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- The Glorious Image of God
- The Glorious Image of God II
- The Glorious Image of God III
- The Little Matter of Guidance
- Standing in the Liberty of Christ
- The Power and Privilege of Preaching
- Creation, Worship and the Triune God
- The Goodness of God
- Knowing the Mystery of God

The Glorious Image of God

The Scriptures present us with a very high view of Man. It is the great dignity of humanity which gives the very high number of statements describing the corruption of humanity their potency. The glory of Man, however, lies not in himself but in his relationship to God. Hence David wrote in Psalm 8,

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalms 8:1-9).

The wonder expressed in this Psalm is not that Man is glorious but that such a glorious God should form such an intimacy with him that this creature may actually administer all else in creation. Some two hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah records God saying

I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. (Isaiah 42:8).

Plainly, then, the implication is that God has created humanity to live in such intimacy with himself that to see God means also to see Man the creature standing within the glory of God. Inasmuch as the Creator is later more fully revealed as Trinity¹, we may say that creation bestowed on Man not merely existence over against God but a participation in the divine nature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Peter's perception of redemption, in 2 Peter 1, indicates that the grace of God restores men and women to their true creaturely status:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.
His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. (2Peter 1:2-4).

¹ From early in the history of the Church, the plural word *elohim*, the word used for God in Genesis 1:26 has been suggested to contain the implication of plurality in unity: 'Let *us* make Adam in *our* image, according to *our* likeness . . . So *Elohim* created Adam in *his* image'.

When we read the accounts of creation in Genesis 1-2 we are presented with a stylised description of the place of Man in the divine economy. In particular, God is described as choosing to ‘make *Adam* in our image, according to our likeness’ (Gen. 1:26) and as creating ‘*Adam* in his image’ (verse 27). The words ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ have prompted some to suggest that a distinction may be in the writer’s mind. Philip Hughes summarises some of the issues:²

There has long been an opinion that in the terminology of Genesis 1:26, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,’ a distinction of meaning or nuance is intended between the nouns ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’³ Etymological considerations, however, are not necessarily related to semantic reality, as the history of language shows over and over again. In general, those who postulate a distinction between the two terms have tended to understand ‘image’ as referring to the natural or physical and ‘likeness’ as referring to the spiritual or ethical aspect of man’s constitution, or, more philosophically expressed, as differentiating between ‘form’ and ‘matter’ in the being of humanity. Some have even convinced themselves that the use of different prepositions in this verse — ‘*in* our image’ and ‘*after* our likeness’ — confirms the rightness of making a distinction between the import of the nouns. But the precarious character of these judgments is demonstrated by the following considerations. For one thing, the statement in verse 27, which announces the fulfilment of the decision of verse 26, that ‘God created man in his own image,’ without the addition of ‘after his own likeness,’ suggests that the combination of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in the earlier verse is designed to convey but one notion, not two. For another, in the broader context of these opening chapters of Genesis precisely the same nouns and prepositions are treated as interchangeable. Thus in Genesis 5:1 we read that man was created ‘*in* the *likeness* of God,’ and in verse 3 of the same chapter that Adam ‘became the father of a son *in* his own *likeness*, *after* his *image*’: the reordering and recombination of the terms at issue could not be more complete. It follows that to say ‘*in* or *after* the image’ is the same as saying ‘*in* or *after* the likeness.’ The terms are employed here synonymously, and the form of expression is better explained, as, for example, Martin Luther and Emil Brunner explain it, as a case of Hebrew parallelism.⁴

To a certain extent, these semantic questions lose some of their significance when the whole creation account is considered in the light of what we have said above. To be ‘in the image of God’ must relate to the intimacy which created Man had with God and, indeed, the second creation account (Genesis 2:4bff) carries this sense. There Man is a living being precisely because God breathed into him ‘the breath of life’ (verse 7). While the Hebrew word here used for ‘breath’, נשמה (*neshamah*; c/f. LXX πνοή, *pnoe*) is not the word used for the Spirit (spirit) of God, רוח (*ruach*), elsewhere the Old Testament writers do identify

² The True Image, p. 7.

³ ‘Image’ in Gen. 1:26 corresponds to the Hebrew *tselem*, which in the Greek (LXX) is rendered *eikon* and in the Latin (Vg) *imago*; and ‘likeness’ to the Hebrew *dēmuth*, which in the Greek (LXX) is rendered *homoiosis* and in the Latin (Vg) *similitudo*. (quoted in Hughes)

⁴ James Barr, in an article entitled ‘The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—a Study of Terminology’ (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol.51 [1968-69], pp. 11ff.), suggested the reason for the use of two words, and not one only, as follows: “The probability is that, though *tselem* is the more important word, it is also the more novel and the more ambiguous. *Dēmuth* is added in order to define and limit its meaning, by indicating that the sense intended for *tselem* must lie within the part of its range which overlaps with the range of *dēmuth*. This purpose having been accomplished when both words are used together at the first mention, it now becomes possible to use one of the two alone subsequently without risk of confusion. In later exegesis the loss of sense for this literary device caused interpreters to suppose that the ‘image’ might be one thing and the ‘likeness’ quite another.” (p. 24) (quoted in Hughes)

the spirit by which Man lives with the *ruach* of God (Gen. 6:3, 17; 7:15, 22; Job 27:3; 33:4; Ps. 104:29, 30).

To be in the image of God is, then, a high dignity for man since it implies first and foremost intimacy of relationship. Later questions as to the precise meaning of 'the image of God' involved the question, 'In what respect is Man a copy or reflection of God?' There is a difficulty in answering this, inasmuch as we lack precise detail in the accounts of creation. Yet the question is not without significance, since, when God had brought Noah and his family through the flood, he restated the creation blessing but added a new element concerning blood.

Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings (*Adam*), each one for the blood of another (*ish achin*⁵), I will require a reckoning for human (*Adam*) life.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human (*Adam*),
by a human (*Adam*) shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image God made humankind (*Adam*). (Genesis 9:4-6).

So close is Man to God that to shed the blood of a human being is to attack God himself. We should also note James' comment that 'with [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God' (James 3:9). This is surely what lies behind the prohibition against making 'graven' images in Exodus 20:4; there must not be any graven (hacked or carved) images⁶ nor any cast images (Exodus 34:17). Presumably we are to understand that an idol is not only a denial of the majesty of God (c/f. the scorn poured on idols in the prophets, see Isaiah 40:18-20; Jeremiah 10:1-10 etc.) but a complete perversion of the true nature of the living image, Man. Thus Paul wrote

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (Romans 1:18-23).

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling the image or resembling those things over which the living image was given dominion. Later Paul put it that 'all have sinned and fall short (continually) of the glory of God' (Rom.3:23). 'Rejection of God is really rejection of one's *essential* self. . . . Sin is against true human nature . . .'⁷ Of course, there is no hint that this would imply any deity in Man.

Man, created in the 'image of God', is a glorious being. When the full meaning of the 'image' is discussed, the variety of suggestions may lead us to conclude that 'the full meaning of the image of God is nowhere unfolded for us'⁸ While this is not completely accurate, as we shall see, it nonetheless demonstrates that it may be true that 'Genesis 1:26

⁵ This is literally, 'at the hand of every man's brother will I demand the life of the man'. This seems to define the matter in terms of the crime of Cain.

⁶ A different Hebrew word to that of Genesis 1.

⁷ Bingham, *Man of Dust!* p. 8.

⁸ Bavinck, quoted in Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, p. 72.

[is] “one of the most mysterious passages in all of Scripture”, one which is, “for man, since the Fall, a deep secret”. . . we cannot analyse it, but we must understand it and respond to it in adoration.’⁹

Attempts to understand the ‘image’ have resulted in a number of solutions, most of which need not occupy us here, although they do open up various aspects of what it means to be human. Basically, they involve three areas. The first is that of human nature itself. By this was implied that the image of God lies in Man’s being a moral being, corresponding to the moral being of God. Man is created to reflect and express the ‘communicable attributes’ of God. We will return to this later.

The second is that of relationships. Since God is Trinity in his essence, and since the persons of the Godhead exist in intimate relationship with each other, it follows that the image of God also finds his identity in relationships. Thus Man is created to relate to God, to his fellow Man and to the creation.

Brunner points out that God created all of the other creatures in their final or finished state. They were created what they were meant to be and that they have remained. Man, on the other hand, remains within God’s workshop, within his hands. God did not make man in a finished state. Rather, God is producing in man the ‘material realization’ of the freedom, responsibility, and answerability which man has received from God. It is the act of response, the relationship with God, that constitutes the material image. God in effect says to man, ‘Thou art mine’. Man’s having been endowed with the capability of being spoken to, and the freedom to respond, is the formal image. When he does indeed respond by saying, ‘Yes, I am thine’, then the material image is also present.

We should not draw the inference that the image is substantive or, as Brunner puts it, structural. He points out that even the formal aspect is not structural; it is relational. Being in the formal image of God means that man stands responsible and answerable before God, hence the image is relational. Even when man turns his back on God, thus losing the image in the material sense, he still stands ‘before God’. He still has responsibility; he is still a human being. Being in the material image of God means ‘being-in-the-Word’ of God. This is the New Testament use of the term ‘image of God’. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the material sense of the image is dynamic and relational, not static and substantive.¹⁰

Barth speaks of the image as still present within the human, inasmuch as he still is man. The nature of man remains unchanged regardless of his sin. Sin does not and cannot re-create man, making bad a being who was originally good. Rather, it conceals his true nature from himself and his fellows, but not from God.

Barth sees the image of God as consisting not only in the vertical relationship between man and God, but also in the horizontal relationship between men. It is not advisable to ask in which of man’s peculiar attributes or attitudes the image of God is to be found. Such a question assumes that the image of God is some quality in man, an assumption Barth emphatically denies. The image is not something man is or does. Rather, the image is related to the fact that God willed into existence a being that, like himself, can be a partner. In that man is capable of relationship, he is a ‘repetition’ or ‘duplication’ of the divine being.

Evidence that there is some sort of relationship within the Godhead is to be found in the very form of the decision to create: ‘Let *us* make man’. Barth maintains that within the very being of God there is a counterpart; thus God experiences a genuine but harmonious self encounter and self-discovery. Man reflects this aspect of God’s nature on two levels—man experiences relationship with God and with man. The similarity between God and man, then, is that both experience I-Thou confrontation. It is, Barth maintains, peculiar that the writer of the creation

⁹ Sikkel, quoted in Berkouwer, p. 74.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 503.

account makes no mention of man's particular intellectual and moral talents and possibilities, his exercise of reason, if these characteristics do indeed constitute the image of God in man.

Barth insists that we must inquire further what this image of God consists of. Barth notes that in both Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 the statement that man was made in the image of God is coupled with the words 'male and female he created them'. The image of God in man, then, is found in man's being created male and female. Both within God and within man an 'I' and a 'Thou' confront each other. Man does not exist as a solitary individual, but as two persons confronting each other.

The image of God is rooted in what is common to man and the beasts: the differentiation into male and female. . . .¹¹

It is hard to avoid the implications of this aspect in today's world. The issues of sexuality are proving intractable because those arguing their cases do so often without a clear understanding of what true humanity is, i.e. they do not have an *ontology* of Man. This relational aspect is clear that there are not two races, male and female, but one: male/female. Furthermore, it is plain that if the primary relationship is male/female it is also the first to suffer dislocation after the Fall.

Related to this is the contention that no individual human being, of himself, constitutes the image of God.

We do well always to understand that according to the biblical picture there is only *one* image of God. This expressed itself first in two people, husband and wife, who by reproduction constituted a family out of which grew other families, then clans, tribes, nations, races. But always when few became many and many became thousands and thousands became millions, there was always one, and only one, *imago Dei*.

In that one image all human *beings participate*. But this participation means exactly what it says: all reflect one image, which like a tree producing ever more branches and foliage does not cease to be one and the same tree. It is the fact of participation in the one image of God that makes her, that makes him, a human being. But there is only one humanity which is the image of God. No one person is or has ever been *the* image of God. Only mankind, whether as two or as many, is *imago Dei*.¹²

In both Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45-49 Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, not merely as individuals but as representatives of humanity. All participate in Adam, just as 'all' participate in Christ. However, Paul also said that 'a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection (glory) of God; but woman is the reflection (glory) of man' (1Corinthians 11:7). In this statement, the 'man' is specifically the 'male' (αζνηρ *aner*). He is in no way superior to his wife (see verses 8-12), indeed, she is his glory, but within the order of creation each has a distinct role and the woman is not described here as the image of God. And we should note that Christ was 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15). In other words, as an individual, like other human beings, he was the image of God. Boer's point, though valuable, is perhaps overstated.

The third area is that of function. The image of God is seen in what Man does, or at least what he is created to do. As we have probably discerned, the various areas dealing with the image of God are not exclusive. So here, we ought to ask what it is that one who reflects the character of god and who is created for intimacy with him should do. When Genesis 1 says that God made Man in his own image, it proceeds immediately to describe how

¹¹ Erickson, p. 505. Karl Barth has emphasised this point strongly in his *Dogmatics*.

¹² Harry R Boer, *An Ember Still Glowing*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990, p. 7.

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. (Genesis 1:28).

This placing of 'image' and 'dominion' together is similar to Psalm 8 where 'glory' and 'dominion' are connected. Bill Dumbrell¹³ has argued that the word 'image' carries the significance of something visible, and concludes:

By creation man is then the visible representative in the created world of the invisible God. . . . If man in the image is thus being viewed in terms of a representative but derived kingship role in Gen. 1, then standing behind the representation, and being the reality of which the image is but a shadow, is the kingship of God.

However, we go further and say that the obligations laid on Man before the Fall were not qualitatively different from those laid upon him after the Fall. So a possible way of discovering the answer to the question of the image of God may lie in asking another question, 'What does the Lord require of these creatures?' Put in another form the question becomes, 'How may Man measure his consistency with his own identity as the image of God?' and then, 'How may Man know God's character?' Man's moral nature and his capacity and responsibility to choose, although initially only recounted in terms of the choice between the fruit of the two trees, meant that he was created to be continually making moral decisions. It would be naive not to see the two trees as representative of the moral realm in which Man lived and to which he must continually relate. The choice in the garden was not substantially different from that which Moses presented to Israel:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (Deut. 30:19-20).

What is meant is not that Man lives in some continual existential moment of decision — that may also be true, but it is not the whole truth — but that Man, by virtue of being created in the image of God, must continually reflect the character of God. Indeed, as 'image' Man has no purpose beyond that. That fulfilling such a purpose is satisfying beyond imagination is repeatedly made plain in the Scriptures, for example:

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart (Ps. 40:8, etc.).

Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me.

I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation.

I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.

I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me.

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:97-103).

Were we to ask the psalmist, he would reply that the law he has in mind and heart is to be found in 'Moses', but plainly the law is not restricted to 'Moses'. For example, 'Abraham

¹³ *Covenant and Creation*, p. 33f.

obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws' (Gen. 26:5). Paul, in Romans 5:12-14, makes the same point:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

The implication here is that sin was in the world before the Law of Moses; that it is not reckoned where there is no law must mean that there was law before Law, otherwise the previous statement becomes meaningless (verse 12). On the contrary, law existed and as a result of Adam's sin against that law death exercised dominion right up to the point where law was put in specific covenantal form under Moses (and death has exercised dominion ever since).

J.A. Motyer has said,¹⁴

Law in the Image of God. Turning now to a very different genre of Scripture, we find in Lev. 19 that God has provided another image of himself on earth. Every aspect of human experience is gathered into this rich review of man's life under God's law: filial duty (vs. 3), religious commitment (vs. 4), ritual exactness (vs. 5), care of the needy (vs. 9) honesty in deed and word (vss. 11-12), and many more, touching on relationships and even on dress, hygiene and horticulture. Yet all this variety suspends from one central truth: 'I am the Lord'. 'Lord is the divine name, the 'I am what I am' (Exod. 3:14), so that the significance of the recurring claim is not 'You must do what I tell you' (ie. 'lord' as an authority word) but 'You must do this or that because I am what I am'. Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written preceptual image of God. The intention of Lev. 19 is declared at the outset: 'You shall be holy for I the Lord you God am holy' (vs. 2). The Lord longs for his people to live in his image and to that end he has given them his law.

A Truly Human Life. When man in the image of God and law in the image of god come together in the fully obedient life, then man is indeed 'being himself'. His nature is the image of God, and the law is given both to activate and to direct that nature into a truly human life; any other life is subhuman. Of course, it is true that in a world of sinners the law, regrettably, has to give itself to the task of curbing and rebuking antisocial and degrading practices, but the OT law has, to a far greater extent, the function of liberating man to live according to his true nature. For it is only when man finds the law of liberty that he becomes free. For this reason the OT asserts that the law has been given for our good, to bring us to a hitherto unrealized fullness of life (Deut. 4:1; 5:33).

His observation that the law is the written preceptual image of God, while not reflecting any use of the word 'image' in the scriptures, at least has drawn our attention to the function of law. The law which existed from creation was and continues to be the expression of the character of God, by which the image of God would understand its own being.

Man, the image, is in the glorious position, not of becoming anything, but of being the reflection of all that is true of God. He is this by participation in the glory of God and thus in the whole purpose of God for creation. Moreover, this glorious honour flowed out of the nature of God as creator/Father. Adam was the son of God (Luke 3:38). He did not become the son.

¹⁴ J.A. Motyer, 'Law', *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 624

If we must come to a conclusion concerning the nature of the image of God, it will not be by making a choice between the various options presented above. On the contrary, we must stand in wonder that our mental struggles do not leave us uncertain but force us to worship. It is not possible to 'reduce' Man, the image, to a definition. As the psalmist was left breathless with wonder in Psalm 8, we can probably do no better than echo Geoff Bingham's phrase: Anything that God is, Man is *like* that, but anything God is essentially, Man is none of that.¹⁵ Psalm 103:13-14 remind us that

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

It is the glory of man that he need not ever attempt to be other than dust. It is as dust of the ground that he receives the breath of life and participates in the life of God.

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¹⁵ Man of Dust! p. 2.

The Glorious Image of God — II

The subject of the *Imago Dei* which occupied our previous study revealed the great glory of Man to be of such a dimension that we may say that only in worship can it be fully comprehended. This is, of course, true of all theology. Theology which is not *doxological* can never proceed beyond the reasoning capacities of Man into the dynamic of God's self-revelation.

It is the *self*-revelation which is most significant. This is because ultimately all we know of the image of God we know because the incarnation of the Word. This is

- (i) because Christ is himself the true image of the invisible God and
- (ii) because in and through him we know restoration into the true image.

For example, we saw that there are three basic areas which delineate the substance of the Image, namely the moral elements, the relational and the functional. The scriptures not only say that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) but indicate strongly the way he fits the criteria of the three areas. We will look at this in more detail below, but what must occupy us first is Paul's statement in Colossians and its implications for our understanding of the person of Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, (Colossians 1:15-19).

