

The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

Vol. 75 No. 6

2008

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

BE INSPIRED...

By confidence in the resurrection

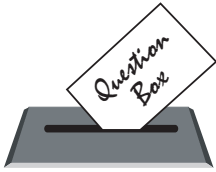
One of the great confirmations of the truth of the life of Jesus is the way that the apostles were prepared to subject themselves to all kinds of danger in their efforts to preach the gospel. The fact that they had been eyewitnesses to the great deeds that Jesus had performed and listeners to his teaching had a profound effect on their faith. Paul was not an eyewitness in the same way as the other apostles but he did have a personal encounter with the Lord that changed his life completely. And amongst all of the glorious deeds of Jesus ultimately it was the resurrection that formed the backbone of their early preaching and was at the heart of their faith.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church he recalled to them an incident in his ministry that had put his life in jeopardy. Paul tells them that he had 'fought with the wild beasts of Ephesus', an event that had put his life in danger and that, he recounts, only made any sense at all in the context of the hope of the resurrection – the main emphasis of his teaching to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:32). It is highly unlikely that Paul actually fought with wild animals as some contend; rather the 'wild beasts' more likely refers to the violent opposition that he and his companions faced from pagan groups who found that Paul's teaching was undermining their commercial activities. Quite possibly Paul refers here to what is known as the 'riot of the silversmiths' when a great mob was incited to create a riot against Paul over his objection to the worship of Diana and the effect that his teaching was having on sales of miniatures of the temple of Diana (see Acts 19).

Whatever the actual circumstances, Paul's message to the Corinthians, some of whom were questioning the validity of the resurrection, was that this example of preparedness to face immense danger on his part should be a confirmation to them of his utter confidence in the truth of the resurrection. The conviction of Paul and his companions is summed up in 2 Cor 1: 8 -10: "I think you ought to know dear brothers, about the hard time we went through in Asia. We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it. We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us, for he can even raise the dead."

Yes, the truth is that Jesus is the 'firstfruits of those who sleep'. That truth was so entrenched in the mind of Paul and those who faced that same danger, that even though they feared for their lives, they knew that should the worst happen, their eternal hope was firmly rooted in the resurrection.

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QUESTION:
Do the world's catastrophes and problems indicate the imminence of the Lord's return? Are these 'Signs of the Times'?



Although this month's question came from an unusual source it is one, which, in the light of the world's current problems, may very well have been asked by a great many people.

For some time the world has experienced disasters of every imaginable kind. We have heard of the tsunami, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, forest-fires, floods, famine, epidemics, wars and rumours of wars in many parts of the world, and, most recently, we have found ourselves faced with the catastrophic failure of the world's financial institutions, bringing the very real threat of world-wide recession and all the fearful consequences that would follow.

The Visitors.

The moment I opened the front door and saw the two men who stood before me, I knew who and what they were, as surely as if they had their identity branded on their foreheads. They were 'servants' of the "Watchtower Organisation", that religious body which, in 1931 became guilty of the offence of 'Identity Theft' when it took upon itself the name that God had used to describe His (unfaithful) ancient people, Israel (Isaiah 43:9-1, and 44:8-9). In other words, these two men were so-called, 'Jehovah's Witnesses'.

They were smartly dressed and very friendly and it came as no surprise to me when, in an affable, conversational style, one of them asked me what I thought of the current world situation. Did I think that we are living in the 'end times'? And did I think that all the world's catastrophes and problems indicate the imminence of the Lord's return? Are they 'signs of the times'?

Now, I claim to be fairly well versed in what "The Watchtower" organisation teaches, and I am aware of the fact that its 'servants' have been instructed by their leaders to radically change their approach when they go 'door to door'. They are no longer to present themselves in the old, uncompromising and rather superior manner that often left people feeling angry and antagonistic towards them. Instead, they must seek to engage their contacts in friendly discussion.

Some of us remember that, years ago, they met with wide resentment, because of their manner of approach, but they accepted resentment and the rejection of their message quite happily, because they regarded themselves as being '*persecuted for righteousness sake*'; and, therefore, they went on their way rejoicing! But, in these days, they adopt a more diplomatic, conciliatory tone, and ask such question as those to which I have already referred, ready, when the opening presented itself, to introduce their 'gospel' of an Renovated, Earth, dry cleaned and sanitised, free of all problems, and providing a Paradisiacal life for the 'great multitude' who accept the 'Watchtower's' message, when Christ returns.

So, in these days, they constantly look for 'signs of the times': a phrase, the definition of which is given as, '*Evidences of the imminence of the Return of Christ and the End of the World*'.

A Common Error

Now, the "Watchtower" is not alone in its search for 'signs'. Throughout the centuries

of the Christian faith men have preached and made predictions concerning the Lord's return, but we do not have the space here to deal with that aspect of the subject. It must suffice to say that, more than 50 years ago there appeared a monthly religious magazine bearing the name, '*The Signs of the Times*', and, as the title indicates, it was dedicated to identifying any event on earth, that might be seen as a 'sign of the times', and, therefore, as a sign that the Second Coming was at hand. In fact, I think that this magazine is still published in parts of the world where "Seventh-Day Adventism" seems strong; for example, in Australia and the U.S.A.

