

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 A people with a purpose

Every now and again we come across the 'Why are we here?' question. It should be a far tougher question to answer for the non-Christian than it is for Christian men and women. I really don't know how those people without a faith answer that question convincingly though no doubt for some it's a case of 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die'; and certainly if people can rid themselves of thoughts of an 'after-life' and any sense of

accountability for the things done in this life then 'why are we here' presumably starts to have a very short-term perspective. I have no real empirical evidence for the following statement but I sense that, as people mature and become more reflective about their position in the grand scheme of things, the desire to identify a purpose does become greater. In some this might show itself by a persons attachment to a political cause, or the environmental lobby, whilst in others voluntary or charitable work may be the means of expression of their wish to do something useful, contribute to society or leave their mark. I don't think that it is necessarily stretching motives too far to suggest that there is some element of a need from within for a sense of purpose in life.

A purposeful life

Christian men and women should never be short of a sense of purpose because the very nature of the Christian life is, by definition, purposeful. That said, I can see no compelling reason either why Christians should not engage themselves in the pursuit of legitimate social and political 'causes' that are consistent with their Christian beliefs. However these activities should never be the dominant feature of the Christian's purpose because whilst we might choose to engage in matters of this sort, I believe that there is a greater purpose for which the Christian has been 'designed', and I use that word quite deliberately, by God.

When Paul wrote to the Colossians he set out for them the fundamental context of the Christian life: **"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the**

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things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:1 – 4). Paul re-iterates here a truly astonishing promise that Jesus also made to his disciples shortly before his death and which we can legitimately apply to ourselves today – that is, that when Christ appears again, we will appear with him in glory. And this is possible (and only possible) because our old nature has been put away, our lives have already been moved into a different, spiritual, dimension and we have been welcomed into the family God. The real value of the life of the Christian lies in the relationship that is enjoyed with God and every Christian should be thankful that in essence God has given true value and worth to life by 'absorbing' the Christian into his own life.

Thankfulness toward God

I don't claim to have the mind of God, but I think it unlikely that He would have engaged in the whole process of creation, and particularly of the creation of humankind, had He not had a definitive purpose for that creation. Very often we talk about giving our lives a purpose but what I am referring to here is something far greater than anything that we could dream up, rather I'm contemplating a purpose that is the product of God's wisdom and desire. After Paul had written about the Christian's life being 'hid with Christ in God' he goes on to explain the attitudes and behaviours that are to be 'put to death' and compares them with those that are to be 'put on'. He speaks of compassion, lowliness and patience; forbearance and forgiveness are to be clear characteristics; more than anything Christians are to be defined by love. Now the fact that these characteristics are predominant in our lives should provoke a reaction that God desires from his people – and that is thankfulness. "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. **And be thankful.** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs **with thankfulness in your hearts to God.** And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks to God the Father** through him." I have expressed the same thought in other contexts but repeat it here again, that if we spent more time reflecting on the majesty of God and expressing our thanks to Him for the transformation that He has brought about in our lives then we would have far less time for dwelling on the inadequacies and failings of our brethren.

Living to the praise of His glory

I guess that we've all heard preachers say words to the effect of (and I've said them myself several times too) that we should have the objective of 'being the kind of people that God wants us to be'. On reflection I think that God has set our objectives much higher than that. When God determined to make man he said, "**Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them"** (Genesis 1:26, 27). Out of all the infinite possibilities that God at his disposal, He chose to make man 'in his image'. Why? What did God have in mind for His people? I believe that the purpose that God had for His people, that ultimately required the intervention and example of Jesus to make it possible, was nothing short of the fact that we, His human creation, should show God in the world and be a reflection of His glory. And if that is true, what a mighty purpose God has established for us. We need to have a look at this in more detail.

God has given belonging and identity to His people. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 3 – 5 set out the eternal purpose of God: **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved"**. Even in these few verses there are some wonderful expressions of God's identity and design for His people:

- Our identity is in Christ
- Our residence is in the heavenly places
- Our destiny is to be made holy and blameless
- Our belonging is as those adopted into God's family

And then Paul reveals God's purpose for His people. **"In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory."** In this phrase Paul perhaps refers specifically to the apostles (we who first hoped) but he then extends this purpose to the 1st century Christians in Ephesus who have heard the word of truth, believed in him (Christ) and been sealed by the Holy Spirit **to the praise of his glory.** And that I think is the real purpose of our lives in Christ. Whatever specific avenue of service we undertake, our purpose is to show to the world the glory of Christ in praise of him. If it is true that the product reflects the maker then we, as the product of God, must reflect his glory. We are the products of grace, the very workmanship of God created in Christ Jesus for good works.....