When Paul says that 'He is the image of the invisible God', to whom is he referring? The answer is that he is referring to the 'beloved Son' of verse 13. But does Paul mean that the pre-incarnate Son was the image of God or is he only saying that as God incarnate, that is, as the man Jesus he is the image?¹ The rest of the paragraph continues the description of the majesty of Christ. He is 'the firstborn of all creation'. Were this phrase to be taken in isolation and in its modern English sense, we may be tempted to assume that the Son was born as a result of God's creative activity. This, however, is quite different from Paul's intention as can be seen from what follows; 'for in him all things were created'. The 'for' (οὐτι) indicates that he is the firstborn *because* he is the one by whom creation came into being.

Furthermore, 'firstborn' has a meaning in the Old Testament which is far fuller than merely 'the first in a sequence'. W. Michaelis writes,

The examples of **בְּכוֹר** or **πρωτότοκος** and related terms express the great importance which the firstborn had in the experience both of antiquity in general and of the men of the OT in particular. Because the land belongs to God, God has a claim to the firstfruits and the firstborn of animals and men. ... In the family the firstborn son took precedence, cf. Gen. 25:29ff; 49:3; 2 Ch. 21:3 and also the echo of this in the laws of inheritance.²

¹ Peter O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 44 says 'As the first title of Majesty, "image" emphasizes Christ's relation to God. The term points to his revealing of the Father on the one hand and his pre-existence on the other—it is both functional and ontological.'

² **πρωτότοκος**, *T.D.N.T.* Vol. VI, p. 874f.

With this OT background, we would understand that Christ, as the firstborn, stands as the one to whom all creation belongs as the inheritance. Since elsewhere Christ is specified as the ‘only begotten son’ (τὸ ὕιὸς τὸ ὡς μονογενῆ) there is no sense that he must share creation with others. It is by virtue of the fact that we are taken up into his sonship that we become ‘fellow heirs’ (Rom. 8:17). Michaelis concludes that in Colossians 1:15

The only remaining possibility is to take *πρωτότοκος* hierarchically. What is meant is the unique supremacy of Christ over all creatures as the Mediator of their creation ... If *πρωτότοκος* is selected in Col. 1:15 and then again in 1:18 to express this supremacy, this is because of the great importance which the term ‘firstborn’ took on as a word for rank in the OT and then retained in later Judaism.³

Since Christ is also described as ‘the firstborn from the dead’ (verse 18), this second use of the word *πρωτότοκος* adds to the picture of Christ’s supremacy. In this case he is supreme as leader of those who have come out of death. This is consistent with the language Paul used in verse 13, ‘He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son’. Paul’s reason for all this is to demonstrate in what way ‘in all things the beloved Son is pre-eminent (verse 18).

Taken as a whole the language of Col. 1:15-19 leads us to see the Son at every point supreme, both before creation and now. But are we then to take the statement, ‘He is the image of the invisible God’ to mean that before the incarnation the Son was the image of God? My suggestion is that this passage, while strongly acknowledging the ‘pre-existence’ of Christ (a foolish term really) does so to indicate the dimensions of the pre-eminence which the incarnate Son now has. Thus verses 19-20 seem to have particular emphasis on the person and work of the incarnate Son:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

If this is so, then there is no reason why the language of ‘the image’ should not be a reference to the man Jesus.

I suppose that I have other reasons for wanting to reach this conclusion. They flow from what I see as the wonder of the incarnation and the focus on the nature of the humanity of Jesus Christ. For example, while the New Testament authors quite obviously believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, as for example seen in the large number of occasions when Old Testament titles and designations of God are applied without explanation to Jesus (cf Luke 2:9 and Isa 42:8; Luke 2:11 and Isa 43:11; Acts 2:21 and Acts 2:36; John 12:39-41 and Isa. 6:9-10 etc) the thrust of much of the New Testament seems to be to stress Jesus’ *humanity*. John explicitly does so, apparently over against the claims of teachers later known as *docetists*. In 1 John 4:1-3 he argues that false prophets, those teachers who do not speak by *the* Spirit, are those who assert that Jesus humanity is somehow not the sphere of salvation.⁴

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that

³ *πρωτότοκος*, *T.D.N.T.* Vol. VI, p. 879.

⁴ Note the comment by Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1982, p. 505: ‘... the issue is not that the secessionists are denying the incarnation the incarnation or the physical reality of Jesus’ humanity; they are denying that what Jesus was or did in the flesh was related to his being the Christ, ie. Was salvific.’ Cf. pp. 51-54; 73-76.

confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.

This is not to suggest that there was anything simplistic about the incarnation. Paul called it a great mystery:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16).

If, for Paul, the incarnation is God revealed in the flesh⁵, for John it was ‘the Word’ who became flesh (John 1:14). For Matthew, it is ‘God with us’ (1:24) and ‘I am with you always’ (28:20). Repeatedly we are presented with comments indicating the aspects of true humanity found in Jesus. Geoffrey Bingham has put it that

The normal ways of showing his humanity are to point out that he became weary, thirsty, hungry, that he laughed, wept, slept, talked, in fact had what we call human faculties and experiences, and this is right. What is often missed is that in fact he did things far beyond what men normally do, but which are still human things. Peter is careful to point out that because of the anointing Jesus of Nazareth does remarkable things, ‘doing good and healing all those who were oppressed of the devil’ [Acts 10:38].

Hence we say that he was truly man, rather than merely describe him as ‘sinless’ and ‘perfect’. It is true he was sinless and perfect, but it is better to describe him as true man, rather than ‘special’ - or ‘super’ - man.⁶

This comment is quite profound. Rarely does anyone observe that what we call the ‘miraculous’ in Jesus life and ministry was actually done by *the man* Jesus. But assumptions to the contrary are precisely what Brown notes above in relation to the secessionists in 1 John. What we are observing in Jesus is at all times what true humanity does. Jesus anointing with the Spirit at his baptism leads us exactly to this point. True humanity is to be found not in the humanity we express but in him. Hence the description in the letter to the Hebrews -

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

"You are my Son, today I have begotten you";
as he says also in another place,

"You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,

⁵ Note the textual variants as described in the footnotes to the various translations. The Greek has ‘*who* was revealed in the flesh’, the antecedent plainly being ‘God’ in verse 15; some MSS have ‘*which* was revealed’ and others ‘*God* was revealed’.

⁶ *The Person and Work of Christ*, Blackwood, NCPI, 1983, p.51.

having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 4:14-5:10).

This description of Jesus is stressing his humanity. It must, otherwise his high priesthood would be an illusion. He must be chosen from among men. The mention of the quote from Psalm 2:7, 'You are my Son, etc' is surely a reference to his 'calling' as high priest, which we know from the gospel stories to be the event of his baptism. The godly fear, the reverent submission (verse 7) was specifically 'in the days of his flesh'. The only distinction between Jesus the high priest and other Jewish high priests is in the area of his freedom from sin. In that area Jesus stands alongside pre-fall Adam.

Again, we may observe that prior to the incarnation there was no 'Jesus' and prior to his anointing there was no 'Christ' (*anointed*). It was the man (baby) who was given the name Jesus, and that because of the task he was to accomplish (Matt. 1:21).

The principle governing the work of atonement is that it is in Man that both judgment and redemption are to be effected. This is because the eternal purpose of God to have a people (this can be discerned from the goal of history revealed in the book of the Revelation etc) has been denied by Adam (ie. Man) and those who participate in his (now) fallen Manhood and so will be accomplished *by* the new Man (Eph. 2:15, cf *NRSV*, 'one new humanity') and so *in* those who participate in his Manhood (cf. Eph. 1:1 'To the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus', Eph. 4:22, 24, 'put off the old Man...put on the new Man').

For this to be achieved, the old man must die. That is because the old man is corrupt through guilt and any bride drawn from his humanity would be polluted and unfit for such a lover as the eternal Son. (See Eph. 5:25-27). The great section of Romans, from 5:12 onwards, deals with salvation with this in view. From 5:12-21 Paul shows how any human being may, indeed, be justified by faith. How can the 'propitiation through faith in his blood' (3:25) come about? The answer is that all that Adam had brought by his act of disobedience Christ by his act of obedience had completely and overwhelmingly removed (see 5:17, 20). Even more, Adam is dead (Rom. 6:6)! Our old Man is was crucified. The nexus between Adam and those now in Christ has been irrevocably broken. Hence Paul concludes that 'you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11).

Romans 8:1-4 is significant in this matter:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Condemnation is no more because God sent his own Son in the *likeness of sinful flesh* and to deal with sin. This does not imply any false incarnation. The fact that Jesus looked like any other human being but was not sinful meant a *genuine* incarnation.

This is why I am suggesting that the description of Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God is a reference to his incarnate humanity. His pre-incarnate relationship to the Father is not in view at all here. We may well understand that the eternal Father always found the full expression of his fatherhood in the eternal Son; the point being argued is that the true image of God is now to be seen in the Man Jesus. This is true still because the scriptures give no indication that the eternal Son has ever divested himself of his Manhood. One cannot help but wonder and worship that grace should be

so powerful that it has effected a change within the Godhead. The eternal Son has taken flesh and never removed it.

This explains the sense of awe we find in the New Testament when the apostles gave their testimony. It is the man Jesus who was raised and who has been exalted at the right hand of God. It is the Man Jesus who has received the promise of the Holy Spirit and who has poured out the Spirit on all who believe (Acts 2:22-33; see also verse 26). It is the Man Jesus who will return (Acts 1:9-11) and the Thessalonians are described as waiting ‘for [God’s] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming’ (1 Thess. 1:10).

With the passage of time, we can only begin to imagine the amazement that gripped John on Patmos. The one whom he saw in majestic splendour, the lamb standing as though it had been slain and now administering all of the purpose of God was none other than the very Jesus whom he had known so intimately (cf. 1 John 1:1).

From a theological perspective, this soteriological understanding of Christ the image of God, means we do not have to struggle with such questions as whether humanity was created in the image of God or in the image of the image. By that some suggest that if the Son was always the image then he stands as the paradigm for our creation and hence also its goal. This study is not attempting to enter that domain. It is vital that we do so at some time, but for the present the focus is on Jesus Christ, the Man, as the true image of God. Having seen that we are now brought back, past the distortions of fallen humanity which hitherto had been our only experience of the image, to the pure joy of seeing creation in all its radiance.

It also means that we can understand the great desire of believers for the return of Jesus. Their ‘Come Lord Jesus’ (Rev. 22:20) is both an expression of pure desire for their bridegroom and, with that, a desire for the fulness of what we presently know only by faith. Hence Colossians 3:4, ‘When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory’, and Romans 8:18-21,

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

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The Glorious Image of God —III

Our two previous studies have shown us both the glory of Man as created and the way we now come to know that glory, namely, in the person of the last Adam, the second Man, Jesus. It is plain that the approach which was taken ran counter to much popular teaching concerning the person of Christ, which tends to regard him as the God/Man but in such a way as in fact to minimise his humanity.

The Early Church realised the problem of understanding the way the deity and the humanity of Christ were co-existent in one person and the records demonstrate the extent of their deliberations on the subject.¹ It has been suggested, validly, that without the incarnation there is no Christianity. James Dunn began his book, *Christology in the Making* with the reflection:

[In order to appreciate the centrality of the incarnation] We need only think of the controversies of the early centuries which shaped the classic credal statements of Christianity — controversies basically as to whether it was possible for the divine truly to become one with humanity without ceasing to be divine, creeds all striving to express the central claim that true God became true man in Jesus Christ. We need only to recall the famous assertions which proved decisive then and which still echo down the centuries with telling power — particularly the striking epigrams of Athanasius: ‘He became man that we might become divine’ ἀὐτὸς ἐνθρώπησεν ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν - *De Inc.* 54); and Gregory of Nazianzus: ‘What has not been assumed cannot be restored (τὸ ἀπρόσληπτον ἀθερόρευτον): it is what is united with God that is saved’ (*Ep.* 101.7); or the later thesis of Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo?* —

If, therefore, as is certain, it is needful that the heavenly state be perfected from among men, and this cannot be unless the above mentioned satisfaction (for sin) be made, which no one *can* make except God, and no one *ought* to make except man, it is necessary that one who is God-man should make it (II.6).²

These quotations from ancient writers highlight the two elements which dominate the subject, namely the cause for and the goal of the incarnation;

- (i) the cause is the need to make satisfaction for sin, and
- (ii) the goal is that ‘we might become divine’.

This latter phrase ought not to be taken simplistically. We have already seen that Man was created as one with the Creator without being, nor expected to be, the equal of the Creator³, and the incarnation can only be understood as having the restoration of this unity in view (see John 14:17, 23 etc).

It is the cause of the incarnation which must occupy us. In the previous study we examined the reason for the description of Jesus as ‘the image of God’. There I suggested that Jesus was the image of God because of his high-priestly office and function. The incarnation and the atonement (which cannot be seen as separate events) was the establishment of a new humanity flowing out of the new image of God, Jesus Christ. But how are we to understand the objects of this great saving action? If created Man is glorious, what is fallen Man? Is he still the image of God or has that image been lost; or, further, has the image been defaced but not lost, and, if so, to what extent? To the question, ‘What is Man’ (Ps. 8:4) the reply is that Man has been made a little lower than God (verse 5).

¹ See the various works on Historical Theology for an examination of the topic from this perspective; for example, Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, London Banner of Truth, 1969; William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, London, Banner of Truth, 1960, Vol. I; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, London A & C Black, 1977.

² SCM Press, London, 1989, p. 1.

³ *The Glorious Image of God*, March 4th, 1995.

But the writer of Hebrews, quoting the Psalm, observes that, in subjecting all things to him, God left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him (Hebrews 2:8). All we see, in this regard, is Jesus. Now in saying that we do not *yet*⁴ see all things in subjection to him, he means that all things will one day be subject to him; now, however, we see Christ the Man, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith (Heb. 2:10; 12:2).⁵ Christ, then, stands over against fallen humanity. He is what Man was created to be but has ceased to be.

When we return to the account of creation, we come again to the statement, ‘Let us make man in our image’ (Gen. 1:26). We have seen the three areas to which the image relates; Man’s moral being, his relationships and his function under the divine dominion. To focus on one aspect of Man’s being as the image is probably not helpful. Keil and Delitzsch say that ‘The image of God consists ... in the spiritual personality of man’.⁶ But that approach seems to overlook the fact that Man is always presented to us as a unity. He is not body *and* mind *and* spirit; he is body-mind-spirit. This does not imply at all that God must, therefore, have a body. All it is saying is that this creature, Man, has been made to continually reflect the truth of God’s being. Man’s body is both part of his creatureliness *and* of his great dignity.

In Genesis 5:1 we read that God ‘made Adam in the likeness of God’, but in Genesis 5:3 we are told that ‘when Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth’. On verse 3 Keil and Delitzsch have commented, ‘[Adam] transmitted the image of God in which he was created, not in the purity in which it came from God, but in the form given to it by his own self-determination, modified and corrupted by sin’.⁷ This is also the position of Calvin.⁸ Wenham, on the other hand, simply observes that ‘This verse makes the point that the image and likeness of God which was given to Adam at creation was inherited by his sons. It was not obliterated by the fall’.⁹ Now while Keil and Delitzsch and Calvin do take the sin of Adam strongly into consideration, it does not seem valid to apply it to Genesis 5:3. I say this first because the context does not support the contention that Adam, as the likeness¹⁰ of God (verse 1) did anything but produce a son ‘according to his image’. If Adam was the image and likeness of God so, then, was Seth. Interestingly, Genesis 4:25-26 points out that in the days of Seth and his offspring ‘people began to invoke the name of the Lord’. To imply that Seth was born with the defaced image of God seems contradicted by the description of the behaviour which arose in the time of Seth and his son Enosh and which was, presumably, associated with them.

Secondly, there is the statement in Genesis 9:5-6 instituting the death penalty.

⁴ Greek οὐπω.

⁵ In an interesting note, P.E. Hughes (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977, p.86f) has argued that ‘we do not yet see all things in subjection to him’ is in fact a reference to Christ and not to Man. He suggests that this is so because ‘enemy forces are still active and as yet unsubdued in the world’ ... [Only faith] ‘penetrates to the great reality that Jesus is already enthroned on high’ (p. 87).

⁶ Cf Keil and F Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988, Vol. 1, p.63.

⁷ p. 124.

⁸ *A Commentary on Genesis*, London, Banner of Truth, 1965, p. 228f.

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1, Dallas, Word, 1987, p. 127.

¹⁰ Note that ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ have been shown to be synonymous; see *The Glorious Image of God*, 4th March 1995.

For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings. Each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a Man, by a Man shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made Man.

The reason why animals may be killed (and eaten) and Man may not be killed lies in Man's unique status as being 'in [God's] own image'. What makes this statement significant is that it comes in the context of acknowledging that horrible sin is something to be both reckoned with and punished. Similarly, the New Testament also sees Man as being still the image of God. Thus

With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. (James 3:9)

and Paul, when discussing the relationships of men and women in the church described the man (male) as 'the image and glory of God' and the woman as the glory of the man (1 Cor. 11:7). If, then, the image of God remains, how are we to understand the present nature and behaviour of human beings? When we are faced with such devastating observations as Genesis 6:5

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

and Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse -- who can understand it?

among many others, we are surely aware of the deep corruption which exists in humanity and, sadly, all too often we see this corruption expressed in our own time and culture. But, at the same time, we are also faced with some features of present humanity which do not seem to be like this at all. Great deeds of heroism, incredible sacrifice and love are often in evidence in the same context as the horror of human depravity. Therefore, merely to preach that people are 'totally corrupt' without taking the full Biblical picture into consideration may indicate that we have failed to see the complexity of mankind's life and situation.

There are undoubtedly facets of human nature which are fearful and which are expressed with destructive energy. The history of Man after the fall is a chronicle of this. We see the destruction of the freedom between the man and the woman and their puerile attempts to redress the problem in Genesis 3:1-7. This is followed by the murder of Abel by Cain (4:1-8) and the subsequent mindless vengeance of Lamech (4:23-24). Even in Israel there are acts of deep perversity recorded. In Romans 1:18-32 we are given an explanation of this state of affairs. God in his wrath, his settled and implacable opposition to evil, has acted against those who, knowing the truth, have deliberately suppressed it by acts of wickedness. The truth of humanity as the image of God remains, and that is the dilemma of man; God constantly confronts him. Consequently Man acts against the truth but cannot avoid the truth.

The sins described in this passage are evidence of God 'giving Man up' to his choices. In particular, the rejection of the truth of God must imply a direct rejection of Man's own being as the image of God. As a consequence Man, while unavoidably a worshipping creature, is compelled to worship idols, the gods made in Man's image, that is as appropriate to Man's perception of his need.