Furthermore, although they do not share the views of the "Watchtower" concerning what will happen before or after the return of the Lord, there are other religious groups who also love to talk about '*the signs of the times*', and whose ideas are just as erroneous as those of the self-styled "Witnesses". These groups, also, are convinced that His return will be preceded by the 'signs'. Indeed, the teaching of certain denominations on the subject of the "Second Coming" is the foundation that underpins everything else that they believe and teach, so that it has become nothing short of an obsession.

It is recorded that, on one occasion, C.H. Spurgeon, said, "*Ye men of Plymouth, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? Get on with your work!*"

No Signs!

It is sad, therefore, that it seems never to occur to these people that they may not be on biblical ground when they look for such 'signs', or that they may be guilty of teaching error when they claim that the Lord's return will be preceded by 'signs'. I say this because, when we examine the particular passage of scripture in which the phrase '*signs of the times*' is mentioned, it becomes quite clear that the 'signs' to which the passage refers, have nothing whatsoever to do with the end of the world, or to the Lord's return.

Let me state this simply. There is not a single verse in the Word of God that instructs, or encourages, believers to look for '*signs of the times*' in connection with the Lord's return, or with the end of the Age.

Matthew 16: The request for a sign.

That expression, '*signs of the times*', occurs only once in the New Testament scriptures. It is found in Matt.16, where we read about an unlikely alliance of traditional enemies, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came to Jesus 'tempting' Him; that is, 'testing' Him. They asked Him for a '*sign from heaven*'. They had already raised the issue earlier, In Matt. 12:38, when they said, "*Master, we would see a sign from you*".

Now, it is significant that they did not treat him with anything more than mild politeness. They merely called Him '*didaskale*' which means '*teacher*'. In John 3: 2, Nicodemus also called Jesus '*Master*', using the title '*Rabbi*' - which also means '*teacher*', but which is a much more respectful and honourable title.

But, notice what it is for which the Jewish leaders ask. They ask for a '*sign*'. There is no mention of His 'Return', or the end of the World. Why not? The reason is surely obvious. It would never have occurred to them to ask such questions, and they would even have regarded any suggestion that He may be the Messiah as outrageous and blasphemous. Only those who believe Him to be the Christ would talk about such subjects. So, what sort of '*sign*' were they seeking? And why did they want a sign? They demanded a sign because the issue was one of authority. They were challenging His authority, and His authority depended on His identity. Had He, in fact, appeared on the scene with a message from *God*? In other words, was He a true prophet?

This was something that Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee, had already settled for himself and which he acknowledged when he said to Jesus: "*We know you are a teacher come from God. For no-one can do the signs you do, unless God is with him*" (John 3:2). (Notice, please, that, although the 'A.V.' uses the word '*miracles*', John actually consistently uses the word '*signs*'.) Later, when the faith of Nicodemus had grown stronger, he appears to have become a true 'believer' (John 19; 38-39).

Now, when the Jewish leaders asked for a '*sign from heaven*' they thought they were setting Him a test, which they were confident He would fail. They were demanding a demonstration of miraculous power as proof that He was a true prophet of God. We need to bear in mind that, because the Jews were a Theocracy, a people governed by God - (at least, in theory!) - they were never surprised when men came claiming to be prophets sent by God. But they invariably demanded that anyone claiming to be divinely commissioned should give proof of his heavenly calling by performing a miraculous act. Such an act would be accepted as the '*sign from heaven*': that is, of '*heavenly*' endorsement. So they said to Jesus: "*What sign do you show?*" "*We would see a sign from heaven.*"

Yes, you and I know that the Lord had already performed enough wonderful deeds to have convinced unbiased people that He had come from God, but, behind their opposition to Him, we must see the fact that these religious leaders were actually concerned about their own authority, which they felt He was undermining. They were resentful of His growing influence among the ordinary people who '*heard Him gladly*', and they wilfully, and quite deliberately, refused to recognize and acknowledge the miracles He had already performed.

Matthew 12 tells us that He had performed a miracle of healing which had amazed the common people, but the Pharisees dismissed the miracle, saying, "*He casts out devils because he is in league with the Devil!*" This is why He called them, "*a wicked and adulterous generation*", when they asked for a sign. He accused them of refusing to see the '*signs of the times*'; that is, the signs of *those* times, and warned them that no special sign would be given to them.

The ultimate proof of His identity and His authority was one that had already been determined by 'heaven'. It was the sign of the prophet Jonah. Now, we know that he was speaking about His death, burial and resurrection on the third day. Romans 1:4, states that He was '*declared to be the Son of God... by the resurrection from the dead*' and it is this, the ultimate sign, which Jesus describes as '*the sign of the prophet Jonah*'. He declared that the acts of power that He had already performed endorsed His identity and proved that He had come to do the will of the Father. But these men shut their eyes against the evidence. More than this, they wickedly described His '*signs*', performed by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the work of the Devil, and in so doing, they were actually committing the unforgivable sin.

Matthew 21: Authority again demanded.

