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The Words and the Word of Jesus

Church Growth and other similar techniques are often countered by such phrases as ‘I just want to preach the word’ etc. Use of this phrase often means that the speaker wants to remain loyal to the Scriptures and to so preach and teach that only the Scriptures are prominent. Parallel to this is an increased stress in some areas of Evangelicalism on ‘Expository Preaching’ and without doubt this has resulted in much fine teaching and in congregations which are often very knowledgeable.

The aim of this paper is by no means to call any of this into question; on the contrary, while churches in other countries are crying out for theological training, even of the most basic sort, we can count ourselves deeply blessed that we have such vast resources at our fingertips. While the gift of teaching is one of the gifts distributed by the Spirit to the church, clearly some parts of the church find the exercise of that gift far more supported than do many other parts.

There is, however, one matter that needs to be raised. Is the focus on ‘*Sola Scriptura*’, as expressed in contemporary Evangelicalism, what is meant by the biblical term ‘the word of God’? Further, is there a development within the Scriptures themselves which forces us to treat different parts of the Scriptures in different ways? Put another way, is there the twofold danger of elevating the scriptures in such a way that they actually take the place of God (‘bibliolatry’) and of so using them that the pragmatism of the techniques we may oppose is in effect replaced by the pragmatism of ‘using’ the Scriptures to accomplish the desired ends?

However, there are a number of issues which ought to be addressed. The first involves our hermeneutic. That is, what is the principle which we employ in interpreting the Scriptures? While probably few would expound, say, Leviticus as being a paradigm for Christian worship or Esther for inter-cultural relationships, could it be possible that much of our exegesis of Scripture is dictated by what may actually be an artificial distinction between the ‘Old Testament’ and the ‘New Testament’? This is not to dispute that these two ‘testaments’ or ‘covenants’ exist, or that they are significant, but it does demand that we enquire what the focal point of the distinction really is.

Jeremiah had located the new covenant quite precisely when he said

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31-34)

The focal point is, of course, not the close of a number of documents but the moment when guilt is removed and ‘the house of Israel and the house of Judah’ are radically transformed in their knowledge of God. The letter to the Hebrews takes up this prophetic promise and says that the new covenant has been established and made operative at the cross. Thus, after introducing the topic of Jesus being the ‘guarantee’ (7:22) and the ‘mediator’ (8:6) of a ‘better covenant’, the writer, having quoted Jeremiah, proceeds to contrast the provision of the old, obsolete covenant (8:13) with the effectiveness of the new.

For if 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, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. (Heb. 9:13-15)

The point of the argument is that the death of Christ, in particular his 'blood', has established the new covenant. Hence the words used by Jesus at the last supper, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20¹). The implication must surely be that Jesus was conscious that this meal was far more than a Passover, or even a fulfilment of the Passover. It was of course that, as the Gospel of John strongly suggests, but it was an anticipation of the establishment of the new covenant.

If this is so, then we may argue that not only is the 'theological' concept of 'the new covenant' to be understood in the light of the cross, but also that the hermeneutical point where the Scriptures are to be divided is also the cross.

(Without doing into details here, it may be accepted that the cross of Christ is not an event to be contrasted with the resurrection, the ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit, but is indissolubly one with them. To speak of the cross is, then, to speak of the whole complex of these four constituent events.)

If this is so, then possibly we will be forced to re-evaluate our approach to some of the New Testament documents, in particular those which recount the teaching of Jesus before the cross. For example, in the Synoptic Gospels, the use of the words 'faith' and 'believe' (the noun and verb of the same root word) are never used by Jesus or the evangelists in any way similar to their use by Paul in his letters.

Within the Synoptics, 'faith' is never associated with 'justification'.² Rather it is used to refer to an immediate willingness to trust that Jesus is in control of a particular situation, as, for example, when the disciples were terrified while Jesus was asleep in the boat on Galilee (Mk 4:40) or when people either looked to him or refused to look to him for healing (Mk 5:34), or again, when faith in God's providence or willingness to answer prayer is required (Matt. 6:30; Matt. 17:20).

In the Fourth Gospel, where there are repeated references to people 'believing' in Jesus (the noun is never used), a majority of the occasions reveal that the 'believing' is defective. So, in John 2:23-25, it is recorded,

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust (lit. *believe*) himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in every one.

And, similarly, in John 8: 30-34(ff),

As he was saying these things, many believed in him. Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone' What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. . . .'

¹ Also 1 Cor. 11:25 'In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" Cf. Mk. 14:24; Matt. 26:28, where 'new' is probably to be omitted, although some MSS also omit Luke 22:19b-20.

² Even in Mk 2:1-12 (and //s) faith, while indirectly linked with forgiveness is directed towards healing.

The point here is that on a number of occasions John intends us to see that ‘believing’ in Jesus must not be taken to mean that people have received him as he is so much as that they have been dazzled by the signs they have seen or by the things he has said. In fact, and here John is distinct from the Synoptics, John has from the beginning specified that true believing is of a totally different order (see John 1:12, ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’). From this perspective, we see that in the Fourth Gospel we are meant to suspend judgment when the word ‘believe’ is used and to wait until the story is complete before determining whether the believing is genuine.³

Now, although the emphasis in John is closer to the Pauline position, neither John nor the Synoptics treats the issue with anything like the clarity of the post-Pentecost situation. Does this not imply, therefore, that simply to treat the whole of the ‘New Testament’ as teaching the same doctrine at every point is to mistake the difference that the cross makes not only to theology but to the very form and content of the documents themselves.

Another illustration, perhaps, appears in ‘the parable of the sower’ (Matt. 13:3ff; Mk 4:3ff; Lu. 8:5ff). In this story, ‘the sower sows the word’ (Mk 4:14). Doubtless the immediate response would be to see this as a pattern for present day preaching.⁴ But is it? First of all, the varied responses described by Jesus seem nothing like as clear cut as those in the book of Acts. One writer has pointed out that in the Acts the preaching always brings either a revival or a riot.⁵ References to the powerful effect of the word (Word) outside the Synoptics are far removed from the more ‘explanatory’ form of the parable.

But then, I suggest that the parable was never intended to be a pattern for Christian proclamation; on the contrary, it was always (and only?) intended to explain the varied responses to Jesus teaching within Israel during his earthly ministry. Furthermore, the word which he brought was not the word found so powerfully later. His was the word of ‘the kingdom’; later preaching was *substantially* different.

It is quickly evident that although the ‘kingdom’ is not absent from later preaching, the phrase ‘the kingdom of God’ appears only eleven times from Acts to Revelation compared to fifty one times in the Gospels. In place of ‘the kingdom of God’ the substance is ‘the preaching of Christ’. Observing the shift, and noting that the preaching of Christ is expressed in such forms as ‘Christ crucified’, ‘Christ raised’, ‘Jesus Christ as Lord’ etc. Mounce asks ‘What accounts for this shift?’. In reply he quotes P. T. Forsyth, ‘The Gospel of Christ replaced the Gospel of the Kingdom, because by his death he became the kingdom.’⁶ This is the substance of Origen’s comment in his commentary on Matthew 18:23⁷, ‘For He is the King of the heavens, and as He is absolute Wisdom and absolute Righteousness and absolute Truth, is He not also absolute Kingdom?’ Origen’s word for ‘absolute Kingdom’ is *αυτοβασιλεια* (*autobasilea*) ‘the kingdom himself’.

P. T. Forsyth takes up this theme in *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of*

³ Reference to Acts 11:17, ‘If then God gave them the same gift [the Holy Spirit] as he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ Here Peter identifies ‘saving’ faith with the reception of the Spirit, and it must be assumed that prior to that event there was no true faith.

⁴ Cf. the delightful letters of John Newton, ‘Grace in the Blade’, ‘Grace in the Ear’ and ‘The Full Corn in the Ear’ in *Letters of John Newton*, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1960, pp. 13-28.

⁵ Robert H Mounce, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960, p. 58.

⁶ Mounce, 1960: p. 52, quoting P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* p. 122 (no publication details).

⁷ 14:7, translated by J Patrick, in *Ante-Nicene fathers*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, Vol. X, p. 498.

Christ,⁸ when he asks the question, ‘Is Christ a preacher for us in the same sense as he was for His own generation?’ An extended quotation is appropriate:

The issue raised by [this question] is one of great moment for our whole construction of Christ’s life work. In what he said to the Jews around him, had he any direct or conscious reference to a remote posterity? Was he speaking to a real public, or, over their heads, to far later ages?

There can be little doubt about the answer, surely. There is no sign that he was talking over the heads of the people round him in order to reach us through the reporters. He never made his disciples his reporters in the sense of taking his words down or memorizing them for a distant future. He never examined them to see if they had got them correctly. It is now freely recognised that he regarded the mission of his life as confined to Israel.—at least till near its close. The Gentiles did not enter into his direct concern while he was dealing with his nation by parable or miracle. Allusions to their reception of these but point his rebukes to Israel for its rejection of himself; and miracles to Gentiles did not flow, but were wrung from him. Insofar as he was preacher and teacher, insofar as his historic personality went, he was a prophet to Israel alone. He met his people with a *bona fide* call, and not one perfunctory and useless, whose failure was forgone. It was a call, at first hopeful, to the greatest decision and the deepest repentance to which that people had ever been summoned by all the prophetic line. It was not impossible that he should have been heard, though . . . it soon grew improbable. He took his mission to Israel with entire seriousness. With all his heart he taught not only the lost sheep, but at first the national soul. But without effect he sought. He failed with his public. And it was his failure as prophet that extorted his resources as Redeemer. The Kingdom, his great theme, could only be established in his Cross.⁹

Forsyth’s point, so obvious in this way, is that Christ did not preach to the early church (or to the later church for that matter) so much as he created it. Forsyth continues:

Christ began in the form of a prophet; but he prophesied as one much more than a prophet, as only Messiah could. And he behaved as Messiah as only the Son of God could. His Messiahship rested on his Sonship, not his Sonship on his Messiahship. He was not the Son of God as Messiah. He was Messiah as being Son of God. He preached not in an interpretive way but in a creative way. He did not simply proclaim and expound the Kingdom of God, like a prophet; not did he simply put himself at the head of his Kingdom like a Messiah. He did what none of the Messiahs could do, what they failed because they could not do—he created the men that composed the Kingdom.¹⁰

Forsyth’s point in all this is to make clear that the preaching of Jesus is, and must be, distinct from the Gospel of Christ. We have seen that mere ‘biblical’ preaching which ignores the centrality of the cross is not ‘biblical’ preaching at all. It may delight in the stories and revere the Bible, but it misses the fundamental thing that Jesus was about. If the words (and deeds) of Jesus are not seen as they appear in the context of his ministry, then we will fail to represent him as he is.

So, if we ought to regard the Gospels, and in particular the Synoptics, as coming within a different context than the documents directed specifically to post-Pentecost churches,¹¹ how should we understand the life and ministry of the church today? Well doubtless we should begin by locating the contemporary church in the same context as the post-Pentecost church of Acts, the letters and the Revelation. In other words, we stand today in the context of ‘the Gospel of Christ’, the context of the established and

⁸ NCPI, Blackwood, 1987.

⁹ p. 5.

¹⁰ p. 10. He argues that Jesus could not have preached the Gospel — He was making it!

¹¹ This does not mean that we must treat them as pre-Pentecost documents, as indeed they are not. But it suggests that the conscious frame of reference for the Synoptic evangelists is old covenant Israel. I think a good case can be made for regarding John as recounting the details of Jesus’ ministry with a post-Pentecost frame of reference. Some light may possibly be shed, then, on the question of whether the Fourth Gospel was actually addressed to believers or whether it was a deliberately evangelistic work.

operative new covenant.

Within this context it is interesting to note that the details of Jesus' 'earthly' ministry (that is, pre-cross ministry) are apparently ignored. The collection of the sayings (words) of Jesus, which many regard as fundamental to the formation of the Synoptics¹² is surprisingly not in evidence in the preaching and writing of the non-Gospel documents. Yet the language used in them indicates powerfully that the word of God/ word of Christ was of fundamental importance (cf. 1 Thess 2:13).

