

The **SCRIPTURE STANDARD**

*Pleading for a complete return to Christianity
as it was in the beginning*

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IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

On the radio this morning, the question of falling "church attendance" was being discussed. Church attendance throughout the U.K. has been dwindling for a very long time but, apparently, the fall has greatly accelerated within the last year or two. The radio programme offered a great many reasons for this situation and opinions, taken from members of the public were given. The public gave many fairly predictable reasons, the most common of which was that "the church" had outlived its relevance and was out of touch with "modern society". It would have to be modernised and relate to the "real world". Mention was made of the outlandish dress of the clergy; and many of us would have to agree. We have all got appalling images of the Moderator of the Church of Scotland replete with 'nicky tams' and gaiters, and we are certainly never likely to see the Pope dressed in sportsjacket and flannels. Nor does it seem necessary for nuns and monks to be dressed in their unwarranted habits. I am sure Jesus, or the apostles, never dressed bizarrely, or needed to get attention in this way. Another opinion, from the public, reckoned that the churches were too "fuddy-duddy" and that the clergy should ditch their dog-collars and spend more time in the local pubs talking about "today's problems" with real people. They should also get "more involved" with the public and "be seen" at football matches, dog-tracks, whist drives, discos and the like. Reference was also made to what goes on in the churches in the U.S.A. and how that the U.K. could get their own "televangelists" and bring a certain "glitz and glamour" to religion, and even compete with other forms of "show business". Others of those interviewed, who obviously belonged to the R.C. Church, said that there ought to be an immediate relaxation of the strict church rules regarding contraception, abortion, celibacy of the clergy, etc. They made the interesting point that the unusually high percentages of divorce in the U.K. had adversely affected church attendance and those divorced were often very reluctant to turn up at church: the remarried losing access to the sacraments. One person suggested that "one-day absolutions" would bring great numbers back and, in fact, when, by reason of a misprint, a "One-day absolution service" was advertised recently the whole island of Barra turned up at the church door. Readers might be wondering about the relevance of these opinions, but surely we should be attentive to everything that people say about the declining interest in church attendance and spiritual things.

Some of the young people interviewed thought that the hymns were old-fashioned and that they should be "jazzed-up" a bit, and suggested that "the young" would respond readily if there were "rock bands" in the churches. Very few of those interviewed brought up the question of church disunity, but one elderly lady reckoned that the apparent disunity amongst the churches was a definite "turn-off" to the general public. She thought (rightly)

that one ought to be able to go to *the nearest* place of worship and find acceptance, and that if all the churches were based upon the N.T. they would all be the same. On any Sunday morning, she added, one could see worshippers passing one another in the streets, all going in different directions to their respective places of worship. She also deplored the obvious level of religious intolerance and thought that greater efforts at "Christian unity" should be striven for and differences overlooked, "For, after all", she said, "what does it matter what we believe as long as we are sincere". The radio commentator considered that this was a very hopeful note on which to end his broadcast, and said, "Yes, our religious differences are not all that important, as long as we hold honest views and are sincere".

LIMITED APPLICATION

The above conclusion is actually a widely held view. I first heard that sentiment when I was a very small boy and evidently it will never go away. It is a view held not just by the general public, but many Christians espouse it as well. It seems to be thought inevitable that we shall all have different points of view, but as long as these differing views *are sincerely held*, it doesn't greatly matter. That seems pretty close to the old lady's remark, "It doesn't much matter what we believe as long as we are sincere". But how true is that statement? Yes, it even sounds plausible at times, but is there any substance to it? We notice, first of all, that this statement is usually confined to *religious matters only*, but seems to be considered inappropriate in science, education, law, medicine, etc.

Those who attend colleges and universities will vouch for the fact that this principle most certainly *does not operate* in the realms of education, and that there's not much use saying to the Examination Board, "Surely it doesn't much matter what I believe as long as I'm sincere". Scientists could not operate on this principle nor could the law courts. Court judges could never reach verdicts on the basis that it does not much matter what we do as long as we are sincere. Yet people glibly apply it to the things of God.

SINCERITY, BUT ALSO TRUTH

Nobody denies the need for sincerity in religion. Surely this was the basic criticism that Jesus had of the Pharisees: their lack of sincerity and their ulterior motives. They made long prayers at street corners to be seen of men; sounded the trumpet when they gave alms, and disfigured their faces to convey an impression of suffering in fasting. Prayers, almsgiving and fasting were, of course, all religious exercises and most commendable, but Jesus did not commend the Pharisees: He rather accused them of hypocrisy. He said, "**Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, 'This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoureth Me with their lips: but their heart is far from Me'. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men**". (Matt. 15:7). The word "hypocrite" comes, I believe, from the Greek *Hupokrites* and refers to "one who is acting a part": an actor. Those who do things to be seen, admired, of their fellow-men fall into this category and many Pharisees, meticulously religious as they were, had fallen into this condition. Falling foul of this sin is easy to do. We notice, in the passage just quoted, that Jesus did not only condemn the Pharisees for hypocritical *motives* in what they did religiously, but also denounced *the content* of their religious service; for they "**taught as doctrine the commandments of men**" i.e. the traditions of the elders. This tells us that Jesus did not share the view "that it does not much matter what we believe as long as we are sincere", but condemned not only the insincerity of the Pharisees **but also** their *teaching* and their *doctrine*. *What people believed* in matters of religion mattered very much to Jesus. *Doctrine* mattered to Jesus: it was vitally important. So much so, that Jesus said, "**in vain do they worship Me**" if they teach the commandments of men. "Church-goers" go to church to worship, and here we have Jesus saying that our *worship is in vain* (ignored by

God) if based on a doctrine other than Christ's: i.e. if grounded in human tradition. All those of us who "go to church" should bear this in mind and make sure that all that we say and do in our worship is founded on the doctrine of Christ and His apostles, and not upon any human source. Thus *it does matter* what we believe religiously: quite apart from any question of sincerity.