This was not the only occasion when the Jewish leaders showed that they were dishonest men. On another occasion, described in Matthew 21:23, when Jesus was in the Temple teaching the people, the Jewish leaders descended on him in full force. The chief priests and elders of the people, backed, no doubt, by members of the Temple Guard who had the responsibility of maintaining order in the Temple-courts, came and demanded to know "*By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?*"

They knew that the previous day He had cleansed the Temple for the second time, and the words, '*these things*' refer to the events of that day: that is, to His cleansing of the Temple-court and His teaching of the people. The priests were indignant:

- Firstly, because He had disrupted the business of buying and selling that went on in the Court of the Gentiles - an enterprise which they allowed and of which they approved because it made them a great deal of money, Matthew 21:12, and,
- Secondly, because He frequently taught the people in the Courts of the Temple, without first acknowledging their authority and obtaining their permission (Matt. 21:23).

In their view, Jesus was not a qualified and authorized teacher, and they therefore concluded that He acted with an authority He did not possess. Hence, their challenge: *"By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?"*

In response He asked *them* a question, concerning the authority of the baptism preached by John the Baptist - was his baptism from heaven, or of men? They were quick to understand the significance of the question, and so they declined to give Him an answer, claiming, *'We cannot tell'*. We hear His scorn for these evil men, when He replied, *'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things'*.

A Conclusion

We see, then, that nothing in these scriptures concerns *'signs of the times'* such as those for which my two "Watchtower" visitors were looking. When the Priests and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign they were concerned about His identity and authority *at that time, during His earthly ministry*. They were concerned about his First Coming, *not* about His Second, concerning which they knew nothing, and understood nothing.

A plain denial of signs

Still in the Gospel according to Matthew, we see that in chapters 24 and 25, His disciples raised the matters of His Return and the end of the Age. In fact, they asked three questions, which we find in Matthew 24:3:

1. There was a question concerning the destruction of the Temple and the City.
2. A question concerning 'the sign of Thy coming'.
3. A question concerning 'the end of the world'.

In response to their first question, the Lord gave them detailed information and instruction, from chapter 24:4. But then, at verse 36 of that chapter, we find this unmistakable statement: *"But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only"*.

The Lord warns that, as it was in the time of Noah before the Flood came and the people were going about their lives in the usual way, so it will be when He returns. In those days, they neither knew nor suspected that anything unusual was about to happen. They paid no attention to Noah's warnings and were unprepared when the flood came and swept them all away.

He then proceeds to teach how believers should behave in view of the fact that there will be nothing to warn that His Coming is imminent. He says that it will be unheralded, like the coming of a thief, in the night, and He gives us, in parabolic form, three watchwords, when He says that we should be:

1. Waiting 2. Watching 3. Working

No 'signs of the times'! No special evidence of His imminent appearance! Instead, a solemn warning which every one of us should take seriously and think about more frequently: Matthew 24:42 *"Watch, therefore for you do not know at what hour your Lord will come."*

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Thinking Out Loud

TIBERIUS CAESAR

Ian S. Davidson: Motherwell

Caesar Augustus died in A.D. 14 at the age of seventy-six. He was a hard act to follow. Tiberius Claudius Nero was his successor. He reigned until A.D. 37, the year of his death at the ripe old age of seventy-nine. So Tiberius Caesar was the emperor at the time of Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. He, of course, knew about Jerusalem and Judea; but we often wonder if he ever heard anything about Jesus' activities in that part of his great empire.

In the days of Augustus, Tiberius had been an outstanding army commander and had served with great distinction in places like Illyricum, Pannonia (modern Balkans and Hungary) and Germany. In B.C. 12 Tiberius was compelled to do a terrible thing by Augustus: divorce his beloved and pregnant wife Vipsania and marry a widowed lady named Julia, who happened to be Augustus' daughter. He obeyed. The marriage was a disaster. Tiberius loathed her and in 2 B.C. Augustus terminated the marriage much to the joy of Tiberius, who, at the time, was sulking on the island of Rhodes.

Tiberius was not easy to get on with. He was the grimmest of men and possessed a violent temper. Suetonius said of him: "For the most he was silent. Seldom or never should you have him talk with those next about him, and if he did, his speech was exceedingly slow, not without certain wanton gesticulation and fumbling with his fingers". He had an uneasy relationship with the Senate and was always suspicious of conspiracies and revolts. Frankly, he did not get on with many people at all. In consequence, at the age of sixty-five, he left Rome and went to live on the island of Caprae (Capri) in the Bay of Naples. In all those eleven years, he never returned to the capital. In Caprae he felt safer and more secure and living there helped alleviate many of his anxieties. From his villa on the east of the island he could better control all who came and went.

The fall of one Sejanus was "the greatest tragedy and downward turning-point of his reign" (Michael Grant). Regrettably, I do not have the space to consider the background to the fall of this man whom Tiberius, at one time, admired and trusted. I wish to quote Michael Grant again in summing up the latter years of Tiberius' life and reign: "Although his mind remained clear enough for most ordinary administrative purposes, his reason was almost unhinged by terror, self-pity and desire to avenge himself on those he believed were trying to break him. The delicately balanced imperial task set him by Augustus would have been too much for almost any man. It was certainly too much for Tiberius, in spite of his outstanding ability." In other words, he was not up to the job.