A purpose for the Church

There is too an eternal purpose for the body of Christians that constitute his Church. I struggled for some time to understand what was 'the manifold wisdom of God that was to be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places'. But look back at what Paul has been describing:

- A plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth;
- A people who by grace have been raised up with Christ to sit with him in the heavenly places;
- A separated, alienated, far-off, hopeless people who have been brought near in the blood of Christ;
- Reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in one body through the cross; the abolition of hostility and the advent of peace;
- How the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The manifold wisdom of God that the Church is making known to the principalities and powers is that that God has prepared a model of unity, brotherhood, fellowship and reconciliation that is far removed from the inclination of the 'natural world'. The Church, the catholic, universal body of Christ is designed to show to the world that there is something far superior to the hostility, divisiveness, brokenness, alienation, prejudice, warring, enmity and more that so readily characterises mankind's relationships. The Church is designed to show that the grace and love demonstrated by Christ brings about peace, unity and harmony and in so doing is destined to shout to the world to the praise of his glory.

When Peter wrote his first letter to the 'exiles of the Dispersion' living in the northern part of Asia Minor he reminded them of the very precious status that they enjoyed and of their purpose: **"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light"** (1 Peter 2:9). A special people, with a special purpose; a God chosen people; a God possessed people; a God sanctified people. A people whose purpose is to proclaim to the world the excellence and wonderful deeds of God.

The new 'sons of light'

Paul's letter to the church in Rome (a letter that I believe has to be read in its entirety to achieve the full flow of the majesty of the narrative) contains, in chapter 8, what many Christians consider to be one of the great scriptural expositions of our relationship with God. Just as in the early days of creation God had determined to make mankind in his own image, so now Paul explains that God is outworking his purpose through those that are faithful to him and that purpose involves those who are faithful fulfilling that first ambition of God's by being 'conformed to the image of his Son'. "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:28 -30). It was of course a matter of deep regret to God that mankind so quickly succumbed to the wiles of the devil but through His Son, he found a way of ensuring that mankind would ultimately reflect his glory.

The basis of the Christian's hope is faith in God and Christ Jesus and as we noted earlier part of our response to the love and mercy of God should be an overwhelming sense and expression of thankfulness for what has been made possible for us. But there is also a real sense in which God has put an enormous amount of faith in his new creation, that is, in that body of people whom God has called into, and called to be, his family. Jesus declared himself to be 'the light of the world'; he told the Jews that those who believed in him, believed not in him but in God who had sent him; he told them that whoever saw him, saw God. It was the same message that he spoke to Philip that whoever had seen Jesus had seen the Father also. He said that for so long as he was in the world it had the light, but that the light was only going to be with them for a little longer. In other words, Jesus was saying quite explicitly that he was the expression of God in the world, and that he was showing the world what God is like.

But of course Jesus the light of the world returned to sit at the right hand of God in heaven. Does that mean that light, the expression of God, has gone out of the world? No it hasn't, because by God's design, by virtue of the fact that we are to live 'to the praise of his glory' and declare his wonderful deeds, and by virtue of the fact that Christians have been conformed into the image of His Son, then we become the expression of God in the world today. In other words, in the new creation that we have become, God has made us the way that we are, to show the world who God is. Jesus said, **"While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light"** (John 12:36). If the world is to see God, then it will see him through today's 'sons of light', God's people declaring their praise of God.

What trust God has placed in us, and what a purpose he has given to our lives and to His Church.

Thinking Out Loud

DEBATING FOR GOD

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

My good friend and brother, Richard J. Cherok, has recently published a book entitled: *Debating for God – Alexander Campbell's Challenge to Skepticism in Antebellum America*.

Brother Cherok is Associate Professor of Church History at Cincinnati University, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. His volume is a very welcome addition to my library. I met brother Cherok last year and took him to New Lanark as a treat. He, of course, knew all about Robert Owen as a result of his research on the debate between Campbell and Owen, which took place, in, of all places, Cincinnati, Ohio in 1829. Owen met his match in this debate, as Alexander Campbell was "the most significant Christian apologist of America's antebellum period" (Cherok).

The propositions to be discussed were the five issues of Owen's challenge to the clergy of New Orleans:

- 1) That all the religions of the world have been founded on the ignorance of mankind.
- 2) That they are directly opposed to the never-changing laws of our nature.
- 3) That they have been, and are, the real sources of vice, disunion and misery of every description.
- 4) That they are now the only real bar to the formation of a society of virtue, intelligence, sincerity and benevolence.
- 5) That they can be no longer maintained except through the ignorance of the mass of the people, and the tyranny of the few over the mass.

