

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 The curse of denominationalism (cont'd)

I consider that the cause of denominationalism has been spectacularly fuelled by one biblical statement that on the face of it is the complete antidote to factionalism and division. **"I appeal to you brethren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement."** Some have taken this to the

extreme of insisting that every thought, every worship practice, every scriptural interpretation of every Christian (or Christian community or ekklesia) should be characterised by its uniformity with every other individual or ekklesia. And of course if that can't be achieved then the dogma that supports this view eventually insists that it is impossible to worship with those who are not of 'like mind' and therefore the tragedy of factionalism and denominationalism results.

Before we try to answer the question of what it means to 'be united in the same mind' we need to examine some of the main principles of the New Testament. We have already looked in the first article at the events surrounding Pentecost and the simplicity of the gospel message as preached by Peter on that momentous occasion. Then last month we considered the Church (the ekklesia), that body of people who have responded to the gospel and who (a) meet together locally to share fellowship and (b) collectively form the universal body of Christ. There is no organisation called 'The Church of Christ'; but there are local communities and a universal body of faithful, repentant believers who share a common salvation and a common Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ.

My objectives in this article are to show that:

- the 'apostles' doctrine' of Acts 2:42 was the gospel, based on their eye-witness accounts of their time with Jesus and that it is this that we should be of the same mind about;

Contents: 1 - Editorial; 5 - Prophets and Prophecy; 7 - Geese and the Snowstorm; 8 - Genesis; 10 - The Early Church; 13 - Understanding the Seasons of Life; 16 - News & Info.

- the history of the early Christian communities was not characterised by uniformity of practice;
- the letters and epistles of the New Testament dealt largely with contemporary issues and were never intended to form a 'rule book', though they contain timeless principles;
- our unity is in Christ.

THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE

Acts 2 records that after Pentecost, those believers who accepted the gospel, repented and were baptised, and who remained in Jerusalem, met together regularly and, amongst other things, '**continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine**'. One of the considerations then that we are inevitably drawn towards as we consider what it is to be united in the same mind is to understand what was meant by the apostles' doctrine. We'll look in a moment at what it was; but most certainly it was not a hastily developed statement of the key tenets of the 'church of Christ' belief system, or, for want of a better term, a creed. That simply did not exist. Neither did the letters and epistles that constitute our New Testament exist. The evidence of the record of the actions and teaching of the apostles shows that, guided by the Holy Spirit, they continued to teach those same truths about Jesus and his role in bringing to fruition the eternal purposes of God, that Peter had publicly stated at Pentecost and that continued to form the core of their public statements. In other words they preached the gospel, initially to the Jews, pointing out amongst other things how horribly wrong they had been in their failure to recognise Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, and later to the Gentiles, emphasising the universal nature of the gospel.

One of the key evidences of the apostles as they met with, taught and bolstered the faith of the new converts (mainly Jews at this stage), was that they had been eyewitnesses of the events surrounding the life of Jesus. They had heard his teaching and seen his miracles; three of them had been with him when he was transfigured; they were present at many of his confrontations with the Pharisees and Sadducees and other Jewish authorities. Most definitively of all they had listened to his promises about his mission and the shape of future events in his life, shared the intimate fellowship of the Passover with him immediately prior his final journey into Jerusalem, been with him in the garden of Gethsemane, seen him arrested, tried, sentenced and crucified. And, gloriously, they had been the, initially stunned, but later totally convicted witnesses to His resurrection.

There was no New Testament, no creed, no statement of principles; the apostles would not have been conducting 'Bible studies' as we understand them today. Therefore I can only conclude that the **apostles' doctrine**, the matters that they would have talked about with new believers, and sought to further convince them of in the light of their Jewish heritage, would have been their experiences and eyewitness accounts of the teachings and actions of Jesus and of His person, characteristics and nature, including his claims to unity with the Father and his role as Messiah, and the glorious truths of his sin-bearing death and victorious resurrection. The apostles' doctrine was their account of the nature of Jesus as the prophesied Messiah and His mission to save.

It is also worth reflecting a moment as well on the 'doctrine' that those Jewish believers who left Jerusalem after Pentecost to return home took with them. There would be no convenient handouts to take home to ensure that they delivered a consistent message. All that they could carry with them back to their communities were the words of the apostles, their newly found belief in Jesus as Saviour and that wonderful sensation of awe and wonder at the events that they had witnessed in Jerusalem. And no doubt, having reported their own experiences in Jerusalem there were those in their own communities who asked them, "What then must I do be saved?" Surely the response to that question could only have been 'repent and be baptised' just as theirs had been in response to the teaching of the apostles.