In setting the agenda for the corporate life of the churches, Paul urged the Colossians to 'let the word (*λόγος*) of Christ dwell in [them] richly' (3:16). This is evidently the same as 'continuously being filled with the Spirit' (Eph. 5:18). Thus the coming of the Spirit is identified with the presence of Christ who speaks to the church. This is the same principle as that presented in the seven 'letters' to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. There it is the risen, triumphant Christ who is speaking (Rev. 1:17 - 2:1 etc), yet each communication concludes with the instruction, 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches' (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17 etc).

Within the Acts, again the powerful element is never the apostles; it is always the word of God.¹³ Of course, that requires some qualification, for the word is never apart from the apostles, either coming directly from their lips or via their apostolic message, but it is nonetheless the word which accomplishes all. Thus Luke wrote:

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. (Acts 12:24)

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. (Acts 19:20)

This latter statement reveals a point of some significance, namely, that the message of the apostles was essentially, and often specifically, 'Jesus is Lord', and that some occasions the phrase 'the word of the Lord' is a reference to the word of Jesus. We see this in Acts 19:20 (above), especially where the context is that 'the name of the Lord Jesus was praised' (verse 17), as also in Acts 11:16, where Peter is quoting the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:5 and in Acts 16:32, where Paul speaks the word of the Lord to all in the house of the gaoler in Philippi and the immediate context is that Paul has said 'Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved . . .' (verse 31). When compared with the other uses of 'the word' in Acts and elsewhere we see (i) that 'The Lord' is a phrase which is interchangeable for both God (the Father) and Jesus and (ii) that the word of the Lord/God etc. indicates that it is no so much the recounting of information *about* Christ which is primary but that the dynamic of the early church was (and is) 'all that Jesus *continues* to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1)¹⁴

The Spirit is poured out by Jesus (Acts 2:32-33) and, as we have seen, the coming of the Spirit and the action of the Spirit is the coming and action of Jesus the Lord (cf. John 14 *passim*). So the triumph of the word is nothing less than the triumph of Christ. In Romans 10, Paul is specific that it is Christ who is actually the speaker who

¹² This is the so-called 'Q', the collection of 230 or so sayings of Jesus which are found in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark; see G. N. Stanton, 'Q' in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (J. B. Green & S. McKnight eds.) IVP, Downers Grove, 1992, pp. 644-650.

¹³ Cf Luther's statement: 'I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: I did nothing . . . The Word did it all.' quoted in James Atkinson, 'Luther', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Sinclair B. Ferguson et al eds) IVP, Downers Grove, 1988, p. 404.

¹⁴ *NRSV* of Acts 1:1 has 'I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning', but this tends to obscure the Greek use of *ἤρξατο*, 'began'.

effects faith in the hearers.

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? . . . So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (verses 14, 17)

It is evident that unless Christ speaks¹⁵, ‘they’ will never believe. Likewise the angel told John in Rev. 19:10 that ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’.

In the post-Pentecost proclamation of the word, the focus is on the direct communication of the crucified, risen, ascended and reigning Christ. In this, Christ speaks as King and men and women, in hearing the word, hear him. He is the Word of God (John 1).

What is it, then, to ‘preach the word’ (2 Tim. 4:2)? It is far more than to repeat the words of Jesus; it is to be as one who speaks ‘the oracles of God’ (1 Pet. 4:11). It is to be one who lives personally in the context of the triumph of Christ and who is attuned to his proclamation so as to be determined to know nothing else than Jesus Christ and him crucified. For to preach the word of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18) is to preach the triumph of Christ as one who is intimately caught up into it. The context of the ‘new covenant’ is not only a theological description, but a powerful reality as ‘they all know me from the least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more’.

¹⁵ This is the $\rho\omega\eta\mu\alpha$ of Christ, the utterance of Christ, although $\rho\omega\eta\mu\alpha$ and $\lambda\omicron\alpha\gamma\omicron\tau\eta$ are virtually synonymous.

The Word and the Spirit

Examination of the book of the Acts of the Apostles reveals the high priority placed on preaching ‘the word’. Thus,

... many of those who heard the word believed; (Acts 4:4)

And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness (Acts 4:29)

When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” . . . The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:2-4, 7)

Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. (Acts 8:4)

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. (Acts 8:14)

You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. (Acts 8:21)¹⁶

Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans. (Acts 8:25)

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. (Acts 10:44)

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. (Acts 11:1)

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. (Acts 11:19)

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. (Acts 12:24)

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them. (Acts 13:5)

He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. (Acts 13:7)

“My brothers, you descendants of Abraham’s family, and others who fear God, to us the message (λόγος) of this salvation has been sent. (Acts 13:26)

The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. (Acts 13:44)

Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. . . .” (Acts 13:46)

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. (Acts 13:48-49)

¹⁶ Literally, ‘You have no part or share in this word (λόγῳ)’. Although here λόγος is generally treated as equivalent to ‘thing’ or ‘matter’ (cf. 15:6) it may possibly refer to the ‘word’ which Philip had earlier preached and whose power Simon wanted to possess.

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them. (Acts 14:3)

Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. (Acts 14:12)¹⁷

When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. (Acts 14:25)

Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news¹⁸ and become believers. . . .” (Acts 15:7)

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord. (Acts 15:35)

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” (Acts 15:36)

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. (Acts 16:6)

They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. (Acts 16:32)

These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message (λόγον) very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. (Acts 17:13)

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word¹⁹, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. (Acts 18:5)

He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:11)

This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19:10)

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. (Acts 19:20)

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking²⁰ until midnight. (Acts 20:7)

And now I commend you to God and to the message (λόγῳ) of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

This list is most impressive, quite apart from its length, because it demonstrates the strong emphasis on the true focus of the early church. About thirty five or so times Luke records that it was the ‘word’, either ‘of God’ or ‘of the Lord’, this latter often being identified with the Lord Jesus.²¹

Nor is it only in Luke that we find this stress. Paul often uses the word ‘word’ to describe his message, indicating that it was far more than *his* message alone. He told the Thessalonians that ‘when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is at work

¹⁷ Literally, Paul was ‘the leader of the word’; that is, the description still identifies the message as a ‘word’ albeit misunderstood as coming from the ‘gods’.

¹⁸ Literally, ‘the word of the gospel’.

¹⁹ Literally, ‘occupied with the word’.

²⁰ Literally, ‘he extended the word’.

²¹ See Acts 20:35 and the study, ‘*The Words and the Word of Jesus*’ p. 5.

in you believers' (1 Thess. 2:13).

Could it be that the point of all this is that what we see in the New Testament descriptions is the powerful initiative and action of and response to revelation. It almost seems that, while some mention is made of the response of some of the first believers, this side is somewhat 'played down'. However, a more likely explanation than that the human element is played down is that the writers are really 'telling it as it is'. Contrary to much contemporary discussion, the writers of the New Testament are far more concerned to record the actions of God.

Repentance and faith, for example, two sides of the one coin, are both presented as the gift of God (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:14). The dynamic of the gospel is likewise found in its revelatory character (Rom. 1:16-17). Quite explicitly, the human element in proclamation is not considered when the saving power of the gospel is discussed (1 Cor. 1:17 — 2:5). As noted above, 'When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region' (Acts 13:48-49).

There is, of course, a view which regards 'the word of God' as descriptive of the content of the message, that is, as the word *about* God. But, while a popular position among some evangelicals, this view stands in contrast to the overall thrust of the scriptures and to some of the specific statements within the scriptures. Certainly it would be inappropriate to equate the scriptures themselves as 'the word' in this context.

In order to appreciate the force of the language of Acts we must understand that 'the word of God/Lord' etc is foundational to all our knowledge of God. Barth put it:

Before human thought and speech can respond to God's word, they have to be summoned into existence and given reality by the creative act of God's word. Without the *precedence* of the creative Word, there can be not only no proper theology but, in fact, no evangelical theology at all.²²

The major factor in all this is that while the word of God is propositional, it is so because it is first personal. That is, it is not *only* propositional. Barth continues:

The Word is the *Word of God*. . . . The Word of God is the Word that God *spoke, speaks, and will speak* in the midst of all men.²³

The power of the word is the power of God himself, since it is him speaking. In creation, both in its beginning and in its preservation, we see the power of the word as God himself brings all things into being and preserves them in accordance with his own plan and purpose. Put another way, the word of God is not some *ad hoc* element but rather, as the *word of God*, inseparable from God, it is always intimately related to the purposes of God. If God has a plan, and we know nothing of God apart from such, then the word as it is spoken not only reveals the plan to us but actually effects it.

Now, while all this may be relatively obvious from the pages of the scriptures, it is the personal confrontation by the Word become flesh which makes it inescapable. The word spoken to men and women confronts them in such a way as to bring them into an intimacy with the eternal Word himself. Hence John wrote,

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard

²² Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, (1963) 1979, p. 18.

²³ 1979:18

so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

The language of Acts concerning ‘the word’, whether it be ‘the word of God’ or ‘the Word of the Lord’, is plainly not referring to the content alone. It is, of course, saying that what concerned the apostles and the disciples was a clear exposition, though, as Barth insists, never their interpretation, of all that God had done. They could not but speak of all they had seen and heard. But their function was not that of story-tellers. On the contrary, they were, as passive witnesses of the Word, active witnesses of the Word. This was in-line with the prophetic nature of the early church and consistent with the prophetic line which had been the means by which God had spoken to men and women ever since their initial, pre-fall, intimacy was broken (cf. Luke 11:50f). The contents of Acts concerns all that Jesus, the Word (although this is not a title used by Luke), continues to do and to teach (Acts 1:1).

With this in view, the church must be seen as one with the Word as the Word is one with the eternal purposes of God. Not surprisingly, then, the only indication as to when the close of the age will come is given in terms of the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom:

And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. (Matt. 24:14)

The Word And The Spirit

If we speak of the Word bringing about the eternal purposes of God then we must say that the ideas of ‘witness’ and ‘mission’ are central to an understanding of the church. In his book, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*,²⁴ Hendrikus Berkhof has demonstrated that mission is logically prior to the church, even if not chronologically so. Whereas mission today is usually relegated to the realm of the obligation of the church, so the gift of the Spirit is treated as the one who empowers believers for their task. Berkhof writes:

... I regret to say that the highly necessary enrichment of systematic theology by taking in the mission as an essential element in God’s mighty deeds is still ahead of us.

The bad consequences of this are most keenly felt in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In Roman Catholic theology, the Spirit is mainly the soul and sustainer of the church. In Protestant theology he is mainly the awakener of individual spiritual life in justification and sanctification. So the Spirit is either institutionalized or individualized. And both of these opposite approaches are conceived in a common pattern of an introverted and static pneumatology. The Spirit in this way is the builder of the church and the edifier of the faithful, but not the great mover and driving power on the way from the One to the many, from Christ to the world.²⁵

By mission, therefore, we must mean more than the task of the church. We must instead understand mission as relating to the true being of God and not merely as something which may be a good thing to have. Without mission we cannot understand the full nature of the Trinity as that has been revealed. We cannot, of course, go beyond or behind that (see Deut. 29:29).

In John 6:37, Jesus declared that ‘Everything that the Father gives me will come to me’, and Paul reminded the Ephesians of ‘his glorious inheritance among the saints’ (1:18). While the antecedent of ‘his’ is ‘God’ (verse 17), it is plain that God the Father has chosen us ‘in him’ that is, in Christ and for Christ. Thus Col. 1:15-16,

²⁴ John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1976, p. 30f.

²⁵ 1976: 33.

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.

Within the ‘family’ of the Godhead, the Father has given all creation to the Son. Psalm 2, facing the hostility of the nations and their rulers, is confident in the knowledge that the nations are the Son’s inheritance and the ends of the earth his possession. He has only to ask the Father to receive the inheritance (surely the implication of Jesus’ rejection of Satan’s ‘offer’ in the wilderness, Matt. 4:8-10).

The various ‘mission’ statements in the New Testament are to be seen in this light. Matthew records it as

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (28:18-20)

The promise ‘I am with you always’ is not for the assistance of the disciples; on the contrary, his presence is the central issue. He is present because he is about the business of gaining his inheritance. The point is that he will gain it by means of the disciples, but he will gain it. The long ending of Mark adds that ‘they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message (λόγος) by the signs that accompanied it’ (16:20). The shorter ending of Mark puts it this way: ‘. . . afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation (κήρυγμα) of eternal salvation.’