I have read the recorded debate on numerous occasions and can safely say that Campbell had the upper hand throughout. Indeed, Owen was no match for Campbell, and, embarrassingly, resorted again and again to reading out his "Twelve Fundamental Laws of Human Nature", copies of which, to this day, can still be purchased in the New Lanark shop. In the end, Campbell took the offensive. "In a masterful twelve-hour discourse – delivered over three days in two-hour speeches from 10.00 a.m. to noon and 2.00 p.m. to 4.00 p.m. – Campbell displayed a vast knowledge of nearly every aspect of the debate's content" (Cherok).

The debate was published under the title: *The Evidences of Christianity* and had a widespread influence. Campbell's arguments helped to ground me in the Christian faith because I first read the debate in my late teens. I recall at being staggered by Campbell's knowledge and abilities. I am still staggered by them. I have been a long admirer of Alexander Campbell and I owe him a great deal. I never tire of reading his books, despite the fact they were written in the nineteenth century. Also, I never tire of reading books about him by others. "Keep them coming!" is what I say.

FURTHER DEBATES

Brother Cherok has pointed out that "Campbell's public discussion with Owen also opened the door for additional confrontations with the advocates of freethought". Cherok's book features the following opponents: Humphrey Marshall, Dr. Samuel Underhill, Irad Kelley, Charles Cassedy, Jonathan Kidwell, Dolphus Skinner, Jesse Babcock Ferguson and Theodore Clapp.

Charles Casedy was an interesting character: alcoholic, writer and inquisitive sceptic. He wrote to Campbell and Campbell responded. Their correspondence featured in Campbell's regular publication: *Millennial Harbinger*. The wonderful thing is that Casedy was eventually won over by Campbell's arguments and became a supporter, who held Campbell in the highest estimation and a convert who went on to assist him in his apologetic effort.

I wish the same could be said of Robert Owen, but sadly it cannot. Surprisingly, Owen, late on in life, turned to spiritualism. "Claiming to have communicated with the spirits of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, the Duke of Kent and a number of deceased members of his own family, Owen used his spiritual contacts to confirm 'the correctness of his plans for the new moral world'" (Cherok). As Christians, we know he was in dangerous territory with spiritualism, which is clearly condemned by God in Scripture (Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:11; Isaiah 8: 19- 20).

DEBATING FOR GOD TODAY

At Motherwell, we have recently watched a DVD, which featured a debate between Richard Dawkins and Dr. John Lennox, both of Oxford. The debate took place in Alabama, U.S.A. and was on the contents of Dawkins' book: *The God Delusion*. We all thought that Dr. Lennox handled matters very well. He hails from Northern Ireland, which has produced, of course, Mr Campbell himself, C.S. Lewis, Alister E. McGrath, and many other great scholars. There is one thing about the Irish: they can speak! But it is great that there are still people out there, who are not fearful of meeting the challenge of modern scepticism. And why should they be when Truth is on their side.

I have also heard of another debate that has recently taken place in the States between the two Hitchens brothers: Christopher and Peter. Christopher is *anti* and Peter is *pro*. I look forward to listening to that one. Christopher deserves to be challenged on the contents of his recent book: *God Is Not Great*. I am glad that these fundamental atheists are not getting things all their own way despite the fact that their books are best sellers.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

The apostle Paul was a great defender of the faith. I have always enjoyed reading of his visit to Athens and his encounter there with the Epicureans and Stoics (Acts 17). Athens was, of course, the ancient Greek capital of philosophy. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno were all associated with this great city. Paul's speech is worthy of analysing and memorising. F.F. Bruce says something interesting about it: "...his exposition and defence of his message are founded on the biblical revelation and they echo the thought, and at times the very language, of the Old Testament writings. Like the biblical revelation itself, his speech begins with God the creator of all, continues with God the sustainer of all, and concludes with God the judge of all".

People today often speak about the light of nature or the light of reason. They reject, of course, the light of God's word. As Campbell wrote in his introduction to the Owen debate: "Show me this eye of reason with this light of nature, working faith in God; working out Christian civilisation, refinement of manners, temperance, justice, public virtue, and humanity; to say nothing of piety and the love and the admiration of the purity of God and I will lend a willing ear to such a demonstration. But the annals of the world and the experience of the present generation afford no such spectacles". Paul knew the Stoics and Epicureans were in error and told them about *The Unknown God*, whom they ignorantly worshipped. Sadly, the truth of his message won only a few over. I recall the words of the Master: "...because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7: 14).

The Bethesda Mystery

Rose M Payne

In the Authorised Version of the Bible, the Gospel of John has a verse in Chapter 5:4 which reads **"For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had."** This is mostly omitted from modern versions because it is not found in some of the oldest manuscripts and it could be an explanatory footnote that has found its way into the main text.