WHAT PAUL'S CASE TELLS US

Had the proposition "that it does not much matter what we believe as long as we are sincere" ever been put to the apostle Paul he would have laughed it out of court. His was surely a classic case. When the Christian religion began Paul (or Saul as he was then known) was a very devout and zealous Jew and consequently detested Christians and Christianity. He regarded it as his God-given duty to strangle this new religion in its infancy, and set about the task in real earnest. On a later occasion he freely confessed that **"I verily thought within myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which things I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the Chief Priests: and when they were put to death I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities"**. (Acts 26). Thus Paul does not try to sugar the pill but freely admits to his own very active part in the slaughter of the early Christians. He was "exceedingly mad against them" and hounded them from city to city, forcing them to blaspheme, shutting them up in prison, and presiding over their death and execution. He says that he felt **"he ought"** to do all these dreadful things and fully considered that he was pleasing God. Jesus had, of course, warned His disciples to expect this kind of treatment and said, **"These things (the warnings of persecution) have I spoken unto you that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues; Yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God's service"**. (John 16:1). Paul's behaviour was a case in point, for all the time that he **"was breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord"** he genuinely supposed that he was doing God's will. Acts 26 goes on to describe Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus: intent as he was to reach that city and arrest all the Christians there. Clearly Paul was HONEST and SINCERE in the pursuit of his own Jewish religious beliefs, and hadn't the faintest inkling that he was at odds with God until Jesus struck him down on that Damascus road with the words, **"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me"**? Indeed, when Paul later recounted to the Sanhedrin the circumstances of his conversion, he stated that he **"had lived in all good conscience before God"** all his life, and therefore was totally unaware that he was offending God when he was wreaking havoc amongst the Christians. In short, Paul was sincere but sincerely wrong.

Thus we can see that, in religious matters as in every other matter, what we do, and what we believe, does matter, notwithstanding the question of sincerity. Later on, and in the full realisation of the enormity of his previous actions, Paul declared himself **"chief of sinners because I persecuted the Church of God"** (Gal. 1:13). And so, as mentioned at the beginning, Paul would have either laughed, or cried, if he had heard anyone say, "it doesn't matter what we believe as long as we are sincere".

IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

Vital as sincerity is, it is not enough. We must also pursue *the will of God*. Jesus (talking about the claims some will make on Judgement Day) said, **"Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have not we prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name cast out demons, and in Thy name done many wonderful works. And then will I profess unto**

them, I never knew you. Depart from Me ye that work iniquity". These claims seem to have been sincerely held. The "many wonderful works" and casting out of demons had all been done "in Christ's name", yet nevertheless at Judgement Day, the doers of these "good works" would receive Christ's rejection. Evidently it does matter **what** we BELIEVE and DO religiously, and Jesus went on to say, "Not every one that sayeth unto Me Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven". (Matt. 7:21). Surely if we are TO DO God's will we must seek TO KNOW God's will. This, if nothing else, shows us that Jesus demands more than *misguided sincerity*. He requires that we seek to know God's will and thereafter to seek to do it. "Ye are my friends," said Jesus, "If ye do whatsoever I command you", and obviously is laying considerable emphasis on the importance of what we do in worship, and all other aspects of our lives. He also said, "God is Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. For the Father seeketh such to worship Him". (John 4:23). This should tell us that, as far as "worship" is concerned we cannot worship God in any old way, or that which suits the fancy. Jesus says God **must** be worshipped "in spirit": i.e. in the proper spirit, and "in truth": i.e. according to God's word, or God's truth. God "seeketh" that kind and quality of worship: and so it DOES matter what we believe and what we do, in worship.

CONCLUSION

With the fall in "Church attendance" has come a proportional upsurge of all kinds of gimmicks and inducements "to pack them in", and the original reason for church attendance has virtually been lost. The latest effort of the C. of E. to attract "the young" in Sheffield has been "The 9 O'clock Service", run by the Rev. Christopher Brain, which "flouts convention" and resembles a "rock" concert, with throbbing dance music, the use of video and lasers, psychedelic images, "rock" hymns and dancing. This has proved "very popular" with the young but not the neighbours, or those close to the 5,000-watt loudspeakers. Unfortunately the Rev. Brain was suspended from office last August following sex allegations from over twenty young women, but the Bishop says these services will continue. There is also a Baptist Church in Glasgow where one has to turn up hours early to get a seat, but perhaps it should be explained that one of the band members is base guitarist with the "Wet, Wet, Wet" group. All this begs the question as to what we understand by "worship" nowadays. Certainly the churches seem to have entered competition with "show business" and even in some congregations of churches of Christ the premises fill for a "sing along" but struggle to get enough for a Bible study.