There is no doubt that the apostles were infused with the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit and that they themselves, having received the special spiritual gifts that made it

possible, performed some startling deeds as the gospel message took hold and started to spread. But time and again their doctrine (that is their teaching), the message that they took was robustly dominated by the purpose, work and nature of Jesus. So:

- Peter in the temple reminded the Jews that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah (Acts 3);
- they continued to teach Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:42);
- Stephen's sermon that led to his death was all about the promised Messiah and the Jewish hierarchy's failure to recognise Jesus as such (Acts 7);
- Philip preached about 'the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ to Simon and his family (Acts 8);
- Philip told the eunuch from Ethiopia 'the good news about Jesus';
- Peter taught Cornelius about the work of Jesus to which they had been eyewitnesses.

And so the pattern of teaching goes on throughout the book of Acts.

EARLY PRACTICE WAS NOT UNIFORM

I referred earlier to some of the principles of the New Testament that need to be embraced. The letters and epistles that were written to different communities and individuals were largely written in response to contemporary, 1st century issues. That is not to say that some of the principles that underpin the responses to those issues are not timeless in their application. They are. But we will never, I think, fully understand the teaching that is given if we conveniently drag the epistles and letters out of their 1st century context. So, for example, the teaching about meat offered to idols was a specific contemporary issue, but the principle of respect for the conscience of others is timeless; the teaching about unruly behaviour at the love-feast was specific, but the principle of how we approach our remembrance of Jesus is timeless; attitudes in the master/slave relationship were specific, but how we handle authority/subordinate relationships remain important; warnings against the infiltration of Gnostic and similar philosophies was relevant then, and today there remains a need to guard against false teaching though it is interesting to note that the false teachings that were warned against were generally concerning the nature of Christ and His work.

I have become convinced that there are recurring themes in the New Testament that centre around the need for a proper understanding of the person and nature of Jesus and how His saving grace has changed the relationship between God and man, for ever, from a Law-based covenant to a covenant of grace. So much of New Testament is devoted to:

- Understanding the true nature of Jesus and refuting the claims of Gnosticism and other similar falsehoods about Jesus and insisting on the deity of Christ;
- Understanding that the old Law-based covenant has been superseded by a covenant of freedom, based on the grace of God through Jesus;
- Understanding that it is only through Christ that we can find salvation;
- Constant warnings to Jewish Christians not to slip back into their old fastidious habits of the Law and thereby deny the grace of God;
- Extolling the virtues of the universal gospel of Christ and confirming that both repentant, faithful baptised Jews and Gentiles are equal and worthy members of the eternal kingdom.

UNITED IN THE SAME MIND

So what has all of this got to do with denominationalism and the main subject of this month's article, 'being of the same mind'? I have tried to demonstrate that the Pentecost message was a straightforward but eternally profound statement about the nature and work of Jesus in fulfilment of God's eternal purposes and that this message was to be to the salvation of not just the Jews, but to the Gentile world as well; that grace, not the

Law is at the centre of the new relationship with God. That was the message that the apostles consistently took into their respective ministries. And in those ministries the apostles had to manage the fact Hebrew Jewish Christians, Hellenist Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians most certainly did not have a uniformity of practice. The great Antioch debate for example, and the question that was taken to the Jerusalem Council, was not about whether Jewish Christians should stop their Jewish practices, but whether Gentile Christians should be forced to adopt them as well as Gentile converts to Judaism were required to do.

We are to be of the same mind about Jesus and His saving grace, that is that people who believe in Jesus, repent and are baptised will be added to universal body of Christ. The message of the epistles and letters is that those who deny the deity of Jesus are to be refuted and alienated; those who deny His incarnation are false teachers; those who teach that immorality, in all its appearances, is acceptable to Jesus, are to be exposed; those who teach that obedience to the Law can save must be challenged; those who follow any spiritual leader other than Christ are to shown the error of that way (the real message of 1 Corinthians 1:10 quoted at the start of this article).

Our unity as repentant, faithful, baptised believers is not something that is constructed by us through the development of a contemporary 'law' that, should we be unanimous about it, and faithful to it, we become of 'one mind'. Read the Galatian letter again and understand that real danger lurks down that road. Our unity is of far greater significance than that; the unity that we have, far from being contained in 'articles of faith' that we have created, is a relationship that we have been invited into by God based on our belief in, and response to, the saving grace of Christ. That unity is potently and beautifully expressed in the words of Jesus as he spoke to his disciples shortly before His death and as John recorded them in his gospel narrative at 17: 20 – 25. **"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."** Those words, which enjoined the apostles into unity with the Godhead and, through the apostles teaching about Jesus, all future believers, are quite simply stunning and awe-inspiring in their importance and what they mean for believers.

OUR IDENTITY IS AS GOD'S CHILDREN

I began this series of articles by asking how we define ourselves as Christians. The answer is that **we** don't; our personal creed doesn't define us, neither does our denominational doctrine. God defines us; based on our belief in Him and His Christ He invites us into His family that is the universal body of Christ; He adopts us as His children; through grace He binds us into that most blessed relationship that Jesus prayed to His Father about, our unity with the Godhead. In our local Christian communities we learn to walk worthy of our calling in Christ in response to His love.

