotation to be Gandhi's, but it is actually one of the teachings of Christ (Luke 6:29). He learned many things from the Bible and I am sure it must have changed his life significantly. However, I am not able to figure out what stopped him from becoming a Christian.

When it comes to changing ones faith, we have to face many problems. Maybe our family won't accept us or maybe our friends will react badly or maybe our society won't accept us. Much of the time thinking about these things stops us from obeying Christ. But Jesus said "No one having put his hand to the plough, and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Many do say we have faith in Christ, But what is faith?

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Faith originates in ones heart yielding to God's will. So faith without works is dead (James 2:17) but someone will say "you have faith, and I have works". Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:18).

You heard the gospel and you say you believe in Christ, so come to Him humbly like a child. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. (Mark 10:15)

You know you have sinned and you know that He will forgive you. For God said "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Hebrews 8:12; 1John 1:9). Come to Him and enter into his kingdom by being baptised (John 3:3-5) (Mark 16:16) (Romans 6:1-5). Then once you are in Christ, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord (2Peter 1:5-7, 3:18) (1John 3:18).

A Christian should abound:

Assemble and break bread in the first day of week (Acts 20:7)

Grow in knowledge (2Peter 1:5-7, 3:18)

Receive the word with readiness (Acts 17:11) (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

Teach others and preach the word (Ephesians 6:19) (2 Timothy 4:2)

Should not be idle (1Timothy 5:13)

Keep His commandments (John 14:15)

Speak wisely (Matthew 12:37)(Ephesians 4:29)

Live righteously (Titus 2:12)

Seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33)

Be faithful even to the point of death (Revelation 2:10)

Help orphans, widows and those in need (James 1:26,27)

Lead transformed lives (Roman 12:1,2)

Abounding in the work of the Lord (1Corinthians 15:58)

Preach the gospel (Mark 16:15, 16)

Be blameless and harmless children of God (Philippians 2:15)

Walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8)
Love your enemies (Luke 6:35)
Not be jealous (Galatians 5:20)
Not sin when provoked to anger (Ephesians 4:26)
Love God and their neighbour (Luke 10:27)
Overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21)
Not fornicate, worship idols, practice homosexuality etc (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; Galatians 5:19-21) (1 Thessalonians 4:3)
Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
Warn, comfort and be patient (1 Thessalonians 5:14)
Be ready always to give an answer (1Peter 3:15)

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). Do this and your works will demonstrate your faith. By your works, faith is made perfect (James 2:22).

Great Expectations

(A P Sharp, Newtongrange)

Some time ago, Charles Dickens wrote a book entitled Great Expectations. It's a novel about a young man living in hard times but who, by following certain rules, made good. He was obedient and listened to his betters. He had lived with wary fear and trauma but he saw the way ahead and overcame tragedy. He had great expectations for the future. He got there!

What of the Christian? Do we too have great expectations? Yes we have! Our expectation is of that home in Heaven. As Christians we expect great things if we are obedient and listen to the Lord. **"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive grace and mercy to help in time of need"** (Heb 4:16).

Yes we may have great expectations but at times life doesn't work out to our wishes. In times of need what do we expect? We must realise this, that nowhere in scripture does God promise to – as you might say – fine-tune our circumstances to **our** liking. He doesn't guarantee us a pain free, problem free environment. As His children we are free to ask what we will, whatever our hearts desire. But as His servants we must submit ourselves to His will. His will, not ours – regardless of what great expectations we seek after.

Nevertheless there are two promised gifts that we can claim with absolute confidence – namely, mercy and grace. It doesn't matter about our circumstances. You see, the Christian holds a tender place in the Lord's heart. He listens; He cares; He loves; He protects; He saves; He guides; He comforts. When we cry out, He is there.

Jesus not only listens, he extends to us the strength we need to endure any situation. We know, for example, that the apostle, Paul, had infirmities. God could have cured him completely, but he didn't. What was given to him though was the strength to endure. This is the idea behind the term grace. It was, and is, God's decision.

Unanswered prayer does not mean that God is ignoring your plea. In His own time and way the Lord will adjudge and confirm one way or the other his response to our pleas. Only remember that God's ways are not our ways. We may hope for, or even expect, what we will, but ultimately God decides. Yes you may have great expectations, but always be prepared to possibly lose out on a few. If God wills, it will happen. As Christians we live by the grace of God and He gives us the strength to withstand the aches and problems of life; and as we remain faithful to His will, like Paul, we will one day stand and give Him all the glory. Beloved let us draw nigh unto our Lord!

The Resume of Jesus Christ

— Author Unknown

My name is Jesus - The Christ. Many call me Lord! I've sent you my resume because I'm seeking the top management position in your heart. Please consider my accomplishments as set forth in my resume.

Qualifications:

- I founded the earth and established the heavens (see Proverbs 3:19).
 - I formed man from the dust of the ground (see Genesis 2:7).
 - I breathed into man the breath of life (see Genesis 2:7).
 - I redeemed man from the curse of the law (see Galatians 3:13).
- The blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant comes upon your life through me (see Galatians 3:14).

Occupational Background:

- I've only had one employer (see Luke 2:49).
 - I've never been tardy, absent, disobedient, slothful or disrespectful.
- My employer has nothing but rave reviews for me (see Matthew 3:15-17).

Skills & Work Experiences:

- Some of my skills and work experiences include: empowering the poor to be poor no more, healing the brokenhearted, setting the captives free, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind and setting at liberty them that are bruised (see Luke 4:18).
- I am a Wonderful Counsellor (see Isaiah 9:6). People who listen to me shall dwell safely and shall not fear evil (see Proverbs 1:33).
- Most importantly, I have the authority, ability & power to cleanse you of your sins (see I John 1:7-9)

Educational Background:

- I encompass the entire breadth & length of knowledge, wisdom and understanding (see Proverbs 2:6).
- In me are hid all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (see Colossians 2:3).
 - My Word is so powerful; it has been described as being a lamp unto your feet and a lamp unto your path (see Psalms 119:105).
 - I can even tell you all of the secrets of your heart (see Psalms 44:21).