The pool is mentioned once or twice in the Old Testament and is said to be the place where sheep were washed before being sacrificed in the temple, but of no special significance otherwise. By the time of the New Testament it is known as Bethesda, meaning house of mercy or grace, and popularly believed to be a place of healing. This belief had persisted long enough for the pool to have been provided with five colonnades, one on each side and one dividing it in the middle, to shelter the sick. Archaeologists claim to have found this double pool exactly as described.

As explained in the text, the people held the belief that when the water was disturbed at intervals a miracle cure was bestowed on the first person to get into it, regardless of whether that man or woman were god-fearing or not, or whether other people were pushed out of the way in the selfish rush to obtain the benefit. This hardly fits with what we read of miracles elsewhere in the Bible. So what can we gather from the visit of Jesus to this pool?

It is not recorded that Jesus ever said that the people were mistaken in their belief or otherwise, but he left them with a demonstration of his power. Coming to the pool, he sought out a particular man, probably because he knew the man was worried about his sins. He asked him if he wanted to be made well. The paralytic must have thought this a very unnecessary question. Was he not always there, waiting and hoping, in spite of being disappointed every time? He had been incapacitated for thirty-eight years and may have spent most of that time beside the pool. His fellow-sufferers would probably have agreed that he had the least chance of anyone of being healed there because, as he explained, he simply could not move fast enough.

Jesus then healed him instantly, so that he was able to walk away carrying his mattress. There was a large crowd of sick people present, and they had just seen the most hopeless case amongst them completely cured without the aid of any bubbling up of the water. Did any of the others ask Jesus to heal them as well? It is not recorded that they did, although in other places Jesus was besieged by sick people and cured them all (Matt. 12:15). We are told that Jesus slipped away in the crowd (John 5:13) but there might have been a few minutes when some of them could have called out "Heal me, too!" Perhaps they were just not quick enough to put their faith in Jesus.

If this were indeed the case, the other sick people had missed the chance of being cured by the most effective healer of all time, simply because they did not have enough faith in him. This is an awful illustration of the similar fate of those who lacked, and still lack, faith in Jesus as a saviour and so will fail to obtain salvation.

Jesus meanwhile found the man in the temple, where he could go for the first time in many years to give thanks. He told him not to sin any more, implying that he was forgiven of whatever sins had been on his mind.

On a later visit to Jerusalem, Jesus met a blind man, and sent him to wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7), where his sight was restored. Why mention Siloam in particular? Would it be to make sure he was to avoid Bethesda, so that it would be clear that this man was healed by the power of God through Jesus and not through the agency of the water at the pool?

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: PREACH THE WORD

One of the buzzwords of the last fifteen years or so has been the word change. There have been countless books and articles that have begun by telling us how much change we are facing. Usually, we are reminded that within one hundred years we have gone from the horse and buggy era to the modern car, or we are simply told that the world has changed, and in particular that the computer has changed our world. You would think from what you read that absolutely nothing has stayed the same.

So enamoured are people with change that what is usually overlooked is how much that has not changed. In particular, God has not changed and the human condition has not changed. What is holy has not changed and the results of the cross have not changed, and neither has the gospel changed any more than mankind's need to hear the gospel. Sin is still sin, in spite of what our society says, and as Christians, as in every previous generation we are to get out of the sinning business.

JERUSALEM AND CHANGE

While the amount of change today may be greater in some areas, than at any other time in history, we must not overlook the fact that change has been with us down through history; some it quite dramatic. When Jerusalem was destroyed, the Christians escaped but imagine the huge change that it brought to the lives of those who had to flee. I have not had to face that kind of change, have you? Even before the destruction of the holy city there was much change that could easily have unsettled people (Matthew 24:4-14). However, in preparing his followers for what was to come, Jesus did not give a discourse full of helpful hints on how to manage change. Rather, the emphasis was on not being deceived but remaining faithful, with the encouraging statement that Jesus' words will not pass away (35).

TIMOTHY AND CHANGE

Because it is memorable, brief and useful, we usually quote, 'Preach the word!' (2 Tim.4:2); but with little reference to its context. Occasionally we might quote the rest of the verse and on the very odd occasion, we may include verses three and four. However, those words do have a context that is larger than that, and for anyone reading the two books that Paul wrote to Timothy, his 'son in the faith' the statement, 'Preach the word!' does not come like a bolt out of the blue.

The central focus of both epistles to Timothy is usually seen as instructing Timothy as to how to deal with the false teachers, who were not outside the Church but within the Church. However, in his second letter Paul explained that those false teachers in the Church were simply mirroring what was happening in the society in general (2 Tim. 3:1-9). Timothy was living at a time when society was changing and he would experience a widespread increase in evil in society that would influence the Church.