All "church-goers" should reflect upon **where** they go to worship; **why** they go, and should ponder upon **what** the scriptures say about **how** God should be worshipped. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst" and one has to doubt whether a "rock and rave" assembly, or, for that matter, any other form of *religious entertainment*, would attract the presence of Jesus, or be conducive to an atmosphere of "reverence and Godly fear". Those interviewed on the radio programme this morning failed to mention that, in the first place, while many may be sincere, many more are "church-goers" for the wrong reasons: i.e. some go out of a feeling of obligation or to please their parents; or to please their spouses. Some go because it is expected of them, or from interest in a member of the opposite sex: some only go to "communion", or only if they have a new outfit; or only go if it is a nice morning: or only go if they like the clergyman. From this it follows that our *motive* for being at a place of worship is of great importance, (and this is where *sincerity* is involved), but we must also worship *according to truth*. The Jew in his synagogue on a Saturday is doubtless sincere but he *errs from God's truth*.

Islamic prayer-mats are in constant use and again sincerity is not in doubt: but **the truth** is that no one comes to the Father but through the Son. And so we could go on. Sincerity is needful but is not enough.

EDITOR.

GLEANINGS

"Let her glean even among the sheaves." (Ruth. 2:15)

SUFFICIENCY

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God". 2 Corinthians 3:5.

THE BIBLE SPEAKS

HE LEADETH ME . . . Psalm 23:2

THE LORD STRONG AND MIGHTY . . . Psalm 24:8

HE SHALL STRENGTHEN THINE HEART . . . Psalm 27:14

WHY ART THOU CAST DOWN, O MY SOUL? . . . Psalm 42:11

THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US . . . Psalm 46:11

BUT THOU, O LORD, ART A GOD FULL OF COMPASSION . . . Psalm 86:15

HE GIVETH POWER TO THE FAINT . . . Isaiah 40:29

SOMEONE HAS SAID

If we must worry, the Lord Jesus has a plan that will cut it down by at least two-thirds. **"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."** This eliminates both yesterday and tomorrow. Many of us need deliverance from the past. If the guilt of past sins lingers with us, God wants us to come to Him for forgiveness, and go on from there. The opportunities we have missed we cannot recall. Let us look for new opportunities.

To be anxious for souls and yet not impatient, to be patient and yet not indifferent, to bear the infirmities of the weak without fostering them, to testify against sin and unfaithfulness and the low standard of spiritual life, and yet to keep the stream of love free and full and open - to have the mind of a faithful shepherd, a hopeful physician, a tender nurse, a skilful teacher - requires the continual renewal of the Lord's grace.

"He breaks the power of cancelled sin,

He sets the prisoner free;

His blood can make the foulest clean;

His blood avails for me."

"God's help can be nearer than the door."

"Some of your hurts you have cured,

And the sharpest you still have survived,

But what torments of grief you endured

From evils that never arrived."

"What does anxiety do?"

"It does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow

But it empties today of its strength."

His plan for today is all I ask;

With Him I can leave the "tomorrow",

So by faith I can walk, and with him I can talk,

Trust today, with its joys and its sorrow."

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might."

Ephesians 6: 10.

THY SUFFICIENCY

"Give me Thy strength, O God of power, then let winds blow, or thunders roar, Thy faithful witness will I be: Upheld by Thy sufficiency."

STEADFAST LOVE . . . HIS MERCIES . . . NEW EVERY MORNING

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness." Lamentations 3: 22-23 (RS.V.)

Selected by Leonard Morgan

LETTER FROM PNG.

(PART 1)

Sister Ruth Coles with her late husband Reg were missionaries in PNG (Papua New Guinea) for nearly 14 years, eleven of which were spent with the Waria tribe. Ruth's interesting letter describes her recent return visit to the Waria Valley. (Due to its length I have split the letter into two parts.)

27th September, 1995.

Dear Brethren,

Greetings from the Christians meeting in the Waria Valley in Papua New Guinea. I wish to thank you again for enabling me to return to Papua New Guinea in June of this year and to stay two months in that lovely country.

I travelled from Edinburgh to London on 13th June where I boarded a Qantas flight for Singapore. I spent two nights there with Dave and Debbie Hogan who are missionaries in that country. I was able to meet the Church there on Wednesday evening. I believe that there are three congregations of the Lord's Church in Singapore.

From Singapore I flew to Brisbane, where I spent two nights with Sister Smith of the Wynnum Church of Christ. I was able to worship with that congregation on Sunday 18th June. The late brother Smith had been a preacher in Brisbane for many years. From Brisbane I travelled to Port Moresby and on to Lae by Air Nugini. I was met at Nadzab airport by Velma Forman, a missionary nurse in Lae, and several brethren from the Waria Valley. Velma is Canadian and a Registered nurse who specialised in paediatrics. We had not met, but I had corresponded with Velma and she had promised to accompany me to the Waria Valley. It was good to see Nebobo, whose husband Tuhe is a carpenter in Lae. Both of their families have been Christians for many years in Orouba and Aroba. Zaro and Kara, both from the Orouba congregation had been attending an Evangelist workshop in Goroka, and they decided to stay in Lae until I arrived. Name and Kristofer are both attending the Bible College in Lae, so I was happy to see both of them. Dogo, a young Christian woman from Rouba was staying with Velma and was helping to organise the library at the Bible College. I had known all of them since they were small as I had taught them in Sunday school.

The first two weeks I spent shopping in Lae with Velma in her small bus. Some of the roads were in a bad state with big potholes. We visited wholesale stores. Chinese and hardware stores to buy the medical supplies, clothing, food, paint and many other things which I planned to take to Orouba. I had forgotten that everything takes twice the normal time in PNG. In the wholesale stores, all the bills are written by hand and one has just to be patient.