Major Accomplishments:

- I was an active participant in the greatest Summit Meeting of all times (see Genesis 1:26).
 - I laid down my life so that you may live (see II Corinthians 5:15).
- I defeated the archenemy of God and mankind & made a show of them openly (see Colossians 2:15).
 - I've miraculously fed the poor, healed the sick and raised the dead!
- There are many more major accomplishments, too many to mention here. You can read them on my website, which is located at: [www dot - the BIBLE](http://www.dot-theBIBLE.com). You don't need an Internet connection or computer to access my website.

References:

- Believers and followers worldwide will testify to my divine healings, salvation, deliverance, miracles, restoration and supernatural guidance.

In Summation:

Now that you've read my resume, I'm confident that I'm the only candidate uniquely qualified to fill this vital position in your heart. In summation, I will properly direct your paths (see Proverbs 3:5-6), and lead you into everlasting life (see John 6:47). When can I start? Time is of the essence (see Hebrews 3:15).

News and Information

There is no Question Box in this issue as at the time of preparation Bro. Frank was undergoing some hospital treatment, from which he is well on the way to recovery. Question Box will be included in the next issue.

Ghana Appeal

Many thanks to all who have helped and continue to help in the plight of our spiritual family in Ghana. All donations should be sent to the fund secretary:

Peter Sneddon, Ochil View, Keir Street, Dunblane, FK15 9BP
(cheques to be made payable to Dennyloanhead Church of Christ).

Dale Meikle

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP 2009

Lancaster University
Thurs 27th Aug to
Sat 29th Aug. 2009

Contact: **Stephen Woodcock**

Tel: (01942) 211 479

Email:

stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

Paul Halliday:

Tel (01633) 858868;

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THE SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

BE INSPIRED...

By confidence in the resurrection

One of the great confirmations of the truth of the life of Jesus is the way that the apostles were prepared to subject themselves to all kinds of danger in their efforts to preach the gospel. The fact that they had been eyewitnesses to the great deeds that Jesus had performed and listeners to his teaching had a profound effect on their faith. Paul was not an eyewitness in the same way as the other apostles but he did have a personal encounter with the Lord that changed his life completely. And amongst all of the glorious deeds of Jesus ultimately it was the resurrection that formed the backbone of their early preaching and was at the heart of their faith.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church he recalled to them an incident in his ministry that had put his life in jeopardy. Paul tells them that he had 'fought with the wild beasts of Ephesus', an event that had put his life in danger and that, he recounts, only made any sense at all in the context of the hope of the resurrection – the main emphasis of his teaching to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:32). It is highly unlikely that Paul actually fought with wild animals as some contend; rather the 'wild beasts' more likely refers to the violent opposition that he and his companions faced from pagan groups who found that Paul's teaching was undermining their commercial activities. Quite possibly Paul refers here to what is known as the 'riot of the silversmiths' when a great mob was incited to create a riot against Paul over his objection to the worship of Diana and the effect that his teaching was having on sales of miniatures of the temple of Diana (see Acts 19).

Whatever the actual circumstances, Paul's message to the Corinthians, some of whom were questioning the validity of the resurrection, was that this example of preparedness to face immense danger on his part should be a confirmation to them of his utter confidence in the truth of the resurrection. The conviction of Paul and his companions is summed up in 2 Cor 1: 8 -10: "I think you ought to know dear brothers, about the hard time we went through in Asia. We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it. We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us, for he can even raise the dead."

Yes, the truth is that Jesus is the 'firstfruits of those who sleep'. That truth was so entrenched in the mind of Paul and those who faced that same danger, that even though they feared for their lives, they knew that should the worst happen, their eternal hope was firmly rooted in the resurrection.

Contents: **1** - Be Inspired; **2** - Question Box; **6** - Thinking Out Loud; **8** - Early Church; **11** - Preaching; **14** - Why Worship Mary?; **15** - News & Info.



QUESTION:
Do the world's catastrophes and problems indicate the imminence of the Lord's return? Are these 'Signs of the Times'?



Although this month's question came from an unusual source it is one, which, in the light of the world's current problems, may very well have been asked by a great many people.

For some time the world has experienced disasters of every imaginable kind. We have heard of the tsunami, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, forest-fires, floods, famine, epidemics, wars and rumours of wars in many parts of the world, and, most recently, we have found ourselves faced with the catastrophic failure of the world's financial institutions, bringing the very real threat of world-wide recession and all the fearful consequences that would follow.

The Visitors.

The moment I opened the front door and saw the two men who stood before me, I knew who and what they were, as surely as if they had their identity branded on their foreheads. They were 'servants' of the "Watchtower Organisation", that religious body which, in 1931 became guilty of the offence of 'Identity Theft' when it took upon itself the name that God had used to describe His (unfaithful) ancient people, Israel (Isaiah 43:9-1, and 44:8-9). In other words, these two men were so-called, 'Jehovah's Witnesses'.

They were smartly dressed and very friendly and it came as no surprise to me when, in an affable, conversational style, one of them asked me what I thought of the current world situation. Did I think that we are living in the 'end times'? And did I think that all the world's catastrophes and problems indicate the imminence of the Lord's return? Are they 'signs of the times'?

Now, I claim to be fairly well versed in what "The Watchtower" organisation teaches, and I am aware of the fact that its 'servants' have been instructed by their leaders to radically change their approach when they go 'door to door'. They are no longer to present themselves in the old, uncompromising and rather superior manner that often left people feeling angry and antagonistic towards them. Instead, they must seek to engage their contacts in friendly discussion.

Some of us remember that, years ago, they met with wide resentment, because of their manner of approach, but they accepted resentment and the rejection of their message quite happily, because they regarded themselves as being '*persecuted for righteousness sake*'; and, therefore, they went on their way rejoicing! But, in these days, they adopt a more diplomatic, conciliatory tone, and ask such question as those to which I have already referred, ready, when the opening presented itself, to introduce their 'gospel' of an Renovated, Earth, dry cleaned and sanitised, free of all problems, and providing a Paradisiacal life for the 'great multitude' who accept the 'Watchtower's' message, when Christ returns.

So, in these days, they constantly look for 'signs of the times': a phrase, the definition of which is given as, '*Evidences of the imminence of the Return of Christ and the End of the World*'.