Of course, those who make them are like them (Psalm 115: 3-8), meaning that Man can never cease to be what he essentially is, a creature in the image of God.¹¹

As I observed earlier, the body is part of Man's creatureliness and part of his dignity as the image of God. So it is not surprising that when God gives man up to his rejection of the truth it is the dignity of the body and the relationships that are necessarily expressed through it which suffer. Hence there is the 'degrading of their bodies among themselves' (Rom. 1:24) and the 'degrading passions' which reverse the natural relationships (verses 26-27).¹²

However, while these sins were so prominent, not all were engaged in them. But perhaps some of the confusion which arises when we try to understand the blanket judgments which are made may be alleviated when we observe that Man is a corporate being. In other words, it is not simply individuals that are corrupt, it is the whole race. The argument of Romans continues to show that all, both Jew and Gentiles, are equally guilty before the law of God, whatever the way that their rebellion may be expressed. Paul wrote to Timothy that 'The sins of some people are conspicuous and precede them to judgment, while the sins of others follow them there' (1 Tim. 5:24).

What must be understood is that *sins* are not the problem; they are a result and consequence of the problem. The problem is *sin*, which may be defined as Man's fundamental determination to live as his own God.

The point is that whether blatantly or virtuously expressed, Man endeavours to suppress the truth of God and in doing so suppresses the truth of his own being. It is the sheer goodness of God that Man is, ultimately, unsuccessful. There are restraints on evil (2 Thess. 2:7), even though on occasions in history the restraint seems to be considerably slackened.

Man is the image of God. He cannot cease being that but he will not *be* that and so Man's existence is a constant contradiction. This being so, even the virtuous living which we, happily, see

¹¹ 'Like them' uses the same Hebrew prefix as in Genesis 3:5, כִּי, although the LXX uses different words, ὅμοιοι here and in Gen. 3:5 ὡς θεοὶ.

¹² No doubt various times and cultures will express their sinfulness in various ways, but it may be instructive to give a brief outline of the ways that New Testament Christians were confronted by it. The following is from Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993, p. 63f. 'Several features of the social organisation contributed to the debasing of morality. Slavery gave occasion for cruelty and sexual license. The punishment of criminals, notably through sentencing to the mines and execution by crucifixion, showed the brutality of the times. The gladiatorial contests and wild beast fights ... reflect a brutal and cruel outlook. The Roman policy of "bread and games" to keep the populace content prevented initiative and emphasised sensual satisfactions.

'Paul's judgment on Gentile morality in Romans 1:18-32 finds considerable confirmation in other sources of the times. Both Jewish and Christian writers agreed that the Greco-Roman world was characterised by moral corruption. The Jewish apologists said that the low morality sprang from idolatry. [See, *Wisdom of Solomon* 13-15.] Sex sins were prevalent, and nearly all of the catalogs of sins in the New Testament have many synonyms for licentiousness (eg. 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5). The numerous words in the Greek language for sexual relations suggest a preoccupation with this aspect of life. Homosexuality was a common result in Greek society, which considered the noblest form of love to be friendship between men. Some of the greatest names in Greek philosophy regarded it as not inferior to heterosexual love, but it was practiced primarily among males between their early teens and early twenties. All kinds of immoralities were associated with the gods. Not only was prostitution a recognised institution, but through the influence of the fertility cults of Asia Minor, Syria and Phoenecia it became part of the religious rites at certain temples. Thus there were on thousand "sacred prostitutes" at the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth. Dio Chrysostom (Discourse 7.133-137) is the only Gentile author known to have attacked brothels on moral grounds.

... 'Inscriptions on grave monuments have been an important source for giving a just estimate of moral virtue in the ancient world. ... The praises of the kindness and faithfulness of husbands and wives in these records are a reminder that many people lived lives of quiet virtue. Not all were given to the sexual sins that appear to have been so prominent in the society.'

around us is still part of the contradiction. We are grateful that Man is still the image of God, but we recognise that his being so cannot be regarded as some form of merit. While Man's expression of the image is offered to God as a satisfaction for Man's guilt, these 'good works' must be considered as 'dead works'. As Articles XII and XIII of the Anglican Church¹³ express it:

XII Of Good Works

Albeit that good works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's Judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring of necessity of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

XIII Of Works before Justification

Works done before the grace of Christ and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make man meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but that they have the nature of sim

In all this, we may well appreciate the tragedy of Paul's observation that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). It is from this perspective that Christ, the image of God, appears as more than a good man. He is the only hope of humanity if Man is to be restored to the glory. The cross of Christ is the point where the corruption of Man is both placarded and judged (see Isa. 52:13-53:12).

This why the New Testament, when discussing the image of God, usually does so in terms of the transformation of the believer into Christ-likeness. The pre-destiny of the elect is that we might be conformed to the image of [God's] son (Rom. 8:29). And it is this which is presently being effected:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, *are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, *so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.* (2 Cor. 3:17-4:11)

¹³ These Articles may be found in the Thirty Nine Articles at the l back of both the *Book of Common Prayer* and An *Australian Prayer Book*.

The Little Matter of Guidance

No doubt most Christians are familiar with the matter of decision making. It is without doubt one of the most discussed matters, especially as the question of 'free will' is raised. There is, however, one aspect of decision making which perhaps takes us back to the heart of the matter, namely the extent to which we make the mind of God our primary point of reference in decision making. While the subject of our will in the decision making process is a significant one, we must not overlook the fact that the way the Scriptures describe human beings does not place primary emphasis there. On the contrary, the Biblical picture focuses on the relationship of men and women to God and the way that all their decision making, the exercise of their wills, is influenced by that relationship.

The principle point to be made is that God contains all of human history within himself. He is 'the Alpha and Omega, ... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty' (Rev. 1:8). The imagery of the book of the Revelation clearly conveys the reality of the sovereignty of the Lamb over all things. The Lamb has conquered and so he alone is worthy to take the scroll and break the seven seals (Rev. 5:5-6). Of course there is no sense that prior to this history was in any sense out of control. The scroll was always in the hand of the one seated upon the throne (5:7). Now the administration of the plan and purpose of God is in the domain of the Lamb, who is none other than the man, Jesus Christ, but his administration is never apart from that of God. The Lamb reigns only ever in submission. In Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18, 'All authority in heaven and earth has been *given* to' him.

With this in mind, we understand that not only is God in control, but that his plans are quite precise. Peter refers to God as 'a faithful Creator' (1 Peter. 4:19) and this conforms to the whole Biblical schema of redemption in which God's purpose is to bring the creation to its fulfilment. Isaiah reminds us that God is 'about to create a new heavens and a new earth' (65:17; cf. 66:22) and this is repeated in 2 Peter 3:13 and then shown as finally brought about in Revelation 21:1 (although, of course, the reality of the 'new creation' is already evident to men and women in Christ, 2 Cor. 5:17). Since the readers of the Revelation are exhorted to endurance and faith (13:10; 14:8; cf. 3:10) the command of Revelation 21:5, 'See, I am making all things new' is powerful. 'See!'. It is there to be seen and so must be seen.

Furthermore, when the goal of God is seen, the various trials of life should be experienced with 'nothing but joy' as they, too, are recognised as an essential part of the grand design (James 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 5:1-5).

In a significant passage, James writes,

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:7-11).

Some question has been raised concerning the phrase, 'the purpose of the Lord' (verse 11). A most unlikely explanation is that the phrase refers to the return of Christ. More likely is the suggestion that it refers to the outcome of Job's suffering, that is, the purpose of the Lord in Job's case. Another possibility is that it refers to the eschatological goal (the word used is Gk. *telos*) to which all history is moving. But even if the reference is to the outcome of Job's suffering, the result is the same as if the reference was primarily to the eschatological goal of God, since the purpose of the paragraph is to demonstrate that what happened to Job is a paradigm for the readers. The goal reached by Job is identical to that to which the readers are moving.

Even more, we may reflect that, even if it is not in the mind of James, it is still true that believers, in seeing Christ, have seen the goal of God. While Revelation 21:6 calls God (that is, 'the one who was seated on the throne') the *telos*/ 'the end', 22:13 gives the same title to Jesus (cf. 22:16). Christ is the goal. In other words, all history is moving towards him. Nothing has any meaning apart from him.

The doctrine of election, 'full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons' (Art. XVII, BCP), is likewise Christologically focussed. Ephesians 1:3-4 indicates that our election, before the foundation of the world, was 'in [Christ]' and Romans 8:29 that the goal is conformity to the image of Christ.

All this leads to the conclusion that Paul's instruction to the Ephesians, 'So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is' (5:17), especially in its context of instructions concerning godliness, is really very simple. The understanding is in the doing (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

Jeremiah stated, 'I know, O LORD, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps' (10:23). From what we have observed above, Jeremiah's knowledge of human limitations is not a mere observation from circumstances but is ontological. Man as created would have known, without demur, his limitations. Statements such as 'The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD (Proverbs 16:1) and 'All our steps are ordered by the LORD; how then can we understand our own ways?' (Proverbs 20:24) must be recognised as none other than the response of faith and so of genuine human living.

It was the sin of Adam that he and his wife attempted to assume control of their own lives and so of their own history. While this began with the two in Eden, Scriptures shows how this decision culminated in the refusal of all the nations to have God's revealed purpose as the deciding factor. The following references are indicative of this: Genesis 1:28; 11:4; Psalm 2:1-3 cf. Acts 4:24-28 etc. Both individually and corporately men and women have chosen to actively resist the truth of God and so the truth of their own being (see Rom. 1:18ff). This choice carries with it the inevitable consequence of being personally opposed by God and the Lamb and, because it is ontologically impossible for the creature to control his own destiny, of being destroyed. This is the force of such imagery as Revelation 19:17-21; 20:7-10 and Ezekiel 38-39.

From the beginning, at least from Abel, God has demonstrated that his purpose will not be thwarted. He has had those who 'call upon the name of the LORD' (Gen. 4:26). Whether these are 'the sons of God' of Genesis 6:2, John writes that in Cain and Abel we see the children of the devil and the children of God represented (1 John 3:10ff). The birth of Seth,

the son given 'instead of Abel', marked the point where the purpose of God, stated in terms of the restoration of that which had been violated, in Genesis 3:15, is begun to be worked out in history as the people of faith are revealed. Although, at times, it seems that very few people are within that group, the promise made to Abraham was that his descendants will indeed be a great multitude which no man can number (Gen. 15:5; Rev. 7:9).

The story within the Old Testament is more than the story of Israel; it is the account of God working his purposes out in the face of human hostility and resistance and so of a people who are continually led by him. Noah was guided by God (Heb. 11:7); so was Abraham (Heb. 11:8ff; Acts 7:2-4 see also Isa. 42:16). It is significant that both are described as not looking for guidance so much as responding to God's revelation. The same is true with so many others within the Scriptures. *It is a basic assumption that God is actually taking the initiative continually to move his people to the goal.*

It is within this framework that the people of God may live and function freely. Of course there are numerous instances when Israel refused to live in that liberty, but Israel's failure and the consequent judgments only prove the rule. The account of Israel being led by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire is a demonstration of the degree to which God was exercising direct control (see Ex. 13:21; 40:34-38). The cloud and fire was nothing less than God's personal presence among his redeemed people. Following the passage through the Sea, Moses and the people sang the great song of triumph (Ex. 15:1ff) in which they declared:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
 Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
 awesome in splendor, doing wonders?
 You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them.
 In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
 you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. (Exodus 15:11-13).

That God should continue to guide his people is taken as axiomatic. Thus

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. (Psalm 25:5).
 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. (Psalm 25:9).
 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, (Psalm 31 :3).
 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (Psalm 32:8).
 O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. (Psalm 43:3).
 that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever. (Psalm 48:14).

What is more, there is no doubt that while God is continually guiding his people, he is not ignoring the nations. Psalm 67:4 sings,

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
 for you judge the peoples with equity
 and guide the nations upon earth.

This is consonant with the principle of Daniel 4, where on a number of occasions the fact of God's sovereign administration is stated (verses 3, 17, 25, 32) and where Nebuchadnezzar is recorded as concluding

When that period was over, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me.
For his sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored the one who lives forever.
All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does what he wills with the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth.
There is no one who can stay his hand or say to him, 'What are you doing?' (Daniel 4:34-35).

What means did God employ to effect the guidance of his people? It must be plain that what was said at the beginning of this study must underlie our approach. The matter of guidance is first and foremost a matter of relationship. That God is moving history towards the goal is one thing; knowing the liberty of the sons of God within that is quite another. So whatever media God uses, our relationship to him is a critical factor in our knowledge of the guidance.

The media of guidance will be recognised by those who are free before God. This will mean that where there is to our minds some uncertainty for the moment, faith will remain relaxed and secure. Our failure to discern a particular issue will not be a cause of tension or concern. Faith continues to recognise that God is Father and as such he will withhold no good thing from his children. Hence, where we do not receive what we want or even what we may perceive as a need, faith will recognise that this is not necessarily due to some failure on our part. It is merely that the Father chooses not to reveal all the answers when we ask.

Recognising the media means living in intimacy with the Father. This means that the man or woman of faith is a person who habituates the life of righteousness which is a feature of the goal of God. If the new heavens and the earth are the place where righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13), then it will follow that the mature sons and daughters are those 'skilled in the word of righteousness, with their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil' (Heb. 5:13-14). Perception of guidance is first a matter not of the intellect but of the will (John 7:16-17).

Lest we reduce guidance to a matter of law-keeping, it should also be stated that righteousness is not an earned status. The word of righteousness is the word of justification (both words translate the same Greek word in the New Testament). Thus our intimacy with the Father was initiated by faith receiving the grace of justification and can only continue that way (see Gal. 3:1-5). From this it can be seen that guidance is never mechanical. While God works through various means to lead his people, we must be constantly alive to him in the matters of faith and obedience.

God guides us through his own law. The law of God is the law by which God himself exists. It is not that law is some external entity to which God submits; rather the law of God is the character of God and God's righteousness is his total consistency with his own character which he both expresses and expects (and which he works for us in Christ). All of

creation is structured to function according to the law of God. Now while we may not be able to discern the moral character of God in the creation, and we are culpable for our failure, the character of God has not been lost. The Law given to Israel is the law of God given in specific covenant form, but it nonetheless is a clear declaration of the character of God and so of the way we are to function in life. In passing, it should be stressed that this does not in any way mean a life of legalism. Legalism is constantly opposed in Scripture. Rather those whom God redeems and justifies are brought into a warm filial relationship with God himself, so that the law/Law is a delight because the delight is in *his* will.

As we will see again shortly, Hebrews 9:14 speaks of the blood of Christ purifying the conscience to serve the living God. Some translations have 'to worship' the living God. Now that we are justified, the law as a power to condemn is finished (cf. Gal. 2:19). The purified conscience can now freely function under law, since it no longer must first set out to excuse failure or cover guilt by avoiding the demands of law. This justified and cleansed conscience is now the way by which we can live in genuine filial obedience, which is true worship.

Moses told Israel,

This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8:1-3).

Within the immediate context, 'every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD' seems to refer to 'the commandments - the statutes and the ordinances' (Deut. 7:11) which were given at Sinai. Yet it would be a mistake to limit the meaning to this, since later God said,

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. (Deuteronomy 18:18-19).

God who revealed himself in the Law continues to speak through the prophets. It is true that some of the prophetic words have been recorded in Scripture, but it must not be forgotten that they were first a living word from God to the people as a whole or to individuals at a particular time and in particular circumstances. 'Do this; don't do that; go here etc'. While the frame of reference of the prophetic in the Old Testament was the law of God, the prophet essentially was the one brought the mind of God to bear upon a particular situation. The major difference between the prophets of the Old and New Testaments lies in the frame of reference. In the New Testament it is Christ and his work which is the basis for understanding the prophetic word. I suspect that is the reason why Paul said that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (in that order, Eph. 2:20): the apostolic testimony (to Christ) was and is the foundation and the prophetic word is the immediate word to the church.

1 Corinthians 14: 1ff tells us that it is the immediacy which is essential if the church is to function fully. No doubt the instructions given in 1 Corinthians 14:29, 'Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said', points to a testing of the prophetic against the apostolic (and so also against the Old Testament) testimony, but there is, nonetheless the expectation that God will continue to speak via the prophetic word.

Some of the prophetic words to the church or to individuals is recorded in the New Testament, though by no means all. Neither, though, were all the prophetic words in the old dispensation recorded. What are recorded in the New Testament are significant insofar as they form part of the apostolic testimony.

The quote from Joel 2, recorded in Acts 2:17-21, shows that with the pouring out of the Spirit the whole church becomes the prophetic community (verses 17-18). The church is the people brought, via justification, rebirth and the Spirit, into prophetic intimacy with God. The whole community is now the 'people of the word', and it is the word/Word which plays the dominant role within the history of the book of Acts (see, for example, Acts 6:2, 4, 7 etc). Although the focus is on the ministry of the apostles, there is still within Acts the recognition of the role of non-apostolic prophets as a vital part of the prophetic community. Agabus is one of a group of prophets in Acts 11:27-28, and he appears again in Acts 21:10-11. Acts 13:1 says that in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, and Acts 21:9, immediately prior to describing the second contribution of Agabus, tells that Philip the evangelist 'had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy'.

Although there have always been those who either have been used by the dark powers or have self-generated a 'prophecy', the reason for this is that God is the one who genuinely communicates his mind.

1 Corinthians 14:26 mentions, in passing since the main stress is on tongues and prophecy, that someone may have 'a revelation'. While some have understood this to be what is earlier described as 'a word of wisdom' or 'a word of knowledge', others have doubted the identification. But the point remains that God sometimes gives a 'revelation' to certain people and that this should build up the church. The consequences of these 'revelations' will no doubt vary with the circumstances. If the revelations come through dreams and visions, as the prophetic insight is often recorded as doing, then we can see the immense significance of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16. On other occasions, too, God spoke through visions (Acts 16: 9-10; 18:9; possibly 27:22-24). Not all visions and revelations are for publication, as Paul indicates in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4. Either these revelations were 'abundant' (*RSV*) or of 'exceptional character' (*NRSV*), but they were nonetheless highly significant for Paul.

Retuning for a moment to Hebrews 9:14, we must remind ourselves of the dynamic of a cleansed conscience. When forgiveness brings purity to the conscience then the conscience is free to respond without conditions to the whole truth of God which has come us. The matter of conscience is far beyond our scope for the present, but it may help to briefly mention two occasions when David was effected by his conscience.

Afterward David was stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. (1 Samuel 24:5).
But afterward, David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly.' (2 Samuel 24: 10).

Significantly there was no explicit law forbidding David from cutting a corner from Saul's cloak. But there was the general principle that Saul was the Lord's anointed and therefore David should trust God to work out his purposes in history. The second occasion is somewhat uncertain, but the overall impression is that God had given David up to his pride and then David's conscience reacted, again driving him to long for forgiveness. Since elsewhere in Scriptures the taking of a census is commanded (see Num. 1 :2), the action in itself was not wrong, but David ought not to have done it in that situation. The maintenance of a clear conscience is, therefore, essential so that anticipated actions may be evaluated from within our relationship to God.