The Kina, which is PNG currency, had been devalued earlier in the year, which enhanced the exchange rate with sterling, but prices had also risen dramatically, but I did benefit some by the good rate of exchange.

As Velma and I were going to the Waria Valley on Church related business, we were

able to fly with the Missionary Aviation Fellowship, at half the normal rate, both fares and freight. The national brethren have the same privilege, and this is a great asset to the Waria brethren, since their only way out of the valley is by air or a two-day walk to the coast to get a ship to Lae.

The day we left Lae the sky was very overcast with low dark clouds. There were far more passengers than the pilot had anticipated, as a family of eight arrived at the last minute to fly to Garaina. This meant that most of our cargo had to be left behind to come at a later date. Visibility was very poor and I was glad that Marcus, a very experienced pilot whom I had known for several years, was at the controls. After leaving Lae, we flew over range upon range of mountains with no landing strip until we reached Garaina. It was a little scary even though I had travelled the same route many times in the past. Garaina is where the first tea was grown in Papua New Guinea in the early nineteen-sixties.

When we touched down on Kira airstrip there was a large crowd of people waiting to welcome us. There is a barrier to keep people off the strip but as soon as the engine stopped the people streamed on to the strip. Normally the pilot would have sent them off, but he knew that they had come to welcome me, so he just stood there smiling while I was engulfed. People hugged me and wept for Reg and for me being alone. It was very emotional for them and for me. It was not possible to shake hands with everyone, but I must have shaken hands with over a hundred people. I saw a lot of changes and some of the younger men especially, I did not recognise. Some had bushy black beards and long hair in ringlets, some were married with children. When they told me their names, they laughed at my surprise for many of them I left as young teenagers who had attended my teenage Bible or literacy class. I was thankful to learn that several of them were Christians and were already taking part in the work of the Church.

As we wound our way single file down the mountain, everyone was talking and laughing and it was just like old times. When we reached the bottom of the mountain and came to a small river which I usually waded across in my bush boots, the women insisted on carrying me across so that I wouldn't get my feet wet. I protested, but to no avail. The people took great care of me as I walked the tracks between the villages during my visit there.

We stopped in the village of Gimine while a man climbed a coconut tree so that we could quench our thirst on fresh coconut milk. It was delicious and brought back so many memories of our association with the people in the Kira district. It was raining heavily by the time we reached Orouba, and as we walked up the track to the Church building and the site of our bush house beyond, I thought of Reg and how he had given himself wholly to the work of the Lord in this remote part of Papua New Guinea.

Sumugau, Gobeda's eldest son, had built a new bush house close to the site of our old house and Velma and I were to have the privilege of being the first to use it. It was a well constructed three-roomed house with a veranda and a credit to Sumugau who was in his early twenties. His father Gobeda had died just three weeks after Reg in July '93. Sumugau lived with his mother Gorapa and the rest of the family in a house next door to us and all of them were very helpful to us during our stay.

There were four more houses built above the site of our old house, on what was originally the helicopter pad. These houses were built by Sehequ and his three sons. All of Sehequ's six children are Christians except one and he is married to a Christian girl, so I believe that he, too, will eventually give his life to Christ.

Needless to say Velma and I had a full programme of work. We held medical clinics on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, although many people came to the house at other times. On Tuesday we visited the six closest villages. We were advised not to cross Mount

Ubari to Aroba as the track had been washed away by heavy rain and even the local women found it difficult to negotiate. On Thursday we had ladies' class and Velma and I shared the teaching. The women from the Qaro and Aroba congregations attended all of these classes. We usually had about seventy women in class. The first Thursday we were there we distributed the used clothing in the afternoon, to the congregations in Qaro and Aroba and to the Christians in the Orouba congregation who came from Sarasara, Pokie, Eroma, Orouba, Onodora, Repanaga and Kira airstrip. We also sent clothing to the distant villages of Girie and Oipo. Everyone was very happy with the clothing which was made up in bundles of fifty kilograms. Each bundle had a mixture of clothing for all ages.

I had bought paint to repaint the church building but was not sure of the quantities required or the colour, as Reg had always taken care of that side of things. However, I had enough undercoat and almost enough top coat for the outside of the building. I had chosen a reddish brown paint and thankfully, everyone liked the colour. Three men got to work with the sandpaper right away while others cleaned the guttering. Some young men got together and replaced some fence posts around the building. When the building was finished it looked really nice with the white facings and reddish brown walls. Saoba, who was in charge of the painting (he is also a very able teacher and preacher) and I were able to work out how much paint I would need to buy to do the inside of the building. It cost more than I had anticipated, but I was glad that you had donated enough money to enable me to do that. Some of you may remember that Reg designed and constructed this building with unskilled labour. Our Christian families had all donated trees, some hundreds of years old and very large. The timber was cut with a chain saw with an Alaskan mill attached. When it was cut to size it was dipped in a chemical solution and dried. It was then trimmed on a circular saw and planed. Reg trained the brethren in the use of the tools and together they built the Church building. Jim McGeachy and his wife Bessie came to work with us in Orouba and Jim made a good contribution to this work. The people are proud of their building because they helped to build it.