Too much of religious activity and debate has centred on 'issues' (and often non-issues); issues create factions and factions ultimately create denominations. Denominationalism is a curse and must, I think, be an affront to God. When the final roll is called there will only be two groups of people; those who have responded to the gospel and become, through grace, children of God, and those who have not. And the ultimate irrelevance of all the world's denominations will be made apparent.

Prophets and Prophecy

The Nature of Prophecy

(Stephen Woodcock, Wigan)

Introduction

In the last article, the role of the prophet was looked at. He/she (because there were prophetesses) was a spokesperson for God. God, through the Spirit, revealed His message and it was communicated to the intended audience. Prophets were commissioned by God to bring His message. However there were false prophets who presumed to speak on God's behalf; but the people had two tests laid down by Moses in Deuteronomy 13:1 – 6 and 18:20 – 22, to help them test those who claimed to be prophets. In this article we will be looking at the nature of prophecy through the way it was communicated and in its purpose.

The world of the prophets



In order to understand the messages of the prophets we need to understand the backgrounds to their messages and why God wanted to communicate with His people. The prophets had to deal with the religious, political, social and moral corruptions of their day because God's people had moved away from Him. So God raised up prophets to communicate His message because they were His chosen people by a covenant He made with them at Sinai (read

Exodus 20:3 – 6; 24:1 – 8) in which Israel pledged, **"All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient."** However they had broken that pledge because of idolatry, oppression, injustice, immorality, occultism, and the list could go on; but God was trying to call them back to Him through the prophets. God through Isaiah made this plea, **"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red as crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken,"** (Isaiah 1:18 – 20). This plea is based on the Blessings and the Curses that are described in Leviticus 26 and in Deuteronomy 28. He wanted to bless His people; but He wanted to remind them of the consequences of their disobedience. God loved His people and He wanted them back in a relationship with Him, and so He told His people: **"Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee,"** (Jeremiah 31:3). So how did God use His prophets to communicate His message in order to try to draw them back to Him?

Modes of communication



The most obvious mode of communication was by word of mouth. Elijah told King Ahab: **"As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but ACCORDING TO MY WORD,"** (1 Kings 17:1). Many of these prophets are referred to as the ORAL (pre-literary) prophets because they spoke their messages and did not write them down or have them written down. Examples of Oral prophets are:

Nathan (2 Sam. 12), Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29ff) and Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 13). Their messages were recorded by other writers who had access to historical records that contained their messages (see 1 Chron. 29:28; 1 Kings 22:39 as examples).

Some of the prophets wrote, or, had their messages written down so that they would be preserved for future generations. These are the LITERARY prophets. In the Old Testament the seventeen prophetic books start at Isaiah and finish at Malachi. There is some evidence that they wrote some

of their books themselves (see Jeremiah 29ff; Isaiah 30:8). Hosea in 3:1 – 5 uses the first person, as does Isaiah in 6:1ff; 8:11; 16 – 18. Some prophets may have used a scribe to write their books. Baruch was Jeremiah's scribe and he wrote what Jeremiah dictated to him (see Jeremiah 36). Some prophets had a group of disciples and these were known as the 'sons of the prophets' (2 Kings 2:1 – 18; 4:38 – 44; 6:1ff; 9:1). They not only followed the prophet they were attached to, but they also recorded his messages. Isaiah had a group of disciples and he dictated some of his messages to them (8:16). It is important to emphasise that the prophet himself was behind the recording of his words, whether by personally writing them, or by dictation, or by teaching.

Sometimes the prophets would include parables or allegories in their messages to drive home a point. The most famous Old Testament parable was Nathan's to King David after David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1 – 14). Isaiah uses a parable of a vineyard to describe God's relationship with Israel and how He wanted them to bear fruit (Isaiah 5:1 – 7). When God looked for good fruit He found bad and corrupt fruit instead.

One of the most dramatic ways that the prophets presented their messages was by the 'acted oracle.' It was like a visual aid to help the audience understand the power of God's message in a contemporary situation. Thus Isaiah walked naked and barefoot (Is. 20), Jeremiah smashed the potter's vessel (Jer. 19), Ahijah tore his new coat into twelve pieces and gave Jeroboam ten (1 Kings 11:29ff), Ezekiel besieged a model city (Ezek. 4:1 – 3), dug through the house wall (12:1ff), did not mourn for his dead wife (24:15ff), and Hosea was told to marry a prostitute (Hos. 1:2ff). The 'acted oracle' was God's way of SHOWING to His people what was going to happen if they did not repent.

The purpose of prophecy



In order to understand the purpose of prophecy we have to find out what the historical background is because the prophet was dealing with a contemporary situation in the first instance. Many mistakes have been made in the interpretation of prophecy because of a failure to understand the context. The reason why we must understand the historical context is because God was communicating His message to His people in a particular situation at a particular time in their history. It was the prophets' role to FORTH-TELL God's message in that context. This is a very important aspect of prophecy because the majority of space taken up in the messages of the prophets was to reveal God's will for His people.