JESUS

What about Jesus, who lived in Tiberius' empire? Was He up to the task? Of course, His task was far greater than Tiberius' because Jesus was born to save the world. Tiberius was once described by the historian Dio Cassius thus: "He possessed a great many virtues and a great many vices, and followed each set in turn as if the other did not exist". Jesus possessed only virtues. There were no vices in His life because, of course, He was sinless, the Son of the Living God. Jesus once challenged His enemies with these words: "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8: 46). Paul later wrote of Him: "For He has made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Hebrew writer said: "For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). "For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens" (Hebrews 7: 26). Peter wrote: "Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22). Jesus was certainly fit for purpose.

Jesus did not go off and live on some exotic island to "get away from it all". He had to be where

His people were and He travelled around their land preaching the good news of the coming kingdom, teaching and performing many miracles, wonders and signs. But He did not have it easy. He was tried and tested at every turn, but He was not diverted from His task. Satan did everything to tempt Him and destroy Him. At times He grew tired and weary. He once said: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8: 20; Luke 9: 58). His circumstances were quite different from those of Tiberius on Caprae. No villas or palaces were built for the Master.

The political scene in Jesus' day was full of intrigue, conspiracy and corruption. Tragically, the religious scene was somewhat affected by the political goings-on. Let us take just one individual as an example. "About A.D. 15 Tiberius sent Valerius Gratus to govern Judaea, and he remained in the province for eleven years. During that period he deposed four high priests and appointed another four. It may well be that this was Gratus' method of enriching himself. The last high priest appointed by Gratus was Joseph Caiaphas (A.D. 18-36), son-in-law of Annas, whom Gaius found in possession of the sacred office when he arrived in Judaea as prefect" (F.F. Bruce). Pontius Pilate, of course, succeeded Gaius as prefect. He is the most famous of all the prefects because of the part he played in the New Testament narrative. He is also mentioned by Josephus and Philo in their writings. The latter had no good word to say about Pilate and describes him as "by nature rigid and stubbornly harsh" and "of spiteful disposition and an exceeding wrathful man". He also speaks of "the bribes, the acts of pride, the acts of violence, the outrages, the cases of spiteful treatment, the constant murder without trial, the ceaseless and most grievous brutality" of which the Jews might accuse him. Truly, there is no comparison between Tiberius, Gaius, Pilate and Jesus. Jesus must have stood out a mile from these men and, yet, he ended up on a Roman cross. One can hardly take that in. Everything about Him must have seemed like a burst of sunlight in a blackened, sinful world. To have seen and heard Jesus of Nazareth should have been a life-changing experience for everyone. "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46); "For He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22); "...for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with Him" (John 3:2b).

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus, of course, never met Tiberius, but he did encounter Pilate, one of Tiberius' political appointees. It was Pilate who condemned Jesus to death and that judgement will "live" with him through all eternity. He did want to let Jesus go, but, in the end, caved in to the demands of the Jewish leaders. Political expediency will result in eternal expulsion from the presence of Almighty God. The lesson is clear: no matter what, we have to do what is right. All corruption is wrong. All conspiracy is wrong. All condemnation of the innocent is wrong. Sin is all wrong and Jesus showed us that righteousness in all is right. Jesus said: "Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5: 6); "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10); "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5: 20). It is interesting to note what Peter said of the next world: "Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness" (2 Peter 3: 13). So we see how important and how lasting righteousness is. It was seen in perfection in Jesus. It was absent from many of the Roman officials. It was found wanting in many of the Jewish leaders too. But righteousness should fill everyone's life because righteousness is what it's all about.

The antonym of righteousness is wickedness. John wrote: "And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5: 19-20). I think it is important to conclude on this commentary note. "When one is in Christ, God does not see him as a guilt-laden sinner, for his own sin has been laid upon Christ, and atonement was made for it at Calvary. God beholds Christ and His sinlessness, and if we are in Him His righteousness is imputed unto us. We have none of our own, but that eternal love, which is bestowed upon the Beloved, becomes our heritage as well because we are in Him. All praise for the glorious generosity which makes this possible".

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 15 OTHER CONTEMPORARY RELIGIONS

The Romans were great borrowers of gods. Though they tinkered with their styles and rituals of worship they took on the religious systems of those nations that they had conquered with enthusiasm. If I can get you to cast your mind back to that image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, to which God supplied Daniel with the interpretation, and with which we began this series of studies, you will no doubt recall that Rome had come to powering succession to the Medes, Persians and Greeks. Like a snowball rolling down hill Alexander's rule had extended across more or less all of the then known world, gathering with it many of the cultural and religious attributes of those kingdoms across which it advanced. Even the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt was founded by one of his former generals. By the time that Rome had risen to the height of its power it was in a position to incorporate what was already an extensive collection of religious ideas and practices, and believed itself enlightened in doing so. Persian, Egyptian and Greek gods, together with their cultic practices, all found a welcome in the Roman pantheon.

Diana (Artemis) of the Ephesians and Dike, the goddess of Justice (Acts 28:4 – notice that the word Justice is capitalised) both put in specific appearances in the New Testament. Paul remarked, without naming any of them, on the multiplicity of gods honoured in Athens and did so, on Mars hill, in a place that was both named after the Roman god of war and sat directly beneath the temple which honoured both Athena and Nike, the god of victory. The twin gods Castor and Pollux formed the figurehead of the Alexandrian vessel on which Paul sailed from Malta to Rome.