On the second Tuesday we were there, the people held a feast in honour of Reg's memory. They killed six pigs and a number of chickens. The women had gone to their gardens and returned with loads of vegetables. There were speeches relating to what Reg had done for the community in bringing the gospel to this area. They talked of the development which had come as a result of Reg constructing the airstrip and how he had persuaded the Government to open a primary school. They talked of my medical work and how they now have a health centre on the airstrip as a result. Some wanted to change the name of the school and the airstrip to include Reg's name, but I persuaded them that Reg would not like that as he never wanted a "big name". However, they are determined to put a plaque on the airstrip and have received permission from the government to do this. They said that they wanted their children and those who come behind to know what Reg had done for them.

One Saturday we held a picnic cum party for the children. This used to be an annual event for the Sunday school when we lived there. Velma and I, with some of the women, cooked twelve bags of popcorn early in the morning and this filled three black garbage bags. We had sweet biscuits, raspberry cordial, lollipops and P.K. chewing gum. Of course many adults had turned up too, so when the children had run all their races and passed the parcel etc., the adults wanted to run races too, so everyone had a hilarious time of fellowship together. The adults love popcorn too, as I found out many years ago when I first made it for the children.

Most evenings people came to visit and the young people to sing. We had some

interesting and informative discussions. Velma and I always made a huge pot of tea and we had brought three cartons of biscuits for these occasions. Everyone enjoyed the visits.

Ruth B. Coles (Mrs.)

To be continued next month (God willing).

A SUBJECT FOR PRAYER

Many times in the past we have heard sermons to the effect that we must all work harder at preaching the gospel. It is implied that the particular congregation being addressed is lazy because numbers are small. The congregation themselves, if able to reply, would probably say that they had tried everything they could think of to spread the gospel already, with little success. The writer's grandfather spent almost all his lifetime giving out tracts on public transport while going to and from work, and on all other occasions, and if sheer persistence were all that was required, the results would have been very numerous, which unfortunately they were not.

So the question is, whether or not people are willing to listen to the gospel. Can we do anything about this?

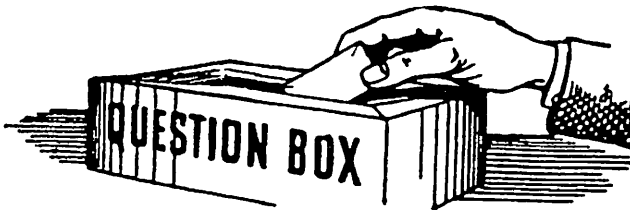
The epistles addressed to congregations as a whole say little about actual methods of contacting the lost. Of course, more was said to Timothy and Titus, who were evangelists. The general epistles do stress, above all, the need for us all to strive after more personal and congregational holiness. Not everyone has the ability to preach, but we can all endeavour to live out the gospel in our own individual circumstances.

We are all told to be ready with an answer for questioners (1 Pet. 3:15). This implies that when people see the Christian life in action, they will begin to ask about it, and this will give us an opportunity. Even if they do not, they can often guess more about our aims and motives than we imagine.

The other thing we must remember to do is to pray about it (Eph. 6:19, Phil 4:6, Col. 4:3 and 2 Thess. 3:1). Sometimes we seem to pray about everything in all places, except the dire lack of faith in our own country. Perhaps we think that if preaching to people is unsuccessful, it is of no use to pray for them. However, it may be that effectual, fervent prayer ought to come first (James 5:16). This is something we can all do, privately and in public.

We need to pray for a new spirit among our neighbours "That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though he be not far from every one of us" (Acts 17:27).

(Miss) R. M. Payne.



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"We used to hear a lot about 'death-bed repentances' and doubtless many feel that God will forgive them and take them to heaven provided they say they are sorry to God, just before they die. Any justification for thinking this?"

I saw many men during the war who, when they thought they were going into life threatening situations, prayed to God. It would be wrong of me to say that they were repentant for having neglected Him for so long; they were, however, unsure and afraid of what they considered to be imminent oblivion. They were at the extremity.

There are two occasions in life when we are at the extremities; one is when we are newborn babes, the other is when we are on the death-bed (that is, of course, if we die a natural death). In both cases we are afraid and unsure. In the first instance instinctively; in the second instance with the knowledge that we face the unknown. The resolution of the child's fear and uncertainty will come by growth and time; the latter is more traumatic unless we have tried to prepare ourselves for it. It is impossible for us to apprehend the mind of God, but He has revealed something of Himself to us in His word, and it is to that word we must turn for enlightenment on all matters concerning life and death.

A JEALOUS GOD

Jealousy is a condition brought on by apprehension of losing the love or goodwill of someone. Socially it could be a close friend; in the married state it could be husband or wife. If pushed to the extreme, jealousy can have terrible repercussions for many people, both inside and outside of families. We cannot, however, refer human actions to God. He is not jealous in the sense that He would do unrighteous actions in order to sustain His own righteousness.

In Deut. 4:23,24, we read, "**Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you, and make you a graven image, or the likeness of anything, which the Lord thy God hath forbidden thee. For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.**" Jealousy when referred to God, means that He is intolerant of disobedience and unfaithfulness. He does not want to see the love and goodwill which He has lavished on His creation spurned out of hand by them. Many people get the idea of a benign Deity who, because He is love, is unable or unwilling to punish those who displease Him. Consequently, the thought persists that He is on 'tap' whenever we want him. We 'turn Him on' whenever we want something from him. We must disabuse our minds of that idea. It is very dangerous for us to treat God like that. He is not to be regarded as some sort of personal 'talismán'. He wants our allegiance, and He wants it while we have something to offer.