Luke, however, both in the Gospel and the Acts, adds that their testimony (or, his testimony through them) would be dependent on their receiving the Holy Spirit (so Luke 24:48-49; Acts 1:8). John’s Gospel confirms this:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

This Johannine version spells out the fact that the mission of the disciples cannot be understood except in the light of his mission. He sends as he himself is sent.

The full account in Luke 24 is instructive in this matter. Verses 46-48 state

“. . . it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

There is no command as such here; it is simply that these things will take place and that the disciples are witnesses. Now while various scriptures may be cited to back up the claim that ‘it is written’, we should note that almost at the commencement of his ministry, when he went to the synagogue at Nazareth (Lu. 4:18-19), Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1-2, where (i) the same Greek words are used of the ministry of the Messiah as that described in Luke 24, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘release’ both translating the same word, (ii) both occasions, perhaps not surprisingly, use the verb ‘to proclaim’ in that connection and (iii) both occasions link the proclamation of release and forgiveness with the gift of the Spirit.

What is being observed here is that the gift of the Spirit for the disciples is inseparable from the gift of the Spirit for their Master. For him to accomplish his task *he* must have the Spirit. There can be no messianic claim to the nations apart from the anointing (the meaning of the title Messiah is ‘anointed one’) of the Son. Hence the

events of Jesus' baptism.²⁶ The Word is taking his stand and the Spirit is the enabling one, by whom the Word will accomplish his goal.

Returning to the Acts of the Apostles, we see that not only is it the word which triumphs but that it is the Spirit who is active alongside the word.

. . . he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:2)

"John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:5, 8)

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:4)

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

This list could well be extended as was the instances of the use of 'the word'. But it is quickly obvious that the Word himself, working with the Spirit prior to the incarnation, now as the Word become flesh works with and through the Spirit for the accomplishment of the goal of God. The various gifts of the Spirit described in the accounts of the early church, whether we call them ministry gifts or whatever, find their rationale in the eternal purpose of God as outworked by the Word and the Spirit. Signs and wonders, while performed through human agents (Acts 2:43), are nothing less than the dynamic testimony of the Lord to the word of his grace (Acts 14:3; cf. Heb. 2:3-4). As gifts to the church, the various functions are for the work of ministry, but the goal of this ministry is the whole body fully functional in Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). As such these are 'manifestations of the Spirit' and their exercise is energised by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7, 11). In other words, the gifts are, in the ultimate and as used in love and for love, the Spirit in action to bring the inheritance of the Word to its maturity. He allocates the gifts according to his own choosing (1 Cor. 12:11) but he does so in full fellowship with the Father and the Son (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

How then shall we live?

The above discussion has presented us with the reality of true ministry, namely that it is the Word and the Spirit together who accomplish all things under the direction of the Father. The growth of the church is the gathering of the inheritance as the 'utterance of Christ' (Rom. 10:17) in concert with the sovereign blowing of the wind of the Spirit

²⁶ Discussions of Jesus' baptism being an example, or even an identification with humanity, while debatable, become somewhat irrelevant in this light.

(John 3:8) bears fruit. While the Word and the Spirit use human agency to accomplish this, they are by no means dependent upon it. The converse is true; the church is dependent on the Word and the Spirit and the outworking of their goal for its very identity and existence. In the final analysis, while we may describe some as 'church-planters' and honour them for their labours, as with others who faithfully exercise their ministries, it is 'he Lord who adds to the church daily such as are being saved'(Acts 2:47).

The parallel commands, 'go on being filled with the Spirit' (Eph. 5:18) and 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Col. 3:16), are, then, not primarily for our sakes. The pure joy of such fulness relates to the intimacy of the one who is filled with the one who fills all things. The fulness is not aesthetic but teleological. The joy lies in being one with the Word and the Spirit in their great joint action within human history and in the hope of the glory of God.

Servants of The Word and The Spirit

It is fundamental to the being of the church that it is to serve. Popular terminology, such as a person being ‘called into the ministry’, while perhaps being somewhat restrictive in the use of the word ‘ministry’ is a recognition, nonetheless, that true leadership is ‘service’. In this it is in line with the descriptions within the Scriptures, such as Hebrews 6:10, ‘For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do’.

In 1 Peter 4:10, Peter declares that ‘as each has received a gift, use it serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God’. However, in the next sentence (verse 11), he adds, ‘if anyone speaks, as the oracles of God; if anyone serves, as from the strength which God supplies’. By this he seems to imply that all gifts are for service, while there may be a specific gift which can be defined as ‘serving’. Paul does likewise, in Romans 12:7, where he singles out ‘ministry’ (service, *diakonia*) for particular attention. There is also the office of ‘*diakono*i’ (deacons/servants) in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, although apart from this ‘job description’ we know nothing specific of their role within the church.²⁷

However, what is conspicuous is that the majority of the uses of the words ‘serve’, ‘servant’ etc. relate not to the service of men and women (except where it is the formal social status of ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ which is being discussed) but to the service of God, of Christ or of the Gospel and so on. The distinction between the general serving and this specific ‘ministry’ can be seen in Acts 6:1-4. Although the translations deal with the passage in various ways, a literal rendering has it that Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the daily *diakonia* (service/ministry)(verse 1, cf. Acts 11:29), to which the apostles replied that it was not right for them *diakonein* (to serve) tables (verse 2) when they ought to be attending to the *diakonia* (service/ministry) of the word.

In Acts 1:17, 25, the apostolic office is seen as a *diakonia*. In Acts 12:24-25, we read that ‘the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. Then after completing their *diakonia* (NRSV ‘mission’) Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem . . .’. In 20:24, Paul speaks of the *diakonia* (ministry) which he received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace. In 21:19, he details ‘the things that God had done through his *diakonia*’.

Within the letters, Paul defines his ministry as that of a ‘slave’, Gk. *doulos*, of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1 cf. Eph. 6:6; 1 Pet. 2:16; Col. 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:24) as do James (1:1), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1) and Jude (1:1). The difference between the *diakonos* and the *doulos* seems to be in the way their service is viewed. The *diakonos* is considered in terms of his work and the *doulos* in terms of the relationship which exists to the master, the latter principally involving a lack of choice.²⁸ There are other words used for ‘servants’ within the New Testament, but our focus here is on the primary issue that, while believers offer service to one another, their service is to God, Jesus, the Gospel etc. and all other service is the outworking of the first duty.

²⁷ The usual assumption is that these deacons were the ones first described in Acts 6. There may be, however, good reasons for *not* making this identification, or at least for doing so with some qualifications.

²⁸ Cf. R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1880 (1973), p. 32.

‘Working together with him’

In 2 Corinthians 6:1, Paul wrote, ‘Working together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain’. It is well known that the words ‘in him’ have been added, of necessity in English, by the translators, but while ‘with you’ (i.e. the Corinthians) is possible, both the context and other comments make it reasonably certain that it is God, or Jesus Christ, who is intended. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul wrote that ‘we are of God fellow-workers’²⁹ and the context of 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 supports this:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

True ministry must then be seen as a participation in the action of God.

As servants of God, the church with its specific ministries can see itself as one with the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Passages such as Exodus 32:13 may have some cultural element in them but there are other occasions, such as Leviticus 25:42, 55; which specify Israel as servants of God over against any other claims which may be made against them. Likewise, there are other individuals who are identified as God’s servants, especially Moses (Num. 12:7f; Deut. 34:5 Josh. 1:1-2, 7, 13, 15 etc), Caleb (Num 14:24), David (2 Sam. 7:5; 1 Kings 11:13, 32, 34 etc) and the prophets (1 Kings 14:18; 2 Kings 9:7, 14:25; 17:13 etc).

The most conspicuous occurrences of the servant of God appear in the second half of Isaiah, where Israel is called ‘my servant (see Isa. 41:8, 9; 43:10 etc), while there is also the Servant, who while Israel is also more than Israel (42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). Here, the service of *the* servant is intimately related with the true role of Israel. It is in this light that the apostles could understand their commission to ‘make disciples of all the nations’ (Matt. 28:19). The authority has been given to him and with that he goes out to conquer the nations. Hence ‘Remember, I am with you always, to the close of the age’ (Matt. 28:20). The close of the age, it should be recalled, is the point when the whole world has had the gospel of the kingdom preached to it (Matt. 24:14).

The nations are especially in mind in the function of the Servant in Isaiah — ‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations’ (42:1), and ‘I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations’ (42:6 cf. 49:1, 6, 7, 22-23; 52:15). The use of Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7 at Jesus’ baptism bear this out, for Psalm 2 also has the conquest of the nations in mind (especially, verses 7-12). No doubt this is understood as the meaning of the baptism, at least by the devil; see Matthew 4:8-9.

As the Servant of the Lord, Jesus has a commission and, having conquered all evil at the cross and having broken through death itself, he now is reigning until he puts all his enemies under his feet. The gospel of the kingdom which is to be preached to the whole world is the proclamation of this reign.

As servants of the Lord, Jesus, the apostles proclaim this gospel, and Paul actually calls himself a servant of the gospel in Ephesians 3:7 and Colossians 1:23. Elsewhere he understands that as a servant he is called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1; cf. 1:9). This service is especially with the nations in view (Rom. 15:16, 1:5).

²⁹ The Greek reads, θεοῦ γὰρ ἐ σμεν συνεργοί . NRSV has ‘We are God’s servants, working together’, changing the RSV ‘(with NIV) ‘we are God’s fellow workers’

The service of the church, then, and of its various members, is to be seen as a partnership with Christ in his service of bringing all creation finally under the authority of the Father. What has been called 'the Great Commission' may perhaps better be understood as 'the Great Communion'.

The Word and the Spirit

What we have earlier seen of the present action of the Word and the Spirit in the book of Acts³⁰ leads us to the conclusion that the church finds its self-understanding only as it is one with the Word and the Spirit in the plan of God. To this extent the church is the eschatological community; it is the community that exists as a visible anticipation of all that lies in the plan of God but which has not yet been unfolded.

If this is so, then the church must be constantly questioning whether its present course of action is not merely consistent with the plan of God but is one with it. It is for this reason that the gift of greatest significance for the church is that of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1ff.). By this gift, the Word himself speaks to the church and the church, having received the Spirit recognises the lordship of the Word in the church. Indeed, so intimately do they work together in the administration of the plan of God that Paul spoke of the Spirit as 'the Spirit of the Lord' while saying 'the Lord is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:17,18).

Paul's concern for the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 2:6ff, is that they had become, by their sectarianism, immune to the revelation of the deep things of God. The former immediacy with the Spirit had diminished and been replaced by activities which, while externally corporate, were fundamentally self-centred (see 1 Cor. 11:17-22; 12:3-13:7 etc). By their neglect of the Word they had, in spite of appearances, neglected the Spirit! A similar situation existed in the Ephesian church (paradigm) in Revelation 2:1-7. There the former intimacy with Christ had been left, while the externals of that remained. Christ still walks among the lampstands (verse 1), but they had become cold and indifferent to him (and so, we presume, to each other).

In contrast to this is the picture in Acts of the church in moment by moment intimacy with Christ. The Jewish Council recognised that Peter and John were with Jesus (Acts 4:13) and while the usual way of understanding this is to point to their having been with Jesus during his three year ministry, and so having the same eloquence and power in spite of their being, like him, uneducated and ordinary, earlier, in verse 8, we are told of Peter being 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. If we understand the fulness of the Spirit as the norm, then it matters little whether this 'being filled' refers to Pentecost or to a special filling to both. What is significant is that Peter spoke by the Spirit and it is not impossible to understand the phrase in verse 13 to refer to Peter and John having been 'with Jesus' after as well as before Pentecost.

Further in Acts it is taken as normative that there would be direct communication from 'the Lord'. Philip is spoken to by 'an angel of the Lord' (8:26) and it is the Spirit who told him to go over to the chariot (8:29). (It was also 'the Spirit of the Lord [who] snatched Philip away' - verse 39 - however that may have occurred.) The conversion of Saul is attributed to the direct word of Christ (9:4-6) and likewise Ananias was spoken to directly (9:10ff). In Antioch, the Spirit spoke to the gathered prophets and teachers (Acts 13:2) the same thing took place in Acts 16:6, where the Holy Spirit forbade Paul and the others to speak the word in Asia. In the next verse the communication is defined as being by 'the Spirit of Jesus'.