In the face of the chill winds of change that were blowing in Timothy's direction, how did Paul prepare Timothy for what was coming?

PREPARING TIMOTHY FOR CHANGE

In his second epistle the first two chapters are very personal, as Paul encouraged Timothy to continue in his ministry. A part of that encouragement included the command for Timothy to 'Hold fast the pattern of sound words' (2 Tim. 1:13); healthy

words which he had received from Paul (What is implied is that there are also unhealthy words). The importance of the origin of these words is seen in how often it is repeated (2:2; 3:10, 14). Timothy was to keep (guard) what had been committed to him (14), the word of God.

Timothy was also to teach others what he himself had been taught by Paul (2:2). Timothy was not to give special instructions to those he was to teach on how to deal with change. The emphasis was on passing on to others what Timothy himself had received from Paul.

Using three metaphors, Paul then reminded Timothy that preaching the gospel involved hardship, and in his own case that had resulted in him being in chains. However, he noted that 'the word of God is not chained' (2:9). He went on to say that the false teachers were to be charged are not to fight over words (14) while, in sharp contrast to that, Timothy was to 'rightly divide the word of truth' (15); he was handle scripture appropriately. Further, in the face of false teachers, Timothy's responsibility was to pursue righteousness, and to teach, 'correcting those who are in opposition' (22-26).

Paul then made it clear that false teachers were to be expected and he outlined the type of behaviour that would characterise them (3:1-9), for it would parallel what was happening in society. In sharp contrast to the false teachers, Timothy had followed and practised what he had been taught by Paul (10), as Paul had affirmed in his first epistle (1 Timothy 4:6). Paul went on to say that the false teachers would 'grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived' (2 Timothy 3:13), but in marked difference to them, Timothy was to 'continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them' (14). Secondly, Timothy was to continue in what he had learnt for the source was the scriptures (15) which were of divine origin (15-17). The scriptures provided all that Timothy needed to instruct him in order for the man of God to be able to live a righteous life.

PREACH THE WORD

After having emphasised so frequently in the letter the importance of Timothy staying with what he had been taught by Paul, and the divine origin of the scriptures, that Paul should then explain in practical terms the importance of the scriptures comes as no surprise. And, in view of the absolutely essential role of scripture in the life of Christians, neither is it unexpected that Paul should then continue by commanding Timothy to preach the word (4:2); not any old word, but that which God had delivered to Timothy, through Christ, who taught the apostles.

Before closing his letter Paul, with three imperatives, commanded Timothy to 'convince rebuke, exhort' because some brethren would not want to know what God had to say, but would prefer what the false teachers had to offer (3-4). That might well be what some brethren wanted, but as for Timothy, he was to do the work of an evangelist (5).

Paul prepared Timothy by saying a lot more than we have considered. But from what we have seen, it is clear that Timothy was to face the chill winds of change, not by making changes to the worship, and not by making the gospel message 'relevant', but by staying with the scriptures and what Paul had taught him. Timothy was to deal with the changes that society would bring to the Church by preaching the word, and that involved correcting the brethren, rebuking them where they went astray and urging them to obey the scriptures.

SCRIPTURE EQUIPS US

We have looked at just two examples, and there are more, of people in the first century facing significant, unsettling change. Jesus did not see the need for a chapter on how to manage change when he predicted that Jerusalem would be destroyed. In

Timothy's case, one would have to be blind to miss the prominence Paul gave to staying with the scriptures in the face of change. The antidote for change was to stay faithful to the word of God; both Timothy and the Church. God's word was to be preached, not psychology, nor ideas from the business world, nor the latest sociological theory about some aspect of church life, and nor was the idea to present an entertaining talk, and not even some fascinating facts about the Bible. Paul did not encourage Timothy to change the songs that they sang, or suggest that drama would work better, or that Timothy should encourage the Church to have a vision for the future, or that they have user-friendly assemblies. None of these, or a host of other modern ideas were suggested; staying faithful to scripture was Paul's instruction for facing the coming changes.

Positive leadership involved teaching the scriptures to the brethren. The Bible was to be taught because it has all that is necessary to equip Christians to be able deal with whatever life throws at them. No matter what challenges change brings the scriptures provide all that is needed to deal with those changes, because scripture equips the Christian for daily life as nothing else can.

CONCLUSION

Today, we are undoubtedly facing significant change and what is our response? Our answer to it generally appears to be to have less Bible study, with some having abandoned it altogether, and doing little more than attending the Lord's Supper assembly. Some churches are replacing Bible study with fellowship, by which most people mean a social occasion. Other churches are filling their Bible study times with other activities so that Bible study is scheduled just once a month. But even then, frequently, the Bible is not studied, except as a side issue! As preachers try to emulate the unfruitful ways of academics, sermons are all too often about the Bible rather than explaining how the Bible can change the brethren's lives. We hear sermons about the forces that were working in the church at Ephesus that led eventually to the sad condition revealed in Revelation 2:1-7; but with just a two line application to today! Just how that is supposed to change brethren is difficult to know. Many brethren skip the sermon altogether, by not listening or simply leaving after the Lord's Supper. That simply does not make sense does it?