UNCARING MAN

This question is applicable to any period of time. People have died, people are dying now, and people will continue to die unless, of course, God intervenes. This particular age, it seems to me, is the age of 'escapism.' Many people are poor, and so they try to alleviate their poverty by placing faith in such things as the national lottery; at the end of the day they succeed only in making themselves more impoverished. Reality has become something which must be 'escaped' from, and in their desire to escape, they run deeper into the mire which ultimately engulfs them completely.

This 'solution in escapism' means that people think only of themselves. The general attitude seems to be, "look after yourself and let the devil take the hindmost" . . . The trouble is that the devil seems to take a distressing delight in taking the 'front-runners' also.

The real tragedy is, of course, that people also **forget** God. Materialism has become endemic in society. The prospector digs for gold and finds it. This starts a 'rush' of people who also want to become rich. This brings along others who kill, maim, loot, in order to deprive those of the treasure they have dug from the earth. Riches galore! It doesn't matter how you get it; just take it. Along comes the Christian and begins to talk about the riches of

the Christian life; love, mercy, concern for others, sacrifice, and the eternal hope of heaven. "You call those "riches"? says the materialist, "I call those things 'pie in the sky'", and so he continues to dig for the gold which may enable him to buy many material things, but which will never ensure for him true happiness and contentment. Why do I mention these things? Well, simply because God knows the true hearts desire of all of His creation, and one day He is going to make decisions about their eternal destiny.

Picture now, if you will, the materialist lying in his bed with an illness he knows to be terminal. The Christian, out of concern for him, is visiting and trying to comfort him. "Tell me some more about the riches you spoke to me about earlier. I think I would like to take them up now." Is the man truly repentant, or is he trying to be a partaker of the heavenly riches in order to compensate for the earthly ones which his illness has denied him? We could never know that, but God does, and it is He, in His wisdom, who will have to give the verdict.

THE VERDICT

Everyone, when they die, will have determined their own guilt or innocence. If we have been obedient to God and tried to do His revealed Will, then we shall have determined our own salvation. If, on the other hand, we have disbelieved and spurned God and His Christ, then we shall be guilty before Him. God will then pass judgment as to where we shall spend eternity.

"Ah", someone may say, "what about those who have never heard the Gospel!, or those who have never had it explained to them properly?" Well, those who have never even **heard** the Gospel would be the same on their death-beds as they had been during their lives, i.e. **unknowing**. Lack of adequate explanation of the Gospel message in order to ensure understanding, would be the fault of those who had taught it. But let me say this. A person who never **hears** the Gospel is, technically, in the same condition as those who hear it but reject it, i.e., he is unsaved and consequently 'lost'. The ultimate charge may be levelled at those who **know** it but do not **dispense** it to those who **need** it. The verdict, then, against the 'unknowing' would not be based on disobedience of something he had never heard - he is technically 'lost', anyway - but would be based on the mercy of the One examining him, i.e., God. It is hard for us to accept that the unevangelised are 'lost', but on the basis of our humanity the Apostle Paul has concluded, "For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God". Rom. 3:23. Therefore, we can only conclude that a person who **needs** the Gospel is a person who **needs** to be saved, and if he **needs** to be saved, then he is lost in sin.

IN CONCLUSION

So what can we say in conclusion about this question of 'death-bed' repentance? In the first place we have to accept that God alone knows whether **any** repentance - 'death-bed' or otherwise - is genuine. We can only hear the words spoken, and watch actions; **He** knows the heart of man.

Secondly, a person who, during his lifetime, has known the Gospel and has deliberately spurned the grace of God, and the sacrifice of His Christ, can only expect the 'just' judgment of God. A cynical attempt to make the most personal gain in any situation, e.g., the 'death-bed' will, in my opinion, be of no avail.

Thirdly, the 'unknowing' will have to throw themselves on the mercy of God. But we Christians must realise that if we have let a situation develop in the promotion of the Gospel, then we must be ready to take the stricture of God.

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden, 20 Costwessy Way,
Winstanley, Wigan. WN3 6ES.)

NEITHER HOT NOR COLD

(Rev. 3:14-22)

In the text, brethren, we find Christ Jesus speaking to the church at Laodicea. The words were aptly spoken because in reality, the church had missed the mark! Words of great importance and just as relevant today. The church then, in the real sense, wasn't alive. We need to heed these words. We should never make the mistake of thinking they apply only to others, and non-believers: as some do. The words were spoken to a believing church who in reality had slipped into thinking of themselves as spiritually elite. It is here we might take time to ponder on the words of Robert Burns;

"Oh to see ourselves as others see us."

Yes we need to stand back and take a new look at ourselves in praise, prayer, and worship. It will do us nothing but good; that's for sure.

You see, brethren, the people of the Laodicean church could not see themselves as they really were. They failed to notice that their Lord was standing *outside* the assembly, and not in the midst. They had become self-centred; wrapped up in their own little community, and could see nothing else. We, today, need to watch out for these symptoms.

The gospel and mission was failing and lacking the necessary vigour. In other words they had grown cold! (Lukewarm) in their concern for a lost world. Does this ring a bell perhaps? They had failed to listen in the on-going sense. Now know this beloved, God truly speaks to those who listen. If we are not listening, or prepared to listen, we won't hear a sound.