On certain matters the Scriptures give us no instructions. Possibly, in the light of all that we have said, none is necessary. Perhaps in those situations where we are faced with a range of choices, none of which is more right or godly than another, we will have freedom. God 'richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment' (1 Tim. 6:17). Perhaps on other occasions, where our consciences warn us to wait, we ought to do exactly that. In the light of our earlier observation that God is moving all of history, including our own, towards his goal, for us to wait until our purified consciences indicate that we are free to make a choice should be no burden.

The Puritan, John Flavel, suggested,

If therefore, in doubtful cases, you would discover God's will, govern yourselves in your search after it by these rules:

1. Get the true fear of God upon your hearts; be really afraid of offending Him.
2. Study the Word more, and the concerns and interests of the world less.
3. Reduce what you know into practice, and you shall know what is your duty to practice.
4. Pray for illumination and direction in the way that you should go.
5. And this being done, follow Providence as far as it agrees with the Word, and no farther.¹

The principle of God guiding is clear in Scripture. As Adam was the son of God (Luke 3:38) so before the fall he would have known intimacy with God; the voice of God came to him in the garden. Likewise God said to Pharaoh, 'Israel is my firstborn son' (Ex. 4:22) and it is plain that God led Israel:

you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. (Nehemiah 9:19-20).

It goes without saying that Jesus *the* Son did only what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19-20) and it is Paul's observation that 'all who are led by the Spirit of God are the Sons of God' (Rom. 8:14). But he follows this with the insistence that

you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ— if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:15-17).

¹ Quoted in I. D. E. Thomas (Ed) *A Puritan Golden Treasury*, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1977, p. 132.

We are being led by and guided by the Father because he is moving all history towards his great goal. We are his children now, but when the consummation comes it will be accompanied by the great covenant cry, 'I will be his God and he will be my son' (Rev. 21:7).

Ian D Pennicook 27th May 1995

Standing in the Liberty of Christ

In Galatians 5:1, there is the injunction, 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery'. There is a sense in which this is the heart of the whole letter. Paul had begun the letter with the fundamental assertion that 'the Lord Jesus Christ ... gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and father ...' (1:3-4) and having done so then moved into the detail of his concern, namely, that the Galatians were deserting the very means by which they had come to that freedom and so deserting the freedom itself.

The details of the Galatian problem are well known. Galatians 3:1-5 summarises the issue:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing? -- if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

When the 'Judaisers' came to the Galatian churches, they taught that to be a mature believer in Christ there must be notable conformity to the heritage provided by Israel, in particular, submission to the *religious* practice of circumcision. Of course, it is unlikely that circumcision was all that was demanded, hence Paul's phrase 'works of the law', although circumcision was not regarded as an isolated act; Rather it represented all that was associated with Jewish identity. It was not that Paul was opposed to keeping the law, he did it himself and when he was arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:22ff) he was in the company of four men whose religious debts he was paying in order to demonstrate that 'you yourself observe and guard the law' (21:24). This was totally consistent with Paul's own stated position, that 'to those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law' (1 Cor. 9:20).

It is this principle that highlights the Galatian problem: for Paul submission to the law was a matter of his free choice, since the law had no claim on him; for the Galatians, on the other hand, their submission was being made a matter of obligation. They were being made to regard their maturity (their 'ending', Gal. 3:3) as being in some direct proportion to their conformity to the demands of the law. **James Dunn** suggests that the letter to the Galatians

makes clearest and fullest sense if we see it as a response to a challenge from *Christian-Jewish missionaries* who had come to Galatia to improve or correct Paul's gospel and to 'complete' his converts by integrating them fully into the heirs of Abraham through circumcision and by thus bringing them 'under the law'.¹

Of course, that is entirely true, but by no means in the way it was presented. It should be clearly understood that these 'Judaisers' were people who taught 'justification by grace through faith'. Whether or not they had a clear faith in Christ is not clear; they are

¹ *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black's New Testament Commentary, Hendrickson, Peabody Mass. 1993, p.11.

described as ‘false brothers’ (*NRSV* — *false believers*) in Galatians 2:4, but they were certainly in the church and claimed to be believers (see Acts 15:5, ‘some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees’). Where they differed from Paul was in their separation of justification from sanctification. Of course these terms did not figure prominently, at least not in the way they are used now. Today ‘sanctification’ is commonly used to refer to the ongoing process towards holiness by which believers become more and more conformed to the image of Christ, with justification as the legal beginning. G.C. Berkouwer² expresses the issue in these terms:

In any discussion about sanctification it is evident that we are concerned, not with a maze of theoretical abstractions, but with the bread-and-butter problems of this life. One can even say that a discussion about sanctification is the more relevant because also the unbeliever evinces interest in what the church professes in the matter. For he detects in this teaching a presumptuous note, the pretension, namely, of being saintly, of being different. And, of course, this pretension seems to the accuser entirely unwarranted.

The confession that the believer is justified by faith alone seems not to interest the unbeliever; the pretension of being different so much the more. Here at least is room for scrutiny, a chance to put Christianity on trial. Is this sanctification indeed a radiant reality crowding out the darkness? Are the children of God indeed a different breed from the rest of men? Or is sanctification a mere fancy, beautiful but barren when put to the test?

The implication is that sanctification somehow justifies our justification; unless justification results in some measurable holiness of life that justification is suspect.

It was this separation of justification and sanctification into distinct categories which Paul regarded so seriously. He asked how those who had begun by faith could possibly become complete through law. No action on the part of the believer could ever secure the goal. Indeed, any application to law would actually do the reverse; it would cut off the believer from Christ.

Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. (Gal. 5:2-5)

How then should the Galatians understand ‘sanctification’? The answer is that they must recognise that they have died to the law (Gal. 2:19-21 — Paul the Jew is himself a paradigm for both Jews and Gentiles). The legal demands of the law are no longer an issue. The cross of Christ which the Galatians had publicly exhibited before their eyes was the point where they themselves died *with* Christ. By believing the proclamation, the Galatians had realised (which means more than ‘come understand’) their own relationship with Christ.

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:19-20)

² *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Sanctification*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1952, p.9f.

Believers must no longer see themselves over against Christ; they are in him and he in them. A retreat to law is, then, a retreat from Christ since he has brought the legal demands to an end. The blessing of Abraham was never available to anyone whom the law cursed, and it cursed ‘everyone who does not observe and obey all the things that are written in the book of the law’ (Gal. 3:10). The Judaiser had failed to recognise that in his appeal to the law he was actually putting himself back under the curse and taking with him anyone who followed his injunctions.

Of course the blessing of Abraham is desirable, and would that all Gentiles would know it.

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith”. But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them”. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” -- in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:11-14).

The blessing of Abraham is ‘in Christ’. He is the promised ‘seed’ (Gal. 3:16). And likewise sanctification is ‘in him’. And we should note that the blessing of Abraham is nothing less than the promise of the Spirit; we can only be in Christ because the Spirit has been given and this is totally a matter of faith. Sanctification, in the sense of holy living, is expressed by Paul in Galatians as ‘liv[ing] by the Spirit’ (5:16), that is, living by Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul put it plainly, that

[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

The only righteousness which believers have is Christ. Apart from abiding in him we have nothing. Likewise the only sanctification we have is also his. It is simply not possible to have any holiness of our own.³

What then does it mean to be free? And what does it mean to live in freedom? This question strikes at the heart of the life of our churches as well as of our lives as individual persons. Luther’s comment on Galatians 5:1 is very helpful here:

This is that liberty whereby Christ hath made us free, not from an earthly bondage, from the Babylonical captivity, or from the tyranny of the Turks, but from God's everlasting wrath. And where is this done ? In the conscience. There resteth our liberty and goeth no farther. For Christ hath made us free, not civilly, nor carnally, but divinely; that is to say, we are made free in such sort, that our conscience is now free and quiet, not fearing the Wrath to come. This is that true and inestimable liberty, to the excellency and majesty whereof, if we compare the other (the civil and the carnal), they are but as one drop of water in respect of the whole sea. For who is able to express what a thing it is, when a man is assured in his heart that God neither is nor will be angry with him, but will be for ever a merciful and a loving father unto him for Christ's sake? This is indeed a marvellous and incomprehensible liberty, to have the most high and sovereign Majesty so favourable unto us, that he doth not only defend, maintain and succour us in this life, but also as touching our bodies will so deliver us, that our bodies, which are sown in corruption, in dishonour

³ This is in the same vein as has been said elsewhere, that until Christ appears we also know no resurrection but his (1 Cor. 15:20) and no life but his (Col. 3:4).

and infirmity, shall rise again in incorruption, in glory and power (I Cor. xv. 42 ff). Wherefore, this is an inestimable liberty, that we are made free from the wrath of God for ever; and is greater than heaven and earth and all other creatures.⁴

This is of immense significance. Liberty lies in the conscience, and in nowhere else. This is precisely the point made in Romans 7:14–8:8, where the point is made that the law is good (7:12) but that Paul understands his own behaviour in the light of the law as utterly corrupt. Whenever a believer opts for law as the standard he will be condemned. As a believer, as one regenerated, Paul could write that ‘with my mind I am a slave to the law of God with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin’ (Rom. 7:25b). But the Spirit has brought the work of the cross to us in such a way that Romans 8:1ff insists that

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law -- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:1-8).

Though the law condemns us, nevertheless our consciences affirm that Christ has brought that condemnation to an end. A return to law must then produce horrible effects.

Randall Zachman⁵ has argued

However, the primary locus of the theology of the cross is the experience of trial or tribulation ... when the very heart and conscience of the believer sense that God's promise of grace and forgiveness is a lie. The believer must regard the promise of forgiveness as true and certain even though the conscience testifies to the contrary.

“But under the cross which we experience, eternal life lies hidden ... We too, experience the cross, and death appears to us, if not in fact, yet in our conscience through Satan. Death and sin appear, but I announce life and faith, but in hope. Therefore, if you want to be saved, you must battle against your feelings. Hope means to expect life in the midst of death, and righteousness in the midst of sins.”

This is the very meaning of being simultaneously righteous and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*): to believe that we are righteous *coram Deo* even though we feel like condemned sinners.

A return to the law-standard must mean that we would acknowledge the validity of the *sense* of condemnation, and so of any attempts to remove that by self-effort of whatever sort. It is at this point that so much which passes for *Christian* counselling/ministry is actually exposed as nothing less than anti-cross in its thrust. The concern to acknowledge the validity of the feelings is to give those feelings a status which, in the light of the work of the cross, they *may not* have. This, of course, does not imply that we should deny the *existence* of the

⁴ A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, James Clarke, London, (1575) 1953, p. 442.

⁵ *The Assurance of Faith — Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 9f.

feelings, merely that we should not treat them as of any significance when the declaration of God contradicts them. Zachman again:

The heart of Luther's theology is the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). The testimony of the Word to the conscience comes under an appearance that contradicts the truth revealed in the Word thus God's mercy is hidden under wrath, God's power is made manifest in weakness, God's life is hidden under death, God's blessing is hidden under a curse. Luther contrasted the theology of the cross with the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). Whereas the theology of the cross comes to the knowledge of God through the indirect and hidden way of the cross, the theology of glory attempts to know God directly through what is apparent in the world. 'That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.' The theology of glory finds a direct continuity between what it sees and feels and what it believes about God, whereas the theology of the cross finds a contradiction between what it sees and feels and what it believes. 'Nature wants to feel and be certain before she believes, grace believes before she perceives.'⁶

By 'theology of glory' Zachman was referring to 'the testimony of the conscience to itself about God that is made on the basis of what is apparent and perceptible to the conscience, that is, works of law. "That wisdom which sees the invisible things of *God in works as perceived by man* is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened".'⁷

It is a theology of glory which thus involves us in a serious deception. At a recent conference in Melbourne, a friend of mine who is a Pentecostal pastor observed that one of the greatest dangers to a true 'Gospel ministry' in his area of ministry is 'triumphalism'. By this he meant the assertion that believers may, indeed must, know now in conscious experience the reality of salvation in all its dimensions. This often translates into a theology of 'bigger is more godly' since it implies success and so commends itself to the world which needs to *see* the reality of Christ. Of course it is not only Pentecostals who think this way, and it must be said that by no means all Pentecostals do think this way. As one man has cynically put it, Christians do not tell lies, they only sing them. A glance through modern Christian song books will often reveal that believers will sometimes try to sing things into being. Over recent years we have had attempts to 'praise' things into being, no 'name it and claim it' ('blab it and grab it'), or even to 'believe' things into being.

There is no reason why our singing ought not describe or even participate in the great eternals (and the same is true of our praise and the exercise of believing) but the danger lies in it attempting to do so over against the truth of the Word. For example, Geoffrey Bingham has recently reminded pastors of the great work of justification in setting us free from the tyrants of sin, Satan and his powers, the age, the flesh, the law of God and the wrath of God, the fear of death, idols and an evil conscience. He wrote:⁸

⁶ *The Assurance of Faith*, p. 19.

⁷ *The Assurance of Faith*, p. 19.

⁸ *Christian Liberation through Christ's Cross*, NCTM Monday Pastors' Study Group, 5th June, 1995, p. 8f.

Man's freedom lies in the death and resurrection of Christ, 'who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification'. The Atonement, as we have seen, is the Father setting forth his Son to be the propitiation for sin, and so 'he is the propitiation for our sins'. Propitiation is that which averts the wrath of God from us, the wrath being the personal action of God in our conscience where the components of guilt are working painfully. Christ, the High Priest, 'having somewhat to offer', is himself the oblation, and in offering himself 'bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors'. In being made sin for us, and bearing 'our sins in his body on the tree,' and dying 'for sins, the just for the unjust', he removes every ounce of guilt of sin and thus his death (blood) 'purifies our consciences from dead works to serve the living God'.

When guilt is gone so has the wrath of God been worked out to exhaustion, the power of Satan and his principalities to accuse is cancelled, and so, then, the power of the world to hold in bondage. Death's sting which is sin's penalty has been withdrawn, and the fear of death has been dissolved. The law has been satisfied by Christ's obedience and his taking of the penal suffering due to Man. The purified conscience is no longer a tyrant, but one which allows us to have entrance to the Holy of Holies. Love — the love of the Cross — has cast out all fear, and so the rebellion of Man is cancelled. Man is reconciled to God, and now by the Spirit the love of God is poured into the heart, thus breaking all obligation to the flesh to live after the flesh. Living in the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit and not the works of the flesh. Idols can no longer fascinate redeemed Man, for God's love now constrains him.

All of this is another way of saying that the power of sin has been broken. The Son has thus made us free and broken the power of the ... enemies. We are free, indeed.

This is the way that freedom lies in the conscience. It can lie nowhere else because the testimony of experience is that these elements, these tyrants, remain alive and well and fully functional. We have seen from Romans 7 how easily law, the law of God, can be revived in its tyranny. 'Sin dwells in me' is the recognition which evokes the cry, 'who will deliver me from this body of death?' (Rom. 7:23-24) Though we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit (Rom. 8:9), the flesh still presents a very vicious opponent to the truth of that statement (see Gal. 5:16-21). Indeed the whole thrust of the New Testament demand for holiness of living takes close account of the reality of the enemy who makes counter claims upon our allegiance. The same is true of Satan and his hosts. The picture in Revelation 12 of the great red dragon making war on the people of God is based on the fact of our actually wrestling against principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12).

Surprisingly, it is often those of a more triumphalist bent who recognise these elements more readily, albeit adjusting their theology to accommodate the apparent realities. Thus there is the practice of attempting to defeat the already defeated and to bind the already bound, but for those who do not come from that direction (and from those who do) there is often only a sense of hypocrisy at our persistent failure to live in the reality we have declared and taught and believed. This can result in an energy-sapping sense of defeat and so of a determination to avoid any sort of conflict which may in the future remind us of our failure.

By way of a personal testimony to the nature of our freedom, I was recently warned by two GP's and a medical specialist that a mole on my leg looked very serious and required attention. Now I have faced death before, and, having survived a serious car accident, I was truly able to say that I was to an extent sorry that the Lord had not taken me. I have tended a dying wife and watched as she passed into the Father's presence. Yet on this occasion all

the terrors of death seemed to come upon me with vicious force. ‘The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me.’ It was quite fascinating to observe my own reactions to all of this. On the one hand there was my theology which determined the way I spoke and acted (genuinely — I knew it to be true) and on the other was the sense of dread which came on me and simply called into question all that I knew to be true. Hebrews 2:14-15 said one thing,

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

the spectre of death said quite the opposite. I should add that what relieved the darkness was not the ‘all clear’, for which I am grateful, but the dawning realisation (sometimes we are very slow!) that the sense of dread was the contesting and not the (effective) denial of the truth.

What thrilled me in the experience, even while it took place, was the awareness that I was refusing to give in to the attacks even though they were painful. My physical and mental perceptions were totally incapable, for a while, of penetrating beyond the sense of dread. Yet the unseen truth, the contradicted truth sustained me. So preaching and teaching continued unabated in the face of the denials. But that was how it had to be.

So how do we live in the liberty for which Christ has set us free? The liberty ‘for which’ is the liberty which rests in the total forgiveness and the purity which the conscience may and must know (Heb. 9:14). It is therefore the liberty which anticipates that God who is now favourably disposed towards us because of the work of Christ will, on that day, because of his own promise, grant to us ‘the glorious liberty of the sons of God’. Then, what we know by faith we will see. What we now know, therefore, is the unshakeable liberty of a clear conscience. In spite of the accusations of guilt (cf. ‘the accuser of our brethren ... who accuses them day and night before our God’ (Rev. 12:10)), we are reminded that

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered’.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39).

To live in our freedom can only mean that we live as those who have been freed from our guilt and who realise that the purpose of that act of liberation is freedom *in* the family of God. As we have seen that means walking by the Spirit and so knowing the fruit of the Spirit being evidenced in us. While that certainly takes great effort, as we struggle against the continued assaults and accusations of the enemies of Christ and his redeemed,

it is nonetheless nothing of us, since the fruit we so long to see are the fruit which are those of the Spirit himself, and so the fruit of the Father and the Son. Indeed, were it to be by our effort, by works of law, it could not, by nature of the case, be of the Spirit.

All that can be done has been done; we can only maintain 'faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith' (1 Tim. 1:19).

But there is more. The liberty we now know is the liberty of the Son himself. Just as God has made him 'wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption', so the victory we have is only to be found in him. It is a present gift, though it is yet to be *seen*. Thus,

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Corinthians 15:54-57).

Not only is the present gift only Christ, it will only ever be Christ. Believers may certainly anticipate reigning in life, but it will always as they are found in Christ. So Romans 5:17 (cf. Rev. 5:9-10, both using the future tense):

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

To stand firm in the liberty with which Christ has set us free is to stand firm in Christ, in his victory, and to refuse every attempt to extend that work of justification so that sanctification becomes a state or process in distinction from Christ.

simul iustus et peccator

Ian Pennicook
22nd July 1995

174, 170, 181, 36, 148

The Power and Privilege of Preaching

Paul instructed Timothy to ‘let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching’ (1Timothy 5:17). While there have been many comments made concerning the nature of the honour due, such as the honour accorded to them *as elders*, which may, and almost definitely does, include remuneration, the question is rarely raised, ‘what is there about preaching and teaching which calls forth this response from those who receive that ministry?’

