

The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

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

BE INSPIRED... To run the race

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

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

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

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

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WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING?

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: SINFULNESS OF MANKIND

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

WORSHIP AND EDIFICATION

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

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

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

A HOLY GOD - A HOLY PEOPLE

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

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

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

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

A NEED TO LEARN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE PURPOSE OF PREACHING IS TO CHANGE LIVES

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

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

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

Thinking Out Loud

BIOGRAPHIES

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

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

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

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

"ISMS"

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

THE GOSPEL RECORDS

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

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

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

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

PROPER LISTENING

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

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 12 – Early Heresies 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

GNOSTICISM AND ‘EVIL’ MATTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GNOSTIC VARIATIONS

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

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

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

‘SPECIAL’ KNOWLEDGE

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Compilation of the New Testament.

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

1. The Creation of a Historical Record.

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

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

2. Apostolic Instruction

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

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

The Collection of the Books

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

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

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

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

The 'Canon' of New Testament Scriptures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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God and the Environment

(Rose M Payne)

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

God created the Environment

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

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

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

In the Old Testament

• God has often used the Environment

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

• God has occasionally changed the Environment as a punishment

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

• Changes to the Environment were not always a punishment

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

• The Israelites were to care for their Environment

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

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

• Environmental promises were made to the Israelites

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

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

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

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

In the New Testament

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What should we learn from this?

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

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

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

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

Obituary Sis Elsie Sinclair

Tranent, Scotland

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

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

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

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

John Colgan

News and Information

Ghana Appeal

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

Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to treasurer:

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

Sis Lavern Frank

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

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

REACHING OUT TO TODAY'S WORLD

Confirmed Speakers

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

More speakers from the UK to be confirmed.

Song Leader:

Jason Snethen (England)

Contact:

STEPHEN WOODCOCK
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Tel: (01942) 211 479

E-mail:

stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

Website:

www.europeanchristianworkshop.com

NEWTONGRANGE, SCOTLAND

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

Date:

Saturday 11th October 2008
at 1.00pm

Speaker:

Bro. Ian Davidson, Motherwell.

A warm welcome is extended to all.

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