LEADING PEOPLE TO TRUTH

Abhorrent to Christians as are the pagan practices of the religions to which we must seek to reach out, an awareness of the mind-set of those cultures in which they predominate is often a necessary evil. While he never attempted to trade blows with them, Paul was very evidently conscious of 'where his hearers were coming from'. Impatiently complaining that people should 'know better' or that 'the Bible is so simple and straightforward that anyone should be able to accept its message' is all very well, but it is an impatience that is hardly likely to lead to any great success in preaching the gospel. Jesus, Paul and the other apostles consistently took people as and where they found them, and led them from there to knowledge of the truth – so must we. Looking for that over which we can argue is a far less effective approach than beginning with that on which we can agree. Today, for example, Hindus have a whole raft of beliefs on which we could very easily take issue but, generally speaking, they have a healthy respect for the authority of the scripture and that makes a great place to start in speaking to them.

Part of Paul's 'becoming all things to all men that by all means (he) might win some' was in acquiring that knowledge of them that allowed him to have conversations with them on a similar 'wavelength'; and no, that did not mean that he either condoned, or gave the appearance of condoning, their often deep ungodliness.

As was the case with the heresies that troubled the early Church, it is not my intention to go into any depth so far as the contemporary religious world is concerned, except so far as it had a bearing on the progress of the gospel and what we discover in the New Testament text.

MYSTERY RELIGIONS

Romans, like the Greeks and Egyptians from whom they drew that majority of their religious thinking and practice, were intrigued by what have become known as the mystery religions. Secrecy, occult practices behind closed doors, mysterious initiation rites and dabbling in dark arts, codes and symbolism held the same strong attractions for them as they have proved to be in today's society, if the popularity of Dan Brown's recent best-selling novels is to be taken as any kind of yardstick.

Many of the gods associated with these mystery cults were concerned with the natural and agricultural cycles of death and rebirth. Tales of travels to the underworld fascinated their adherents and means of contact with that unseen world of the dead were a significant objective in their rituals. In this respect they had much in common with what were mainly fertility religions amongst the Canaanite tribes described in the Old Testament. Commonly, and with seemingly little reluctance on the part of their devotees, these gods were said to require frenetic sexual activity and drunken over-indulgence as suitable expressions of worship. Demeter (Roman 'Ceres') was the goddess of grain whose daughter Persephone was said to be banished to the underworld during winter. Over this period Demeter was believed to be withholding the production of the fruit of the earth, in mourning for her daughter, whilst spring heralded her renewed willingness to provide its bounty, in rejoicing at the return of Persephone.

Dionysius (Bacchus) was similarly a fertility god, especially so in association with the grape harvest. Worship of him consisted in the imbibing of his product in vast quantities and revellers apparently roamed the countryside, supposedly filled with their god. This state was referred to as one of 'enthusiasmos', the original Greek word from which our word 'enthusiasm' comes, and literally meaning filled with the god.

Orpheus was the god of poetry and music, best known for his journey to the underworld to rescue his captive wife who was held there by Pluto and Persephone. Some Jews apparently identified him with David, charming the dark spirits of the regions of the dead with his music and poetry, into better disposition toward the living. The Orphic cult, in many respects one of the more moderate, vied for his favour through asceticism and vegetarianism. There were cults devoted to Cybele, the great mother, whose temples being given over to use by Christians at the instruction of Constantine, is thought by many to be the basis on which Mary began to be worshipped as the Queen of heaven. The Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris are similarly said to have contributed something to the notion of Mariolatry (worship of the Virgin Mary).

In some ways the most significant of these mystery cults was that associated with the Persian god, Mithras. Whilst it was generally initially restricted to men of the army, it acquired great popularity and centred on the issues of life after death and happiness in heaven. Mithraism was heavily involved with symbolism, ritual, secrecy and ceremonial, including 'baptism' in the blood of animals. The worship on the feast day of god, December 25th, including the offering of gifts in celebration of his birth from a rock, by shepherds and magi, was the basis on which fourth century Roman bishops began the celebration of Christmas as a Christian festival. The myths of Mithraism also contain references to his resurrection from the dead, and sceptics have, more than once, been known to charge Christians with having 'lifted' the story and made it their own.

If you did not know it already, you might easily guess that the Gnostics found a great deal of common ground with cults of this type, and this was indeed one of the reasons for the advances which they managed to make in the second and subsequent centuries. Nor is it difficult to spot their parallels in freemasonry or the cultic practices of Rosicrucians, Theosophists and New Age movement groups that persist to this day, and might even be thought to be growing in popularity.

PAUL AND MYSTERY

At least a little knowledge of these mystery religions is useful to us then in tracing the origins of these religious distortions, but also in answering allegations of religious plagiarism, such as that concerning the resurrection, mentioned above. The most persistent and serious of these, however, concerns the charge that Paul was deeply involved with, and impressed by them and that this is obvious from his evident from his obvious liking for the idea of that which is a 'mystery'. Sure enough he does use that word, 'mysterion' some twenty times in his writings, but it requires little interpretational skill to recognise that it is in a completely different context and manner to that in which it was thought of by these cults. For them, like the Gnostics, secrecy and mysticism of a kind that could only be accessed by the privileged elite, was something to be kept locked behind doors of ritual, code and difficult to penetrate symbolism. Whereas their efforts were directed towards keeping the mystery mysterious, Paul's were in precisely the opposite direction, devoted to making it widely and plainly known.