³⁰ See the Study for April 9th 1994.

In Acts 11 and 21 we are told of the prophet Agabus and also in 21:9 of Philip's 'four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy'. With the background of the Old Testament prophetic movement, where God spoke through 'his servants the prophets', there is no immediate reason to assume that God did not use the prophetic gift when speaking on many of these occasions. Paul told the Corinthians that a genuine prophet³¹ in church would inescapably recognise that what he had said was 'a command of the Lord'(1 Cor. 14:37). Since he had previously described the proper exercise of the prophetic gifts (1 Cor. 14:29-32), he probably meant that the Corinthians would treat his apostolic word as prophetic and judge accordingly. But whatever the means, there was the expectation that the Word and the Spirit together would lead the church.

It is noteworthy that in Acts 13:1 there are 'prophets and teachers' in the church at Antioch, and it is this coupling which is significant. The prophet without the teacher is unrestrained; the teacher without the prophet is confined to the past. But when both function together, the church has the capacity to check whether the prophetic word is genuine and whether the Spirit is indeed speaking to the church. The warning of 1 John 4:1 is doubtless to be understood in this context.

It is of immense pastoral significance that the people of God today, as always, understand these matters. It is not merely that prior to the completion of the canon there was prophecy; the issue is that it is the present lordship of Christ which is being outworked in history, and it is being outworked through the church. Christ is presently working and speaking in, to and through the church. The Spirit of Christ is the one who is energising and sustaining the church. Together they are bringing the goal of the Triune God to fulfilment and the people of God are either in the flow of that fulfilment or they are adrift and aimless, all too often seeking to establish their own purpose by strategies and means.

Unless we recognise that the Word and the Spirit are personally present in the church and working towards the goal of God, and unless we live under the personal lordship of Christ and the Spirit then we will not be 'servants' of God and our various ministries will be such in name only. The warning of Romans 16:17-18 is vital:

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching you have learned; avoid them. ¹⁸For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by their smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.

³¹ His phrase is 'if anyone claims to be a prophet or *pneumatikos*, spiritual, let him recognise . . .'. The adjective *pneumatikos* (spiritual) is used twenty four times by Paul, sixteen of which are in 1 Corinthians; 2:13(2); 2:14; 2:15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:4(2); 12:1; 14:1; 14:37; 15:44(2); 15:46(2). It does not seem unreasonable to assume that this was a word with which the Corinthians were familiar.

No Other Burden

¹⁸And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

¹⁹I know your works--your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. ²⁰But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. ²²Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; ²³and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. ²⁴But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call 'the deep things of Satan,' to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; ²⁵only hold fast to what you have until I come. ²⁶To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,

I will give authority over the nations;

²⁷to rule them with an iron rod,

as when clay pots are shattered—

²⁸even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. ²⁹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

(Revelation 2:18-29).

The incursions of terrible heresy into the church of Thyatira were wreaking great damage. It is notable that neither in this church nor in the others in Revelation 2-3 are the precise details of the heresies and personalities known. Here, the identity of the 'prophetess' and the way she was 'teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols' is not given; neither, elsewhere, is the identity and teaching of the Nicolaitans or 'the teaching of Balaam'. Even the name 'Jezebel' seems to be more a symbol, so that the issues are hidden under the image of the Old Testament character.³²

Whatever the details were, the real matter was that this church had recognised the issues at the very beginning but had tolerated the woman with her pretended visions and the teaching which had such disastrous results and which was bringing such terrible judgment on the church. (Compare the warnings of Deuteronomy chapter 13, where Israel was instructed to be especially alert to the dangerous effects of being beguiled by people who claim prophetic status.) Likewise, the church today is beset with idolatry and immorality, sadly much of which goes unchallenged and is often even openly promoted.

The phrase 'the deep things of Satan' (τὰ βῆθηα τοῦ Σατανᾶ) seems unlikely to have been actually used by the false teachers, although it is not impossible that they did. More likely is that, in apparent consistency with other genuine teachers and prophets,

³² 'Thyatira was noted for [its] trade guilds, about which we have considerable knowledge from inscriptions. One of these guilds dealt in purple cloth, and it is probable that Lydia of Philippi was a representative of this guild (Acts 16:14). These trade guilds enjoyed common meals which were probably dedicated to some pagan deity, and from this source arose the problem of the Christians in Thyatira. It would be nearly impossible for a citizen to participate in trade and industry without membership of the appropriate guild, and the question naturally arose whether a Christian could properly participate in such meals. Many Christians would argue that the alleged gods had no real existence, and therefore participation in such meals involved no compromise of one's Christian witness. The question was complicated by the fact that such social meals would often end in unbridled licentiousness. Here is the same problem we have met in other churches. Ephesus had declared herself strongly opposed to all such compromise with pagan practices; in Pergamum a small party in the church had advocated full participation in heathen social life. The problem in Thyatira . . . assumed a new and dangerous form.' (G E Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 50.)

the claim was that what was being taught was ‘the deep things of God’ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10, *τα βάθη του θεου*; Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:18; see also Job 11:7). As such it was using the language of the truth but the source was Satanic (cf. Jer. 23:30, 30 ‘Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbour’).

More significant here, however, is not the nature of the problem but its solution. Jesus said,

²⁴But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan,’ to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; ²⁵only hold fast to what you have until I come’ (Rev. 2:24-25).

Some have seen the phrase ‘any other burden’ as a reference to the decrees of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:28, although, apart from the use of the word ‘burden’ (*βαρῶς*) there is no other linguistic connection. However, the decree from that council did include prohibition of eating meat offered to idols, of eating blood, what is strangled and fornication. Indeed, that may help to explain the inclusion of ‘fornication’ among the prohibitions, since it would be more a specific reference to fornication associated with idolatry.³³

Whatever the source of the phrase, the implication is clear. In the face of damaging teaching and behaviour, Christ refuses to impose any other burden. On the contrary, far from adding extra obligations on those who have remained unstained, as if to apparently protect them from danger, he insists that they ‘hold fast to what [they] have until [he] comes’.

Jesus had earlier scathingly attacked the Pharisees for ‘tying up heavy burdens’ (*φορτί α βαρέα*) by means of their regulations and insistence on the prescriptions of law. The Pharisaic burdens (the Greek *φορτί ον* used here is a synonym for *βάρος*³⁴) are in strong contrast to that of Jesus, who declared that ‘my yoke is easy and my burden (*τὸ φορτί ον μου*) is light’ (Matt. 11:30). Likewise, Paul was immovable over the matter of believers using law as a means to their growth to maturity. He called on the Galatians to recall their beginnings and to contrast their present behaviour to it:

¹You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! ²The 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? ³Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴Did you experience so much for nothing? -- if it really was for nothing. ⁵Well 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? (Galatians 3:1-5).

Legal prescription is not merely counter-productive because of the sense of guilt which it produces and which in turn restricts the believer from enjoying the full dimensions of his or her freedom, but it stands opposed to the way which God has determined to act.

³³ There is, however, no agreement as to the significance of the prohibition against fornication here. It may refer (i) to fornication as a thing in itself; (ii) to fornication associated with pagan worship; (iii) with Jewish marriage restrictions on the grounds of consanguinity. See the discussion below, where (i) or (ii) could hardly be intended merely to avoid offending the Jews. However, other suggestions concerning the reason for the prohibition have been offered. The association of idolatry with fornication is also seen in Rev. 2:14 and Rom. 1:18-27.

³⁴ See G Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1937, p. 76. It may be tempting to see a parallel to the use of these words in the English translations of Jer. 23:33 etc, but the LXX uses another word, *λήμμα* (lemma), which means a burden in the form of a commission received; see Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, p. 1045. It is totally unlikely that there is any connection between the prophetic burden and that of Rev. 2:24, even though both have the role of ‘prophets’ in mind.

God works through faith and *through no other means*. Galatians 5:1-6 continues,

¹For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ²Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. ⁴You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Shortly after this Paul said that if he preached circumcision, that is, law, he would not be persecuted (by the Jews) for the offence of the cross would have been removed (Gal. 5:11). Hence his determination to know nothing but ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2) and to ‘never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to [him] and [he] to the world’ (Gal. 6:14).

The word of the cross is offensive to ‘the natural man’. This man is the one who, in Adam, has rejected the simplicity of faith and replaced it with his own program for justification. This was seen in the practice of Israel which replaced obedience as a response to salvation with obedience as a means to it. The offence of the cross lies in the fact that it denies *all* human initiative and effort in the matter of salvation. This is the issue faced by the council of Jerusalem.

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’. ²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses’. (Acts 15:1-5).

The significance of the council which ensued can hardly be over stated. Although Paul and Barnabas are mentioned as addressing the assembly, it is the contribution of Peter and James which is recounted.

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’

¹²The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,
¹⁷so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things

¹⁸ known from long ago.’

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.’ (Acts 15:6-21).

What differs between this and the later decree which was promulgated (verses 28-29), apart from the order, is that in these discussions James identifies the reason why these things should be avoided. Jewish sensitivities were not binding on the Gentiles (nor, in fact, on the Jews, themselves although that is another matter) but Gentiles ought to express their faith in love so as not to callously or indifferently offend the Jews. Whatever the purpose, these four matters are, under no circumstances, to be seen as essential to salvation. They are good advice in terms of the relationships between Jew and Gentile and but they are not ‘law’.

When, therefore, Jesus speaks to the believers in Thyatira and declines ‘to lay on [them] any other burden’ we must see this as being totally consistent with the emphasis of the rest of the New Testament.

‘Only hold fast to what have until I come’ can, then, only mean that the word of the cross which was received in faith is not only the beginning but also the whole of life. It must mean that to preach anything extra to the work of the cross is utterly opposed to the whole action of God. The desire of preachers to see positive results in their hearers is often disappointed, but the temptation to make up the deficit by imposition of law, however subtly, and by manipulation through guilt is no different from the Galatian heresy. The preacher has no right to do anything other than declare what God has done and urge a response on the basis of that.

John told his readers that

²⁶I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷As for you, the 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 2:26-27).

Jude also stresses that in the face of licentiousness in the church, the only solution is to ‘contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’ (Jude 3). While there may be the accusation that we are preaching continuance in sin in order that grace may abound, to cease preaching the totality of grace is not an option. Plainly, there is no place for sin in the life of the Christian, but while antinomianism is rejected so is law as a means of sanctification. Grace is the only way in which law can be seen as liberty (cf. Ps. 119:32, 45, ‘I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding. . . . I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts’). This is the amazing point being made by Titus 2:11—3:8

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. ¹⁵Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

¹Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ²to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. ³For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. ⁴But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through

the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸The saying is sure.

I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.

The matter of grace is not new to us, but the temptation to regard it as merely a doctrine, or even as a theological system, must be resisted. Grace is God coming to us for our good and for his glory and hence the motivation of grace is the fact that God himself evokes the desire and provides the resources for godliness in the preaching of the cross. It is hardly surprising that some have argued that 'preaching grace does not work' if by that they mean the doctrines of grace. But if grace Himself is in the proclamation we may well be content to leave the results to him and, with Christ, to lay 'no other burden' on the church.

True Ministry and the Council of God

The description by Jeremiah of the genuine prophet standing in the council of the Lord is of great significance.

¹⁸For who has stood in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word? Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? . . . ²¹I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. ²²But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings. (Jer. 23)

He means that the genuine prophet speaks not merely because he or she has thought out his subject and has determined the appropriateness of it to his audience (it is quite plain that the genuine prophet has indeed done this, in particular from the careful way the prophecies are constructed) but because he or she has been in the council of the Lord and the word of God has come to them with such immediacy that they cannot but speak.