A Common Error

Now, the "Watchtower" is not alone in its search for 'signs'. Throughout the centuries

of the Christian faith men have preached and made predictions concerning the Lord's return, but we do not have the space here to deal with that aspect of the subject. It must suffice to say that, more than 50 years ago there appeared a monthly religious magazine bearing the name, '*The Signs of the Times*', and, as the title indicates, it was dedicated to identifying any event on earth, that might be seen as a 'sign of the times', and, therefore, as a sign that the Second Coming was at hand. In fact, I think that this magazine is still published in parts of the world where "Seventh-Day Adventism" seems strong; for example, in Australia and the U.S.A.

Furthermore, although they do not share the views of the "Watchtower" concerning what will happen before or after the return of the Lord, there are other religious groups who also love to talk about '*the signs of the times*', and whose ideas are just as erroneous as those of the self-styled "Witnesses". These groups, also, are convinced that His return will be preceded by the 'signs'. Indeed, the teaching of certain denominations on the subject of the "Second Coming" is the foundation that underpins everything else that they believe and teach, so that it has become nothing short of an obsession.

It is recorded that, on one occasion, C.H. Spurgeon, said, "*Ye men of Plymouth, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? Get on with your work!*"

No Signs!

It is sad, therefore, that it seems never to occur to these people that they may not be on biblical ground when they look for such 'signs', or that they may be guilty of teaching error when they claim that the Lord's return will be preceded by 'signs'. I say this because, when we examine the particular passage of scripture in which the phrase '*signs of the times*' is mentioned, it becomes quite clear that the 'signs' to which the passage refers, have nothing whatsoever to do with the end of the world, or to the Lord's return.

Let me state this simply. There is not a single verse in the Word of God that instructs, or encourages, believers to look for '*signs of the times*' in connection with the Lord's return, or with the end of the Age.

Matthew 16: The request for a sign.

That expression, '*signs of the times*', occurs only once in the New Testament scriptures. It is found in Matt.16, where we read about an unlikely alliance of traditional enemies, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came to Jesus 'tempting' Him; that is, 'testing' Him. They asked Him for a '*sign from heaven*'. They had already raised the issue earlier, In Matt. 12:38, when they said, "*Master, we would see a sign from you*".

Now, it is significant that they did not treat him with anything more than mild politeness. They merely called Him '*didaskale*' which means '*teacher*'. In John 3: 2, Nicodemus also called Jesus '*Master*', using the title '*Rabbi*' - which also means '*teacher*', but which is a much more respectful and honourable title.

But, notice what it is for which the Jewish leaders ask. They ask for a '*sign*'. There is no mention of His 'Return', or the end of the World. Why not? The reason is surely obvious. It would never have occurred to them to ask such questions, and they would even have regarded any suggestion that He may be the Messiah as outrageous and blasphemous. Only those who believe Him to be the Christ would talk about such subjects. So, what sort of '*sign*' were they seeking? And why did they want a sign? They demanded a sign because the issue was one of authority. They were challenging His authority, and His authority depended on His identity. Had He, in fact, appeared on the scene with a message from *God*? In other words, was He a true prophet?

This was something that Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee, had already settled for himself and which he acknowledged when he said to Jesus: "*We know you are a teacher come from God. For no-one can do the signs you do, unless God is with him*" (John 3:2). (Notice, please, that, although the 'A.V.' uses the word '*miracles*', John actually consistently uses the word '*signs*'.) Later, when the faith of Nicodemus had grown stronger, he appears to have become a true 'believer' (John 19; 38-39).

Now, when the Jewish leaders asked for a '*sign from heaven*' they thought they were setting Him a test, which they were confident He would fail. They were demanding a demonstration of miraculous power as proof that He was a true prophet of God. We need to bear in mind that, because the Jews were a Theocracy, a people governed by God - (at least, in theory!) - they were never surprised when men came claiming to be prophets sent by God. But they invariably demanded that anyone claiming to be divinely commissioned should give proof of his heavenly calling by performing a miraculous act. Such an act would be accepted as the '*sign from heaven*': that is, of '*heavenly*' endorsement. So they said to Jesus: "*What sign do you show?*" "*We would see a sign from heaven.*"

Yes, you and I know that the Lord had already performed enough wonderful deeds to have convinced unbiased people that He had come from God, but, behind their opposition to Him, we must see the fact that these religious leaders were actually concerned about their own authority, which they felt He was undermining. They were resentful of His growing influence among the ordinary people who '*heard Him gladly*', and they wilfully, and quite deliberately, refused to recognize and acknowledge the miracles He had already performed.

Matthew 12 tells us that He had performed a miracle of healing which had amazed the common people, but the Pharisees dismissed the miracle, saying, "*He casts out devils because he is in league with the Devil!*" This is why He called them, "*a wicked and adulterous generation*", when they asked for a sign. He accused them of refusing to see the '*signs of the times*'; that is, the signs of *those* times, and warned them that no special sign would be given to them.

The ultimate proof of His identity and His authority was one that had already been determined by 'heaven'. It was the sign of the prophet Jonah. Now, we know that he was speaking about His death, burial and resurrection on the third day. Romans 1:4, states that He was '*declared to be the Son of God... by the resurrection from the dead*' and it is this, the ultimate sign, which Jesus describes as '*the sign of the prophet Jonah*'. He declared that the acts of power that He had already performed endorsed His identity and proved that He had come to do the will of the Father. But these men shut their eyes against the evidence. More than this, they wickedly described His '*signs*', performed by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the work of the Devil, and in so doing, they were actually committing the unforgivable sin.

Matthew 21: Authority again demanded.

This was not the only occasion when the Jewish leaders showed that they were dishonest men. On another occasion, described in Matthew 21:23, when Jesus was in the Temple teaching the people, the Jewish leaders descended on him in full force. The chief priests and elders of the people, backed, no doubt, by members of the Temple Guard who had the responsibility of maintaining order in the Temple-courts, came and demanded to know "*By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?*"

They knew that the previous day He had cleansed the Temple for the second time, and the words, '*these things*' refer to the events of that day: that is, to His cleansing of the Temple-court and His teaching of the people. The priests were indignant:

- Firstly, because He had disrupted the business of buying and selling that went on in the Court of the Gentiles - an enterprise which they allowed and of which they approved because it made them a great deal of money, Matthew 21:12, and,
- Secondly, because He frequently taught the people in the Courts of the Temple, without first acknowledging their authority and obtaining their permission (Matt. 21:23).