Scripture provides all we need in order to face whatever challenges life throws up, and without doubt, today's changes are quite unsettling. The scriptures are eminently practical but it takes work to understand them and to apply them to everyday life. Yet, in the face of a need for guidance from scripture, in order to deal with the troubling changes that we are facing, it appears that in many places scripture is slowly being abandoned, in spite of Paul's unmistakable advice to Timothy.

Is it perhaps that evangelists need to take 'Preach the word... Convince, rebuke, exhort' far more seriously? When did you last hear a sermon that contained all these elements? When did you last compliment a speaker because the sermon helped straighten you out in some way? Or, do you reserve your compliments for when the sermon makes you feel good?

Is it perhaps that Bible teachers need to teach the Bible and explain better how it connects with everyday life? Is it perhaps that all of us need to pay far more attention to the scriptures, and how they apply to daily life? If we are not studying the Bible in the relaxed atmosphere of Bible classes then how can we expect to use the scriptures under the pressures of day-to-day living to help us make righteous decisions? If we do not know the book, how are we to weather the winds of change and reach our eternal home?

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INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 16 THE MERGING OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR AUTHORITY

The merging of church and State has, it seems, always been a hot topic of debate and continues so to be. Politicians, public and constitutional lawyers alike have strong views on the question of its desirability but when all is said and done it has never risen high enough on this country's list of priorities to incline anyone to meddle with the status quo.

Whilst there are, of course, considerable differences between societies like our own in Great Britain and the theocracy of Israel in Old Testament times, there is nothing new or unusual about the concept. Fundamental Islamic states, the existence of the Vatican state and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia are all variants on this theme, albeit with very different objectives and styles of operation.

CONSTANTINE & CHRISTIANITY

When Constantine became emperor, he inherited a realm that already practised a loose variety of religious/state-controlled dominion. The Caesar was regarded as the defiled embodiment of the state – Romana, and many, though not of all of its functions, were dictated and carried out according to religious considerations.

Constantine is said to have been converted in response to a vision of the cross, when his heavily outnumbered troops sought to overthrow his rival, Maxentius at the battle of the Malvinian Bridge, in 312 AD, and against all the odds, succeeded. Even scholars that are not renowned for their conservatism, sometimes question the reality of his conversion, except on the pragmatic grounds that the God of the Christians was a handy one to have on his side. But for all that, it marked a turning point of enormous proportions in the future history of Europe.

He was not baptised until he was on his deathbed, and whilst some try to justify this as being a common practice even among the faithful, further doubts are cast on his true Christianity by his willingness to erect statues in honour of both Mithras and Cybele.

Whatever his motives, Constantine was sufficiently impressed by Christianity as to be moved to redress the balance in its favour; the persecutions that they had suffered under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius required a counter-balance of something better than mere toleration in his view. In pursuit of this aim, he commissioned the production of new copies of the scriptures, built churches, including the basilicas of Peter and Paul in Rome and the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and turned over some of the prosperity of his wife, of the Lateran family, to be used as residences for the bishops of Rome. Churches were partially, but generously, funded by provincial taxes and laws were enacted to protect children, peasants and slaves. Branding of criminals was prohibited because Constantine regarded them as being 'made in God's image'.

CONSTANTINE'S LEGACY

Even without going into the development of Roman Catholicism it is not difficult to see from this how Constantine has left behind a legacy that touches on matters which continue to be of importance to us. Not infrequently, quite often in fact, buildings that were turned over to the use of Christians for worship had been public facilities of pagan temples. The ornateness and

symbolic decoration with which they were adorned, including representations of both Cybele, the Queen of heaven, and Mithras, was sometimes simply accepted without modification, as doing service for the portrayal of Mary and Jesus.

Church buildings are often a pragmatic necessity, but the view that the Church that meets in any locality is less than it ought to be without such a structure is hardly scripturally tenable and has, on occasion, become an encumbrance without which that congregation may well have fared better. Considerations of financial entanglement with those outside of the congregation, who held the purse strings but lacked spiritual wisdom and maturity, have led to tragic consequences for some of our own brethren in the past. All in all it is to be wondered whether Constantine really did the Church any favours in this respect.

Constantine was also the first to establish civil Sunday trading laws, closing the law courts but curiously, to our eyes at least, declaring that it was an appropriate day for the holding of farmers' markets.