Oh yes, the Laodiceans were convinced that they were on the right track (as did Paul in his early years), but note this, their self-sufficiency and spiritual arrogance, led Christ to say they were "**neither hot nor cold**", and "**I will spit you out of my mouth**". Now these are harsh words; strong words; that we might understand and be concerned. We need to be committed in the true sense. Beloved never allow the devotion of your heart to become callous. Pray that your mind will remain open and sensitive to the Spirit of God.

The Church at large needs a revival; an awakening; a stirring up in its thinking and working. I hope you can agree. We need to make it our goal never to lose sight of God's pre-eminence in our lives, and church.

To be able to listen, we must need be awake. God still speaks. Beloved are we listening? Are we awake? Are you aware as to what is around you? If so, you have a ready ear. SO LISTEN

Andrew Sharpe, Newtongrange.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Dec. 3	Psalm 80:	John 15:1-11
Dec. 10	Psalm 35:19-28	John 15:12-27
Dec. 17	Zech. 4:	John 16:1-14
Dec. 24	Psalm 29	John 16:15-33
Dec. 31	Psalm 132 & 133	John 17:

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

Visitors to Hampton Court London, can

see England's largest vine - the Great Vine. It was first planted in 1768, has a girth of 7ft 1in. with branches up to 114ft long. It has an average yield of 703lbs. I recently admired this outstanding plant and, as I did so, could not help recall Jesus' words as recorded in John 15. The chapter begins: "**I am the vine and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that bears not fruit, He takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit!**"

(15:1,2). His disciples would have understood His words because all of them at one time or other must have tended a vine, which was a very common plant in that day.

It is interesting to note how often the picture of Israel as the vine or the vineyard occurs in the O.T. For example, we find the illustration in Isaiah 5 and Ezekiel 15. But Jesus called Himself the *true* vine. It is as if He said: "You think that because you belong to the nation of Israel you are a branch of the true vine of God. But the nation is a degenerate vine, as all your prophets saw. It is I who am the true vine. The fact that you are a Jew will not save you. The only thing that can save you is to have an intimate living fellowship with Me, for I am the vine of God and you must be branches joined to me" (William Barclay).

The importance of fruitful branches is seen in this passage. Indeed, we must bear much fruit and thus show ourselves to be true disciples of Jesus. Paul later wrote to the saints in Galatia: "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law**" (5:22,23, N.I.V.) And remember, "**If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch and is withered; and men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned**" (John 15:6).

THE WORLD HATES THE DISCIPLES

Jesus said: "**If the world hate you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you**" (15:18). They persecuted Jesus; they would persecute His followers. Jesus had His disciples well warned about the ex-communications from the synagogues and the killings, supposedly in God's name (16:2). Such actions resulted from the persecutors not knowing the Father nor His Christ (16:3).

I recall here Jesus' words from the so-

called Sermon on the Mount. "**Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you, when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you**" (Matthew 5:10-12). Standing up for Jesus would inevitably bring violent opposition, and that is just what we find as we work our way through the N.T. scriptures. Those of the world do not like people who do not conform and who regard themselves as being quite different. As one writer has said: "To be different will be dangerous, but no man can be a Christian unless he accepts that risk, for there must be a difference between the man of the world and the man of Christ".

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

At Motherwell I have just completed a study of the evil spirit, who, of course, is Satan. I thought it best to go on and immediately undertake a study of the Holy Spirit so that the contrast between these two could be clearly seen. We read: "**Howbeit, when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will show you things to come.**" (16:13). These words were, of course, spoken by Jesus to His apostles. They were to be guided "**into all truth**". This is an important fact in the light of so-called modern revelations. But of what does "all truth" consist? Does Jesus here refer to astronomy, geology or physics, for example? No! The truth He refers to is the truth that redeems and reconciles and restores the Divine-human relationship.

The apostles, by the power of the Holy Spirit, bore witness to Jesus (15:27).

Without the Spirit they could not have achieved what they did. They were outstanding servants of the Paraclete and I admire every one of them. They fearlessly and courageously took the good news of Jesus to an often hostile world. To me it is no wonder that their twelve names are in the twelve foundations of the wall of the eternal city (Revelations 21:14).

**JESUS PRAYS FOR HIMSELF,
HIS DISCIPLES AND ALL
BELIEVERS**

This is a most significant prayer by the Master. I observe that the word "Father" is used six times and that the words "glory" and "glorify" occur nine times in all. His arrest, trial and crucifixion were now not far away. Albert Barnes has written: "it (His prayer) was offered on the most tender and solemn occasion that has ever occurred in our world and is perhaps the most sublime composition to be found anywhere".

Jesus said: **"And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent"** (17:3). So here we have a definition of eternal life - a definition that is rather different from some we have heard and seen from men. Remember, eternal life speaks of quality rather than quantity. Eternal life is the very life of God Himself. As one writer has put it: "To possess it, to enter into it, is to experience here and now something of the splendour, and the majesty, and the joy, and the peace, and the holiness which are characteristic of the life of God."

The unity of all believers should be a vital subject to us because it was, and is, a vital subject to Jesus. When His prayer is carefully studied, we can see that the conversion of the world hinges upon the unity of all believers. We have to face up to the fact that God's kingdom today is hopelessly divided, with the result that many in the world do not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the God. He

said: **"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father art in Me, and I in thee, that they all may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me"** (John 17:21).