The world of the New Testament had its brilliant orators; the art of rhetoric was one which was highly cultivated among the Greeks (and Timothy was part Greek, Acts 16:3). The significance of the spoken word in the ancient world can hardly be over estimated.

The most common form of advanced education, also available to one who entered a ‘profession,’ was in rhetoric. It was something of the ancient equivalent of the college arts degree. We can hardly exaggerate the influence of rhetorical education on ancient culture and literature. Isocrates had championed the oratorical tradition against the philosophical type of education advocated by Plato. Quintilian provides an attractive summary in Latin of the rhetorical educational ideal at the end of the first century. Since reading was done aloud, the spoken word had a great influence on literature. Speech was the queen of studies. Since one might have to speak on any subject and could find useful illustrative material from a wide range of subjects, rhetorical education included some philosophy, astronomy, history, and so forth. The teaching of both rhetoric and philosophy was usually accomplished in one of three ways: by wandering popular lecturers, by private teachers established in the cities, or in institutions of learning in educational centers such as Athens and Alexandria. ... Cicero described the duties of the orator as to inform, to delight and to motivate. Since Aristotle three kinds of arguments were recognised: an appeal to *ethos* or character, to *pathos* or the emotions, and to *logos* or the reason.¹

The various rhetorical techniques and the philosophical understanding which marked out a master orator are almost certainly what lay behind the form of Paul’s language in the Corinthian letters.² Thus he writes ‘For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with *a wisdom of logos* (NRSV ‘eloquent wisdom’) lest the cross of Christ be emptied’ (1 Cor. 1:17). There is a *logos*, but it is the *logos* of the cross (verse 18). He goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 2:4 that

He deliberately avoided the very thing that now fascinates them, ‘the persuasion of wisdom’. But his preaching did not thereby lack ‘persuasion.’ What it lacked was the kind of persuasion found among the sophists and rhetoricians, where the power lay in the person and his delivery. ... Even though he was weak and his preaching lacked ‘rhetoric’ and ‘wisdom,’ their very coming to faith demonstrated that it did not lack power.’³

¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, pp.102, 110; cf. the articles on ‘Rhetoric, Greek’ and ‘Rhetoric, Latin’ in N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard (Eds), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, pp.920-922.

² See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 64, n. 79.

³ Fee, *First Corinthians*, p. 94, 95.

Knowing, therefore, the fascination the world had for the *form* of the proclamation, Paul stresses that it is the *content* which is effective. To that extent his language in 2 Corinthians probably bears a strong touch of irony. To quote C.K. Barrett's comment on 2 Corinthians 11:6⁴

Here too Paul manifests the same desire not to claim too much that appears in I Cor. xv. 9. **I may be unskilled in speech, but I am not unskilled in knowledge.** *Unskilled* is not an adjective but a noun (ιξδιότης), denoting 'one who stands outside a particular activity or office' ... , and therefore is untrained in the skills proper to that activity or office. Paul disclaims ability in the art of speaking; see x. I, IO; also I Cor. ii. 3 f. ... ; and compare Plato, *Ion* 532D, You rhapsodes and actors, and the poets whose verses you sing, are wise; and I am a common man (ιξδιότην ἄνθρωπον), who only speak the truth (Pauline and Socratic irony have something in common). Paul's writing so strongly resembles **speech**, and in its own way very eloquent speech, that there is much force in the conclusion that either Paul suffered from an impediment in his speech (which could have been the physical weakness he appears to refer to in xii. 7 ...), or that he writes with undue modesty. More probably Paul is admitting (and in the admission continues his ironical vein) a judgement of his eloquence based upon presuppositions he did not himself share.

In other words, the Corinthians were evaluating Paul by the standards of the world around them. The *form* of his preaching had become their focus and in this Paul did not meet their requirements. In contrast were those whom Paul calls 'super-apostles' (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). Using the expected technique of exalting themselves and demeaning their opponents, these men deliberately gave the impression of success. On the contrary, when Paul 'boasts' he only does so concerning the things which mark off his weakness (11:30). He highlights his suffering.

And what I do I will also continue to do, in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognized as our equals in what they boast about. For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds.

I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool; since many boast according to human standards, I will also boast. For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves! For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone dares to boast of — I am speaking as a fool — I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman — I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people,

⁴ A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, A & C Black, London, 1973, p. 279.

danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (blessed be he forever!) knows that I do not lie. In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 11:12- 12:10).

The whole of 2 Corinthians 10-13 ought to be examined in this regard. However, what must be stressed is that Paul does not regard himself as ‘weak’ simply because others have regarded him in that way. He is, in fact insisting that he ought to have been honoured by the Corinthians, not for any personal qualities but because he was an apostle and

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works. (2Corinthians 12:12).

The weakness of Paul is, in fact, the weakness of Christ. Thus he wrote:

I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not be lenient — since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. (2Corinthians 13:2-4).

The weakness of which Paul boasts is the weakness of Christ crucified. All his irony merely exposes the fact that those who boast in their own abilities actually do not and cannot know the power of God. Were the power of the word of the cross to come to such who boast in themselves and their own wisdom it would destroy them.

This is why the stress is not on the form but on the content of the preaching. That does not mean that it is unimportant who preaches, as if merely having the details presented is all that is to be done. That would require no more than training parrots. No, the content actually

includes the preachers. As Paul put it, 'Christ is speaking in me'. The signs of a true apostle were the evidences of Christ himself speaking.

The suffering of the true preacher is, then, a participation in the suffering of Christ. Bearing in his body the putting to death of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:10), Paul longed to share even more deeply the sufferings of Christ and to be fully identified with his death (Phil. 3:10). Only in this way could he know the power of Christ's resurrection issuing in his own (verse 11).

The pain of true preaching is inescapable if we are to know the power of the word, because the word of the cross, the word of weakness, is the word of strength. The suffering is essentially 'moral' as we are identified with the heart of the cross — 'He died for sin, once for all'. The power of the word lies not in the weakness of the preacher. That would merely result in a perverse asceticism, as if by our renunciation of certain elements we could achieve power. It would, furthermore, be a great error, for it would rest on the assumption that we have something to deny; the truth is that no human being has any strength of himself or herself anyway (cf. Rom. 5:6). Certainly 'once for all' cannot mean that there remains some dying yet to be accomplished and even more certainly not by us.

Paradoxically, the power of the word lies in the weakness of the word, its foolishness and its scandal. And so the power of the word lies in the fact that it is the word of Christ crucified. And for that reason Paul calls the gospel a mystery.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a *logos* may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19)

Obviously Paul is aware of the substance of his message. He speaks of 'my gospel' (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8) and his determination to preach only Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23). But conspicuously, his determination is not merely to preach but to *know* Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). His great statement of Galatians 2:19-20 is most important —

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The cross was the point where Paul died with Christ and the result is that the only life which Paul can now know is the life of Christ *but that life can only be known in the ongoing action of faith*. Hence Paul's message can never be reduced to a formula. To preach Christ crucified is to preach as one crucified with him and as one abiding in him. A refusal to go the way of the Corinthian 'super-apostles' is not a technique for success; it is the very essence of all that we are about. Those who belong to Christ 'have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (Gal. 5:24).

The statement above from Ephesians 6:19 indicates that the mystery of the gospel can only be 'lived-in', for Paul's prayer is that when he opens his mouth 'a word may be given' to him. In other words, the preacher does not have the word, the word has him. The use of techniques known to produce results, whether those of ancient rhetoric and sophistry or of more modern times, is meaningless in the matter of the proclamation, for in the final analysis it is Christ who speaks and not us. Hence the question:

Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence. (2 Corinthians 2:16-17).⁵

Shortly after this Paul said,

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2Corinthians 4:1-7).

He was convinced that the word which he spoke, by which the new creation came to life, was none other than the word who had spoken creation into being.

Thus, when Paul urged that the elders who rule well, particularly those who laboured in preaching and teaching, should receive double honour, the reason lies primarily in the fact that those who preach and teach are charged with the high privilege of speaking the word, which comes from Christ, to the people. This does not imply that there is anything esoteric about the preaching or teaching. Paul and the others argued from the scriptures, and when a prophetic word was given to the church it was first carefully weighed before being accepted. Nonetheless, James warned that to be a teacher is no light thing. Indeed, the teacher 'will be judged with greater strictness' (3:1). Yet this warning to the presumptuous is no restraint to those who must speak. Whatever the suffering, it is a deeper suffering to remain silent. We are like Jeremiah, the word of *God* in our mouth, so that silence is a torment;

I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9).

Possibly all this seems strange to us. If it does, the reason may lie in our having separated the word from God. Perhaps the word written has been *hypostasised*, that is, given an independent status and life that of itself it cannot have. There is no question concerning the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, at least not in my mind. But, while they do not *become* the word, they can never *be* the word apart from the Word. If we make such a separation then we are left with nothing but the echo of the voice and we are today surrounded by many who, having only the echo, are energetically attempting to find elsewhere the power which the Word alone has.

⁵ Eugene Peterson has rendered this 'We stand in Christ's presence when we speak; God looks us in the face. We get what we say straight from God and say it as honestly as we can'. (*The Message*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, 1993, p. 372).

Why should the church honour those who labour in preaching and teaching? It should be noted that Paul is not urging respect for evangelists, but for those who fulfil the function of teaching elders. So what does he expect the result of their ministry to be? The following is from P.T. Forsyth's magnificent work, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*.⁶

The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the Church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach. Yet so that he is not its echo but its living voice, not the echo of its consciousness but the organ of its Gospel. Either he gives the church utterance, or he gives it insight into the Gospel it utters. He is to preach to the Church from the Gospel so that with the Church he may preach the Gospel to the world. He is so to preach to the Church that he shall also preach *from* the Church. That is to say, he must be a sacrament to the church, that with the Church he may become a missionary to the world.

You perceive what high ground I take. The preacher's place in the Church is sacramental. It is not sacerdotal but sacramental. He mediates the word to the Church from faith to faith, from his faith to theirs, from one stage of their common faith to another. He does not there speak to un-faith. He is a living element in Christ's hands (broken, if need be) for the distribution and increment of Grace. He is laid on the altar of the Cross. He is not a mere reporter, nor a mere lecturer, on sacred things. He is not merely illuminative, he is augmentive. His work is not to enlighten simply, but to empower and enhance. Men as they leave him should be not only clearer but greater, not only surer but stronger, not only interested, nor only instructed, nor only affected, but fed and increased. He has not merely to show certain things but to get them home, and so home that they change life, either in direction or in scale. It is only an age like the present age of mere knowledge that tends to make preaching the statement of sound and simple truth, interesting but powerless. It is only an age which starves the idea of revelation, by its neglect of the sacramental idea, that reduces preaching to evangelizing alone. It is only an age engrossed with impressions and careless about realities that could regard the preacher's prime work as that of converting the world, to the neglect of transforming the Church. It is only such an age that could think of preaching as something *said* with more or less force, instead of something *done* with more or less power. We spend our polemic upon the Mass, and fitly enough in proper place. But the Catholic form of worship will always have a vast advantage over ours so long as people come away from its central act with the sense of something done in the spirit-world, while they leave ours with the sense only of something said to this present world. In true preaching, as in a true sacrament, more is done than said. And much is well done which is poorly said. Let the preacher but have real doings with God and even with a stammering tongue and a loose syntax he will do much for life which has never yet been done by a finished style. The preacher may go 'lame but lovely', to use Charles Lamb's fine phrase. His word may lack finish if it have hands and feet. He is a man of action. He is among the men who do things. That is why I call him a sacramental man, not merely an expository, declaratory man. In a sacrament is there not something done, not merely shown, not merely recalled? It is no mere memorial. How can you have a mere memorial of One who is always living, always present, always more potent than our act of recall is, always the mover of it? What he once put there might be a memorial, but what he is always putting there is much more than that. It is at least his organ. It is, indeed, his act. It is something practical and not spectacular. A revelation may be but something exhibited, but in a sacrament there is something effected. And the one revelation in the strict sense is the sacrament of the Cross, the

⁶ NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 53-58.

Cross as an effective act of redemption. A revelation of redemption is a revelation of something done; and it is only a deed that can reveal a deed. If the preacher reveal redemption he does it by a deed, by a deed in which the Redeemer is the chief actor, by some self-reproduction by Christ, some function of the work of the Cross. He has to reproduce the word of the beginning, the word of the Cross which is really the Cross's own energy, the Cross in action. No true preaching of the Cross can be other than part of the action of the Cross. If a man preach let him preach as the Oracle of God, let him preach as Christ did, whose true pulpit was His Cross, whose Cross made disciples apostles, in whose Cross God first preached to the world, whose preaching from the Cross has done for the world what all His discourses—even His discourses—failed to do.

The preacher, in reproducing this Gospel word of God, prolongs Christ's sacramental work. The real presence of Christ crucified is what makes preaching. It is what makes of a speech a sermon, and of a sermon Gospel. This is the work of God, this continues His work in Christ, that ye should believe in Him whom He hath sent. We do not repeat or imitate that Cross, on the one hand; and we do not merely state it, on the other. It re-enacts itself in us. God's living word reproduces itself as a living act. It is not inert truth, but quick power. All teaching about the truth as it is in Jesus culminates in the preaching of the truth which is Jesus, the self-reproduction of the word of reconciliation in the Cross. Every true sermon, therefore, is a sacramental time and act. It is God's Gospel act reasserting itself in detail. The preacher's word, when he preaches the gospel and not only delivers a sermon, is an effective deed, charged with blessing or with judgment. We eat and drink judgment to ourselves as we hear. It is not an utterance, and not a feat, and not a treat. It is a sacramental act, done together with the community in the name and power of Christ's redeeming act and our common faith. It has the real presence of the active Word whose creation it is. If Christ set up the sacrament, His Gospel set up the sermon. And if He is real in our sacramental act still, no less is His deed real in our preached word which prolongs that deed. And it is known to be real by the insight of faith, however many counterfeits there are, with no insight but only zeal, and sometimes with nothing but stir.

... It is this sacramental note that I fear our preaching often loses. It is this objective power, overruling both the temperament of the preacher and the temper of his time. We speak freely and finely about the Gospel, but does the Gospel come to its own in it all? Does it preach itself through us with power? Are our sermons deeds, 'action sermons'? They cost much labour, and what do we take by it? They are not without some effect, but are they real causes in the religious life? If they are not, is it because they lack will-power, because they are exercises more than acts, productions more than powers, which aim at impression more than at change? Is it because they lack behind them the volume of a Church's conviction, a Church's faith, the impact of a whole Church's will? Is it because we are more eager to have in our pulpits the manly man than the new man?

Ian Pennicook, 29th August 1995.

Creation, Worship and the Triune God

And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

This statement is taken from the introductory section of ‘The Creed of Saint Athanasius’. What is significant for our study is that this creed, while fundamentally a statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, commences with the insistence that the God whom we must describe in such doctrinal terms is the God whom we *worship*. The assumption is that the church is essentially a worshipping community. An examination of the history of the church shows this to be so.¹ However, while we may observe church practices, that in itself provides little justification; ‘we do it because we do it’. The various forms of worship do not of themselves explain the content. P D Manson has put it that ‘What is central to Christian worship is not “forms” but the presence of the triune God’.² Manson adds that God is present ‘through his word, the Bible, and ... his Holy Spirit’, but this is, of necessity, only true in the post-apostolic church, since the Bible as we know did not reach a fixed form until at least late in the second century. But allowing for this anachronism, it remains true that worship is far more than what we do.

Worship has to do with the triune God being present to his creation and the response of the creation. The ancient hymn, *Te Deum Laudamus*, puts it,

We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting. ...
The Father: of an infinite Majesty;
Thine honourable, true: and only Son;
Also the Holy Ghost: the Comforter.

Another hymn in ancient use, this time taken from the Apocryphal *Prayer of Azariah*, makes the point graphically:

O all ye Works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him forever
O ye Angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
O ye Heavens, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever
O ye Waters that be above the Firmament bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
O all ye Powers of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
O ye Sun and Moon, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
O ye Stars of Heaven, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
O ye Showers and Dew, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
O ye Winds of God, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
O ye Fire and Heat, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
O ye Winter and Summer, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.

¹ See, for example, R G Rayburn, ‘Worship in the Church’, in Walter A Elwell (Ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 1193ff.

² ‘Worship’, in Sinclair B Ferguson and David F Wright (Eds), *New Dictionary of Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1988, p. 732.

O ye Dews and Frosts, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Frost and Cold, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
 O ye Ice and Snow, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever
 O ye Nights and Days, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Light and Darkness, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Lightnings and Clouds, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O let the Earth bless the Lord: yea, let it praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Mountains and Hills, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O all ye Green Things upon the Earth, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever

O ye Wells, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Seas and Floods, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Whales, and all that move in the Waters, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O all ye Fowls of the Air, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O all ye Beasts and Cattle, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Children of Men, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O let Israel bless the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Priests of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Servants of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye Spirits and Souls of the Righteous, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O ye holy and humble Men of heart, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.
 O Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him for ever.

Or, going back further, there are the words of God himself in Job 38:4ff.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
 Tell me, if you have understanding.
 Who determined its measurements — surely you know!
 Or who stretched the line upon it?
 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone
 when the morning stars sang together
 and all the heavenly beings³ shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7).

How do the scriptures themselves present the matter of worship? It is one thing to read back into the accounts the detail of later revelation, but it is another to allow the original texts to unfold the subject in the way their own authors intended. Of course the wisdom of hindsight is wonderful, but it is often like a person who continually refuses to allow another to tell his own story by interrupting and explaining.

Creation And Worship

One of the benefits of critical studies of various books of the Bible is that we are freed from the constraints of rigid fundamentalism. This is particularly true of Genesis. In a recent Pastors' School study I suggested 'that if a later date for Genesis is valid then the writer may be expected to have had a far more detailed understanding of covenant when he wrote than would have otherwise been the case. The accounts of Genesis 1-11 need not, therefore, be in anyway primitive but may,

³ Heb. *sons of God*.

on the contrary, be carefully constructed accounts of the theological principles governing creation and its spoiling, utilising all the resources available through later reflection. Dumbrell's evaluation is that "the Old Testament appears to have been very carefully theologically edited".⁴ The same is true concerning worship. Some recent scholars⁵ have argued that the descriptions of creation, and especially of 'Eden', are intended to be recognised as being based on, or at least the basis for, the later language of the tabernacle and its worship in the wilderness, described in Exodus.