Clearly though, the prophets spoke to encourage or warn the people about the future. There are three grounds for this practice of FORE-TELLING:

- (1) Prediction or fore-telling belonged to the prophetic office. This is clearly laid out in Deuteronomy 18:20 – 22. A prophecy could be tested by whether it was fulfilled or not.
- (2) If the people were to exercise moral responsibility, then they needed to be aware of the future. Calls to repentance (e.g. Jonah 3:4) and calls to practical holiness (e.g. Isaiah 2:5) were based on messages about the future.
- (3) God, the Ruler of History, was behind the messages of the prophets. Through the prophets He revealed His knowledge of future events and how they would affect His people. One example is the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon prophesied by Jeremiah and Isaiah (2 Chronicles 36:17 – 23; Jeremiah 25:12 – 13; 29:10; 33:10 – 11, 14; Isaiah 44:28). Notice that Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would allow this to happen. Isaiah lived about 300 years BEFORE Cyrus came to the throne of the Medo-Persian Empire.

The predictive nature of prophecy was remarkable and is one of the evidences for the truth of Scripture. In the next article we will be looking at the Fulfilment of Prophecy.

The scroll is the Isaiah scroll from Qumran opened at chapters 38:9 – 40:28. From www.biblepicturegallery.com

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The Geese and the Snowstorm

— Author Unknown

There was once a man who did not believe in either the virgin birth of Christ nor the spiritual meaning behind it, and was sceptical even about God. He and his family lived in a farm community. His wife was a devout believer and diligently raised her children in the faith. He sometimes gave her a hard time about her belief and mocked her religious observances.

"It's all nonsense — why would God lower himself and become a human like us? It's such a ridiculous story," he said.

One snowy day, she and the children left for church while he stayed home. After they had departed, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blinding snowstorm. He sat down to relax before the fire for the evening.

Then he heard a loud thump, something hitting against the window... And, still another thump. He looked outside but could not see anything. So he ventured outside for a better view. In the field near his house he saw, of all the strangest things, a flock of geese. They were apparently flying to look for a warmer area down south, but they had been caught in the snowstorm. The storm had become too blinding and violent for the geese to fly or see their way. They were stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter, unable to do more than flutter their wings and fly in aimless circles. He had compassion for them and wanted to help them. He thought to himself, the barn would be a great place for them to stay. It is warm and safe; surely they could spend the night and wait out the storm. So he opened the barn doors for them.

He waited, watching them, hoping they would notice the open barn and go inside. Nevertheless, they did not notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He moved closer toward them to get their attention, but they just moved away from him out of fear.

He went into the house and came back with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread trail to the barn. They still did not catch on.

Starting to get frustrated, he went over and tried to shoo them toward the barn. They panicked and scattered into every direction except toward the barn. Nothing he did could get them to go into the barn where there was warmth, safety, and shelter. Feeling totally frustrated, he exclaimed, "Why don't they follow me? Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm? How can I possibly get them into the one place to save them?"

He thought for a moment and realized that they just would not follow a human. He said to himself, "How can I possibly save them? The only way would be for me to become like those geese. If only I could become like one of them, then I could save them. They would follow me and I would lead them to safety."

At that moment, he stopped and considered what he had said. The words reverberated in his mind: If only I could become like one of them, then I could save them. Then, at last, he understood God's heart towards mankind... and he fell on his knees in the snow.

For God so loved the world, that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

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STUDIES IN GENESIS 3

(Ian S Davidson, Motherwell)



We read: **“And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed”** (2:8). There was a river, which watered the garden, and which eventually divided into four heads. Their names are given as Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates. The lands of Havilah, Ethiopia and Assyria are mentioned with them. The Euphrates we know about. Hiddekel, in ancient times, was associated

with the Tigris. The other two names of the rivers are not clearly identified. The names of Ethiopia and Assyria are familiar to us, but not Havilah. I believe that the geography described in these verses in Genesis does not now exist. “The rivers and countries described were antediluvian geographical features, familiar to Adam...They were all destroyed and the topography and geography completely changed, when ‘the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished (2 Peter 3:6)’” (Morris). The Garden of Eden was, of course, also destroyed in the great flood.

LIFE IN THE GARDEN

In the Garden of Eden, Adam was given great freedom. But there was one restriction upon him. **“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it: for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die”** (2: 16,17). Alexander Campbell has written: “His position or state was that of a lord tenant. The earth is, indeed, the Lord’s; but He gave it to man on a very easy and liberal lease, and so it became his property. He was, therefore, a free and responsible agent, capable of managing his estate and paying his rent; and consequently was susceptible of virtue and of vice, of happiness and misery. In order to freedom, virtue and happiness, it was expedient and necessary to place him under law; for where there is no law there can be no liberty, virtue, or happiness. The law became a test of his character, a guarantee of his continued enjoyment of the life and property which God had leased to him on the condition of his obedience to the precept.” Tragically, he failed the test.