What began as a small local dispute, provoked by the views concerning the true deity of Christ by an elder at Alexandria by the name of Arius, and his contention that He was in fact a created being separate in substance from the Father, spread like wild-fire across the religious world of the day. Old loyalties were invoked and sides taken until a situation was reached where the church was threatening to tear itself apart.

THE IMPACT OF 'COUNCILS'

In an effort to promote reconciliation, Constantine decided to convene a council of bishops at Ankara, but further ill-will amongst them, along with interference by Constantine, meant that he moved it to Nicea, the better to exert his own influence.

To cut a long, and not very edifying, story short, the outcome of the council of Nicea was 'agreement' on an article of faith subsequently known as the Nicene Creed, declaring that Jesus is indeed "very God of very God", although Arius himself was only prepared to sign up to it with the inclusion of caveats. Such bad feelings lingered however, that the future division into eastern western churches may well have been inevitable thereafter. In truth, little or nothing was resolved and certainly not the reconciliation which Constantine supposedly sought.

Whatever estimate we place on the worth of Constantine's legacy, it cannot be denied that in both geopolitical and religious terms, it has proved to be deep and lasting. So too, in rather different form, has that of the council of Nicea. To concentrate on its lessons rather than any prolonged repetition of the historical circumstances of it, this council raises a number of points worthy of consideration in relation to our own views and practices.

If it was genuine, Constantine's conciliatory ambition is a noble one that deserves our appreciation as consistent with that of Jesus and his apostles. The convening of councils and the endorsement of creeds as vehicles for such conciliation are, however, matters to which careful consideration should be given. We have already seen, in the material presented so far, ample evidence of the fact that good intentions are not necessarily any guarantee of results consistent with God's will. Those who advocated them, and those who continue to view them with approval, would often argue that ecumenical councils and the promulgation of creeds are simply practical ways of ensuring the imposition of scriptural orthodoxy. Creeds, we are told, are, at their best, clarifying statements of what is written in scripture and preserve against deviation from apostolic truth.

If there is anything noble and admirable about the intentions of those who have called councils together with this in mind, their history is one which is such as to demonstrate an almost entirely opposite effect. Nicea certainly aroused even greater divisions and tensions than those that it set out to resolve and more recent ecumenical gatherings of similar supposed intent have, if anything, shown themselves almost eager to set aside scriptural authority for the sake of convenient compromise.

LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

Once more though, I am more concerned for us to think about how we should apply the lessons

of this kind of religious history to ourselves rather than in leaping to smug and gleeful judgement upon the errors of others. We tell people with some pride that we have “no creed but Christ”, and it is certainly true that no one will ever discover such a thing in officially documented form. Yet I wonder if I am alone in the impression that there is the odd person in our wider brotherhood who would very much like to impose their own interpretations of certain matters, could a suitably respectable excuse for doing so be conjured up. Preservation of congregational autonomy is a vitally important principle that is established even further on the evidence of departures from it in legislative councils like that of Nicea. They have had almost entirely catastrophic results both so far as the service of true unity and faithfulness to God’s revealed word is concerned.

Ambitions to impose a particular viewpoint or personal understanding are not confined to the calling of councils and the dictation of formal creeds, however. Occasionally brethren who would be horrified by the attachment of any such implication to their motives have used other, equally dubious methods, to have their voice heard above the rest and sometimes, by either inference or bald statement, have increased the pressure by accusing others of less than apostolic orthodoxy because of their refusal to bend to their inclinations.

It is one thing to criticise paths followed by others, but another to adopt approaches that conform more perfectly to those which God has indicated to be his will. Paul’s advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 is as sound as it ever was and the lesson in Ephesians 4:11-16, equally so. Titus 1:9, particularly taken in proper connection with verse 5, also points to the need for local men of spiritual maturity to see the teaching and defence of sound doctrine as a major facet of their responsibility as a congregation’s shepherds. Again, writing to Titus, Paul’s inspired instruction to “avoid foolish controversies” along with the rest of that section from verse 1 to verse 11 in chapter 3, is worthy of diligent attention and practice.

Advice and better instruction in the word than may be readily available locally are, in my view, scripturally legitimate subjects of request, but not so legislation or imposition of required tenets of belief or tests of suitability for fellowship applied either overtly or via covert, cold-shoulder coolness.

SUMMARY

If anyone had the right to ‘throw his weight about’ with any congregation, it may well have been the apostle Paul to the wayward Corinthians. Yet notice what he wrote to them in 2 Corinthians 1:24: “Not that we lord it over your faith, **but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith that you stand firm**”.

WILL OF GOD

(Andrew P Sharp)

“The world passeth away and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God, abideth forever” 1 JOHN 2:17.