Dumbrell, for example, says of the establishment of the seventh day as blessed and holy (Gen. 2:2-3) that

God declares his work complete and, by implication, invites human beings to enter into the special situation of rest which the seventh day has brought into being. ... The links that Exodus 2:8-11 forges encourage us to see in the episode of the seventh day in Genesis 2 a model of what the later Sabbath was to represent. Humankind in direct fellowship with God in an unbroken relationship, living in harmony with the earth from which they were drawn and with the animate world with which they are placed in direct relationship, is the message of Genesis 2.⁶

The description in Genesis 2:8 of 'Eden' is also a pointer to the later worship of Israel. Without going into too much detail, the impression given by Genesis 2:7-8 is that Man (Heb. *Adam*) was created first and that the garden⁷ was planted later. The word 'Eden' carries the sense of 'pleasure' or 'delight' and if 'Eden' is not the place where God dwells it is at least the place where God was present to Man; God and Man were in intimate communication (see 2:15-17; 3:8, 10). The Tabernacle was later the expression of this presence of God to Israel.

The duty of Man to 'till' and to 'keep' the garden is indicative of far more than Man's function in creation. In Genesis 1: 26-29 Man is given dominion over all that God had made but in Genesis 2:15 the duty is 'in the garden of Eden' and the language of tilling and keeping, while having an ordinary agricultural sense, is also used to define the Levitical Tabernacle duties in Numbers 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26etc.⁸

In other words, the account of Man in the garden in Genesis is given in terms that establish Eden as the archetypal sanctuary, where God is present to Man and where Man knows an intimacy with God which is specifically 'priestly'. When Israel's cult was later set up with a high priest and other priests etc, the reason lies in the nature of Man as created. Sacrificial elements in the cult are, then, not *essentially* 'priestly' but become a necessary feature in the light of the Fall.

Outside of Eden

The curse placed upon fallen Man is given in two forms, corresponding to the two descriptions of (i) his relationship with creation in Genesis 1:26ff and (ii) his relationship with Eden in Genesis 2:15-17. First, in Genesis 3:17-19, the ground is cursed because of him and as a result stands as

⁴ W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation, A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984, p. 17.

⁵ See W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, Apollos, Leicester, 1989, p. 21; *The End of the Beginning*, Lancer, Homebush West, 1985, pp. 40-42; Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1, Word, Dallas, 1987, pp. 53f, 61, 67.

⁶ *The Faith of Israel*, p. 18f.

⁷ Only in Gen. 2:8 is the phrase 'in Eden' used. Elsewhere it is 'garden of Eden' or simply 'Eden' (see Wenham, *Genesis*, p. 61).

⁸ Wenham, *Genesis*, p. 67; Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, p. 19.

the gift (Gen. 1:29) which cannot fulfil its function (cf. Rom. 8:19-22). Second, in 3:22-24, the Man (*Adam*) was put out of ‘the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken’. He now tills, but it is outside of the ‘delights’ of the intimacy. Indeed, it is quite impossible for Man of himself to return to the source of life. He has thus ‘died’ (cf. Gen. 2:17). The placing of the cherubim and a flaming sword at the east of the garden is evidently a paradigm, too, for the later worship of Israel. Cherubim (the plural of *cherub*, by no means ‘a beautiful or innocent child’⁹) were

human-headed winged lions, the traditional guardians of holy places in the near East. ... In Israel pictures of cherubim adorned the walls of the tabernacle and temple (Exod. 26:31; 1 Kings 6:29), a pair of solid cherubim formed the throne of God on the ark (Ex. 25:18-22) and a very large pair guarded the inner sanctuary of the temple (1 Kings 6:23-28). ... Again one is reminded of the orientation of the tabernacle and temple, which were entered from the east.¹⁰

The episode of Cain’s murder of Abel and the subsequent expulsion is also indicative of the later worship of Israel. There the people of Israel were to present to God the ‘first-fruits’ of grain (Lev. 2:14-16) and the ‘first-born’ of the animals (Ex. 22:30; 34:19). Conspicuously this is what Abel offered but there is no mention of this detail with reference to Cain. Equally conspicuous is the statement that ‘the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard’ (Gen. 4:4-5). In Hebrews 11:4 we are informed that Abel was a man of faith and that it was this which made his offering more acceptable. But Hebrews does not tell us how Abel’s faith was expressed.

The usual English translation of verse 7, ‘if you do well, will you not be accepted?’ is translated by Wenham as ‘will you not be forgiven?’.¹¹ If this is correct, then we may understand that the sacrifices of the two sons was related to forgiveness which was, in turn, related to a restoration to the presence of God and so to the intimacy which Adam had lost. Genesis 4:14, 16 details Cain’s judgment; ‘I shall be hidden from your face’ and ‘Cain went away from the presence of the Lord’. His destination was ‘the land of Nod, east of Eden’. Far from returning to the Lord’s presence, Cain is now further from the place of delights, the presence of God, than were his parents.

What is being suggested in all this is that these opening chapters of Genesis establish the principle of worship. Man is created to worship and this sets the pattern for all humanity.¹² Positively we see that there were those who ‘called upon the name of the LORD’ (Gen. 4:26). Both Enoch and Noah ‘walked with God’ (Gen. 5:24; 6:9). Noah’s first act after coming out of the ark was to build an altar and to offer sacrifices of ‘clean’ birds and animals (Gen. 8:20). This is another clear anticipation of the later sacrifices of Israel and may be seen here as Noah, the head of redeemed humanity, propitiating God by his offering. As a result, God promises that no further curses will be added to creation. On the contrary, Genesis 9:1-17 specifies that the covenant of creation is affirmed. By implication, the intention of God to have priestly worship is established. Negatively, we are made aware of the alternate worship of idolatry, although this is not seen as a threat to the purposes of God. Abraham, though once an idolater (Josh. 24:14-15) was met by God (Gen. 12:1; Acts 7:2) and the result was that he, too, ‘called on the name of the LORD’ (Gen. 12:8).

⁹ So the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

¹⁰ Wenham, *Genesis*, p. 86.

¹¹ *Genesis*, p. 93, 104. Cf. Davidson, *Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament*, MacDonald, Mac Dill, *nd*, p. DLXIII.

¹² The matters of holiness as meaning intimacy with God who is also ‘wholly other’, which were raised at the 1995 Spring School, should be seen as significant here.

Israel's worship

The purpose of redemption was worship. Thus Exodus 4:22-23:

²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. ²³ I said to you, “Let my son go that he may worship me.”’

Prior to this directive, Moses was told that the sign of his commission being from God was that Israel would worship at Sinai (Gen. 3:12). Paul told the Romans that God had given to Israel ‘the worship’ (Rom. 9:4). Apart from Israel, while there were people of faith, for example Melchizedek and Jethro, there was no clear understanding of worship outside of Israel (cf. John 4:22 — ‘You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews’).

Fundamentally, worship requires redemption.¹³ In this, Israel was a paradigm for the worship by all humanity. But more than this, Israel was to be the vehicle by which all humanity, all the families of the earth, would be brought to God. Hence, when Israel had been brought out of Egypt and stood at the foot of Sinai, Moses was told,

³ Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴ You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶ but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:3-6).

Israel could not accomplish anything by its worship; God had already ‘brought you to myself’. This intimacy, not altogether pleasurable (Ex. 19:16), is seen in the way the presence of God on the mountain brings the very words of God to Israel. ‘God spoke all these words ...’ (Ex. 20:1). The commandments were evidence of the presence of God, not a means to it:

³² For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? ³³ Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? ³⁴ Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? ³⁵ To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. ³⁶ From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. ³⁷ And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, ³⁸ driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. ³⁹ So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. ⁴⁰ Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time. (Deuteronomy 4:32-40).

The commandments, statutes and ordinances of Israel were the stuff of the worship of Israel. The sacrificial cultus, that is, what was done in the tabernacle, was what kept the intimacy of Israel with God.

¹³ See David Peterson, *Engaging with God*, Apollos, Leicester, 1992, p. 26ff.

If you do well, will you not be forgiven? (Genesis 4:7) But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered (Ps 130:4). 'The blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified' (Heb. 9:13). But all of life was the worship of Israel. The law, the *Torah*, spelled out the way Israel was to live within the relationship which God had established. The redemption which was continually renewed in the sacrifices caused the worshippers to find exquisite delight in the cultus. So Psalm 84 –

¹How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

²My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

³Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

⁴Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. *Selah*

⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! *Selah*

⁹Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.

¹⁰For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.

¹²O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

As the songs of the worship of Israel, the Psalms overflow with the delight of those who know the presence of God. 'You bestow on [the king] blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence' (Ps. 21:6). The redeemed David recognises that the sacrificial cultus is not an end in itself; it is merely the means. So Psalm 40:6-8

⁶Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

⁷Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

⁸I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

In Psalm 36 he wrote,

⁷How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

⁸They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

⁹For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Psalms 36:7-9).

This is the language of Eden. In fact the Hebrew word for 'delights' is the same word as 'Eden'. But with or without the precise words, the substance of the worship of Israel is the truth of creation.

True Worship

What has been said of Israel's worship is perhaps only part of the picture. Certainly for many the cult did become an end in itself. This is borne out in Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees, for whom the aspect of right behaviour had become the dominant feature (see Mark 7:1-8). But it must not be overlooked that there were always those 'who have not bowed to Baal' (1Kings 19:18; Rom. 11:4); Simeon 'was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him' (Luke2:25); Anna, the prophetess, 'never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day' (Luke 2:37); Joseph of Arimathea 'was a good and righteous man ... waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God' (Luke 23:50-51).

Yet, in all this, Jesus' own intimacy with the Father, through the Holy Spirit, stood in strong contrast to all that had been known since creation. Not only is God now revealed as Trinity¹⁴ but also 'Man' is seen engaged in worship which is total, requiring no propitiatory features. What is more, the worship is twofold. First it is shown pre-dating his humanity. The one who in his flesh revealed the Father's glory was the one who, as the Word, was with God in the beginning and was God (John 1:1). Such was the intimacy that he stood *pros ton theon*, a phrase meaning 'in the presence of God'¹⁵ Statements such as 'the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world' (John 10:36) and 'the Father and I are one' (John 10:30) reach a climax in John 17 where the intimacy of Jesus with the Father is shown to flow out of the relationship which he had known before creation.

⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. (John 17:4-5).

While scripture does not say that the Son 'worshipped' the Father, we may, for the implication is there nonetheless. He was in the presence of the Father, he obeyed the Father in so much as the command was given in the presence. This was surely what was meant when Jesus said, 'Father ... your will be done on earth *as it is in heaven*' (Matt. 6:9-10). Furthermore, the service was constrained by love (John 17:24).

Yet it is as this Word become flesh that we know him. Jesus (the name belongs only to him as incarnate) is repeatedly shown to be Man as Adam was Man. His genealogy is traced back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38) and he is described as being born through the agency of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:30-35; cf. Gen. 2:7 etc). His temptations may be seen as a recapitulation of the events in Genesis 3 where the word spoken to Man was called into question. Jesus' response, however, is to insist that his purpose in not yielding to the suggestions is to live by the word spoken by God (Lu. 4:4, see Deut. 8:3), to worship him alone (Lu. 4:8) and to allow God to set the parameters for his life (Lu. 4:12).

¹⁴ Although the word 'Trinity' was not used until coined by Tertullian in the late second century, and the understanding of the Trinity was not finally (?) defined until the fourth and fifth century councils, the way God is described within the New Testament is quite distinct from the Old Testament. Titles and defining creeds could still only arise because of the revelation which Jesus brought. Apart from him the idea of the Trinity would never have arisen.

¹⁵ Cf. C K Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, SPCK, London, 1958, p. 129; Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Volume I (Anchor Bible), Doubleday, London, 1966, p. 4f. D A Carson's warning against reading the idea of 'motion towards', the usual way of understanding *pros* with the accusative, should be noted; *The Gospel According to John*, Inter-Varsity press, Leicester, 1991, p. 116.

Within this, Jesus remained totally loyal to the cultus, both in the temple worship and in the synagogue activities.¹⁶ Indeed, 'the Sermon on the Mount' demonstrates that Jesus was more loyal to the Law than were the Pharisees. He did not, as one man suggested, correct the Old Testament;¹⁷ on the contrary, he radicalised the law by taking the issue back to its creational purpose (see, for example, Matt. 19:3-9).

When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, he responded to her question concerning true worship, plainly the essential question to ask if he *is* a prophet, by saying:

²¹Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:21-24).

Up to that point worship was focussed on the worship of Israel, which meant that it was Jerusalem (the temple) and not the Samaritan Mount Gerizim which was the centre. However the time was coming, in fact had already arrived, when true worshippers would not require these material foci but would be in direct communion with the Father. That this 'now is' indicated that already the Man Jesus was in that worship. He was the Man of the Spirit (John 1:32-34) and the truth of intimacy with the Father was in him (John 14:6).

'The hour is coming' is a phrase expounded elsewhere in John. For example, in John 7:37-39 we read:

³⁷On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water".' ³⁹Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit [given], because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39).

Probably the description of living water flowing comes from Ezekiel chapter 47, but equally, may we see it as coming from Genesis 2:10, 'A river flows out of Eden to water the garden'? Could there be the inference that those who believe in Christ receive the Spirit as a result of his glorification and so become the dwelling place of God? The point of true worship, of deepest intimacy with God, is the human heart.

John 14-16 surely takes this theme up by promising that, when the Spirit comes, Christ himself comes to us and so the Father and Son make their abode in the believers.

²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. ... ²³Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. (John 14:20-21, 23).

¹⁶ The Synagogue was not part of the Old Testament religious life, only developing during the inter-testamental period. However, the reading of scripture and the exposition given there were a necessary adjunct to the Jerusalem cultus.

¹⁷ A B Bruce said, 'Christ's position as fulfiller of the law entitled him to point out the defects of the law itself ... and there is reason to believe that ... he actually does so'. For details see Ian Pennicook, *Living in the Kingdom*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p. 19f.

But for this to happen, the great worship of the Father by Jesus must reach its climax. Over against the lack of true worship comes the Man who is obedient, because he loves the Father (John 14:31). He becomes 'obedient unto death' (Phil. 2:8). This was the supreme worship.

It is in the letter to the Hebrews that this is made most plain. David Peterson puts it thus:

Hebrews presents the most complete and fully integrated theology of worship in the New Testament. All the important categories of Old Testament thinking on this subject - sanctuary sacrifice, altar, priesthood and covenant - are taken up and related to the person and work of Jesus Christ. More than any other New Testament document, Hebrews makes it clear that the inauguration of the new covenant by Jesus means the fulfilment and replacement of the whole pattern of approach to God established under the Mosaic covenant. The writer proclaims the end of that earthly cult, by expounding Christ's work as the ultimate, heavenly cult.¹⁸

The stress in Hebrews is that Jesus offers the ultimate worship, bringing Jewish worship to a conclusion, by being our great High Priest and offering his own blood as the once for all propitiation for sins. Henceforth, the worshippers have access, albeit in hope, to the inner shrine, the holy of holies, because Christ has entered there on our behalf (Heb. 6:19-20). But he has gone there as Man; all that was true of created Man is true of him and in him (Heb. 2:8-10).

The letter reaches the great conclusion that believers have come to the very heart of true worship, not by a return to the Jerusalem cultus, but by coming to Christ.

¹⁸You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear'.) ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:18-24).

The sprinkled blood is not, as the hymn writer put it 'pleading for our pardon'. Quite the contrary, the blood of Christ speaks a better word than that of Abel because it declares eternal redemption. The pardon has been won. Hebrews 9:11-12 claims

¹¹But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), ¹²he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, *having obtained*¹⁹ eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12).

Believers do offer cultic worship, but it is the 'sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name' which is offered (Heb. 13:15). Peter says a similar thing,

¹⁸ *Engaging With God*, p. 228. For his discussion of Hebrews and Worship, see pp. 228-260.

¹⁹ RSV and NRSV have 'thus obtaining', NIV 'having obtained'; the Greek *heuramenos*, the aorist middle participle of *heurisko*, does not indicate time so much as the nature of the action. Whether it is coincident with his entry (NRSV) or antecedent (NIV) is a matter of exegesis. See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (NIGTC), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, p. 452f.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1Peter 2:4-5).

Yet 'spiritual sacrifices' are not unsubstantial. Rather, Paul reminds the Romans that on the basis of the (received) mercies of God, they should present their bodies as living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God - *that* is their spiritual worship (12:1).

The priestly intimacy now granted to all believers is seen as the context for the life which is worship. Such passages as Ephesians 3:14-19 demonstrate the passion of Paul for believers to be fully functioning in the triune God. Without doubt this issues in rich corporate worship (Eph. 5:18-20) as well as in harmonious relationships (Eph. 5:20-6:9). But lying behind all this is the awareness that believers are 'in Christ', 'the new Man', 'the last Adam', and as such they are 'a new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24; 1 Cor. 15:45). Their life of worship is the life of the true creation restored though the new Man.

The great worship!

In a world where false worship abounds there is an *eternal* gospel:

⁶Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth--to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water'. (Revelation 14:6-7).

True worship is, and has always been, directed towards God the creator. This is why the call goes out in these terms. Men and women are under the obligation of creation to worship, and as we have seen, will always do so (even believers will misdirect their worship, see Rev. 19:10). But the book of the Revelation opens the reality of a worship far beyond the limits of human expression. Certainly men and women worship, but their worship has been given to them, just as Israel's worship was given to them, and it has been given for us to participate in the great worship.

Revelation 4 is overwhelming in its description of the great worship. There is a vision of the throne in heaven where God the creator is worshipped. The twenty four elders are there (vs. 4), no doubt representing the people of God from both old and new dispensations, and there are the four living creatures, representative of all animate creation (vss. 6b-7). The worship of these living creatures, in the language of Isaiah 6:3, is so powerful that the twenty four elders cannot restrain themselves; they too are caught up in the worship and declare that

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. (Revelation 4:11).

But there is more, for when John is aware that the plan of God is being administered by the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David (5:5) he sees that the Lion has conquered because he is the Lamb slaughtered. When the Lion/Lamb takes the scroll the four living creatures and the twenty four elders again burst into rapturous praise.

⁹They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; ¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth'. (Revelation 5:9-10).

This is a declaration that saints from every tribe and nation etc. are priests to our God. It is not a select group or even Israel alone who are priests but all the redeemed. In chapter 7, when John sees the great multitude which no one could count, all with robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb he hears them singing,

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! (Revelation 7:10).

and the elders and the living creatures join them,

singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen'. (Revelation 7:12).

The purpose of this redemption is worship.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple ... (Revelation 7:15).

But when recognition of the priestly service of the redeemed is made there are *far more* than the elders, the living creatures and even the redeemed involved in the worship.

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshiped. (Revelation 5:11-14).