The council of the Lord has been described as ‘the privy council . . . where his decrees are announced’³⁵ There is no sense that God takes advice from anyone before making up his mind, although it is clear from elsewhere that the prayers of his people are of great import in the overall scheme of God’s action (see James 5:16, ‘The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective’.). In the Old Testament the council is pictured as the heavenly assembly where those present before the Lord are variously described as ‘the host of heaven’, ‘spirits’ (1 Kings 22:19-22), ‘sons of God’ (Job. 1:6; 38:7) and angelic beings (Isa 6:1-7). Within the book of Revelation we see that there are also the four living creatures (cf Ezek. 1:4ff), the twenty four elders as well as ‘myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands’ of angels. As the word ‘angel’ is interchangeable with ‘messenger’ we can easily discern that from the council come the angels of the Lord who carry out his bidding. In so far as they are under his direct authority there is little difficulty in understanding how many passages can equate the angel of the Lord with the Lord himself.

Jesus’ description of the response to the repentance of a sinner is revealing;

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance . . . Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents’ (Luke 15:7, 10).

The joy of the Lord (Neh. 8:10) can be seen infecting the whole council of heaven. There is little difference between this and the moment of creation, ‘when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy’ (Job 38:7).

What we must understand is that the genuine prophet is called to enter that council and to hear the word of the Lord as the vast host hears it, directly and intimately. Having heard it, he *must* proclaim it.

This ‘must’ is twofold. First there is the ‘must’ of his commission. He is commanded to speak, and is aware of the consequences of disobedience (See Ezek. 3:16-18 etc). Added to this is the compulsion of the word itself. Amos declared,

⁷Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.

³⁵J. D. Douglas, ‘Council’ in *The New Bible Dictionary*, IVF, London 1962, p. 263.

⁸The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:7-8)

Jeremiah records his commission in similar terms:

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵ 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'.

⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

(Jeremiah 1:4-10).

When he subsequently found the reaction to his preaching too strong, Jeremiah admitted that

If 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).

Paul knew the same compulsion. Thus he wrote in Romans 15:18-19,

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

and in Colossians 1:25,

I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, . . .

and again in 2 Timothy 4:17,

. . . the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

In all three of these statements, the English tends to obscure the fact that Paul's description of his ministry is in continuity with the prophet line of the Old Testament. A literal translation of his comment in Romans is, 'I have fulfilled the gospel'. The Colossian phrase is 'to fulfil the word of God' and in Timothy, 'to fulfil³⁶ the proclamation'.

The impulse for Paul's ministry was thus the inner dynamic of the word, but even this was directly linked to his being directly and personally confronted by the speaker. Paul's commission was received in conjunction with his experience on the road to Damascus, which is recounted three times in Acts (9:3-25; 22:3-16; 26:12-20) and

³⁶ A different Greek word is used for 'fulfil' is used in 2 Tim. 4:17 but its meaning is the same as that used in the other two quotations. Although he does not observe these elements, Peter O'Brien, *Consumed by Passion – Paul and the Dynamic of the Gospel*, Lancer, Homebush West, 1993 does examine the rationale of Paul's ministry in the light of that of Jeremiah.

again, in a different form, in Galatians 1:13-17. There he says that ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son to (Gr. *in*) me’ (vss. 15-16). Peter says,

The risen Christ appeared to Paul on the Damascus road as *God’s Son* (υἱός/*huios*), that is, the content of the revelation was Jesus as the Son of God. In recent years Seyoon Kim has brought the importance of Paul’s Damascus road experience for an understanding of his faith and theology back to the centre of the discussion. Kim’s claim is that crucial emphases in Paul’s gospel, especially his Christology, soteriology and universal mission, were formed in large measure in that encounter itself. The gospel which Paul received on the Damascus road, and thus the content of his preaching, may be defined christologically: it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Gal. 1:12, 16; cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Eph. 3:8) who is the crucified, risen and ascended Lord.³⁷

Christ revealed *in* and *to* Paul was the same as the prophets of old being taken into the council of the Lord. Christ in him and he in Christ are not opposites but two ways of describing the personal intimacy which Paul now knew. As Jeremiah had the word of God placed in his mouth through the intimacy of revelation, so Paul has the utterance of Christ as the driving force in his own life through his intimacy with the speaker (cf. Rom. 10:17).

The insistence that Paul received his gospel by revelation (Gal. 1:11-12) is followed by the indication that his prophetic intimacy was continuous, Hence, ‘after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation’ (Galatians 2:1-2). In a similar vein are the descriptions in Acts of the Holy Spirit leading both Paul and others in their activities or of an angel appearing and speaking (Acts 27:23-24) or even of the Lord himself appearing in a vision (Acts 18:9-10). None of these things is ever regarded as other than perfectly normal Christian living.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 Paul described an experience which ‘a person’ had fourteen years previously, but that experience was evidently exceptional in that it involved him seeing things which he was not permitted to repeat. But otherwise he said ‘I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord’. The plural ‘revelations’ here in verse 1 and also later in verse 7 indicates that he did not regard them as in anyway unusual.

By this we are not intended to infer that we must have visions and revelations. By nature of the case they will always be God’s gift in his time, but we do infer that the apostolic ministry was in continuity with the Old Testament prophetic ministry. Both gained their authority and their power from their standing continually in the council of God.

The prophetic intimacy of the people of God

Peter’s instruction, ‘Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God’ (1 Pet. 4:11) is a reminder that the prophetic intimacy is the norm for the whole church. This is surely the thrust of Peter’s use of Joel 2 when he addressed the crowd at Pentecost:

This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:16-18).

³⁷Consumed by Passion, p. 9.

The gift of the Spirit upon all the people of God means that not that all are prophets but that the whole people enjoys that same intimacy and so the word issues from the community as prophetic. Indeed, the New Testament is explicit that the church consists of many members with differing functions. But the church has as its core the word of God, hence Paul's urging that the Corinthians earnestly desire the gift of prophecy within the community. Yet when he describes the desired gathering he says 'But if all prophesy . . .' (1 Cor. 14:24). The whole church is engaged with the word, not as a mental exercise, but as living and functioning in the presence of God. That is why the outsider or unbeliever recognises that 'God is really among you' (vs. 25).

In the face of those who denied the truth known by the church, John wrote that the anointing which they had received brought them into the knowledge of God (1 John 2:20). This follows from his statement that fathers know him who is from the beginning, that children know the father and that the word of God abides in the young people (1 John 2:12-14). That is why they have no need that any one should teach them (2:27) that is, should mediate God to them. The anointing teaches them all things, bringing them into the truth and exposes the lie. All that remains is that they should abide in the anointing (2:27, note that it can be translated, 'abide in *him*').

The significance of the commands of Ephesians 5:17-20 and Colossians 3:14-17 now becomes more prominent. In Ephesians, knowing the will of God is directly related to an ongoing fullness with the Spirit and this in the context of, not merely resulting in, shared joy in worship. In Colossians, being clothed with love, 'which binds everything together in perfect harmony' is nothing less than the very being of God. The serenity of Christ is then received and known as the word which he speaks dwells in them richly. Within that context, they teach and admonish *with all wisdom* and that, again, in the context of gratitude and worship.

So they live and so they speak. They cannot but speak of the things they have seen and heard. But these things are surely more than those things of the increasingly distant past. When Paul described his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, he recounted that

¹⁵ I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me *and to those in which I will appear to you.* (Acts 26:15-16)

He and the whole people of God speak from an ongoing life in the council of God. Hence the 'little' injunction to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thess. 5:17). Of course there is nothing little about it; it is the very heart of what we are about.

There is no question that this is constantly and viciously contested. The prophets were opposed by those who not only spoke against them, but claimed to do so in the name of the Lord and by doing so gained the popularity of the people. The Apostles were opposed by

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. (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

In a similar way 'the flesh' continually resists the truth and the world stands in constant denial of the presence of God. But to act in response to the opposition is to succumb to the opposition. The truth is that the people of God do 'know the Lord, from the least of

them to the greatest' and so the course set is that of continuing to live and move and have our being in the presence of God. Indeed, from that position, the world, the flesh and the devil appear in their true light.

True ministry, then, is nothing less than the truth of a man or a woman coming into the council of God and deliberately continuing there. It is there that theological precision loses its harshness and becomes warm and intimate. It is there that the word is as sweet as honey. We do not go out from the presence into ministry; we go into ministry in the presence.

The Mystery of the Incarnation

Students of church history are often faced with the extraordinarily complex array of heresies which appeared in the early church. The accounts of the battles which were waged over the Trinitarian and Christological controversies provide modern students with what is often an excuse for avoiding the sort of study which may result in such apparent confusion. And yet the situation is not so simple.

To begin with, issues such as the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ are usually not ‘simply’ drawn from the Scriptures. The ways we now express ourselves on these matters are as much the result of these controversies as they are of biblical research. In spite of our Protestant protestations, the church today is significantly dependent upon ‘tradition’, especially as that means the decisions of church councils in the past. The decisions of Nicea (325) and Constantinople I (381) established the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit and are associated with what is known as the ‘Nicene Creed’.³⁸ Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553) and III (680) were essentially concerned with nature of Christ in the light of the teaching of such men as Nestorius and Eutyches. Nestorius, in reaction to the increasing use of the title *theotokos* (God-bearer) for Mary, taught that Christ had two distinct natures:

Christ is indivisible in that he is Christ, but he is twofold, in that he is both God and man, he is one in his Sonship, but he is twofold in that which he takes and in that which is taken. In the *prosopon* of the Son he is an individual, but as in the case of two eyes he is separate in the natures of manhood and Godhead’.³⁹

In reaction, Eutyches affirmed

our Lord to have become out of two natures before the union. But I confess one nature after the union.⁴⁰

The definition of Chalcedon, which dealt with these issues, is as follows:

In agreement, therefore, with the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin; begotten from the Father before the ages as regards His Godhead, and in the last days, the same, because of us and because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*, as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one *prosopon* and one *hupostasis*—not parted or divided into two *prosopa*, but one and the same Son, only begotten divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets of old and Jesus Christ Himself have taught us about Him and the creed of our fathers has handed down.⁴¹

³⁸ For a general outline of the ecumenical councils, see G L Bray, ‘Councils’ in S B Ferguson, D F Wright (Eds), *New Dictionary of Theology*, Inter-Varsity press, Leicester, 1988, p. 169ff; see also, J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Longmans, London, 1960, pp. 205-367.

³⁹ Fragment 297, quoted in H D McDonald, ‘Nestorius’ in *New Dictionary of Theology*, p 457.

⁴⁰ H D Mc Donald, ‘Monophysitism’ in *New Dictionary of Theology*, p. 443.

⁴¹ In J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, A & C Black, London, 1977, p. 339f.

This definition, attempting to hold both the unity of Christ as well as the distinctions of his Godhood and his manhood, declares that its solution is both consistent with the teaching of 'the prophets of old and Jesus Christ Himself' and with the creed of 'our fathers'. The creed is the 'Nicene' creed, but what is the teaching of 'the prophets of old and Jesus Christ Himself'?

Each of the early heresies could in some way appeal to the Scriptures for a justification of their position. Arius, for example, could appeal to such statements as 'the LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deut. 6:4), 'The LORD created me at the beginning of his work . . .' (Prov. 8:22), 'The Father is greater than I' (Jn. 14:28). Plainly, then, the Chalcedon definition has more in mind than mere accumulation of verses. It implies, rather, that there is a continuity beginning with the prophets, coming to a specific point in Jesus Christ and then going on through the history of the church up that point.

Is there, then, some factor which unifies the testimony of the prophets and of Christ and to which the fathers could bear witness? When asking why the early church became so embroiled in the Christological controversies, or, more importantly why they did not avoid them, Geoffrey Bromiley says that

[t]wo factors weighed against these considerations. First, since the early Christians took the confession (Jesus as Lord) seriously, they could not avoid the theological task of working out its rationality both positively as part of the renewal of the mind and negatively in answer to rationalistic objections. Second, they perceived very clearly that the divine humanity of Christ belongs essentially to the gospel of reconciliation. . . . Dismissal of the questions of the relationship of Father to Son or of Christ's deity to his humanity finally meant dismissal of the Christian message itself.⁴²

In other words, the starting point had to be the gospel of reconciliation. The Scriptures were not concerned with Christological speculation but with understanding salvation. If that is so, then perhaps many of the statements in Scripture which were treated as abstract formulations could possibly be better understood within the framework of the Christian understanding and experience of salvation. This gives point to P T Forsyth's comment that

The power of His incarnation has become so weak among men, for one reason, because its explanation has been sought at the wrong end of His life. The wonder has been transferred from Good Friday to Christmas, from the festival of the second birth to the festival of the first, from redemption to nativity, from the fellowship of His death to the sentiment of His babyhood.⁴³

John said that 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14); Paul put it that 'The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men' (Titus 2:11). Incarnation and redemption are inseparable.