In their view, Jesus was not a qualified and authorized teacher, and they therefore concluded that He acted with an authority He did not possess. Hence, their challenge: *"By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?"*

In response He asked *them* a question, concerning the authority of the baptism preached by John the Baptist - was his baptism from heaven, or of men? They were quick to understand the significance of the question, and so they declined to give Him an answer, claiming, *'We cannot tell'*. We hear His scorn for these evil men, when He replied, *'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things'*.

A Conclusion

We see, then, that nothing in these scriptures concerns *'signs of the times'* such as those for which my two "Watchtower" visitors were looking. When the Priests and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign they were concerned about His identity and authority *at that time, during His earthly ministry*. They were concerned about his First Coming, *not* about His Second, concerning which they knew nothing, and understood nothing.

A plain denial of signs

Still in the Gospel according to Matthew, we see that in chapters 24 and 25, His disciples raised the matters of His Return and the end of the Age. In fact, they asked three questions, which we find in Matthew 24:3:

1. There was a question concerning the destruction of the Temple and the City.
2. A question concerning 'the sign of Thy coming'.
3. A question concerning 'the end of the world'.

In response to their first question, the Lord gave them detailed information and instruction, from chapter 24:4. But then, at verse 36 of that chapter, we find this unmistakable statement: *"But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only"*.

The Lord warns that, as it was in the time of Noah before the Flood came and the people were going about their lives in the usual way, so it will be when He returns. In those days, they neither knew nor suspected that anything unusual was about to happen. They paid no attention to Noah's warnings and were unprepared when the flood came and swept them all away.

He then proceeds to teach how believers should behave in view of the fact that there will be nothing to warn that His Coming is imminent. He says that it will be unheralded, like the coming of a thief, in the night, and He gives us, in parabolic form, three watchwords, when He says that we should be:

1. Waiting 2. Watching 3. Working

No 'signs of the times'! No special evidence of His imminent appearance! Instead, a solemn warning which every one of us should take seriously and think about more frequently: Matthew 24:42 *"Watch, therefore for you do not know at what hour your Lord will come."*

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Thinking Out Loud

TIBERIUS CAESAR

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

Caesar Augustus died in A.D. 14 at the age of seventy-six. He was a hard act to follow. Tiberius Claudius Nero was his successor. He reigned until A.D. 37, the year of his death at the ripe old age of seventy-nine. So Tiberius Caesar was the emperor at the time of Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. He, of course, knew about Jerusalem and Judea; but we often wonder if he ever heard anything about Jesus' activities in that part of his great empire.

In the days of Augustus, Tiberius had been an outstanding army commander and had served with great distinction in places like Illyricum, Pannonia (modern Balkans and Hungary) and Germany. In B.C. 12 Tiberius was compelled to do a terrible thing by Augustus: divorce his beloved and pregnant wife Vipsania and marry a widowed lady named Julia, who happened to be Augustus' daughter. He obeyed. The marriage was a disaster. Tiberius loathed her and in 2 B.C. Augustus terminated the marriage much to the joy of Tiberius, who, at the time, was sulking on the island of Rhodes.

Tiberius was not easy to get on with. He was the grimmest of men and possessed a violent temper. Suetonius said of him: "For the most he was silent. Seldom or never should you have him talk with those next about him, and if he did, his speech was exceedingly slow, not without certain wanton gesticulation and fumbling with his fingers". He had an uneasy relationship with the Senate and was always suspicious of conspiracies and revolts. Frankly, he did not get on with many people at all. In consequence, at the age of sixty-five, he left Rome and went to live on the island of Caprae (Capri) in the Bay of Naples. In all those eleven years, he never returned to the capital. In Caprae he felt safer and more secure and living there helped alleviate many of his anxieties. From his villa on the east of the island he could better control all who came and went.

The fall of one Sejanus was "the greatest tragedy and downward turning-point of his reign" (Michael Grant). Regrettably, I do not have the space to consider the background to the fall of this man whom Tiberius, at one time, admired and trusted. I wish to quote Michael Grant again in summing up the latter years of Tiberius' life and reign: "Although his mind remained clear enough for most ordinary administrative purposes, his reason was almost unhinged by terror, self-pity and desire to avenge himself on those he believed were trying to break him. The delicately balanced imperial task set him by Augustus would have been too much for almost any man. It was certainly too much for Tiberius, in spite of his outstanding ability." In other words, he was not up to the job.

JESUS

What about Jesus, who lived in Tiberius' empire? Was He up to the task? Of course, His task was far greater than Tiberius' because Jesus was born to save the world. Tiberius was once described by the historian Dio Cassius thus: "He possessed a great many virtues and a great many vices, and followed each set in turn as if the other did not exist". Jesus possessed only virtues. There were no vices in His life because, of course, He was sinless, the Son of the Living God. Jesus once challenged His enemies with these words: "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8: 46). Paul later wrote of Him: "For He has made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Hebrew writer said: "For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). "For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens" (Hebrews 7: 26). Peter wrote: "Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22). Jesus was certainly fit for purpose.

Jesus did not go off and live on some exotic island to "get away from it all". He had to be where

His people were and He travelled around their land preaching the good news of the coming kingdom, teaching and performing many miracles, wonders and signs. But He did not have it easy. He was tried and tested at every turn, but He was not diverted from His task. Satan did everything to tempt Him and destroy Him. At times He grew tired and weary. He once said: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8: 20; Luke 9: 58). His circumstances were quite different from those of Tiberius on Caprae. No villas or palaces were built for the Master.