THE CREATION OF EVE

From Genesis 1:4 onwards, we read of many things that God saw, which were good. Now in Genesis 2:18, we read of something God saw, which was not good. **“And the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him an help meet for him.”** And so God created woman. The Authorised Version informs us that Eve was created from Adam’s “rib” (2:21,22). The Hebrew word is *tse/a* and means “side”, which is a better translation. This is why Adam could go on to say: **“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...”** (2:23a). Woman is so-called, because she was taken out of man (2:23b). The Hebrew word for woman is *ishshah*. It is frequently translated “wife” in the Old Testament. Eve was Adam’s wife. It is interesting to note that God created only one wife for Adam and not many. Marriage is the union of one man and one woman. **“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh”** (2:24).

Polygamy, I believe, is contrary to the will of God, although many famous Biblical

characters practised it. Incidentally, the first case of polygamy in the Bible features Lamech (Genesis 4:19), who took two wives, Adah and Zillah. Things eventually got so out of hand that Solomon, for example, ended up with 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11: 3). And may I state here that marriage is quite definitely not the union of one man and one man. As has been frequently pointed out, it was, in the beginning, Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve.

THE FALL

Many regard the contents of Genesis 3 as mythological. They ask: How could Eve be taken in by a serpent that speaks? They forget about the uniqueness of the circumstances. Satan immediately features as "the serpent". Where did Satan come from? He, I believe, was the leader of the angels, who had caused a war in heaven (Revelation 12). As a result, God cast him out of heaven together with his angels (12: 9). His followers ended up in Tartarus (2 Peter 2:4) and he ended up wandering about the earth (Job 1:7). His days of roaming around are not for ever (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10).

Satan used "the serpent" for his own ends – as an instrument to tempt Eve. She was not surprised at his ability to converse with her because either some animals originally could speak, like Balaam's ass (Numbers 22:28), or "it may simply be that Eve, in her innocence, did not yet know that the animals were incapable of speaking and so was not alarmed when the serpent spoke to her" (Morris). Either way, she was taken in by what the serpent said. (Please note that, at this time, the serpent could probably stand erect and converse with her eye to eye.) He told her lies, tempted her by "**the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life**" (1 John 2:16), and, as a result, she ate of the forbidden fruit, which was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3: 6a). She gave the fruit to Adam and he too ate of it (3: 6b). That day they died, as God had warned (2:17). They, of course, did not die physically that day, but spiritually. The world has never been the same since. It changed everything, and certainly not for the better. "Adam rebelled. The natural man became preternatural. The animal triumphed over the human elements of his nature. Sin was born on earth. The crown fell from his head. The glory of the Lord departed from him. He felt his guilt, and trembled; he saw his nakedness, and blushed. The bright candle of the Lord became a dimly-smoking taper. He was led to judgement. He was tried, condemned to death, divested of his patrimonial inheritance; but respited from immediate execution. A prisoner of death, but permitted to roam abroad and at large till the king authorised his seizure and destruction" (Campbell).

Many books could be written on the Fall and its consequences. But I think the subject is well summed up in this short statement I once read: "In the Fall, man lost all his personal glory". Please note the writer uses the word *all* and I think he is correct in doing so. Some writers have been mistaken about the full consequences of the Fall. Thomas Aquinas is one of them. Francis Schaeffer has written: "Aquinas held that man had revolted against God and thus was fallen, but Aquinas had an incomplete view of the Fall. He thought that the Fall did not affect man as a whole but only in part. In his view the will was fallen or corrupted, but the intellect was not affected. Thus people could rely on their own human wisdom, and this meant that people were free to mix the teachings of the Bible with the teachings of the non-Christian philosophers". In the end such thinking led to the gradual separation of philosophy from revelation and "this set the stage for the humanistic elements of the Renaissance and the basic problems they created" (Schaeffer).

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 2 – THE INFLUENCE OF JUDAISM

In the first article of this series, attention was paid to the significance of Rome's influence, as the dominant world power, on the early development and progress of the first century Church.

Although of necessity we are presenting these influences as if they were simple, single strands, it is very much the case that it was a complex inter-play between them that formed the active environment in which the Church lived and functioned. In addition, it is crucial that we never lose sight of the fact that every political, military, economic and cultural circumstance is subsidiary to, and well within the control of, God's power and will to advance His eternal purpose.

JEWS AND GENTILES

The focus of this section is to be upon the interactions between Judaism and the early Church, which, since they are more directly concerned with spiritual and doctrinal matters, proved to be associated with all the emotional complications, conflicts of loyalty and ferocity of debate that are frequently the accompaniment of deeply held religious beliefs.

The very first members of the Church were overwhelmingly, if not entirely, converts from Judaism. In so far as that meant knowledge of the scriptures and the concept of respect for God's sovereignty, authority and righteousness and holiness I also suggested that they might be fertile ground for the implanting of further gospel truth. On the other hand, that form of spiritual education that the majority of them had received, being that to which their religious leaders and educators subscribed, left them heavily burdened with loads of legalistic baggage from which it often proved enormously difficult to disentangle them.