This all creation, celestial and terrestrial. bursting with uncontainable worship. Doubtless this is the archetypal worship, of which all other is only an expression, but at the same time as we may understand creation as part of this we may also do well to see this revelation as the climax of God's revelation of himself. The Lamb has the seven spirits of God (the seven-fold Spirit) and so he takes his place with the Father and together the triune God is adored and served by all creation. For us, even as we may now 'rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory' (1 Pet. 1:8), there yet remains the consummation of history, when there is a new heavens and a new earth, that is, when the heavens and the earth are re-newed, liberated from their bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Ian D Pennicook, 5th October 1995

The Goodness of God

'Goodness' is a rather vague subject in general conversation. When we say that something is 'good' we may be saying nothing more than that it is 'appropriate' for its responsibilities; for example, a 'good' fire may be one which keeps a person warm, but when the number of people sitting around it increase then, without any change in the fire's production of heat it may cease to be 'good'. This is similar to the way we describe a child as 'good' when all we mean is that it does not interfere with our enjoyment or sleep etc. Again, the adjective 'good' could be applied to something like a lie, 'He told a good one', or to a crowd of people, 'A good number were in attendance', where the description merely indicates that some sort of approval. It is not impossible that the word could also be used in a patronising way, as in the phrase, 'My good man' etc.¹

What we observe, then, is that in common usage, 'to describe someone as 'good' need not be regarded as saying that they are particularly virtuous. The same could be said of some of the uses in the Scriptures; Absalom, following the rape of his sister Tamar, 'spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon' (2 Sam. 13:22), meaning that he said nothing at all, of either pleasantries or rudeness. Proverbs 31:18 calls the merchandise of the capable wife 'good' which the NRSV translates 'profitable'. Soil is called 'good' (Ezek. 17:8) and Abraham chose a 'good' calf for the three visitors (Gen. 18:7).

This wide range of meanings has been summarised as follows: 'In Hebrew, טוב [tob] means that a person or thing is in accordance with the acknowledged practical, moral or religious standards'.² The New Testament basically uses two words for 'good'; ἀγαθός (*agathos*) generally carries the moral meaning while καλός (*kalos*) has the sense of 'beautiful', though the two are sometimes synonymous.

However, it is the moral use of 'good' and 'goodness' which concerns us for the present, and Guthrie and Martin conclude that 'The concept of goodness is difficult to define but is nevertheless generally recognised to be closely linked with the moral holiness of God'.³ While not disagreeing with the general thrust of this conclusion, I would want to ask if there may not be some way of more precisely understanding the matter of God's goodness.

Understanding 'the good'

It is acknowledged that there are 'good' people. Luke describes Joseph of Arimathea as 'a good and righteous man' (Luke 23:50) and Barnabas 'was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith' (Acts 11:24). Also the possibility of 'good' people is anticipated in such statements as 'The good person brings good things out of a good treasure' (Matt. 12:35), while the king, in Jesus' parable of the wedding feast, sent out his slaves who 'went out into the streets and gathered an gathered all whom they found, both good and bad' (Matt. 22:10).⁴ There is also the acknowledgment that Jacob and Esau had done neither good nor bad when God elected them (Rom. 9:11) and Paul, in Romans 5:7, envisages that a good man may be more inspiring than one who is righteous.

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* lists 17 usages of the adjective 'good'.

² J. Hempel, 'Good', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, E-J, Abingdon press, Nashville, 1962, p.440.

³ D. Guthrie and R P. Martin, 'God', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, IVP, Downer's Grove, 1993, p. 365.

⁴ See also Matt. 25:21; and John 7:12; also Judges 8:35 and 2 Chron. 24:16.

While this verse is superficially clear in its meaning, the distinction between ‘righteous’ and ‘good’ is not made plain by Paul. In the context of the argument of Romans; we may have expected that to be righteous would be the pinnacle of acceptability. C.E.B Cranfield⁵ thinks that the best sense is given if τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ (*tou agathou*) is understood as ‘the benefactor’ (cf. Ps. 73:1; 118:1). If this is correct then it may assist us later in our definition.

But still we are not able yet to say precisely what ‘goodness’ is. A similar dilemma is addressed by Plato in his Socratic dialogue, *Euthyphro*, where he poses the question concerning the nature of holiness. As Socrates leads Euthyphro through the discussion, he asks him ‘Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?’⁶ If we read ‘good’ for ‘holy’ we would then ask if something is ‘good’ because God approves it, or does God approve it because it is good? Either way, we still have a problem, since we would be suggesting that there is something called ‘goodness’ which is intrinsic to some persons or things and which God approves. But the question itself is incorrect. The search for goodness will be fruitless, for there is no such *thing* as goodness; there is only God.

Jesus’ conversation with ‘the rich young ruler’ is significant: Matthew records the man as asking, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?’ (Matt. 19:16) and Mark, ‘Good teacher, what must I do ...?’ (10:17, cf. Luke 18:18). But Jesus’ reply is to state that only God is good. Matthew has it ‘Why do you ask me concerning a good thing; *one person* is the good (one)’ (19:17).⁷ The assumption was that the young man had some capacity *of himself* to do some good thing, or even that Jesus was, as a man, able to be described as good. On the contrary, people and things can only be ‘good’ as they stand in direct relationship to God. It was at this point that we must reject Socrates’ question.

God is good

How do we know that God is good? Fundamentally, we know it by revelation, but in particular we know it by the way God is described in his dealings with creation and with men and women. See what God does!

Creation is not merely the backdrop for history; it is its rationale. Yet to see the great action of creation is to see that it is ‘good’ and then ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). If it is good, then it is so because it derives from God and is consistent with his being and purpose. In the light of the hope of ‘a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet. 3:13), we may say that the first creation was not merely aesthetically good but vibrant with holiness and beauty and purpose and dynamically able to fulfil the needs of its inhabitants in every way. Far from creation being an act of grace, with grace being understood in its true sense of restoring something which was lost by sin’s entrance, or even understood as an ‘unmerited favour’, creation is the outflow of God’s pure and unbounded generosity. No wonder that when creation was brought into being, ‘the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings (lit. *sons of God*) shouted for joy’ (Job 38:7).

So, even after the fall, it is not impossible that good gifts may be given, since creation still stands under the good giving of God; ‘every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above,

⁵ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Volume I, ICC, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1975, p. 264f and n.4.

⁶ Reginald E. Allen (Ed), *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, The Free Press, New York, 1966, p. 67.

⁷ τί με ἐρωτᾷς περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ; εἶς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός.

coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change' (James 1:17). It is not because men and women are 'essentially good' but because God himself does not change that we see any good coming from men and women. The creation continues to function because God has continued to express himself. So Acts 14:15-17,

¹⁵Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; ¹⁷yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.

The joy of living is evidence of God's continued bounty. The Psalmist cries out:

⁸O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
⁹O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
¹⁰The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. (Psalm 34:8-10).

God's goodness is known in his giving. Goodness is not some abstract moral quality but is the overwhelming generosity of God. Nehemiah described Israel in the promised land: 'they ate, and were filled and became fat, and delighted themselves in your great goodness' (9:25) and speaks of 'the great goodness you bestowed upon them' (9:35). His closing words are a plea that, in the face of all he has done for God, when God comes to act generously, 'remember me' (13:31).

Without overlooking the hardships which come to all people and especially to the people of faith, it remains a constant theme that God's generosity is a cause of great joy.

¹⁰For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.
¹¹For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.
¹²O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you. (Psalm 84:10-12).

When Leah had borne her sixth son, she declared that 'God has endowed me with a good dowry' (Gen. 30:20) and Moses commanded Israel to 'celebrate with all the bounty (*RSV in all the good*) that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house' (Deut. 26:11). Repeatedly, the promised land is called 'the good land'; it is God's gift to Israel (see Deut. 1:25; 3:25; 4:21, 22; 6:18 etc).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminded his disciples that God the Heavenly Father is continually generous to his creation; how then could they not trust him for all the necessities of life? (Matt. 6:25-33). Moreover, they ought not be afraid to ask:

⁷Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11).

Asaph the psalmist wrote: 'Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart' (Ps. 73:1). Conspicuously, he says this in the face of the prosperity of the wicked (verses 3-9). His conclusion was reached, not by thinking on his own material well-being but by being confronted by God in his sanctuary.

¹⁷until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.

¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.

¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!

²⁰They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms.

²¹When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,

²²I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.

²³Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.

²⁴You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour.

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.

²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

²⁷Indeed, those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you.

²⁸But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, to tell of all your works.

(Psalm 73:17-28).

His conclusion, then, is not that God is *good* so much that *God* is good. The material prosperity of the wicked is a deception; it will not last. But the alternative is not poverty; it is God. Thus, verses 25-26, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you ...' For Asaph, the 'good' is to be near God (vs. 28).

With this in mind, a 'Prosperity Doctrine' is unthinkable. Quite apart from the simple fact that the Scriptures do not support a teaching which suggests that Christians should as a matter of principle be materially prosperous, the issue is that God is good and the good things which come from him must relate to his plan and purpose and not merely to our comfort.

The story of the Fall of Man is told in these terms. Adam and Eve were told not to touch 'the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (Gen. 2:17). Access to the tree of life, the alternative, was certainly there (though having chosen one they could not have the other) but knowledge of good and evil was not in the gift of God. The Lord gives good gifts out of his own goodness and it is not for the creature to decide what is good. Genesis 3:6a is quite an amazing statement,

So ... the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate ...

It was simply untrue. The fruit would not do any of these things at all. It was never given for food. The assumption was that she would determine what was appropriate for the moment.

It was thus that God's goodness to his people was that he restated the creational principle (see Rom. 2:15) by giving Israel his Law. Nehemiah 9:13-14 puts it

¹³You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them *right* ordinances and true laws, *good statutes and commandments*, ¹⁴and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses.

It was pure generosity that God did not allow Israel (and, through Israel, 'many peoples' - Isa 2:3) to rely on warped judgment as to what is good. Hence Paul, when recounting the way sin uses the

Law to kill, nonetheless insisted that ‘the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good’ Rom. 7:12).

When Psalm 118:1 says, ‘O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good’, it adds, ‘his steadfast love endures forever’. This equation is significant in that it shows that God’s goodness is expressed in his ‘covenant faithfulness’ (‘steadfast love’ translates the Hebrew, **חֶסֶד**, *chesed*⁸). It is God’s covenant purpose to bless his people. Expressed in material terms, and initially experienced in material terms, was the great blessing of God, later to be expressed as, but always to be found in ‘righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:17).

But covenant faithfulness does not imply indulgence. For example, Deuteronomy chapter 28 opens with a list of blessings which are attendant upon covenant obedience, but this is followed by a list of the curses attendant upon covenant disobedience. The curses are not to be understood as God’s vindictive spite towards those who reject him; rather they are equally the outworking of his eternal purpose for his good creation. In Israel’s case, God will punish simply because of his purpose to bless. Were he to allow evil to go unchecked his own ‘goodness’ would be more than called into question, it would be frustrated.

The same principle is seen in Hebrews 12:5-29. In terms clearly based on Israel’s wilderness experiences, the writer reminds the readers that as children of God (cf. Deut. 14:1) they must regard the discipline that comes upon them as the discipline of love. ‘He disciplines us for our good’ (verse 10). The reason is clear; there is an inheritance for the saints which is far more than any earthly, material blessing (see verses 18-24), it is ‘a kingdom that cannot be shaken’ (verse 28). With this as the goal, mere comfort would be a total contradiction.

This is by no means to deny that God ‘richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment’ (1 Timothy 6:17) or that legalistic abstinence is a violation of the principle that ‘everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God’s word and by prayer’ (1 Tim. 4:4-5). But it is to assert that where these *things* become more important than God, then God must, for the sake of his own purpose, keep his people true to his call. Philippians 1:6 sets the agenda: ‘I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ’, and the letter closes with Paul’s gratitude for the Philippians generous gift. But the joy in the gift is placed in a far wider context.

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

¹⁵You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and

⁸ ‘When the term is used of God it denotes that deep commitment of God to his people that reaches out beyond the mere demands of reciprocal obligation such as those specified by law or custom’; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, (NICOT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 319.

pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:10-19).

The overall questions are, ‘what are the needs of the Philippians?’ and ‘who determines them?’ To set ourselves as the ones to decide these matters is to run counter to the matter of Matthew 6:25-33, which is a restatement of the great goodness of God in creation, that all the needs are met for those who seek the Father’s kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

The curse of the blessing

The danger of receiving the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1) must not be forgotten. The very blessings which came from the goodness of God may become a snare to the recipients if the gifts become an end in themselves. For example, Deuteronomy 8 warns Israel not to ‘forget the LORD your God’ (vs. 11) by saying ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth’ (vs. 17). The wealth is always to be seen and received as the gift of God.

¹⁸But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. ¹⁹If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.

²⁰Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 8:18-20).

Likewise, the gifts which so enrich the church may also become a snare to the church which fails to use them as they were intended, namely, in and for love (1 Cor. 13:1-4). This is possibly what is intended in 1 Corinthians 14:20-25, where an undue emphasis on tongues and not on the living word of God, prophecy (cf. Deut. 8:3), causes unbelievers to assume that the speakers are ‘out of your mind’ rather than bringing them to participation in the worship.⁹

⁹ An extended discussion of the approaches to this passage is found in D.A Carson, *Showing the Spirit, A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*, Lancer, Homebush West, 1988, pp. 108-117. Carson’s preferred option is as follows:-

In the context of Isaiah 28:9-13, the ‘strange tongues’ of foreigners (ie., the Assyrian troops) represent God’s visitation in judgment on his people. They had refused to listen to him and repent when he spoke clearly; now he will visit them through invading hordes by whom he will ‘speak’ in a language (Assyrian) whose content they will not understand, even though in it they will ‘hear’ a message of judgment. The ‘strange tongues’ therefore do not convey content to the unbelieving Israelites, but they do serve as a sign — a negative sign, a sign of judgment. This is the example to which Paul appeals. In the Law it is written (and by ‘Law’ here he means what we would call the Old Testament Scriptures) that at a crucial juncture in the history of the covenant community, God ‘spoke’ to his people through ‘strange tongues.’ But when he did so, he was speaking a message of judgment. It appears, then, that when God speaks through strange tongues and the lips of foreigners to unbelievers, at least here it is a sign of his judgment upon them.

It may have been that some believers in Corinth were justifying their indiscriminating overemphasis on tongues by extolling their virtue as a witness to unbelievers, as a sign to them of God’s powerful presence in the life of the church. Paul replies, in effect: Yes, you are partly right. Tongues are a sign for unbelievers. But if you examine how the Scriptures describe the relationship between unbelievers and ‘strange’ (ie., foreign and unknown) tongues, you discover that they constitute a negative sign. They are a sign of God’s commitment to bring judgment. But when in the same verse (v. 22), Paul says that prophecy is a sign for believers, does he not mean this in a positive sense?

Indeed, the most frequent criticism of this interpretation — in fact, the only one that is regularly raised against it—is that it uses ‘sign’ in a negative sense with respect to the gift of tongues, and in a positive sense with respect to the gift of prophecy. But two things must be said in defence of this interpretation. First, it is possible that verse 22 is commenting on the situation in Isaiah’s day. The unbelievers faced judgment, and were addressed by God in the unintelligible language of foreigners; but there remained a godly remnant who benefited, not from tongues, but from prophecy — Isaiah’s prophecy (see Isa. 8:16). In other words, the distinction as to whether a certain phenomenon served as a positive sign or a negative sign extends back into the context of Isaiah. Second, the word σημεῖον (*semeion*, sign), especially in the Septuagint, often simply means, ‘an indication of God’s attitude.’ Whether those indications are positive or negative is a subordinate issue. Grudem provides long lists of examples in which signs are entirely positive (eg., the rainbow [Gen.9: 12,13,14]; the blood on the doorpost [Exod.12:13]; the mark on the forehead [Ezek. 9:4, 6]), entirely negative (the bronze censers of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram [Num.16:38]; the defeat of Pharaoh Hophra [Jer.44:29]). In the former series, the ‘signs’ show God’s approval and blessing; in the latter, his disapproval and impending judgment. Indeed, many signs are simultaneously negative and positive: negative to the rebellious and unbelieving, and positive to the Lord’s faithful people (eg., the signs and wonders at the time of the exodus

God's good gift

The reality of fallen humanity is that, cut off from God, 'there is no one who does good, no, not one' (Pss. 14:1, 3; 53:1, 3¹⁰). In order to do 'good works' (Eph. 2:8-10) it is necessary for a person to be the recipient of 'God's inexpressible gift' (2 Cor. 9:15). In Romans 3:8 Paul quotes the perverse as suggesting 'Why not do evil that *good* may come?', while in Romans 6:1 he renders the sentiment as 'Shall we continue in sin that *grace* may abound'. The work of grace is the good work of God, his abounding generosity in giving himself. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son ...' (John 3:16).

The purpose of this giving is that men and women should be restored to their created position and so 'bear fruit in every good work' (Col. 1:10; Eph. 2:10). They ought to be continually functioning in 'every good work and word' (2 Thess. 2:16), 'complete in everything good, so that [they] may do his will' (Heb. 13:21).

Grace is purposive, and this is brought out in 2 Corinthians 8, where grace ought to be 'completed' (vs. 6) and 'abound' (vs. 7). What Paul is urging is 'generosity' and his reason for urging this response is that 'you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (vs. 9). Here the *NRSV* translates as follows:

verse 6 ... he should also complete this *generous undertaking* among you.

verse 7 Now as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you — so we want you to excel also in this *generous undertaking*.

were negative to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians [Exod.10: 1 -2; 11 :9- 10; Deut.6:22; Neh.9: 10]; but they were positive to Israel [Deut.4:34-35; 6:22; 7:19]). Even in the New Testament, a 'sign' can indicate God's approval and blessing (eg., Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; John 2:11) or God's disapproval and threat of impending judgment (Luke 11:30; 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19). In other words, it is more intrinsic to the word sign (σημειῶν, *semeion*) that something about God be 'sign-ified' than that the 'sign-al' be positive or negative. Paul may therefore not have cared if the 'sign' of tongues is negative and the 'sign' of prophecy is positive, even within the same verse; for in both instances the commonality was for him more decisive.

If this approach to the sign value of tongues is taken in verse 22, then there is no longer any difficulty in understanding verse 23. When outsiders or unbelievers come into a Christian assembly where every one is speaking in tongues, it will not be surprising if they simply conclude that the believers are possessed (which is probably what the word μαϊναεσθε [mainesthe] means). The two words I have rendered 'outsider' and 'unbeliever' probably refer to the same kinds of people: non-Christians. Because the first word is used in 14:16 to refer to the Christian without the gift of tongues, some have preferred to think it here refers to some sort of 'halfway' Christian, a catechumen perhaps. But that imposes too narrow a referent on the term, and fails to recognize its intrinsic genius: it simply means 'outsider'; but what this person stands outside of can be determined only by context. Because the flow of the argument in these verses contrasts believers with unbelievers, newcomers with the established Christian community, it seems best to see in 'outsiders and unbelievers' a double description of the non-Christian visitor to the congregation...