The Christological questions arose because of the work of salvation, or, more precisely, because a number of events took place which resulted in the apostolic proclamation which, in turn, produced the church where questions would be asked of the apostolic testimony and where the apostolic proclamation must be defended.

The Gospels recount the appearing, brief ministry and death of Jesus. Plainly, their

⁴² *Historical Theology*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1978, p. 68f.

⁴³ 'The Divine Self-Emptying' in *God the Holy Father*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p.41.

primary interest is in his death and its associated events, the last week, last supper, arrest, trial, death, burial and resurrection. Matthew devotes eight out of twenty eight chapters to the subject, Mark five and a half out of fifteen and a half, Luke five and a half out of twenty four and John nine out of twenty (one). Yet all that precedes this sets the stage for understanding it. The disciples of Jesus had been apprehended by a man who was plainly a man yet he was also different. Later it would be said that he was ‘one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin’ (Heb. 4:15). But they knew him as a man.

They insist that he ate with them, drank with them, slept through tiredness; at times he acknowledged his ignorance of certain matters (such as the length of time that a boy had been suffering from demonic attack in Mark 9:21 as well as the time for the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, Mark 13:32, although Acts 1:6-8 does not actually say as much). Some suggest that Jesus’ knowledge of the human heart indicated his divine omniscience, as, for example in Luke 6:8, ‘he knew what they were thinking’.⁴⁴ But such a conclusion need not apply. It is just as likely that the motives of Jesus’ opposition were, in reality, quite easy to discern. Likewise, John’s statement that Jesus ‘would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone’ (John 2:24-25) need imply no more than that Jesus had read and believed the Scriptures and so recognised his audience in the light of them.

If that is so, then it may be that our talk of Jesus’ humanity may indeed rest on an inadequate base. If our paradigm for humanity is the humanity which we ourselves experience and express, then we will necessarily assume that that was Jesus’ humanity. However, in discussing Jesus’ humanity the Scriptures look for another pattern. Paul wrote that God sent ‘his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh’ and that, in doing so, ‘he condemned sin in the flesh’ (Rom. 8:3). In other words, Christ was truly flesh, but not *sinful* flesh. Sin was indeed condemned in the flesh, but that flesh was ‘without sin’. This is surely why the letter to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 8 as it does.

⁶But someone has testified somewhere,

‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?’

⁷You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor,

⁸subjecting all things under their feet.’

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:6-9).

Jesus is to be understood not from the paradigm of fallen humanity but from that of man as created and without guilt. Paul’s statement that Jesus is ‘the second man’, ‘the last Adam’ (1 Cor. 15:47, 45) is consistent with this. Indeed, were we to ask ‘how justification can possibly come to sinful men and women?’, ‘what does it mean to be saved by Christ?’ Paul’s answer in Romans 5:5-21 is to draw the contrast between Adam’s transgression and Christ’s act of righteousness.

This same contrast is possibly being made in Philippians 2:5-11⁴⁵.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁴⁴ See, Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, TNTC, Inter-Varsity press, London, 1974, p. 123.

⁴⁵ This passage has been extensively examined from many angles. See P T O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, pp. 263-268 for discussion of the Adam-Christ parallel.

⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.
⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Many questions are raised by this passage, among them whether the hymn refers to Christ's pre-existence or only to his human life, but there is no agreement among scholars. What is obvious, however, is the willing submission of Jesus. It is not merely that the eternal Son was obedient but that the obedience was of the one who was found in human form (καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος). Of this latter clause, O'Brien⁴⁶ says,

As R. P Martin puts it, v. 7d 'contains an unmistakable witness to His personal humanity in its declaration that, in the eyes of those who saw His incarnate life, he was "as a man"'. The reality of his humanity is thus reaffirmed. . . . The ὡς does not suggest that to those who saw him he was more than a human being, . . . 'he was found to be a man'.

So whether or not Paul is actually alluding to an Adam-Christ contrast, in general terms the contrast is there, by nature of the obedience of Jesus which is itself contrasted with the disobedience of Adam. Of course, the name *Jesus* itself is only applicable to the man.

Why should the New Testament writers stress the humanity of Jesus, even contrasting him with the humanity of Adam? The answer must be that it is in him as a man that true humanity is found and revealed. But how can this be? The response to this latter question lies in what we call the 'incarnation', the 'en-fleshment'. John's statement that 'the Word became flesh' (John 1:14) points, to the humanity of Jesus, but does so by asserting that the Word, who was God (John 1:1, the past tense referring to 'in the beginning' not to any subsequent loss of deity) became flesh.

It is here, of course, that the speculative questions of the early church could intrude: How can two natures co-exist in one person? Is the human nature of Jesus, the man, somehow submerged in the deity of the Word? and so on. But are these questions valid? In the light of the heresies of Arius, Apollinaris, Nestorius and Eutyches, the Chalcedon definition and the 'Nicene' creed are superb summaries of the issues. But are they truly expressive of the New Testament evidence? It is evident that of themselves they have not stopped further questions being asked. McGrath⁴⁷ quotes Maurice Wiles' summary of Chalcedon.

On the one hand was the conviction that a saviour must be fully divine; on the other was the conviction that what is not assumed is not healed. Or, to put the matter in other words, the source of salvation must be God; the locus of salvation must be humanity. It is quite clear that these two principles often pulled in opposite directions. The Council of Chalcedon was the church's attempt to resolve, or perhaps rather to agree to live with, that tension. Indeed, to accept both principles as strongly as did the early church is already to accept the Chalcedonian faith.

So, how then is the tension presented in the New Testament? My suggestion is that while there is no resolution to the questions raised by the early church, there is

⁴⁶ *Philippians*, p. 226f.

⁴⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology - An Introduction*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1994, p. 295.

the overriding emphasis on Jesus as the true man, and that this emphasis is explained by means of the mystery of the incarnation.

Perhaps a good place to begin this line of thought may be found in Jesus' warning in Matthew 12:31-32 concerning sin against the Holy Spirit.

³¹Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

In its context, Jesus' statement is referring to the accusation by the Pharisees that 'it is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out demons' (verse 24). His response was to assert that when he cast out demons it was 'by the Spirit of God' (verse 28). The implication is that by their accusation, the Pharisees were culpably failing to see that in Jesus the Holy Spirit was at work. In their blindness they were refusing to see that he was (a) man who did nothing apart from obedience to the Father through his being filled with the Spirit.⁴⁸ Furthermore, they ought to have recognised him in this way; instead, when they looked at the last Adam, they saw only the first.

When Matthew and Luke recount the conception of Jesus, they both refer to it in terms of the action of the Holy Spirit.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'. (Matthew 1:20).

The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God'. (Luke 1:35).

Luke's reference actually specifies that Jesus' sonship relates to the action of the Holy Spirit. This is consistent with Paul's comment that 'all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God' (Romans 8:14, not 'children' as in *NRSV*). Matthew continues by referring to the salvific purpose of Jesus' birth and then linking it with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us"' (1:23).

After describing the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus into Egypt, Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son'. In the light of the opening genealogy, Matthew seems intent on placing Jesus in a continuum with Israel. Jesus' sonship seems particularly to be a fulfilment of the failed sonship of Israel. Even the Isaiah reference, 'God is with us' need refer to no more than the fulfilment of the covenant promises (although that is dramatic enough in itself).

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus focuses on the announcement to the shepherds (2:8-14). Having promised Mary that the child to be born via the agency of the Holy Spirit would be holy, the Son of God, the angel now comes in the midst of a revelation of the glory of the Lord and announces the birth of 'a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord'. The language of Luke chapters one and two are unmistakably 'loaded'. First, the glory of the Lord shines round the shepherds (verse 9). God had already made it clear that 'I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols' (Isaiah 42:8). Yet, immediately, the angel refers to the new born Jesus as 'the Lord'

⁴⁸ Leon Morris observes that 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is . . . to deny that God was at work in the exorcism' (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 319). But he does not go any further to explain the implications of the action of the Spirit. His approach is typical of evangelical comments on this passage.

(verse 11). Moreover, he is also a 'saviour', another title explicitly belonging to God (see Isa. 43:11, 'I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior'; see also Ps. 24:5; Isa. 12:2). Besides this, in the Magnificat, Mary speaks of 'God my Saviour' (Lu. 1:47). Elizabeth describes Mary as 'the mother of my Lord' (Lu. 1:43) and Mary then 'magnifies the Lord' (Lu. 1:46) who is specified to be 'God my Saviour' (2:47). The result of this is not confusion but an awareness that the child to whom Mary gave birth shares the titles of God. Luke does not need to explain this; it is a natural way of referring to Jesus.

The use of the title 'Lord' for Jesus is common in the New Testament. Peter's address at Pentecost concluded with the declaration that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36). He did this in the light of his appeal to Joel's prophecy, and indeed to an extent his address is an exposition of that prophecy. Peter's conclusion is based on the final sentence from Joel, namely that 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32). In Joel, the Lord is God. For Peter, the Lord is Jesus. The designation, 'Jesus is Lord' was, within the framework of the church's Jewish matrix, far more than a recognition of his authority; it was a declaration that he was none other than the God of Israel, since 'Lord' (κύριος) was used both for 'Master', 'Sir' etc and, in the LXX, for Yahweh as well as Adonai.

We may add to these the numerous other occasions when Old Testament ascriptions to God are explicitly given to Jesus. But the point is that they are given to the Man Jesus. Small wonder that Paul calls Christ, 'God's mystery' (Col. 2:2; cf. 4:4; 1 Tim. 3:16). To know Christ requires a revelation, which is what Matthew records in 16:16-17.

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'.

What all this means, then, is that Jesus is true man. He is true man because the Word became flesh. In order to accomplish this the Holy Spirit took the place of a human father — we are not told why this must be so — and Mary became pregnant. The question of whether two wills or one were in Jesus is not one which interests the New Testament. The point for the first witnesses was that now there is a true man who lives in total yet simple obedience to God, a man who is dependent on the Holy Spirit for all that he does.

Who then feeds the five thousand? Is it God, is it the God-man, or is it the true man who knows what the Father requires and does it? It is obvious from the references in Acts and elsewhere that miracles are not, *per se* the province of God. It is apostles through whom signs and wonders are performed in Acts; indeed, there are ample occasions when the miraculous is associated with people who claim no allegiance to God at all, as, for example, the magicians of Egypt in Exodus 7:22. The point is not the miraculous but the source. Hence the serious matter of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

As we have said, it is the soteriological which gives point to the incarnation. Jesus was not the Word incarnate for the sake of incarnation but in order that the purpose of God may be fulfilled (see Gal. 4-5). Conspicuously the knowledge of God which is mediated⁴⁹ to us through Jesus Christ is mediated to us by 'the man Jesus Christ' (1 Tim. 2:5).

⁴⁹ For discussion of the Christology of Christ as mediator see McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 298ff; Calvin, *Institutes*, II, 12.

The knowledge of God is impossible for fallen humanity. Only true humanity can know God and reveal him, since only in true humanity is the image of God unsullied (Col. 1:15a, cf. Matt. 11:25-27).

It is obvious that as flesh had become guilty in Adam, so the judgment must come to flesh. This, as Paul records in Romans 8:3, is what happened; God ‘condemned sin in the flesh (of Christ)’. That Jesus bore the sin of fallen humanity meant that the judgment must fall on him. It was totally our judgment which he experienced, since he was ‘without sin’. But his sinlessness gave him no claim on God, since as a man in the image of God he was, rather, obliged to be sinless. His resurrection was not a reward for his sinlessness. Peter says that it was impossible for death to hold him,

²⁵for David says concerning him,

‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;

²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope.

²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption.

²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

(Acts 2:25-28).

Paul adds that Jesus was raised ‘by the glory of the Father’ (Rom. 6:4), and later Peter said ‘He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit’ (1Peter 3:18), which may well be translated He was put to death *by* flesh and made alive *by* Spirit’ (θανατωθεὶς μὲν ὑπὸ σαρκὶ ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι).