Conflict, fuelled by years of mutual suspicion and inbred prejudice was only ever likely to increase as Gentiles were added to the body of Christ.

On the Jewish side it was thought well-nigh unbelievable that their ears had not deceived them, when they were told that it was God's will that Gentiles were to be included amongst the company of the redeemed. For the Gentiles' part, the perception that they were looked down on, or grudgingly tolerated, but not warmly welcomed into anything more than a very reserved fellowship, cannot have been easy for them to either understand or accept as consistent with the gospel which they had believed and obeyed.

That being so it would be surprising if, when it came to the settling of disputes, the formerly Jewish members did not feel entitled to a weightier voice.

Though it was an extension and progression from Judaism, it would be a mistake to think of Christianity as any kind of modified form of it, and especially so if the comparison were to be between Judaism as it was when widely practised, rather than that of the Old Testament scriptures. Sadly we would be on less than solid ground if we were to draw our definition of Judaism, for the purposes of this study, entirely from our own understanding of the Old Testament.

JEWISH OPPOSITION

It is usual in studies such as this to offer an examination of the various religious sects and parties into which Judaism had become divided, but since that is ground that has been

well covered elsewhere, it may be more profitable to approach it a little differently on this occasion; that is in terms of some of the tensions that actually arose, rather than ones which might have been expected to.

In the very earliest days of the Church, after Pentecost, those conflicts between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish hierarchy, that had marked His own ministry, continued unabated. Peter, John and Stephen found themselves in regular and deadly trouble with the Sanhedrin; Paul the Pharisee went after Christians with murderous enthusiasm and later suffered heavily himself at the hands of his erstwhile colleagues in Thessalonica, Ephesus and Jerusalem.

A good deal of the opposition from Jewish sources shows a somewhat surprising tendency to have taken the form of physical violence, offered to both person and property; sometimes, as was the case with Jason, in Thessalonica, accompanied by mobs of unruly thugs who, one presumes, had no particularly religious axe to grind.

No less threatening, but at least buried beneath a veneer of spiritual respectability, were the doctrinal disputes that constantly simmered and sometimes erupted over the continuing significance of the Law of Moses. Either alone, or as in the situation at Colossae, in alliance with others who sought to make undermining inroads into the burgeoning faith of the saints, and whether overtly or surreptitiously, a more or less constant pressure was maintained in demand that Gentiles could not be accepted as in a right relationship with God unless they were willing to conform to the requirements of that Law. Once more there is evidence of a willingness to associate with those whose beliefs were poles apart from their own if that meant the acquisition of a bigger and better stick with which to beat the Christians.

THE EFFECT OF JUDAISM IN ANTIOCH

To a certain extent, but with crucial consequences, there was for some time an incompletely resolved issue over this question even amongst the apostles. Further separate articles will cover the Jerusalem Council and the ministries of Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles, but the significant doctrinal importance of this matter, reflected in the confrontation between Paul and Peter at Antioch seem, to me at least, to mark it out as worthy of the closest attention in this present study of the influences of Judaism on the early Church.

Without entering into the question of Peter's motives, it is pretty clear that they were, in any case, somewhat mixed, when a visit from some of James' disciples to Antioch prompted him to distance himself from those Gentile Christians with whom he had happily eaten previously. In Paul's view this was behaviour that merited public confrontation not because he took it as a personal affront, but because the impression left by it was such as to have seriously damaging effects on the central truth of the gospel.

The letters to the Galatian congregations, Romans, Colossians and Timothy each add something to an accurate impression of the true scale of this issue which was extensive not only in the number of congregations affected by it, nor even its central importance, but also because of the vital doctrinal spin-offs that would easily result from failure to correct misunderstandings, whether deliberate or unintentional.

There is, I believe, further good reason to pay careful attention to this particular influence of Judaism because, although in different form, it has continued to be one that has troubled, and still troubles, the Church today.

GRACE VERSUS LEGALISM

In whatever way it is thought necessary to supplement Jesus' sacrifice on behalf of sinners, that is to imply an insufficiency that we are capable of rectifying by our own effort. If adherence to the Law of Moses, as a means of favour-winning contribution to

what is necessary for salvation, was a valid view, it was, as Paul regularly pointed out, one that tacitly complained of something lacking in the extent of Jesus' contribution. It looked to shift the balance point between grace and brownie-point winning, law-keeping and between good works which come out of real faith and those that looked to put God under obligation to reward them.

To whatever extent we choose to depend on the worth of our own achievements, we catastrophically fail to depend, by obedient faith, on God's grace. This never was an either/or matter. If faith does not result in good and Godly works it is not worthy of the name. If good works are not the natural outcome of genuine appreciation of the all-sufficiency of Christ, they should not be called truly good, whether what actually encourages them is the demands of the Law of Moses, or man-made rules of holiness and conditions for acceptability into fellowship.