The political scene in Jesus' day was full of intrigue, conspiracy and corruption. Tragically, the religious scene was somewhat affected by the political goings-on. Let us take just one individual as an example. "About A.D. 15 Tiberius sent Valerius Gratus to govern Judaea, and he remained in the province for eleven years. During that period he deposed four high priests and appointed another four. It may well be that this was Gratus' method of enriching himself. The last high priest appointed by Gratus was Joseph Caiaphas (A.D. 18-36), son-in-law of Annas, whom Gaius found in possession of the sacred office when he arrived in Judaea as prefect" (F.F. Bruce). Pontius Pilate, of course, succeeded Gaius as prefect. He is the most famous of all the prefects because of the part he played in the New Testament narrative. He is also mentioned by Josephus and Philo in their writings. The latter had no good word to say about Pilate and describes him as "by nature rigid and stubbornly harsh" and "of spiteful disposition and an exceeding wrathful man". He also speaks of "the bribes, the acts of pride, the acts of violence, the outrages, the cases of spiteful treatment, the constant murder without trial, the ceaseless and most grievous brutality" of which the Jews might accuse him. Truly, there is no comparison between Tiberius, Gaius, Pilate and Jesus. Jesus must have stood out a mile from these men and, yet, he ended up on a Roman cross. One can hardly take that in. Everything about Him must have seemed like a burst of sunlight in a blackened, sinful world. To have seen and heard Jesus of Nazareth should have been a life-changing experience for everyone. "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46); "For He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22); "...for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with Him" (John 3:2b).

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus, of course, never met Tiberius, but he did encounter Pilate, one of Tiberius' political appointees. It was Pilate who condemned Jesus to death and that judgement will "live" with him through all eternity. He did want to let Jesus go, but, in the end, caved in to the demands of the Jewish leaders. Political expediency will result in eternal expulsion from the presence of Almighty God. The lesson is clear: no matter what, we have to do what is right. All corruption is wrong. All conspiracy is wrong. All condemnation of the innocent is wrong. Sin is all wrong and Jesus showed us that righteousness in all is right. Jesus said: "Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5: 6); "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10); "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5: 20). It is interesting to note what Peter said of the next world: "Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness" (2 Peter 3: 13). So we see how important and how lasting righteousness is. It was seen in perfection in Jesus. It was absent from many of the Roman officials. It was found wanting in many of the Jewish leaders too. But righteousness should fill everyone's life because righteousness is what it's all about.

The antonym of righteousness is wickedness. John wrote: "And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5: 19-20). I think it is important to conclude on this commentary note. "When one is in Christ, God does not see him as a guilt-laden sinner, for his own sin has been laid upon Christ, and atonement was made for it at Calvary. God beholds Christ and His sinlessness, and if we are in Him His righteousness is imputed unto us. We have none of our own, but that eternal love, which is bestowed upon the Beloved, becomes our heritage as well because we are in Him. All praise for the glorious generosity which makes this possible".

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 15 OTHER CONTEMPORARY RELIGIONS

The Romans were great borrowers of gods. Though they tinkered with their styles and rituals of worship they took on the religious systems of those nations that they had conquered with enthusiasm. If I can get you to cast your mind back to that image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, to which God supplied Daniel with the interpretation, and with which we began this series of studies, you will no doubt recall that Rome had come to powering succession to the Medes, Persians and Greeks. Like a snowball rolling down hill Alexander's rule had extended across more or less all of the then known world, gathering with it many of the cultural and religious attributes of those kingdoms across which it advanced. Even the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt was founded by one of his former generals. By the time that Rome had risen to the height of its power it was in a position to incorporate what was already an extensive collection of religious ideas and practices, and believed itself enlightened in doing so. Persian, Egyptian and Greek gods, together with their cultic practices, all found a welcome in the Roman pantheon.

Diana (Artemis) of the Ephesians and Dike, the goddess of Justice (Acts 28:4 – notice that the word Justice is capitalised) both put in specific appearances in the New Testament. Paul remarked, without naming any of them, on the multiplicity of gods honoured in Athens and did so, on Mars hill, in a place that was both named after the Roman god of war and sat directly beneath the temple which honoured both Athena and Nike, the god of victory. The twin gods Castor and Pollux formed the figurehead of the Alexandrian vessel on which Paul sailed from Malta to Rome.

LEADING PEOPLE TO TRUTH

Abhorrent to Christians as are the pagan practices of the religions to which we must seek to reach out, an awareness of the mind-set of those cultures in which they predominate is often a necessary evil. While he never attempted to trade blows with them, Paul was very evidently conscious of 'where his hearers were coming from'. Impatiently complaining that people should 'know better' or that 'the Bible is so simple and straightforward that anyone should be able to accept its message' is all very well, but it is an impatience that is hardly likely to lead to any great success in preaching the gospel. Jesus, Paul and the other apostles consistently took people as and where they found them, and led them from there to knowledge of the truth – so must we. Looking for that over which we can argue is a far less effective approach than beginning with that on which we can agree. Today, for example, Hindus have a whole raft of beliefs on which we could very easily take issue but, generally speaking, they have a healthy respect for the authority of the scripture and that makes a great place to start in speaking to them.

Part of Paul's 'becoming all things to all men that by all means (he) might win some' was in acquiring that knowledge of them that allowed him to have conversations with them on a similar 'wavelength'; and no, that did not mean that he either condoned, or gave the appearance of condoning, their often deep ungodliness.

As was the case with the heresies that troubled the early Church, it is not my intention to go into any depth so far as the contemporary religious world is concerned, except so far as it had a bearing on the progress of the gospel and what we discover in the New Testament text.

MYSTERY RELIGIONS

Romans, like the Greeks and Egyptians from whom they drew that majority of their religious thinking and practice, were intrigued by what have become known as the mystery religions. Secrecy, occult practices behind closed doors, mysterious initiation rites and dabbling in dark arts, codes and symbolism held the same strong attractions for them as they have proved to be in today's society, if the popularity of Dan Brown's recent best-selling novels is to be taken as any kind of yardstick.