If an unbeliever enters the congregation when everyone is prophesying, instead of speaking in tongues, then communication takes place. It may even be communication designed by the Spirit to expose the secrets of his own heart and thereby to convict him of sin, bringing him to repentance and worship (14:24-25).

¹⁰ Although the Hebrew uses טוב [tob], when Paul quoted these verses in Romans 3:12 he used a different word for 'good', χρηστότητα, (*chrestoteta*) which the *NRSV* translates as 'there is no one who shows kindness' (lit. 'kindnesses'). Cf. Titus 3:4, where the same Greek word is used: 'the *kindness* and love of humanity (φιλάνθρωπί α, *philanthropia*) of God our Saviour appeared'. This should be seen against Titus 2:11, where Paul writes that 'the *grace* of God has appeared'.

verse 9 For you know the *generous act* of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

These good works, these generous works, do not mean that Paul is merely concerned with ethical behaviour. His view is far larger than that. The concern is based on the fact that believers are now restructured by the gift of grace in order to function in the truth of the likeness of God (Eph. 4:24). Once we were slaves to 'dead works' (Heb. 9:14) but now are freed for 'good works', those works which reflect, and express, the character and purpose of God, because those 'good works' are given and directed by him. Thus Paul described the Roman believers as 'full of goodness'.¹¹ Ephesians 5:9 reminds the readers that 'the fruit of light is found in all *goodness* and righteousness and truth' and, most expressively, Galatians 6:22 asserts that one of the fruit of the Spirit is 'goodness', which the *NRSV* translates as 'generosity'.

The rich giving of God, his generosity, his goodness, which is first seen at creation, which has been continually revealed ever since in the sustenance of what has been created and the particular care of the faithful, and which has been climactically revealed in the great action of redemption in Christ, is again to be seen in the redeemed. The Spirit expresses his own being in those who live and walk by the Spirit. Of course, this not something automatic; generosity, as with any other attribute of God, must be learned and habituated. But it can be learned and habituated because it is first evoked. And having been evoked, how can it not be habituated?

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¹¹ Cf. 2 Thess 1:11, where 'good resolve' translates εὐδοκίαν ἀγαθῶσυνῆθι, 'good pleasure of goodness'.

Knowing the Mystery of God

There are a number of things described as ‘mysteries’ in the New Testament: there is the mystery (mysteries) of the kingdom (Matt. 13:11; Mk 4:11; Lu. 8:10), the mystery of the hardening of part of Israel (Rom. 11:25), the mystery of God (1 Cor. 2:1 etc) and the mystery of his will (Eph. 1:9), the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4), the mystery of marriage (Eph. 5:32), the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19), the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:7), the mystery of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9) and the mystery of godliness (*NRSV* ‘our religion’) (1 Tim. 3:16).

The English word ‘mystery’ carries connotations of a ‘riddle’; solve the riddle and the mystery disappears, but this is not the sense of the word in the Scriptures. The English word is in fact a transliteration (not a translation) of the Greek μυστήριον (*musterion*), which comes from μύω (*muo*) meaning to shut (the mouth), meaning that which cannot be spoken. Coming from μύω is μύεω (*mueo*) originally meaning to initiate into the mysteries, so that the one initiated was called a μύστης (*mustes*).

The sense of the Greek word ‘mystery’, then, has nothing to do with anything difficult to understand. Rather it refers to that which may not be revealed to all and sundry. However, when used in the Scriptures, ‘mystery’ conveys something more. The mystery relates to the deep things of God and his amazing self-revelation. For men and women to know God, his nature and purposes always remains a privilege which God himself accords. Knowing the mystery of God is first a matter of relationship with God and only secondarily a matter of theological insight.

God is not hidden

In the face of Job’s assertion of his innocence and his insistence that God does indeed know it (Job. 10:2-7), Zophar the Naamathite responded,

2Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and should one full of talk be vindicated? 3Should your babble put others to silence, and when you mock, shall no one shame you? 4For you say, ‘My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God’s sight’. 5But oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you, 6and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

7Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? 8It is higher than heaven — what can you do? Deeper than Sheol — what can you know? 9Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. 10If he passes through, and imprisons, and assembles for judgment, who can hinder him? 11For he knows those who are worthless; when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it? 12But a stupid person will get understanding, when a wild ass is born human. (Job 11:2-12).

His argument is that Job cannot know God; the limits of God are far beyond any human capacity to know them. However, when Paul uses the words of verse 7¹, he makes the opposite point:

¹ This does not imply that he is consciously doing so. At the same time, considering the difficulty of identifying the source of the ‘quotation’ of verse 9, certainty on the matter is not possible.

⁷But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' -- ¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).

The depths of God are the very things which God chooses to make known to us by the Spirit. The phrase in 1 Corinthians 2:7, 'we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden' is literally, 'we speak a wisdom of God in a mystery'. In other words, Paul is fully conscious that he is working within a mystery, but the failure of the Corinthians to understand the wisdom which he wants to convey is not the way things ought to be. Indeed, it runs counter to the whole ministry of the Spirit. Believers ought to know the mysteries of God!

Paul uses himself as the illustration for this in Ephesians 3 —

²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; (Ephesians 3:2-9).

He says that (i) the mystery was made known to him by revelation; (ii) he has written (this letter) in order that the readers may perceive his understanding of the mystery and then (iii) that, as a result, all may see what is the plan of the mystery.

What is it, then, to know the mystery of God? We may say that the mystery of God is God himself. To know the mystery is to know God himself in the full intimacy which comes from the revelation he has given of himself. To a certain extent, Zophar was correct. Of himself, Job could never come to a knowledge of the deeps of God. But this is only provisionally correct; it is certainly not ontologically correct, that is, it is not the way things have been created and so as they are essentially are.

By creation Man was given full intimacy with God. The usual understanding of *Creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) is that once there was God alone, then there was the creation including Man and there was nothing from which the creation had any antecedent. While this is true in material terms, the Scriptures do not actually say so. Hebrews 11:3 only says that

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things *that are not visible*.

But the full picture of Man's creation forces us to the conclusion that creation was *ex Deo* (out of God). That is, Man as created did not stand over against God in any way. Even to speak of God as 'transcendent' does not force us to the conclusion that his 'otherness'

implies some distance from the creation. Rather Man was in total harmony and intimacy with God. We may even say that Man participated in the transcendence, only without himself being God. Transcendence only means that God is not the creation and the creation not God. God's 'immanence' is his coming to the creation, both in providence and redemption.² But I am suggesting that these ideas of God are essentially post-fall in their focus. Before the division caused by Man's sin, transcendence and immanence were not necessary distinctions. God created out of his own being and while distinct from his creation in deity was fully one with his creation relationally. *Typically*, a mother is not her child but her intimacy with the child does not come as some gift to the child following the birth; it is fundamental to the motherhood and the childhood. So she does not come *to* the child for intimacy. Likewise Adam and Eve were created *in* harmony and not merely *for* harmony.

As created, therefore, Man knew the mystery of God and for him it was no mystery. It is as fallen Man that the knowledge of the mystery is lost. Now not only does he not know God, he will not know God (Rom. 3:11). As Paul put it, Man 'does not think it fit to have God in knowledge' (Rom. 1:28). His thinking is futile and his senseless mind darkened; outside of the knowledge of the mystery of God Man truly *knows* nothing. Far from being wise he has become a fool, saying in his heart 'No God'. This does not mean that Man's created abilities on the horizontal plane have been diminished, but that simply functioning on the horizontal Man must continually create his own mysteries. Man, fallen short of the glory of God, cannot live without glory, and since true glory is the glory of the presence of God and he cannot abide the presence, he must of necessity devise a mystery for himself.

Rudolf Otto described the feelings Man has for God as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a mystery which is awe-ful and at the same time compelling.³ This results in a drive to worship in a mystery. In the ancient world it was the mystery religions which were most popular.

During the NT and subsequent eras the most popular religious forms in the Greco-Roman world were those of the mystery religions. Some of these had been imported from Egypt and the Orient, while others were indigenous to Greece. The traditional cults of the Olympic gods were no longer perceived as able to fulfill the common person's spiritual needs, and so there was a turning to those religions which promised salvation and a blessed afterlife. Immortality could be obtained through initiation into a secret experience which was intended to save the soul after death. Aristotle said that the initiated did not learn anything so much as they felt certain emotions and were put into a certain frame of mind. Cicero could maintain that Athens had given to the world no greater institution than that of the Eleusinian mysteries. They provided a reason to live with joy and to die with better hopes. Moreover, a civilized way of life had been established through the rites which were properly called 'initiation', since they indeed taught the beginnings of life. Women in particular responded to the promise of a brighter future, as well as to the increased recognition and participation which were theirs in the mystery cults.

The essence of the mysteries lay in their secrecy. One could incur the death sentence by revealing the mysteries through speech, pantomime, dance, or depiction. Thus it was that a complete understanding of their secrets perished with the last of their adherents. Their influence

² See for example, G.R.Lewis, 'God, Attributes of', in Walter A. Elwell (Ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, Grand rapids, 1984, p. 458f, for a summary of the traditional concepts.

³ *The Idea of the Holy*, (John W. Harvey trans.) Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959.

permeated ancient society so deeply, however, that the general outlines can be constructed with a considerable degree of certainty. Literally thousands of allusions to the mysteries remain in the form of literary references, vase paintings, reliefs, frescoes, inscriptions, funerary statues, and so forth. We are further aided by the confessions of certain of the church fathers who had been initiated into one or more of the mysteries, although their accounts are far from unbiased. Much religious detective work has been expended upon these ancient mysteries.

Seasonal celebrations marked the birth and death of vegetation gods and of yearly changes in the forces of nature. The mystic rites reenacted a myth concerning a divine figure who suffered some sort of violence, was mourned, and then restored to the grateful worshipers amid general jubilation. Beside the reenactment — which was usually accompanied with music, dancing, and sometimes stunning stage effects — there were acts performed, words spoken, objects revealed, a sacrifice offered, and a sacramental meal shared. Sexual symbols and activities were significantly present. Death, marriage, and adoption by the deity were often simulated, and in some cases the initiate was actually supposed thereby to attain divinity. While noise and wild tumult often accompanied the earlier stages of initiation, silence was attendant upon the ultimate unveiling of the truth. In the Mithras cult the initiate must lay his finger on his lips, address Silence as the symbol of the living, imperishable God, and pray, ‘Guard me, Silence’. The culmination of the Eleusinian rites was said to be the display in complete silence of a newly reaped ear of corn. Such beatific visions guaranteed a blessed afterlife to the initiate.

There were within the mysteries successive grades of initiation in which truth might be perceived in a progressive series. On several occasions Plato likened the discovery of philosophic truth to these levels of initiation. Theon of Smyrna described five stages, the first of which was purification. The second communicated some sort of explanation of the rite and an exhortation. There followed a revelation of a sacred spectacle, after which the initiate was crowned with a garland. Then came the final stage, the happiness of knowing that one was beloved of the gods. The objective was indeed participation in the divine life.⁴

The reason for outlining the content of the mystery religions at such length is in the observation that they have not, in fact, died out. They illustrate a principle which keeps re-occurring and which does so in the guise of the mystery of God. Thus there are attempts in many forms to provide a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As society changes its expectations so the attempts replace those that are now outworn, but it is the alternate mystery which is so significant. Quite apart from those attempts at mystery which are now termed ‘new age’ (and which are anything but ‘new’⁵) there are the attempts to provide spectacle, entertainment and the like as well as those of a more mystical variety.

Knowing The Mystery

The principle being enunciated here is that knowing the mystery of God is the reality which all the other forms attempt to emulate. As such, knowing the mystery of God is first and foremost a matter of intimacy with God in the whole of his being and the outworking of his

⁴ S. Motyer, ‘Mystery Religions’ in Walter A. Elwell (Ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, p.742f.

⁵ Compare also the emphasis on ‘spirituality’ and ‘journeys’. While these may have a valid use as terms to describe genuine Christian experiences, their overall vagueness means that it is possible to use them in such a way that the hearers are often inclined to provide their own content to our terms.

purposes in history. This being so, the language of rich delight is the natural expression of all that such intimacy bestows. For example,

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:11).

You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence. (Psalm 21:6).

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. ⁹O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. ¹⁰The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. (Psalm 34:8-10).

They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. (Psalm 36:8).

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." (Psalm 40:8).

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. (Psalm 46:4).

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. (Psalm 116:1).

This is the language of one who knows God and who knows that he knows. However, there is more than 'delight'; there is the inescapable reality of the knowledge of God which stands over against that which is counterfeit or, at best, which has become somewhat 'two dimensional'. For instance, we should examine the prophets of the Old Testament. Their 'word' was not necessarily a 'delight' to them or to their hearers; Jeremiah complained

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. ⁸For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. (Jeremiah 20:7-8).

and Ezekiel was told

As for you, mortal, your people who talk together about you by the walls, and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to a neighbor, 'Come and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD'. ³¹They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. ³²To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it. (Ezekiel 33:30-32).

The prophets are in good company:

Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, ⁴⁰but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹You are indeed doing what your father does'. They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself'. ⁴²Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. ⁴³Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. ⁴⁴You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer

from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God." (John 8:39-47).

The significance is that Jesus knows the Father and so recognises the counterfeit father. Thus,

Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, "He is our God", ⁵⁵though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. (John 8:54-55).

Later Jesus put it that he was in the Father and the Father in him (John 10:38; cf chapter 17). In John 5:17-20, Jesus explained that all that he did was the result of the Father showing him what he, the Father, was doing. This is not so very different to the prophets who spoke because they too were

... filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. (Micah 3:8).

Unlike the false prophets, the true prophet has a powerful word to speak because God himself has spoken directly *into* the prophet (see Jer. 1:9) and the prophet stands continually 'in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word' (Jer. 23:18).

This is, of course, the place where the whole church of the new covenant is now standing. The gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost is explained by Peter, quoting Joel 2:28-32, as bringing 'all flesh' into a prophetic intimacy with God.

This is nothing less than restoration into the intimacy of creation. The anointing of the Spirit which comes to 'all flesh', both Jew and Gentile (see Gal. 3:1-5; Col. 1:25-27 etc.), amounts to believers being in full communion with God. John put it that

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. (or, 'you know all things') ²⁷the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1John 2:20, 27).

That this is more than cognitive knowledge is shown in John's introduction, where he writes that his purpose is nothing less than participation in the fellowship with the Father and the Son (1 John 1:3). We may add to this, and in 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (2 Cor. 13:13).

From this perspective we can observe that worship is essentially relational. Romans 12:1-2 indicates that by presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice we are in the position to 'discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect'. 1 Corinthians 11:4 mentions praying and prophesying as the elements of corporate worship and these we may understand to be the two-way flow of the communion between God and his children. This is not to suggest that other things may not be found in corporate worship, but what is

understood in genuine prophecy is nothing less than the presence of the triune God himself (1 Cor. 14:25).

In 2 Corinthians 13:3 Paul insisted that ‘Christ is speaking in [him]’ and added ‘Do you not realize that Christ is in you?’ (13:5). Paul’s apostolic role did not make him superior to the Corinthians, only different. Both apostle and readers stand in the same intimacy with the Word of God. So there is the instruction to the Colossians, ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’ (3:16), which in Ephesians 5:18, understood in this light, is ‘Go on being filled with the Spirit’.

Of great significance is the language of the book of Acts. As has been frequently noted, the ‘hero’ of Acts is ‘the word’ (cf. Acts 4:29, 31; 6:7; 8:4; 19:20 etc). It should be noted that ‘the word’ in Acts does not cryptically refer to Jesus; that may have been the case if Acts had been written by John, so that it would have been understood in the light of the Prologue of John’s Gospel (1:1-18). Instead, we understand that the word is prominent in Acts because the whole church is, by virtue of the gift of the Spirit, the *prophetic* community. Now the whole church stands in the council of God and so speaks.

True ministry and the Mystery

This study is essentially a response to two comments made recently. One asked if a speaker had lost ‘the prophetic edge’ and the other suggested that it was possible to speak and preach with great theological accuracy but not to do so ‘out of the mystery’. Thus the church at Ephesus was told

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Rev. 2:2-5).

The church had maintained the truth without the intimacy and must repent if powerful testimony is again to be given. Paul reminded Timothy of his standing in Christ:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶For this reason I remind you *to rekindle the gift of God that is within you* through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

⁸Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, (2 Tim. 1:5-8).

Timothy’s ministry will be alive and powerful as he fans the gift he has received into life. He does not need to receive the gift again, simply to be alive to all that God has done and is doing.

How could Paul say that he ‘did not come proclaiming the mystery⁶ of God in lofty words or wisdom’ (1 Cor. 2:1)? We have already seen that his apostolic calling was to make the mystery known. But the issue is that he was aware that he was actually opening up the mystery of God to others. He knew the mystery and so must proclaim that. I suggest that the answer lies in the matter and manner of his proclamation. Hence he continued,

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.⁷ But we speak *God's wisdom in a mystery* which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1Cor. 2:2-7).

Determination to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified was not a formula for accurate preaching: it was the heart of the intimacy which is God’s gift. Many will recall the comment that so many students can preach powerfully *about* the cross while never really preaching the cross. Here is the issue. Paul was determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified because ‘I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal. 2:19f). He was insistent

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14).

The heart of true ministry, then, lies not in accurate information, important as that is, but in the mystery of God. Paul is a steward of the mystery. But as we have seen he is not alone in this. For ‘*You* have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God’ (Col. 3:3); ‘Those who belong to Christ Jesus *have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*’ (Gal. 5:24). True ministry flows from the mystery. It is the ministry of the co-crucified ones.

Hindrances to knowing the mystery

Jesus spoke of intimacy with himself and the Father, in John 15, in terms of the vine and the branches. The obligation of the branches is to abide in the vine and to bear fruit. This the same as being ‘God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works* which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’ (Eph. 2:10). So abiding in the vine, in Christ is ‘natural’ for the redeemed. Having intimacy with and delight in Christ is the norm. Why, then, do we so often seem to find all this so strange, so exotic?

The answer must surely be that, either subtly or otherwise, we have opted out of abiding *in him*. So Colossians 1:23 and 2:6-7,

... provided that you continue securely established and steadfast *in the faith*, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

⁶ Most English versions have ‘testimony’ here. The manuscript evidence is divided. However, the point being made is not really changed by the differences.

⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Such statements could be multiplied many times: the thrust would always be the same. By faith we are in Christ, so continue in the faith. You are in the love of God so keep yourselves in the love of God. You have been born anew to a living hope, so let us hold fast to the confession of our hope. Where faith hope and love are reduced to mere formulae, the intimacy becomes a formula also. Of course it is never that but it always appears so.

From this perspective, the great concerns of the New Testament become simple and clear. For example, where the issues of holiness become dull and where the things which are earthly are permitted to contradictorily co-exist with the truth of the cross then the mystery of God becomes mysterious, a thing to be gained by technique or, more often, some *thing*, the absence of which needs to be disguised and for which a counterfeit is devised.

The secret to knowing the mystery of God

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