Why then was he raised? Paul wrote that ‘he was raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4:25). But how could his resurrection justify us? Allowing that ‘being handed over to death for our trespasses’ is the other side of the same coin⁵⁰ Paul nonetheless says that the resurrection of Jesus guarantees our justification. We are justified not because we are raised but because he is. At present the only resurrection we know is his (see Phil. 3:10-14; Eph. 1:19-23). We know no justification other than that found in Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 1:30). As the man raised from death and now living to God he is the only one with whom we can identify: ‘So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*’ (Romans 6:11).

Jesus Christ stands as the new man in whom creation finds its fulfilment. He is not ‘God in disguise’. He is the Word become flesh, God’s gracious paradigm for humanity. In him all the people of God find their true identity. He is more than *a* man; he is *the* man. In him the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, grace so immense that we know of no God other than he who became flesh never to renounce it. Thus Paul wrote that ‘truth is in Jesus’ (Eph. 4:21).

The complexity of the explanations concerning the person of Christ cannot and, furthermore, must not be avoided. But neither must we, in bewilderment at the subject matter, lose sight of the way the Scriptures present the topic. To what extent the questions of the early church are conditioned by issues outside the New Testament is for others to decide; within the New Testament the way the person of Jesus is described always carries the sense of awful wonder in the presence of such an incomprehensible revelation of grace.

Christology must arise from the context of the worship of the redeemed. One cannot but sense that such was the case with men such as Athanasius and other fathers of the

⁵⁰ See C K Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, A & C Black, London, 1971, p. 100.

church. For example, Athanasius wrote,

... the good God has give [men] a share in His own Image, that is, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and has made even themselves after the same Image and likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of Godlikeness in themselves, they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.⁵¹

Interestingly, Athanasius wrote his work *The Incarnation of the Word* prior to the Arian controversy. We may perhaps assume that his strength in the great trial of the church which followed lay in the deep roots in worship and meditation on the Person and Work of Christ which had gone before. Could the same be the essential for the students of the Word today?

⁵¹ *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, (Translated and Edited by a Religious of C.S.M.V. with an Introduction by C. S. Lewis), Mowbray, London, 1982, p.38.

Appendix – The Pre-existence and ‘Virgin-Birth’ of Jesus.

It is well known that only Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus. But do they describe Jesus’ birth in terms of an ‘incarnation’ of the pre-existent Son, the second person of the Trinity?

R. E. O. White⁵²suggests that

The Preincarnate existence of Christ may be ‘only a simple, contemplative inference backwards from the spiritual glory of the present Christ’ (Deissmann); certainly its clearest expression is found in later writing reflecting on the rudimentary messianic, even adoptionist, assessment of Christ in the primitive Christian community (Acts 2:22-23; 10:38). Yet preexistence is at least implied in words of Jesus himself: ‘The son of man came’; the owner of the vineyard ‘had still . . . a beloved son: finally he sent him.’ It is explicit in sayings attributed to Jesus in John’s Gospel: ‘I came down from heaven’; ‘The glory I had with thee before the world was.’

While we may agree with some of White’s suggestion, even statements of Jesus such as Matt. 11:19, ‘*the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,*’ need not be taken to imply as much as pre-existence. Other statements which he mentions from the Synoptics certainly could carry the inference:

‘just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’ (Matt. 20:28; par. Mk. 10:45).

‘For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’ (Luke 19:10).

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son’. (Matthew 21:37).

However, it seems more accurate simply to assert, as James D. G. Dunn does, that Matthew does not present the reader with an ‘incarnation’ as such. Rather, for Matthew, Jesus is shown to be descended from Abraham and David, *and* from God. He says,

. . . closer analysis of Matt. 1-2 makes it quite clear, as R. E. Brown’s masterly study shows, that Matthew’s intention in chapter 1 is to give an account of *the divine origin of Jesus* – note merely son of David, but also Son of God; descended from David sure enough (1:1-17), but more important, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:18-20). . . . this was an unheard of step to take, for, as Justin Martyr rightly insisted long ago (*Apol.* I.33), it claimed for Jesus a unique conception — the offspring of a human mother, but through an act of God’s creative power, *not* through sexual intercourse with a divine being. The point which bears upon our study is that Matthew presumably understands this as Jesus’ *origin*, as the *begetting* (= becoming) of Jesus to be God’s Son (1:16, 20). As Brown notes, there is in Matthew ‘no suggestion of an incarnation whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on human flesh’. The thought of pre-existence is not present at all in this text.

. . . where Mark thought of Jesus’ sonship as from his anointing with the Spirit at Jordan and in terms particularly of his suffering and death, *Matthew has extended the understanding of Jesus’ divine sonship by dating it from his conception and attributing that to the (creative)*

⁵²‘Preexistence of Christ’, in Elwell, W. (Ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 872f.

power of the Spirit and by depicting Jesus' sonship in terms of his mission which fulfilled the destiny of God's son Israel.⁵³

With reference to Luke's account, Dunn adds,

... here too it is sufficiently clear that it is a begetting, a becoming which is in view, the coming into existence of one who will be called, and will in fact be the Son of God, not the transition of a pre-existent being to become the soul of a human baby or the metamorphosis of a divine being into a human foetus.⁵⁴

Witherington adds,

The significance of the [virginal conception⁵⁵] should not be minimised. It indicates not merely that Jesus was God's Son through the Holy Spirit . . . but that Jesus was a unique person who was the product of both the divine and the human in a manner unlike any others before or since. To be sure, our two authors [Matthew and Luke] do not try to address the relationship of a virginal conception to the doctrine of the incarnation of a pre-existent Son, but it may be that the author of John 1 later saw that the two concepts were connected (cf. Jn 1:13).

In terms of its theological significance, the virginal conception explains *how* the incarnation transpired, though Matthew and Luke do not speak of the event in terms of the incarnation of a pre-existent being . . . Later theological reflection was also to see in the virginal conception the explanation of how Jesus could be born with a human nature not tainted with original sin.⁵⁶

It is this latter point which demonstrates the way biblical information was later used *beyond its original intention*.

It is principally John and Paul who argue for the incarnation of the pre-existent Son. Even Paul, though, does it in the context of his particular purpose in his letters. Thus there are such passages as

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. (2Corinthians 8:9).

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4).

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited . . . (Philippians 2:5-6).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for 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. (Colossians 1:15-16).

Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people'. (When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? . . . (Ephesians 4:8-9).

⁵³ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making, An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, SCM Press, London, 1989, p. 49f. The reference to R. E. Brown is to his *The Birth of the Messiah, A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1977.

⁵⁴ *Christology in the Making*, p. 50f.

⁵⁵ This phrase is preferred to the usual 'virgin birth' since there is no suggestion in the New testament that Jesus' birth was anything other than totally natural. Later, medieval, theologians did make suggestions concerning the birth of Jesus, but they are not of any importance here and have almost completely been rejected., see, Brown, *Birth*, p. 517f.

⁵⁶ B. Witherington III, 'Birth of Jesus', in J. B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, InterVarsity press, Downers Grove, 1992, p. 72.

And of course, there are the many statements in John, especially his prologue (1:1-18) etc.

What ought to be noted is that the focus within the New Testament is on Jesus Christ. However significant these statements (above) may be, the concern is to show that 'the truth is in Jesus' (Eph. 4:21). The name 'Jesus' appears some 917 times in the New Testament, and on every occasion, naturally, the reference is to the man born of Mary, etc.

A brief look at the book of the Revelation may help. The name 'Jesus' occurs fourteen times. The revelation is of 'Jesus the Messiah' (1:1). John is seeing the man whom he had known in Galilee and Judea but who is now actively administering the whole plan and purpose of God in history, and who is doing so from before the throne of God. It is also noteworthy that on seven occasions it is the testimony of Jesus which is at issue. Jesus the man is the supreme prophet, testifying to the truth of the purposes of God (1:2; 1:9; 12:17; 17:6; 19:10(2x); 20:4). In Rev. 1:12, Jesus is described as 'the faithful witness'. It is the man Jesus who speaks. The very purpose of calling him by the name 'Jesus' is to indicate his humanity. It is not merely 'the Son' who speaks, although that is undoubtedly true (Heb. 1:1-2, John 1:1-3, 14), but the Son is now man (cf. Heb. 2:6-10) and it is as man that he is accomplishing all things.

The virginal conception of Jesus is, then, an indication of the *locus* of the action of God. Later Christological questions, as has been suggested, had little to do with the text of Scripture and more to do with speculation arising from other areas.

The Cross, The Resurrection and the Gospel

In 1 Corinthians Paul, when dealing with the issue of factionalism in the Corinthian church, very carefully replies to the problem in terms of the his own preaching of the Gospel. Factionalism, he says is totally out of place because Paul's commission was not to preach himself or to focus on himself by having people baptised in his name. His preaching, rather, concerned 'Christ, and him crucified' (2:2). This was not a matter of his own preference, either; it derived from the fact that 'the word of the cross', while it may be foolish to the perishing, is nothing less than the power of God.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul deals with the question of the resurrection of *believers*, beginning by insisting that the resurrection of *Jesus* was a fundamental part of the gospel which he preached.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1Corinthians 15:3-8).

In this passage, we have the first explicit reference in this letter to the reason for the cross, namely, 'that Christ died for our sins'⁵⁷. Even when he describes the institution of the Lord's Supper, there is no reference to the reason for it, at least not in so many words. His reminder of the words of Jesus, 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood', certainly carries the thrust of all that is meant by the new covenant, but for the moment that is not his point.

Later on in chapter 15 Paul specifies why it is that the resurrection must be part of his preaching:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised.¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (1Corinthians 15:12-17).

Here he links the resurrection with the removal of sin. If Christ has not been raised then his death for sin is completely ineffectual. It seems possible to conclude that the power of the word of the Cross must be intimately associated with the resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 6, when discussing the need for moral purity, Paul wrote:

'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food', and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! (1Corinthians 6:13-15).

Although not developed here, the present unity of the believer with the resurrected Christ with its associated hope of our resurrection is stated as the reason why fornication is inconceivable

⁵⁷ Though cf. 5:7; 6:9-11.

for the believer. Although we are not yet raised, nonetheless we are members of Christ who is raised.

Were we to possess only 1 Corinthians, we may conclude that Paul's gospel, 'the word of the cross', contained the resurrection of Jesus as an essential feature. Christ died for our sins, but had he not been raised, we would remain hope-less. The word of the cross is, therefore, far more than the teaching about the cross.

Paul identifies the fact that the resurrection in his gospel is 'in accordance with the scriptures'. What does that phrase mean? G. E. Ladd has outlined what he regards as the nature of the understanding of resurrection in the Old Testament.⁵⁸ He lists a number of Old Testament passages which seem to have some reference to 'a hope of blessed existence after death'⁵⁹, and then notes some passages where, 'in the prophets we find several clear intimations of the hope of resurrection'.⁶⁰ Among these he mentions Hosea 6:1-2 and Ezek. 37; on the first passage he admits that 'the passage more likely refers to the restoration of the nation' and on the latter passage he comments:

This clearly refers to the resurrection of the nation ... not to individual resurrection. However, the very fact that the vision sees the restoration of dead bones to life suggests that the *idea* of bodily resurrection was familiar. [Then quoting R Martin-Achard, he adds] 'There is no doubt that the symbolism that [Ezekiel] employs raised among the Jews the question of renewal of life for the departed.'⁶¹

Such reasoning is highly questionable. Surely Ezekiel's description of the re-vival of Israel stands out as a quite exceptional occurrence. In other words, there is nothing familiar with his vision at all. His supporting quote does not specify *when* the symbolism raised the question of resurrection for the Jews, but it was certainly not in Ezekiel's time, unless the book of Daniel is roughly contemporary with Ezekiel, and there are sufficient critical questions to make us hesitant of dogmatism at that point. We will refer to the book of Daniel in a moment, but first we must note the reference in Isaiah 26:19.

Your dead shall live, their corpses⁶² shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

While this certainly does mention the rising of bodies from the grave, the context does not imply anything like resurrection which is found in the New Testament. See, for example, verse 18, where the figurative language of being pregnant but giving birth only to wind is used. E.J. Young's assertion that 'the language is not to be taken figuratively' seems strangely inconsistent.⁶³

The only clear statement in the Old Testament affirming the resurrection is in Daniel 12:2.