Many of the gods associated with these mystery cults were concerned with the natural and agricultural cycles of death and rebirth. Tales of travels to the underworld fascinated their adherents and means of contact with that unseen world of the dead were a significant objective in their rituals. In this respect they had much in common with what were mainly fertility religions amongst the Canaanite tribes described in the Old Testament. Commonly, and with seemingly little reluctance on the part of their devotees, these gods were said to require frenetic sexual activity and drunken over-indulgence as suitable expressions of worship. Demeter (Roman 'Ceres') was the goddess of grain whose daughter Persephone was said to be banished to the underworld during winter. Over this period Demeter was believed to be withholding the production of the fruit of the earth, in mourning for her daughter, whilst spring heralded her renewed willingness to provide its bounty, in rejoicing at the return of Persephone.

Dionysius (Bacchus) was similarly a fertility god, especially so in association with the grape harvest. Worship of him consisted in the imbibing of his product in vast quantities and revellers apparently roamed the countryside, supposedly filled with their god. This state was referred to as one of 'enthusiasmos', the original Greek word from which our word 'enthusiasm' comes, and literally meaning filled with the god.

Orpheus was the god of poetry and music, best known for his journey to the underworld to rescue his captive wife who was held there by Pluto and Persephone. Some Jews apparently identified him with David, charming the dark spirits of the regions of the dead with his music and poetry, into better disposition toward the living. The Orphic cult, in many respects one of the more moderate, vied for his favour through asceticism and vegetarianism. There were cults devoted to Cybele, the great mother, whose temples being given over to use by Christians at the instruction of Constantine, is thought by many to be the basis on which Mary began to be worshipped as the Queen of heaven. The Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris are similarly said to have contributed something to the notion of Mariolatry (worship of the Virgin Mary).

In some ways the most significant of these mystery cults was that associated with the Persian god, Mithras. Whilst it was generally initially restricted to men of the army, it acquired great popularity and centred on the issues of life after death and happiness in heaven. Mithraism was heavily involved with symbolism, ritual, secrecy and ceremonial, including 'baptism' in the blood of animals. The worship on the feast day of god, December 25th, including the offering of gifts in celebration of his birth from a rock, by shepherds and magi, was the basis on which fourth century Roman bishops began the celebration of Christmas as a Christian festival. The myths of Mithraism also contain references to his resurrection from the dead, and sceptics have, more than once, been known to charge Christians with having 'lifted' the story and made it their own.

If you did not know it already, you might easily guess that the Gnostics found a great deal of common ground with cults of this type, and this was indeed one of the reasons for the advances which they managed to make in the second and subsequent centuries. Nor is it difficult to spot their parallels in freemasonry or the cultic practices of Rosicrucians, Theosophists and New Age movement groups that persist to this day, and might even be thought to be growing in popularity.

PAUL AND MYSTERY

At least a little knowledge of these mystery religions is useful to us then in tracing the origins of these religious distortions, but also in answering allegations of religious plagiarism, such as that concerning the resurrection, mentioned above. The most persistent and serious of these, however, concerns the charge that Paul was deeply involved with, and impressed by them and that this is obvious from his evident from his obvious liking for the idea of that which is a 'mystery'. Sure enough he does use that word, 'mysterion' some twenty times in his writings, but it requires little interpretational skill to recognise that it is in a completely different context and manner to that in which it was thought of by these cults. For them, like the Gnostics, secrecy and mysticism of a kind that could only be accessed by the privileged elite, was something to be kept locked behind doors of ritual, code and difficult to penetrate symbolism. Whereas their efforts were directed towards keeping the mystery mysterious, Paul's were in precisely the opposite direction, devoted to making it widely and plainly known.

SUMMARY

Christianity is not in any sense elitist or restrictive, although you wouldn't know it to read or listen to some of the ways in which those who are supposed to be its advocates have represented it down the centuries. Various branches of what has presented itself as Christianity have not proved themselves guiltless of multiplying rules, requirements and criteria for the maintenance of good standing, designed to keep 'the wrong sort of people' out, or to maintain a stranglehold of control on those within. Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are all matters that have proved susceptible to misrepresentation and misconstruction in the hands of those who have done so for purposes completely at odds with God's intentions, and after a fashion that bears closer resemblance to those of the mystery religions than His. Sacramentalism and 'means of grace' theology is far from being dead, even within so-called mainstream Christian denominations.

If we were to simply confine our impression of the mystery religions to one of Bacchanalian orgies and childish obsession with secret societies, then that would be to underestimate the significance of their far-reaching tentacles by a considerable margin. Roman Catholicism is deeply dyed with some of their influences and so too are the majority of cults. But we have no cause to be smug ourselves; have we never known those who look upon baptism as if it were some kind of magical initiation rite, or seemed to believe that regular taking of the Lord's Supper has some mysteriously transmitted, spiritually therapeutic effect? Oh, I know that that has nothing to do with scripture's teaching on these matters, but some have acquired them from somewhere, nevertheless. The prevalence of a disposition towards interest in 'spiritual' things is a mixed blessing, both an opportunity and a caution, which requires us to be both knowledgeable and diligent in our teaching of the truth of God's word, lest we seem to find partners where no real basis for such partnership exists.

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: THE PURPOSE OF SCRIPTURE

As the Church in the New Testament we have given a lot of attention to the scriptures, as we should have. In particular, brethren have recognised and taught that scripture is the written word of God, and so the scriptures are of divine origin and, as such, inspired. We have long argued that as scripture is inspired then it is infallible and free from all errors in the original autographs, and therefore must not be altered or revised. Further, it is through scripture that God has spoken to mankind and revealed himself and his will for mankind. Paul's words to Timothy (2 Tim 3:16-17) have featured in virtually every such discussion.

The concept of revelation presumes that God has revealed something to mankind, rather than our having discovered something as a result of a search into the religious. That raises the question of what it is that God has revealed. The quick answer to that is that he has revealed Himself. With some thought we would add that he has also revealed his scheme of redemption, and how we are to obey the gospel. Unlike the denominations, also we have insisted that scripture reveals things like how the Church is to be organised, how we are to worship God, and the roles of men and women, and that scripture is all sufficient in all these areas.

However, these verses say far more than the fact that scripture is God's revelation to us, and is inspired, infallible and all sufficient; to leave it there is to miss out something very fundamental.