All the great reformers saw the absolute necessity of the oneness of all Christ's followers. Sadly, people ended up as Lutherans, Calvinists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and what have you. As far as I can see, it was never Martin Luther's, John Calvin's, John Wesley's intention to establish a separate group or sect further, Alexander Campbell had no wish to see bodies divided into the Christian Church, Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, following his plea and labours for unity. The present situation would pain brother Campbell greatly. Thomas Campbell, his beloved father, known as the Apostle of Unity, would be equally troubled. It is one of the greatest tragedies of history that men and women ended up more divided after the Reformation than before, Jesus, of course, foresaw all this - thus His prayer.

What then is the answer? I would say immediately - Jesus! "Faith in Jesus as the true Messiah and obedience to Him as our Law-giver and King, the only test of Christian and character and the only bond of Christian union, communion and co-operation, irrespective of all creeds, opinions, commandments and traditions of men". So wrote Alexander Campbell in 1835. His words are well worth quoting in 1995.

Ian S. Davidson,
Motherwell.

**TEST YOUR BIBICAL
KNOWLEDGE**

1. Who was the chief official of the island of Malta?
2. Where did Paul fight wild beasts?

3. Who said to Paul: "Your great learning is driving you insane?"
4. What kind of pillar led the children of Israel by day?
5. What was the name of Elisha's servant?
6. Who was Bathsheeba's first husband?
7. What animal was sent into the desert on the Day of Atonement?
8. Through which desert did the children of Israel pass between Elim and Sinai?
9. Who were Ahinoam and Abigail?
10. In which city was Paul stoned and left for dead?

COMING EVENTS

ANNUAL SOCIAL

Kirkcaldy
20th April, 1996

Ladies Day:
18th May, 1996

We look forward to a rich time of fellowship with the various congregations.

GHANA APPEAL

There has been a great deal of activity in Ghana in the past month. Preaching in new areas continues and there was a conversion from Catholicism which has encouraged a congregation in the Ashanti region.

We have received a letter from the church meeting in Takoradi that brother James Nyame-Kwaw has been discharged from hospital after a 5 week admission. The brethren send their thanks for aid sent to pay for the treatment.

We continue to receive letters of thanks for the Twi Bibles, which have arrived and been distributed.

We have a number of Medical Aid

requests before us (two of our brethren are in hospital and two have just left having received treatment) we will send £1000 this week (11/10/95) to Ghana mainly for Medical Aid although £200 will be sent to a congregation whose roofing fund money was redirected to James' hospital treatment. After this transaction the funds available in the Bank will be £273.75.

Money collected to date stands at £55,585.35p. The money collected at the Newtongrange Social gathering was £112.78p (not £112.72p) and we thank the brethren for this gift, which will be sent to John Mensah Bonsuh to assist in Medical Aid in the Odumasi - Afrancho church this week.

Once again, all letters from Ghana ask me to pass on their warmest thanks for the efforts of the Scripture Standard readers who have participated in this work.

Anyone wishing to assist in this work, please contact Graeme Pearson, 13 Fairways, Dunfermline, Fife. KY12 0DU. Tel. 01383 728624. Cheques should be made out to "Graeme Pearson Ghana Appeal."

ABILITY

The Bible teaches us the ability of God. Over and over again we are told 'God is Able.' The testimony of God's power is revealed in men and women. God's treasure is found in earthen vessels that the power may be of God and not of ourselves.

Ability means able to do. What is our ability? What are we able to do? All have ability of some sort or another. Some have more than others and some have less. Ability must be used rightly or it is wasted.

In the parable of the Talents, one had five, another had two; and the other had only one. They were given according to their ability. They all had ability and were

given talents they were capable of using. The five-talent man went to work and added five more. The one with two talents traded and gained two more. The one-talent man buried it in the earth. With it he achieved nothing.

From this we learn that it is not the ability we have that matters, but what we do with it. Five, two or one matters not so much as to whether they become ten, four or none. Five and two gained 100 per cent, but the one, lost even the one he had been given, because he failed to put it into use.

Let each of us assess the ability which God has given us and let us use it to the praise of His Glory.

Tom Kemp, Hindley.

THE BOOK THAT ENDURES

On the Times building in London two books are sculptured in stone. They represent respectively the past and future of human literature. On one, the Past, ivy is graven to indicate how the writings of past ages are overgrown with antiquity like the ruins of an old cathedral. On the other rests the scythe of Time to indicate how all future writings of men will be severely tested by Time as to whether they can endure, while all that is mortal perishes. On the Bible Society building in

the same street one book is ensulptured - the Book of God, with the sentence: "The Word of the Lord Endureth Forever."

A. T. Pierson.

POINTS TO PONDER

Because of an inordinate desire to do all the talking a man has missed hearing a lot of needful information.

It is true that the willing horse gets the heaviest load. It is equally true that he develops the strongest muscles and gets the most corn.

A Christian is in the world, but not of the world. His citizenship is in heaven. He thinks on heavenly things. He lives on a higher level. Unto the divine pattern - the life of Christ - he conforms his life.

-
1. Publius (Acts 28:7).
 2. Ephesus (Corinthians).
 3. Festus (Acts 26:24).
 4. Cloud (Exodus 13:22).
 5. Gehazi (2 Kings 4:25).
 6. Uriah (2 Samuel 11:3).
 7. Scapergat (Leviticus 16:10).
 8. Desert of Sin (Exodus 16:1).
 9. Wives of Davis (2 Samuel 2:2).
 10. Lystra (Acts 14:8,19).

ANSWERS

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