SUMMARY

Christianity is not in any sense elitist or restrictive, although you wouldn't know it to read or listen to some of the ways in which those who are supposed to be its advocates have represented it down the centuries. Various branches of what has presented itself as Christianity have not proved themselves guiltless of multiplying rules, requirements and criteria for the maintenance of good standing, designed to keep 'the wrong sort of people' out, or to maintain a stranglehold of control on those within. Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are all matters that have proved susceptible to misrepresentation and misconstruction in the hands of those who have done so for purposes completely at odds with God's intentions, and after a fashion that bears closer resemblance to those of the mystery religions than His. Sacramentalism and 'means of grace' theology is far from being dead, even within so-called mainstream Christian denominations.

If we were to simply confine our impression of the mystery religions to one of Bacchanalian orgies and childish obsession with secret societies, then that would be to underestimate the significance of their far-reaching tentacles by a considerable margin. Roman Catholicism is deeply dyed with some of their influences and so too are the majority of cults. But we have no cause to be smug ourselves; have we never known those who look upon baptism as if it were some kind of magical initiation rite, or seemed to believe that regular taking of the Lord's Supper has some mysteriously transmitted, spiritually therapeutic effect? Oh, I know that that has nothing to do with scripture's teaching on these matters, but some have acquired them from somewhere, nevertheless. The prevalence of a disposition towards interest in 'spiritual' things is a mixed blessing, both an opportunity and a caution, which requires us to be both knowledgeable and diligent in our teaching of the truth of God's word, lest we seem to find partners where no real basis for such partnership exists.

WHY DO WE HAVE PREACHING

(Ian Grant, Corby)

SUBJECT: THE PURPOSE OF SCRIPTURE

As the Church in the New Testament we have given a lot of attention to the scriptures, as we should have. In particular, brethren have recognised and taught that scripture is the written word of God, and so the scriptures are of divine origin and, as such, inspired. We have long argued that as scripture is inspired then it is infallible and free from all errors in the original autographs, and therefore must not be altered or revised. Further, it is through scripture that God has spoken to mankind and revealed himself and his will for mankind. Paul's words to Timothy (2 Tim 3:16-17) have featured in virtually every such discussion.

The concept of revelation presumes that God has revealed something to mankind, rather than our having discovered something as a result of a search into the religious. That raises the question of what it is that God has revealed. The quick answer to that is that he has revealed Himself. With some thought we would add that he has also revealed his scheme of redemption, and how we are to obey the gospel. Unlike the denominations, also we have insisted that scripture reveals things like how the Church is to be organised, how we are to worship God, and the roles of men and women, and that scripture is all sufficient in all these areas.

However, these verses say far more than the fact that scripture is God's revelation to us, and is inspired, infallible and all sufficient; to leave it there is to miss out something very fundamental.

TIMOTHY AND SCRIPTURE

In his first epistle to Timothy Paul had warned of people falling away from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-5) and teaching false doctrines. Paul then gave examples of false teachings and encouraged Timothy to instruct the Church about these things. While some would depart from the faith, Timothy himself was to be nourished by God's word (4:6). In his second epistle, Paul returned to the subject of false teachers (2 Tim. 3:1-9), but this time he focused on their ungodly behaviour. While the false teachers would behave like the ungodly in the world, in marked contrast to that Paul reminded Timothy that he had "carefully followed" what Paul had taught him and that just like Paul, Timothy could expect to suffer for the sake of the gospel (3:10-12). Next, Paul warned Timothy that evil men would both deceive and be deceived, (3:13) but again by way of contrast ("but as for you"), Timothy was "to continue in the things which you have learned" (14). The source of that teaching was scripture (the Old Testament), which he had been taught from an early age. Even though Timothy was older, that scripture was still relevant to Timothy, as Paul went on to explain (15-17).

... the holy Scriptures which are able

The word "able" is the word *dunamai*, which means to have power, and from which dynamite was named. God's word is not limp-wristed and ineffective but has power. Scripture is not simply an interesting history of man's search for God or even a book that God wants us to read so that we can win some Bible Quiz contest. The scriptures are powerful and, as such, we would expect that power to be exercised.

... to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus

The scriptures have the power to make us wise regarding salvation in contrast to the deceptions of false teachers (13). They tell us of the plight of mankind caught up in

sin but needing salvation, and God's plan to deal with that dilemma. The Old Testament points us to Christ and it is through faith in him that salvation is available.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God

This is something with which we are very familiar; scripture is "breathed out" by God. This speaks of its origin. It is God's message to mankind and as such, it is totally trustworthy in matters of history, science and doctrine. Put simply, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who worked through them, chosen men wrote what God wanted them to write and so what the scriptures say is true and to be trusted.

... and is profitable

In other words, there is some advantage or benefits. In our commercial society profit is something that we understand. Companies set out to maximise their profits while companies that fail to make a profit tend to end up bankrupt and so, if we own shares in a company, we see profits as a good thing. Scripture will profit us, not in monetary terms but in ways that will not perish.