TIMOTHY AND SCRIPTURE

In his first epistle to Timothy Paul had warned of people falling away from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-5) and teaching false doctrines. Paul then gave examples of false teachings and encouraged Timothy to instruct the Church about these things. While some would depart from the faith, Timothy himself was to be nourished by God's word (4:6). In his second epistle, Paul returned to the subject of false teachers (2 Tim. 3:1-9), but this time he focused on their ungodly behaviour. While the false teachers would behave like the ungodly in the world, in marked contrast to that Paul reminded Timothy that he had "carefully followed" what Paul had taught him and that just like Paul, Timothy could expect to suffer for the sake of the gospel (3:10-12). Next, Paul warned Timothy that evil men would both deceive and be deceived, (3:13) but again by way of contrast ("but as for you"), Timothy was "to continue in the things which you have learned" (14). The source of that teaching was scripture (the Old Testament), which he had been taught from an early age. Even though Timothy was older, that scripture was still relevant to Timothy, as Paul went on to explain (15-17).

... the holy Scriptures which are able

The word "able" is the word *dunamai*, which means to have power, and from which dynamite was named. God's word is not limp-wristed and ineffective but has power. Scripture is not simply an interesting history of man's search for God or even a book that God wants us to read so that we can win some Bible Quiz contest. The scriptures are powerful and, as such, we would expect that power to be exercised.

... to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus

The scriptures have the power to make us wise regarding salvation in contrast to the deceptions of false teachers (13). They tell us of the plight of mankind caught up in

sin but needing salvation, and God's plan to deal with that dilemma. The Old Testament points us to Christ and it is through faith in him that salvation is available.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God

This is something with which we are very familiar; scripture is "breathed out" by God. This speaks of its origin. It is God's message to mankind and as such, it is totally trustworthy in matters of history, science and doctrine. Put simply, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who worked through them, chosen men wrote what God wanted them to write and so what the scriptures say is true and to be trusted.

... and is profitable

In other words, there is some advantage or benefits. In our commercial society profit is something that we understand. Companies set out to maximise their profits while companies that fail to make a profit tend to end up bankrupt and so, if we own shares in a company, we see profits as a good thing. Scripture will profit us, not in monetary terms but in ways that will not perish.

... for doctrine

While to our modern ears the word has a less than pleasant ring to it, it is no more than that which is taught – it is a body of teaching. Its importance can be seen in that in his first letter to Timothy, Paul had told him that he had to give attention (to put thought and effort into it) to doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13) for it was by continuing in it that he would be saved and also those who listened to him.

The scriptures instruct us in such matters that God wants us to know and that we need to know. In the scriptures God has disclosed himself to the extent that he has chosen to reveal himself; without such a revelation we could not know God. Through nature we can know something of God (Romans 1:20) but it is very limited. We need to know far more than nature reveals. God has intervened in history but without a word from God we cannot know how he has intervened or the meaning of what he has done. On our side we cannot know how to respond to what he has done unless he spells it out for us. We need to understand not only his scheme of redemption and his plan of salvation, but also God's will for us as we live here on the earth. This will include matters of church organisation and Christian conduct.

Notice how these verses (2 Tim 3:14-17) are set between warnings about false teachers (3:13 and 4:3-4). False teaching is something to be avoided; we need sound, healthy doctrine (1 Tim 1:10).

That it is needed can be seen in that today we face difficult decisions that call for answers. We can of course, simply live like those around us and assume that our society has got it right. However, careful observation will reveal that in this society, sadly, there is a willingness to "call evil good, and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). As practising evil will keep us out of the kingdom (Gal. 5:19-21), it is essential that we know what is good and what is evil. The teaching of scripture provides those answers.

But it does not stop there!

... for reproof

The word means to bring to light, to correct, to convict of error. Scripture will provide the necessary teaching, and having brought us to an understanding of God's will for us, and shown us where we are failing, it follows that, for that to have any value, one then has to be convinced both of its truthfulness and one's own failure. Scripture has the power to convince us that we are wrong.

We can choose to be stubborn and resist the power of scripture or, if we will allow God's word to work on our hearts, it will convict us of failing to meet God's standard of holiness, such that we are willing to acknowledge our failure and repent of our sin.

This is an important step that must not be missed out. God is not offering us helpful hints on how to live successful lives. He is not simply telling us what we might try to achieve the best outcome and what to avoid that is counterproductive. It is not a matter of what we do, not being acceptable without asking to whom it is unacceptable. Neither has it to do with failing to reach our potential. Sin is morally wrong and against God (Psalm 51:4) and so repentance and forgiveness is what is needed, for only God can forgive sin. That forgiveness will not be forthcoming unless we are convicted of sin, for why would we repent of something that we do not think is wrong? Repentance involves a change of heart and scripture by having the power to convict us of sin sets us on the right path (1 John 1:9).

... for correction

This term means to restore, to improve, and to correct. It is a word used for putting right what has gone wrong. Not only does scripture teach and bring us to an awareness that we are sinners who fall short of God's standard of righteousness, it corrects us in that it straightens us out. We speak of people being bent or crooked and on the other side of someone being an upright person in the community.

Scripture straightens us out, stands us back on our feet again and restores us to an upright position. It not only convinces us that we have sinned it gets us out of the mess into which we got ourselves.

... for instruction in righteousness

This is the positive outcome. At first glance this appears to be a repeat of scripture being **profitable for doctrine**. However the word instruction is the word for training and it is used for disciplining children (Hebrews 12:6). There it parallels the word **scourge** showing that it is firm discipline.

Thus the scriptures have the power to discipline us such that it produces the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).

... that the man of God may be complete

The basic word means to make suitable. It refers to all the parts being present for completeness, so that they are able to carry out their designed purpose.

... thoroughly equipped

This is translated from just one word; it is the same word that Paul has just used (**complete**) but with *ex* in front to intensify it. It means to accomplish and is used for completing the time for a ship to unload its cargo (Acts 21:3-5). It was used of a rescue boat that was outfitted with all the necessary equipment for its task, such as extra canvas, sewing tools, etc.

The scriptures completely equip the Christian for every task that God requires.

... for every good work

There is no good work for which scriptures fail to equip the man of God to carry out. Nothing that God requires that we are to do is beyond us; other than if we choose not to be taught and equipped by the scriptures. The scriptures provide us with all that is needed for all problems, relationships, and behaviours.