There was another ramification of this particular strand of Judaistic influence, which, were that possible, threatened even more dire consequences for the Church. Legalism, by which I mean the belief that God's favour can be earned by the production of sufficient weight of good works, inevitably proves competitive in a way that is greatly damaging to the unity of any congregation in which it surfaces. It is but a short leap of distorted logic to conclude that if works buy God's favour, more works buy more favour. Jews and Gentiles alike, legalists and the amazed by grace alike, hold that as their ultimate desire, but if it is to be bought, ability to pay its price becomes the all-important consideration.

Probably, not surprisingly, since this is a distortion of the gospel of God, favour with God tends to be equated with, and evaluated in terms of, reputation with men. That was one of general Judaism's major failings, and had been deep into the Old Testament past. Surface appearances had acquired such an unjustified high value in human estimation that it was necessary for Isaiah to issue the almost bitter rebuke that he did as recorded in Isaiah 1: 10-17.

Meaningless, empty worship; interminable wranglings over who seems holiest and selfish ambitions to appear so at whatever cost; frustration to the point of despair on the part of sincere, but struggling believers; burnt-out, teeth-greeting, grace-empty, Spirit devoid, joyless grinding out of self-effort in the name of the mistaken belief that then they may claim credit for it. These are the fruits of the tendency into which the Judaisers looked to drag the Church.

SUMMARY

Since it is the aim of this series of studies to concentrate on matters of relevant historical; background to the Church's development, it is hoped that they will simultaneously draw attention to the importance of reflecting on it when it comes to the way in which we read, study and come to an understanding of the New Testament, especially its letters. Only through awareness of the original circumstances are we in any position to draw an accurate analysis of the eternal principles that they teach, and only then are we properly prepared for the application of those principles to our own conduct and service.

The specific forms in which the Christian's dilemmas are cast have changed considerably since the first century but their spiritual essence not at all. All the more necessary then that we should ask ourselves, as we stand before any passage of scripture, not only what does it say, but why, when, how and with what purpose in mind is God causing this to be written.

No human author of scripture produced his work with the view that one day this might come in handy for someone, somewhere; still less that we may need something to study in our midweek Bible class. With that principle in mind and in the light of how great a proportion of the New Testament is devoted to the Holy Spirit's responses to it, it is worth pondering over the enormous significance of Judaism's influence not only upon the early Church, but the shape of that which is today.

Understanding the Seasons of Life

Lesson 7 - The Season of Failure (John 21:1-8)

(David Yasko, USA)

We are going through the seasons of life and sooner or later, all of us will enter the season of failure. Failure belongs to all of us. And the important thing about failure, since it's inevitable, is to know how to deal with it when it comes. Ecclesiastes 3 tells us there is a time for every thing under heaven. There is a time to get and a time to lose. When you put it like that, the season of failure is not something to be avoided, but something to be embraced. John 21:3: **"Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will also come with you.' They went out, and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing."** Please notice that phrase "they caught nothing." Now, what is going on here? This incident is shortly after the death of Jesus and His resurrection. It should be a time of victory and success in the Kingdom of God. Then how come we find seven disciples sitting in a boat on a cold, foggy night, fishing? It wasn't a season of victory; it was a season of failure in the life of those disciples. They were scared. They'd seen Jesus put to death on the cross and they just might be next. So what do they do now? Peter came up with an idea. He said, "I know how to do one thing well, and it's fish; and I'm going back to what I know." The other disciples said, "We'll go with you. Everything else we planned on and dreamed about is shattered." And all night long they put down their nets and all night long they came up empty. That night they caught nothing.

Can you imagine being in that boat? It was like adding insult to injury. The one I thought was the Messiah is dead and to top it off, I'm failing at the only other thing I know how to do. It was a season of failure.

It is difficult, because we live in a success driven culture. We know how to handle success. The problem is we don't know how to handle failure. And, to be honest, I don't think we really know what success looks like. We **think** we know what success looks like, but really don't. That's why we struggle with the concept of "what's enough." We want more money and newer cars and bigger houses and better toys because to us success is the evidence of God's blessing. And that's why we are miserable. God isn't in the success business. God is in the refining business. Job 23:10 **"But He knows the way I take; when He has refined me, I shall come forth as gold."**

The whole problem with failure is that failure doesn't play fair. Failure has many faces and many forms. Sometimes failure is a disappointment. Someone lets us down and we feel like we have failed. In fact, it doesn't take much to make us feel like failures. Maybe a friend has betrayed you or a spouse has walked and you are left to feel like the failure. The law of life is that seasons of failure are inevitable. Never mind meeting anybody else's expectations, I can't even meet mine. And even though failure is inevitable, failure is still devastating.

WHY IS FAILURE DEVASTATING?

1. BECAUSE FAILURE SHOWS OUR IMPERFECTIONS

We lack the courage to be imperfect. At work, it's important to be perfect. That way nobody can blame anything on you. In marriage, it's important to be perfect so it's never my fault. We have to be perfect, always. We have to be strong, always. We have to be successful, always. So God has to teach us a lesson occasionally. In Philippians 3:12-13: **"Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead ..."** Paul says, "I keep working for that day when I can finally be all that Christ has saved me to be." We are not perfect now, but we are in the process of being made that way. And failure is part of that process. So I want to lay down a challenge to have the courage to be imperfect. I tell anybody who will listen that you do me an injustice if you never expect me to make a mistake.