⁵⁸ I Believe in the Resurrection, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1975, pp. 44-50.

⁵⁹ I Believe, p. 47.

⁶⁰ I Believe, p. 47.

⁶¹ I believe, p. 48

⁶² NIV etc. 'bodies'. The difficulties associated with this verse are discussed critically in Otto Kaiser, Isaiah 13-39, SCM, London, 1980, pp. 215-220. See also, C. Brown, 'Resurrection', Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 3, Paternoster, Exeter, 1978, p. 268. Even translation is difficult, as evidenced by the AV, 'Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.'

⁶³ The Book of Isaiah, Volume II, Chapters 19-39, NICOT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1969, p. 226, cf. p. 225 on verse 18, 'As a figure of nothingness "wind" is most fitting'. Young's work has not been without its critics, even among evangelicals.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

The similarity to John 5:28-29 is striking. However, there is a difference; Jesus said that ‘all who are in the graves’ will come out, while Daniel merely refers to ‘many’. Whatever the implications of this statement, we could hardly take it as a prophecy of the resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, it seems impossible to identify any single passage in the canonical Old Testament which would fit Paul’s description of the resurrection of Jesus as ‘according to the scriptures’. If the phrase ‘according to the scriptures’ is applied strictly to ‘on the third day’ and not to the matter of Jesus’ resurrection in general, then *perhaps* the account of Jonah, referred to in Matthew 12:40, may be in mind.

While the doctrine of resurrection is found in the inter-testamental writings, especially in 2 Maccabees, and later in the Apocalypse of Baruch and 2 Esdras, none of these would have been included under the heading of ‘scriptures’.

In spite of the development of the doctrine of the resurrection in Judaism between the testaments, when Paul was arraigned before Herod Agrippa II he asked ‘Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?’ (Acts 26:8). With particular cunning, Paul had previously caused havoc in the Sanhedrin by referring to ‘the resurrection of the dead’ (i.e. Christ, Acts 23:6-10). At the time, the Pharisees were still only a vocal minority in Judaism, so that any reference to the resurrection could not be made on the basis of some generally accepted position.

How then could Paul say that Christ was raised on the third day ‘according to the scriptures’? Rather than look for particular ‘proof-texts’, a procedure which is fruitless in this area, we may be better served by following another method.

In his study, *Resurrection and Redemption, A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*,⁶⁴ Richard Gaffin summarises the approach of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos in this way:

The centre of Paul’s teaching is not found in the doctrine of justification by faith or any other aspect of the *ordo salutis*. Rather, his primary interest is seen to be in the *historia salutis* as that history has reached its eschatological realisation in the death and especially the resurrection of Christ.⁶⁵

From this approach, the resurrection is not merely an item preached because prophesied but the next great event in the unfolding plan of redemption. The resurrection is ‘according to the scriptures’ because all that God had revealed in ‘the scriptures’ had led inescapably to this point as much as to the cross.

The resurrection of Christ takes on an eschatological significance in its own right. Whereas it has been treated as a confirmation of the value of the work of the cross or as an anticipation of our future resurrection, both of which positions are undoubtedly true, the resurrection of Christ stands as a climax in the progress of salvation history. The resurrection of Christ is, then, quite a startling event. It could never have been merely anticipated by a reading of the Old Testament, even though it can only be understood in the light of the Old Testament.

Before we ask what the resurrection means within the Pauline proclamation, we should note two points. The first is that the gospel which Paul preached could not have been fully delivered in a brief address to a synagogue or other gathering. On a number of occasions Acts records that after Paul and his associates had spoken to a group he was requested to continue his proclamation at a later time. For example,

⁶⁴ Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987 (Formerly titled, *The Centrality of the Resurrection*, 1978)

⁶⁵ p. 13.

⁴²As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next sabbath. ⁴³When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. (Acts 13:42-43)

In this context, 'to continue in the grace of God' should not be seen in the limited sense of the present grace of redemption but rather in the grace of God as revealed in the progress of redemptive history which Paul had been detailing in his address in the synagogue (verses 15-41). The context, while allowing that some Jews became believers at that point, certainly does not say so. Instead Acts indicates that it was Gentiles who became believers (verse 48) and that the Jews, stirred up by that response fulfilled the prophesy repeated in verse 41 (Hab. 1:5) by persecuting Paul and Barnabas (verse 50).

Likewise, in Acts 20:27, Paul told the Ephesian elders that he 'did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God'. This 'whole purpose of God' as stretching from before the foundation of the world to the final consummation is surely the background behind Paul's exposition in the letter to the Ephesians⁶⁶. His proclamation, his gospel, was far more than a recital of the basic facts with the fuller detail only given to those who responded. Given the time and the opportunity, the *whole* proclamation was given to *all* who would listen. The cross 'according to the scriptures' and the resurrection 'according to the scriptures' were both seen as essential elements in the whole gospel.

The second point is that in the book of Acts the message of the resurrection is as prominent as or perhaps more prominent than the cross. The following list is somewhat selective:

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.(Acts 1:3)

beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us-one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection. (1:22)

But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.(2:24)

Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption'.(2:31)

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.(2:32)

and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.(3:15)

much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.(4:2)

let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.(4:10)

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.(4:33)

The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.(5:30)

but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear (10:40)

But God raised him from the dead; (13:30)

he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'(13:33)

⁶⁶ Whether or not the letter was written to that particular church or was in fact a cyclical letter written to a number of congregations. See especially chapters 1-3.

As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, 'I will give you the holy promises made to David.' (13:34)

but he whom God raised up experienced no corruption. (13:37)

Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babblers want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities'. (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) (17:18)

because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (17:31)

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this'. (17:32)

When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, 'Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead'. (23:6)

I have a hope in God—a hope that they themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. (24:15)

unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them, 'It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today'. (24:21)

Although this list takes no account of context, so that a number of the references may relate to the same occasion, it is still instructive to see how prominent the language of the resurrection is.

Familiarity with the *doctrine* of the resurrection should not dull us to the amazing *fact* of the resurrection. While there were occasions in Israel's history when people were raised from death, and the same occurred in the ministry of Jesus himself, none of these 'miracles' was in any way like the resurrection of Jesus. *When Jesus walked out of the grave there was no prior paradigm by which to understand it.* It was completely new event! Unlike all the previous resuscitations, 'we know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Rom. 6:9). The responses to seeing the risen Jesus were strikingly different to the responses on the prior occasions. Thus,

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. (Matthew 28:9).

When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. (Matthew 28:17).

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'. ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?' ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. (Luke 24:31-43).

Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:28)

What, then, was it about the resurrected Jesus which evoked these responses? (We may compare them with the way the crowd came to ‘gawk’ at Lazarus in John 12:9.) Without our having the same physical vision of Jesus we can only guess at the effect seeing had on them. But we can understand how Paul, who had seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1), described the resurrection body.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:42-49).

In Romans 1:4 Paul put it that Jesus ‘was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead’ (Romans 1:4). Gaffin’s conclusions are worth observing.⁶⁷

- (1) At his resurrection the personal mode of Jesus’ existence as the last Adam was so decisively changed by the Holy Spirit that Paul says he has become life-giving Spirit. The Spirit, who raised him up as the firstfruits, indwells him so completely and in such a fashion that in their functioning he *is* the Spirit who will be instrumental in the resurrection of the full harvest. Further,
 - (a) the life-giving activity predicated of the resurrected Christ is not predicated *directly*; the Spirit is an indispensable factor. Only by virtue of the functional identity of the Spirit and Christ, effected redemptive-historically in his resurrection, is Christ the communicator of life. No principle in Paul’s soteriology is more fundamental.
 - (b) The change in Christ’s person at his resurrection is as real as and commensurate with the transformation to be experienced by the rest of the harvest.
- (2) The resurrection of Jesus has more than personal significance. [1 Cor. 15:45] in its immediate context brings into view not only an organic connection with the resurrection of believers but also considerations cosmic in scope. Resurrection here is nothing less than the counterpart of creation. The resurrection of Christ is the beginning of the new and final world-order, an order described as spiritual and heavenly. It is the dawn of the new creation, the start of the eschatological age. In terms of the conceptual framework with which Paul views the whole of history, it is the commencement of the ‘age-to-come’.

Paul’s gospel, then, spoke of the cross as being Christ’s death for man’s sin and his resurrection, real and physical though beyond observable paradigms, as the breaking in of the fulfilment of God’s purposes for creation.

In Romans, Paul had told his readers that justifying faith was ‘in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification’ (4:24-25). Justification, or righteousness, is the characteristic of the kingdom of God, both present (Rom. 14:17) and to come (2 Pet. 3:13). So the resurrection of Jesus is the way by which believers are brought into that righteousness. They stand with him as their righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). Righteousness is far more than legal status; it is the present reality of the believer. The gospel has brought a revelation of the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:17), so that in Christ believers really are righteous. They are thus seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6) and their lives are hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). The truth of their identity is only hidden from sight, though not from faith. So when the *risen* Christ (Col. 1:3) is revealed, they, too, will be revealed with him in glory.

⁶⁷ Resurrection, p. 89f.

... in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ there is the revelation of the still hidden fruit of Christ's death. It is this very turning-point which is still hidden in the death of Christ, hidden under the aspect in which man there appears consumed by the wrath of God. And now the New Testament bears us witness, that this aspect of man is not the meaning of the event upon Golgotha, but that behind this aspect the real meaning of this event is the one which is revealed on the third day. On this third day there begins a new story of man, so that we can even divide the life of Jesus into two great periods, the thirty-three years to his death, and the quite short and decisive period of the forty days between His death and the Ascension. The third day a new life of Jesus begins; but at the same time on the third day there begins a new *Aeon*, a new shape of the world, after the old world has been completely done away and settled in the death of Christ. Easter is the breaking in of a new time and world in the existence of the man Jesus, who now begins a new life as the conqueror, as the victorious bearer, as the destroyer of the burden of man's sin, which had been laid upon him. In this altered existence of His the first community saw not only a supernatural continuation of His previous life, but an entirely new life, that of the exalted Jesus Christ, and simultaneously the beginning of a new *world*. (The efforts to relate Easter to certain renewals, such as occur in creaturely life, say in spring or even in man's awakening in the morning, and so on, are without any strength. Upon spring there inexorably follows a winter and upon the awakening a falling asleep. We have here to do with a cyclic movement of becoming new and old. But the becoming new at Easter is a becoming new once for all.) In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the claim is made, according to the New Testament, that God's victory in man's favour in the person of His Son has already been won. Easter is indeed the great pledge of our hope, but simultaneously this future is already present in the Easter message. It is the proclamation of a victory already won. The war is at an end—even though here and there troops are still shooting, because they have not heard anything yet about the capitulation. The game is won, even though the player can still play a few further moves. Actually he is already [check]mated. The clock has run down, even though the pendulum still swings a few times this way and that. It is in this interim space that we are living: the old is past, behold it has all become new. The Easter message tells us that our enemies, sin, the curse and death, are beaten. Ultimately they can no longer start mischief. They still behave as though the game were not decided, the battle not fought; we must still reckon with them, but fundamentally we must cease to fear them any more. If you have heard the Easter message, you can no longer run around with a tragic face and lead the humourless existence of man who has no hope. One thing still holds, and only this one thing is really serious, that Jesus is the Victor. A seriousness that would look back past this, like Lot's wife, is not *Christian* seriousness. It may be burning behind—and truly it is burning—but we have to look, not at it, but at the other fact, that we are invited and summoned to take seriously the victory of God's glory in this man Jesus and to be joyful in Him. Then we may live in thankfulness and not in fear.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals, it completes this proclamation of victory. We must not transmute the Resurrection into a spiritual event. We must listen to it and let it tell us the story how there was an empty grave, that new life beyond death did become visible. 'This [man snatched from death] is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' What was announced at the Baptism in Jordan now becomes an event and manifest. To those who know this, the break between the old world and the new is proclaimed. They still have a tiny stretch to run, till it becomes visible that God in Jesus Christ *has* accomplished all for them.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, SCM, London, 1966, p. 122-123.