... for doctrine

While to our modern ears the word has a less than pleasant ring to it, it is no more than that which is taught – it is a body of teaching. Its importance can be seen in that in his first letter to Timothy, Paul had told him that he had to give attention (to put thought and effort into it) to doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13) for it was by continuing in it that he would be saved and also those who listened to him.

The scriptures instruct us in such matters that God wants us to know and that we need to know. In the scriptures God has disclosed himself to the extent that he has chosen to reveal himself; without such a revelation we could not know God. Through nature we can know something of God (Romans 1:20) but it is very limited. We need to know far more than nature reveals. God has intervened in history but without a word from God we cannot know how he has intervened or the meaning of what he has done. On our side we cannot know how to respond to what he has done unless he spells it out for us. We need to understand not only his scheme of redemption and his plan of salvation, but also God's will for us as we live here on the earth. This will include matters of church organisation and Christian conduct.

Notice how these verses (2 Tim 3:14-17) are set between warnings about false teachers (3:13 and 4:3-4). False teaching is something to be avoided; we need sound, healthy doctrine (1 Tim 1:10).

That it is needed can be seen in that today we face difficult decisions that call for answers. We can of course, simply live like those around us and assume that our society has got it right. However, careful observation will reveal that in this society, sadly, there is a willingness to "call evil good, and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). As practising evil will keep us out of the kingdom (Gal. 5:19-21), it is essential that we know what is good and what is evil. The teaching of scripture provides those answers.

But it does not stop there!

... for reproof

The word means to bring to light, to correct, to convict of error. Scripture will provide the necessary teaching, and having brought us to an understanding of God's will for us, and shown us where we are failing, it follows that, for that to have any value, one then has to be convinced both of its truthfulness and one's own failure. Scripture has the power to convince us that we are wrong.

We can choose to be stubborn and resist the power of scripture or, if we will allow God's word to work on our hearts, it will convict us of failing to meet God's standard of holiness, such that we are willing to acknowledge our failure and repent of our sin.

This is an important step that must not be missed out. God is not offering us helpful hints on how to live successful lives. He is not simply telling us what we might try to achieve the best outcome and what to avoid that is counterproductive. It is not a matter of what we do, not being acceptable without asking to whom it is unacceptable. Neither has it to do with failing to reach our potential. Sin is morally wrong and against God (Psalm 51:4) and so repentance and forgiveness is what is needed, for only God can forgive sin. That forgiveness will not be forthcoming unless we are convicted of sin, for why would we repent of something that we do not think is wrong? Repentance involves a change of heart and scripture by having the power to convict us of sin sets us on the right path (1 John 1:9).

... for correction

This term means to restore, to improve, and to correct. It is a word used for putting right what has gone wrong. Not only does scripture teach and bring us to an awareness that we are sinners who fall short of God's standard of righteousness, it corrects us in that it straightens us out. We speak of people being bent or crooked and on the other side of someone being an upright person in the community.

Scripture straightens us out, stands us back on our feet again and restores us to an upright position. It not only convinces us that we have sinned it gets us out of the mess into which we got ourselves.

... for instruction in righteousness

This is the positive outcome. At first glance this appears to be a repeat of scripture being **profitable for doctrine**. However the word instruction is the word for training and it is used for disciplining children (Hebrews 12:6). There it parallels the word **scourge** showing that it is firm discipline.

Thus the scriptures have the power to discipline us such that it produces the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).

... that the man of God may be complete

The basic word means to make suitable. It refers to all the parts being present for completeness, so that they are able to carry out their designed purpose.

... thoroughly equipped

This is translated from just one word; it is the same word that Paul has just used (**complete**) but with *ex* in front to intensify it. It means to accomplish and is used for completing the time for a ship to unload its cargo (Acts 21:3-5). It was used of a rescue boat that was outfitted with all the necessary equipment for its task, such as extra canvas, sewing tools, etc.

The scriptures completely equip the Christian for every task that God requires.

... for every good work

There is no good work for which scriptures fail to equip the man of God to carry out. Nothing that God requires that we are to do is beyond us; other than if we choose not to be taught and equipped by the scriptures. The scriptures provide us with all that is needed for all problems, relationships, and behaviours.

Thus, scripture will enable us to spend our lives doing good works and not waste our lives doing what appear to be good works but which turn out to be a waste of time, at best, or sinful at worst.

CONCLUSION

This part of Paul's letter to Timothy is bracketed by a reference to false teachers growing worse (2 Tim 3:13) and brethren who will not want sound teaching (2 Tim 4:1-5). In between, Paul stressed the all-sufficiency of Scripture for equipping Christians for living life and for facing any and every eventuality. Scripture is all that

is needed for all situations from dealing with false teachers to brethren who do not want to hear the truth. In contrast to people who reject the truth, the man of God lives by what the scriptures teach. As the creator of life God has revealed knowledge of life that is not to be found anywhere else.

Paul piled term upon term to describe the scriptures. Similarly, he has emphasised that there is no good work for which the man of God cannot be prepared. That nothing else beyond scripture is needed has serious implications when one contemplates what Paul has written here, but that will have to wait for another article. Right now, it is important to notice that the scriptures have as their purpose, to provide all the information that the Christian needs in order to live a righteous and godly life and to deal with whatever problems life might throw up. That Scripture is inspired and is God's revelation to us is one side of the coin; on the other side is the fact that the scriptures are sufficient to be the authority in all areas of life. That means that scripture is all that we need in order to be able to live righteous lives that will bring glory to God.

