

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"

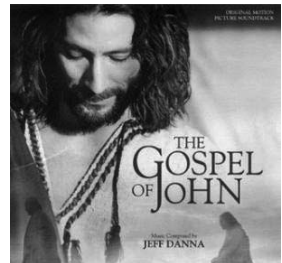
Understanding the Life of Jesus The final discourse

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)

Introduction

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

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



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

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

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

Jesus speaks about His glory

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

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

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

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

Jesus speaks about love

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus promises another Counsellor

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

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

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

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

Jesus speaks about unity

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus’ mission complete

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

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 10 – THE persecution of Christians.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Check this out for yourself.

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Thinking Out Loud

SOME WORDS ON BIRDS

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

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

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

DESIGN

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

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

NUMBERS

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

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

THE BIBLE AND BIRDS

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

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

BIRDS SACRIFICED

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

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

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING?

(Ian Grant, Corby)

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

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

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

DULL AND BORING

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

WORSHIP GOD?

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

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

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

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

PREACH THE WORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thoughts on being a Christian

By V.Sujatha (Darwen)

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

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

New and Information

Obituary Bro Eric Winter

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

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

Brian Stevens

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP

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

REACHING OUT TO TODAY'S WORLD

Confirmed Speakers

Tony Coffey (Ireland) – Keynote

Bob Eckman (England)

Mike Moss (USA)

Ian Cameron (Scotland)

Vladimir Psenko (Croatia)

Gary Holloway (USA)

Eleni Mellirrytos (Greece)

More speakers from the UK to be confirmed.

Song Leader:

Jason Snethen (England)

Early Bird Fee: £99
(before 30th April, 2008)

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NEWTONGRANGE, SCOTLAND

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

Date:

Saturday 11th October 2008
at 1.00pm

Speaker:

Bro. Ian Davidson, Motherwell.

A warm welcome is extended to all.

Conscience

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

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

A Practical Religion

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

Shakespeare

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

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