Thus, scripture will enable us to spend our lives doing good works and not waste our lives doing what appear to be good works but which turn out to be a waste of time, at best, or sinful at worst.

CONCLUSION

This part of Paul's letter to Timothy is bracketed by a reference to false teachers growing worse (2 Tim 3:13) and brethren who will not want sound teaching (2 Tim 4:1-5). In between, Paul stressed the all-sufficiency of Scripture for equipping Christians for living life and for facing any and every eventuality. Scripture is all that

is needed for all situations from dealing with false teachers to brethren who do not want to hear the truth. In contrast to people who reject the truth, the man of God lives by what the scriptures teach. As the creator of life God has revealed knowledge of life that is not to be found anywhere else.

Paul piled term upon term to describe the scriptures. Similarly, he has emphasised that there is no good work for which the man of God cannot be prepared. That nothing else beyond scripture is needed has serious implications when one contemplates what Paul has written here, but that will have to wait for another article. Right now, it is important to notice that the scriptures have as their purpose, to provide all the information that the Christian needs in order to live a righteous and godly life and to deal with whatever problems life might throw up. That Scripture is inspired and is God's revelation to us is one side of the coin; on the other side is the fact that the scriptures are sufficient to be the authority in all areas of life. That means that scripture is all that we need in order to be able to live righteous lives that will bring glory to God.

As his children, God has given us everything that is needed to live joyful, productive, faithful lives. The scriptures give us all that we need to find biblical solutions to the problems that we face as we live life from day to day. At the same time, we are told that families are in trouble. That ought to drive us to searching the scriptures, both to learn for our own benefit but also to learn so that we are able to help others whose lives are in a mess. Yet paradoxically, fewer and fewer brethren appear to be attending Bible classes.

"Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved."

WHY WORSHIP MARY?

V. Sujatha, Stretford

Was Mary a sinless person? Does she need to be worshipped? The Bible does not say anything about worshipping Mary. God blessed her with his grace to become the mother of the Christ. She was the highly favoured one. Luke 1:27 says that God choose Mary. Luke 1:28 says "rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you amongst women". It said blessed are you amongst women, which means: amongst the women of flesh you are the most blessed one, but does not say that she should be treated as being equal to Jesus or to the Father.

Mary was also a human being and the Bible says: "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). Only Christ has power to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). In Matthew 12:46-50 Jesus was talking to multitudes, when someone said to him: "look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak to you". Jesus answered: "who is my mother and who are my brothers?" He stretched out his hand towards his disciples and said: "here are my mother and my brothers" and continued, "for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother". Mary was one of the people who followed Christ and just like everybody else she needed to be saved through Christ.

In Luke 11:27, a woman said "blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which you drank from." But Jesus said: "more than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it". Hebrews 12:2 states that Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. He is the true God, Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

News and Information

Question Box

Readers will note that the Question Box is again featured this month as Frank is, thankfully, recovered from his recent treatment.

However, the Question Box is, once again, completely empty, and as we have stated several times before there is no intention of 'making up' questions just to keep the feature live. So, this genuinely is a reader's call in that if no questions are received the feature will, regrettably, be withdrawn. Frank's address, email and telephone number are all noted at the end of his latest article but, for the record they are reproduced here:

Address: 11 Stanier Close, Corby,
Northants, England. NN17 1XP
Email: fworgan0@talktalk.net
Tel: 01356 206848

Ghana Appeal

Many thanks to all who have helped and continue to help in the plight of our spiritual family in Ghana. All donations should be sent to the fund secretary:

**Peter Sneddon, Ochil View,
Keir Street, Dunblane, FK15 9BP
(cheques to be made payable to
Dennyloanhead Church of Christ).**

Dale Meikle

Newtongrange, Scotland

Due to health problems and weather that is often inclement, we will no longer be holding Gospel Meetings on Sunday

evenings until further notice. The morning meeting may be extended occasionally instead.

M Hunter, Secretary.

A new book from Alastair Ferrie

Please find below details of a new book entitled "**Evangelism in a Post Christian Culture**" written by Alastair Ferrie from Dundee.

Title: Evangelism in a Post Christian Culture.

Published by: iUniverse

ISBN: 978-0-595-53003-2

Author: Alastair Ferrie.

Alastair writes:

I would commend this to the Church as a very useful approach to understanding and implementing evangelism in a very changed world. A Christian worldview is explained in terms of a 5 stage model and contrasted with the much more common Darwinian worldview. A number of chapters are devoted to the format of home Bible studies that might be conducted and the book ends with five chapters on arguments for believing that I have used in home Bible studies through the years.

This book has taken 30 years to write and is the book I wish someone had handed me 30 years ago. I hope it will challenge Christians to rise to the challenge of sharing the gospel with today's world.

It is available from Amazon.co.uk or iUniverse.com, or can be ordered from any bookstore quoting the ISBN number. This is a much more substantial book than my last one, being over 200 pages

long and showing reasoned argument, and useful tools for evangelistic outreach. I am currently using this for class materials here in Dundee and each member of the class has their own copy. I am to present a seminar on this book for the Newcastle church in February.

Alastair

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP 2009

**Lancaster University
Thurs 27th Aug to
Sat 29th Aug. 2009**

Contact: **Stephen Woodcock**

Tel: (01942) 211 479

Email:

stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

Paul Halliday:

Tel (01633) 858868;

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Website:

www.europeanchristianworkshop.com

Do we really mean what we sing?

"Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for He is gracious, and a song of praise is seemly." Psalm 147;1.

Over the years I have often heard it said that we do not mean what we say in the songs that we use. Recently I came across this unusual comparison someone has made:-

We sing "Heavenly sunshine," and stay away from services when it's too hot.

We sing "Onward Christian soldiers" and have to be drafted for His service.

We sing "Hiding in Thee," and then go and hide from Him.

We sing "Marching to Zion," but fail to march to Bible class and worship services.

We sing "Cast thy care on the Lord," and worry ourselves into nervous breakdowns.

We sing "Throw out the lifeline," and content ourselves with throwing out the fishing line.

We sing "Blest be the tie that binds," and then let the slightest offence sever it.

Selected

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