2. BECAUSE WE CONFUSE FAILING WITH BEING A FAILURE.

And that is an irrational thought. Let me ask, "How many failings does it take to make a failure?" You tell me. I may fail a lot, and I do, and so do you, but that doesn't make us failures. The day we become failures is the day we give up. Only then can we be called failures. As long as we keep trying we are not failures. OK, so when is failure, really failure? I love those stories you read about people who suffered setback after setback and didn't give up and finally made it.

- ❑ Take the young boy who was born with so many physical problems. He had to wear silk pajamas because he was allergic to linen. And the other kids made fun of him for it. He sat the sixth grade and failed. He was sent to a boarding school where he would run into the woods and hide because the other boys teased him about his funny body and big head. One day the principal sent home a note to his father that said, "This young man shows a conspicuous lack of success." Years later **Sir Winston Churchill** would wave that letter when, at age 70, he became the leader that saved the British Empire from Nazi Germany. Winston Churchill was considered to be a total failure until the early part of his 70's.
- ❑ Or maybe the young man who was a student at the University of Berne in Switzerland who turned in his doctoral dissertation to the committee in charge of such awards only to have it returned to him with the words scrawled across the top, "This thesis is irrelevant and fanciful." And so **Albert Einstein** took his dissertation somewhere else.
- ❑ **His music teacher told Beethoven** that he would be hopeless as a composer.
- ❑ **Walt Disney** was fired from his job as a newspaper reporter because the editor thought he had no imagination.
- ❑ There was a mother in rural Iowa who got a visit from the principal of the school to tell her that her little boy was never going to be much as a student, that he just didn't have the intellect and it would be better for everybody if she would withdraw him and put him to work on the farm. The mother said no. And every

day after school she would sit down with him and go over and over his lessons and homework until he got it. Later on he wrote the words: "When everyone else is quitting on a problem that is the time to begin." **Thomas A. Edison.**

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH FAILURE?

1. LEARN TO MAKE GOD A PART OF OUR FAILURES

Failure is a part of our Christian experience, so bring God in on them. Receive our failures like God is the one giving them to us. I'm not saying God makes us fail; we do that pretty well on our own. I am saying when we do fail, invite God into the middle of it. Philippians 3:8, **"More than that, I count all things to be a failure in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."** When we put God in the process, we get to put our failures in their proper perspective. Because in God's way of doing things, there is no such thing as failure, only forced growth. Failure forces us to think past the here and now.

2. LEARN TO GROW FROM OUR FAILURES.

Philippians 3:10: **"... that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."** Failures help us to understand the fellowship of suffering. Success is built on a mountain of failures. Erma Bombeck, the writer who passed away a few years ago, was invited to a banquet celebrating success in the market place. The room was full of highly successful people. She went because she wanted to know what highly successful people talked about. And as she table-hopped she realized that everybody had the same thing to say. It was how they had used their failures as a springboard to learn from. You see, God has lessons to teach us and the best we can do is accept them as gifts of his grace.

3. LEARN TO FORGET OUR FAILURES.

The problem with failure is that it keeps us awake at night chewing on us and we can't seem to get past it. Philippians 3:13: **"Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on to the goal."** Paul says the secret to getting where we want to be is to forget the failures of the past. For most of us, our failures imprison us, they rob our hope and our confidence and they make us want to give up. The antidote is to see God in the middle of the failure, learn from them and then move on.

TURN FAILURE TO SUCCESS

But the story that we started with doesn't end with "and they caught no fish." Jesus was standing on the shore and he asked them if they'd caught anything and they said, "We've tried and we've failed." So he told them to put down their nets on the other side of the boat. And they did, and you know what happened. The nets were so full they almost didn't get them back into the boat. Which leads me to ask, "Where is Jesus when we fail?" Well, he's right there on the shore. And when our life story is written, there won't be any failures, only the gentle hand of God refining us, and guiding us because it is in failure that God does his finest work in the hearts of people.

Coming Events

Saturday Evening Meetings at Stretford.

To be held in the Green Hut,
538 Kings Road, Stretford, Manchester.
Each meeting will start at 7.00 pm and
will consist of:

A Gospel Topic, followed by
Light refreshments, concluding with
Open Discussion.

Dates and speakers:

22nd September 2007
Mark Hill, Loughborough

20th October 2007
Ernest Makin, Wigan.

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

**Thursday 30th August to Saturday
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And
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Last year we had 53 people from 11
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The speakers that have been
confirmed so far are:

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Vince O'Donovan (UK),
Jason Sneathen (UK),
Alexander Malirrytos (Greece),
Randy Lowery (USA),
Terry Briley (USA).*

We are also planning to hold
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If you want further information then
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