As his children, God has given us everything that is needed to live joyful, productive, faithful lives. The scriptures give us all that we need to find biblical solutions to the problems that we face as we live life from day to day. At the same time, we are told that families are in trouble. That ought to drive us to searching the scriptures, both to learn for our own benefit but also to learn so that we are able to help others whose lives are in a mess. Yet paradoxically, fewer and fewer brethren appear to be attending Bible classes.

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WHY WORSHIP MARY?

V. Sujatha, Stretford

Was Mary a sinless person? Does she need to be worshipped? The Bible does not say anything about worshipping Mary. God blessed her with his grace to become the mother of the Christ. She was the highly favoured one. Luke 1:27 says that God choose Mary. Luke 1:28 says "rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you amongst women". It said blessed are you amongst women, which means: amongst the women of flesh you are the most blessed one, but does not say that she should be treated as being equal to Jesus or to the Father.

Mary was also a human being and the Bible says: "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). Only Christ has power to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). In Matthew 12:46-50 Jesus was talking to multitudes, when someone said to him: "look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak to you". Jesus answered: "who is my mother and who are my brothers?" He stretched out his hand towards his disciples and said: "here are my mother and my brothers" and continued, "for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother". Mary was one of the people who followed Christ and just like everybody else she needed to be saved through Christ.

In Luke 11:27, a woman said "blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which you drank from." But Jesus said: "more than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it". Hebrews 12:2 states that Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. He is the true God, Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

News and Information

Question Box

Readers will note that the Question Box is again featured this month as Frank is, thankfully, recovered from his recent treatment.

However, the Question Box is, once again, completely empty, and as we have stated several times before there is no intention of 'making up' questions just to keep the feature live. So, this genuinely is a reader's call in that if no questions are received the feature will, regrettably, be withdrawn. Frank's address, email and telephone number are all noted at the end of his latest article but, for the record they are reproduced here:

Address: 11 Stanier Close, Corby,
Northants, England. NN17 1XP
Email: fworgan0@talktalk.net
Tel: 01356 206848

Ghana Appeal

Many thanks to all who have helped and continue to help in the plight of our spiritual family in Ghana. All donations should be sent to the fund secretary:

**Peter Sneddon, Ochil View,
Keir Street, Dunblane, FK15 9BP
(cheques to be made payable to
Dennyloanhead Church of Christ).**

Dale Meikle

Newtongrange, Scotland

Due to health problems and weather that is often inclement, we will no longer be holding Gospel Meetings on Sunday

evenings until further notice. The morning meeting may be extended occasionally instead.

M Hunter, Secretary.

A new book from Alastair Ferrie

Please find below details of a new book entitled "**Evangelism in a Post Christian Culture**" written by Alastair Ferrie from Dundee.

Title: Evangelism in a Post Christian Culture.

Published by: iUniverse

ISBN: 978-0-595-53003-2

Author: Alastair Ferrie.

Alastair writes:

I would commend this to the Church as a very useful approach to understanding and implementing evangelism in a very changed world. A Christian worldview is explained in terms of a 5 stage model and contrasted with the much more common Darwinian worldview. A number of chapters are devoted to the format of home Bible studies that might be conducted and the book ends with five chapters on arguments for believing that I have used in home Bible studies through the years.

This book has taken 30 years to write and is the book I wish someone had handed me 30 years ago. I hope it will challenge Christians to rise to the challenge of sharing the gospel with today's world.

It is available from Amazon.co.uk or iUniverse.com, or can be ordered from any bookstore quoting the ISBN number. This is a much more substantial book than my last one, being over 200 pages

long and showing reasoned argument, and useful tools for evangelistic outreach. I am currently using this for class materials here in Dundee and each member of the class has their own copy. I am to present a seminar on this book for the Newcastle church in February.

Alastair

Coming Events

EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WORKSHOP 2009

**Lancaster University
Thurs 27th Aug to
Sat 29th Aug. 2009**

Contact: **Stephen Woodcock**

Tel: (01942) 211 479

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Paul Halliday:

Tel (01633) 858868;

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info@europeanchristianworkshop.com

Website:

www.europeanchristianworkshop.com

Do we really mean what we sing?

"Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for He is gracious, and a song of praise is seemly." Psalm 147;1.

Over the years I have often heard it said that we do not mean what we say in the songs that we use. Recently I came across this unusual comparison someone has made:-

We sing "Heavenly sunshine," and stay away from services when it's too hot.

We sing "Onward Christian soldiers" and have to be drafted for His service.

We sing "Hiding in Thee," and then go and hide from Him.

We sing "Marching to Zion," but fail to march to Bible class and worship services.

We sing "Cast thy care on the Lord," and worry ourselves into nervous breakdowns.

We sing "Throw out the lifeline," and content ourselves with throwing out the fishing line.

We sing "Blest be the tie that binds," and then let the slightest offence sever it.

Selected

THE SCRIPTURE STANDARD

(10 issues per year)

PRICE PER COPY – POST PAID FOR ONE YEAR

UNITED KINGDOM £7.50

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