Brethren, without a doubt, the only life worth living, is the Christian life.

How comforting the words ring out, “He that doeth the will of God abideth forever”. We should note the following: “doeth the will of God”, present tense. Not, “he that hath done, but doeth”: not past but present.

It is a full Christian life, that will have the assurance – the hope – the certainty of life eternal. The Christian “doing” the will of God will be blessed abundantly.

1 PETER 4:2 exhorts us to live, not to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. Brethren, we must find and do the will of God, in our own individual lives, to the betterment of self, the church, and Christian community. In the world, oh yes, but not of it.

As such, if we live, and God is not playing an important part in it, our life is in need of serious adjustment and needs seeing to. Consequently, we must find the route, and source the will of God, and follow it.

LIGHT OF GODS' WORD

In darkness we need light to show the way. To find the source of Gods' will, we need to turn on the light of Gods' word. Gods' revelation to man, the word is filled with direct commands and clear principles for living: it gives unmistakable direction to the will of God.

"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" PSALM 119:105.

The psalmist of old could write these words with sincerity. Where do we stand today? Are we missing out? Are we failing to find Gods' will for the individual? Every page of scripture shows to us some insight or other. The question remains: Do we see it, and act upon it?

LIGHT OF THE INDWELLING SPIRIT

The gift of the Holy Spirit has been given to us to use. It is a gift from God. We tend to strangle the Spirit that lives within. He is pushed into a corner, unused. Jesus the Christ, before he went to glory, gave us the promise:

"I will pray to the Father and he shall give you another Comforter" JOHN 14:16.

This is a reference, of course, to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is indeed the "Spirit of Truth". His directive is both true and reliable. We can follow in confidence.

Prayer is the answer. Prayer and more prayer. Check it, try it, use it! It brings closer working of the spirit. "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing. The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" JOHN 6:63.

Jesus makes the statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" JOHN 14:6

LIGHT OF PERSONAL DESIRE

To be an effective Christian, we should desire more spirituality in our beings. Again this is realised in meditation, prayer and reading of the scripture. It is known that God the Spirit will never lead the individual into something unsuitable, both for Church and self.

Talents granted us should be utilised to the full. In our mutual ministry, we tend to over-react at times. We seek to do all things, sadly to say, to the detriment of worship.

Taking stock of what we can do effectively and heeding the Spirit, we will in turn, be used to the glory of God, and the advancement of the Church.

"Follow after love, and desire spiritual gifts." These words of Paul we take to our hearts.

LIGHT OF CIRCUMSTANCE

A wise man has said, "the Lord leads by opportunity", and that is true.

In scripture we find men and women who responded, gloriously, to an opportunity placed before them, the result being a successful venture. God in his wisdom creates many opportunities for the individual. However, it is the individual who must act upon it, one way or the other, to grasp it or not.

God can, and will, and does, open doors. All the individual needs do is step boldly through in faith. Let us not forget that, "all things work for good, to them that love the Lord".

It is the will of God that we should be happy, contented, and used of the Spirit, to greater things. The Spirit we have: let us use him, often, abundantly. Various lights have been made available to all Christians. We should use and take advantage of all that has been given us by God.

Are you used of God? Is your life a channel of blessing? Are you living abundantly?

If not, we need heed the lights afforded us. It is the will of God, that we live a life of blessing. Brethren, Let us seek the will of God and use it effectively, both for self, Church, and the Christian community.

News and Information

Question Box

As noted in the last edition, 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

Would all potential visitors to Newtongrange please note that the Breaking of Bread service will now take place at 10.00 am each Sunday rather than the previous time of 11.00 am.

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

Notice Bro H B Frank

Many readers will be saddened by news of the passing of Bro H B Frank on Christmas morning 2008. HB make a tremendous contribution to the work of the churches in the United Kingdom during his 17 years preaching in a number of congregations and his death comes 6 months after that of his wife Laverne. Our thoughts are with his immediate and extended family. A fuller tribute will be carried in the next edition.

Editor

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;

Email:
info@europeanchristianworkshop.com

Website:
www.europeanchristianworkshop.com

STRETFORD MANCHESTER

Saturday Gospel Meetings at 7 p.m.

The Green Hut
538 Kings Road
Stretford
MANCHESTER
M32 8EJ

May 16th 2009
John Morgan
Hindley

September 19th, 2009
Frank Worgan
Corby

October 17th, 2009
Samuel Appiah-Anane
Liverpool

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Tel: 01875 853212 to whom change of address should be sent.

EDITOR: ROBERT MARSDEN, 4 The Copse, Orrell Road, Orrell, Wigan, England, WN5 8HL. Tel: 01942 212320 E-mail: bobmarsden@bulldoghome.com