

A Passion to Proclaim

I have, for some time now, become aware of how little the *hearts* of many Christians seem to be involved in the things of God and I should say from the outset that I include myself in this. We have become experts, perhaps, in theological precision, church growth and organisational techniques and our moral sensitivities may be acute, that is, we can pick sin in others from a mile off. But what of our hearts, our affections? Jesus' question to Simon Peter bears asking again: 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' And I have to ask myself, do I love Jesus? This is no light matter, as if merely an accurate theological reply will satisfy. No, 'Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord' (1 Cor. 16:22).

Jesus' subsequent instruction to Peter, 'Feed my sheep – feed my lambs', sometimes may seem strange, but it shouldn't. If Peter loves the Shepherd then he will love the flock and he will do all in his power to ensure that they are cared for. Later, Peter wrote

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22).

And John put it bluntly:

²⁰Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 Jn 4:20-21).

So the question bears asking again, 'Do I love the people for whom Christ died?' Is my heart aching for them, do I long to see them grow, to be blessed, to be reconciled where there is division, and do I want those things without them giving *me* any credit for it? Or am I simply using others to gain some sort of *kudos* for myself?

Then there is the fact that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16)'. If God loved and he gave his Son, do I love them enough even to give them the news of his love? There is much talk today, in some circles at least, of being 'filled with the Spirit', but Andrew Murray put it plainly, 'No one may expect to be filled with the Spirit if he is not willing to be used for missions'.¹ Matters of personal comfort and of rights, so important in the world around us, are evidently no less important to believers. We seem to believe it is our 'right' to contribute to the life of the church and we are offended if we do not receive our due prominence. We believe that the church exists to make us feel secure and to stroke our so easily bruised egos and so we are more ready to move from one church to another for our own sakes than we are to move to another location for the sake of those who are lost without Christ. The attitude of the Apostle Paul is in striking contrast.

To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor 9:22-23)

Could it be that 'love' does not mean today what it meant in the New Testament? Perhaps it was only a calculated course of action, established by a predetermined set

¹ Andrew Murray, *The Spirit of Christ*, Nisbet, London, n.d., p. 160.

of values? That way love would only be what you do and would remain quite unrelated to a person's affections, or even to their emotions.

Some have drawn our attention to the two different words used for love in Jesus' conversation with Peter. They are correct: Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, using the verb *agapaō*, whereas Peter responded with another word, *phileō*. But it would not be correct to assume that one was a lesser love than the other.² When Jesus spoke earlier about the Father loving him, he said 'The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands' (John 3:35), using the verb *agapaō*, but then said 'The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:20), this time using *phileō*. Whatever the difference between the two words, both are more than adequate to affirm the love of the Father for the Son.

A similar picture appears when we understand the love which the Father has for men and women. 'For God so loved (*agapaō*) the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16); 'the Father himself loves (*phileō*) you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God' (John 16:27). Likewise, when describing the deep need to love 'the Lord', Paul wrote 'Let anyone be accursed who does not love (*phileō*) the Lord' (1 Cor. 16:22), and Jesus told 'the Jews' that 'I know that you do not have the love (*agapē*) of God in you' (John 5:42). It is obvious that the words are synonymous, though precisely why John (and others) chose to use them this way is not explained.

What is also obvious is that what is contained in the words is very potent. To speak of love is to speak of a reality which overwhelms and transforms. All too often today the love of which the Scriptures speak is presented as a mere 'ideal', a moral realm of duty unrelated to the deep things of life where men and women are moved to the heart of their being, where tears flow and where nothing can ever be the same.

The Passion of God

To the Athenians, Paul said that God is not 'served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things' (Acts 17:25). We understand that God does not 'need' anything. This is not because we have some abstract idea of what God is, some sort of 'unmoved mover' or 'ground of all being' or whatever; such language owes far more to Greek philosophy than to Christian faith.³ So does the idea that God is 'without body, parts or *passions*'.⁴

² Some older commentaries suggest this, not always consistently. For example, J. C. Ryle, (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, John Volume III*, James Clarke & Co, Cambridge, 1873, reprinted 1969) p. 508: 'Two different words are used to express our one word "love." One of these two words means a higher, calmer, nobler kind of love than the other. This is the word which our Lord uses in the fifteenth and sixteenth verses, where He asks the question, "Lovest thou Me?"—The other of the two words means a more passionate and lower kind of love. This is the word which Peter always uses when he says, "I love thee!" and our Lord once uses it in the seventeenth verse.' R.C.H. Lenski, (*The Interpretation of John*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1942) p. 1418, while agreeing with the position defined by Ryle, adds: 'To this day, despite the information long available regarding these two words, some reverse the meaning of these two verbs and let ἀγαπᾶν refer to the lower form of love (the English "like") and φιλεῖν to the higher form. And they confuse the true ideas, for they think of ἀγαπᾶν only as love for a benefactor and of φιλεῖν as love for the person himself.'

³ See, for instance, Millard J. Erickson *Christian Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, 1984, 1985, p. 713, 737.

⁴ *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter II, 'Of God, and of the Holy Trinity'*. 'There is but only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions...'

The Puritan writer Thomas Watson put it, God 'is impassible; he is not capable of being hurt',⁵ which is, of course, true, but Watson's reason for saying this was not that God is sovereign, reigning over all he has made but that he is 'spirit', that is, totally different from what we see.

The word 'passion' does indeed come from the Greek word for 'suffer'.⁶ The notion that God is 'impassable', however, derives from the idea that suffering is a purely human experience and that God, being totally different from, totally other than, humanity could not experience the weaknesses we associate with fallen human beings. Suffering is equated with helplessness. To suffer seems to imply being at the mercy of circumstances, to be vulnerable. *We* are embarrassed by our tears, by our loss of control, and we could not understand God having such needs as we have. Nor we would want a God so weak as to be subject to forces outside himself.

But why should we read back our experience of 'passion' into God? Supposing our fears really relate to the fear of death, the ultimate vulnerability. And what if God could 'suffer' without being forced? Jürgen Moltmann writes:

The logical limitation of this line of argument is that it only perceives a single alternative: either essential incapacity for suffering, or a fateful subjection to suffering. But there is a third form of suffering: active suffering — the voluntary laying oneself open to another and allowing oneself to be intimately affected by him; that is to say, the suffering of passionate love.⁷

This would imply that Paul's statement that 'God does not need anything but that he gives' means that, far from being manipulated by the circumstances, he freely gives himself, even if it means participation in the deep agony of men and women. In the early Church, Origen writing on Romans 8:32, 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us', said:

In his mercy God suffers with us (συμπάσχει); for he is not heartless.

He (the Redeemer) descended to earth out of sympathy for the human race. He took our sufferings upon Himself before He endured the cross — indeed before He even deigned to take our flesh upon Himself; for if He had not felt these sufferings [beforehand] He would not have come to partake of our human life. First of all He suffered, then He descended and became visible to us. What is this passion which He suffered for us? It is the passion of love (*Caritas est passio*). And the Father Himself, the God of the universe, 'slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy' (Ps. 103:8), does He not also suffer in a certain way? Or know you not that He, when He condescends to men, suffers human suffering? For the Lord thy God has taken thy ways upon Him 'as a man doth bear his son' (Deut. 1:31). So God suffers our ways as the Son of God bears our sufferings. Even the Father is not incapable of suffering (*Ipse pater non est impassibilis*). When we call upon him, He is merciful and feels our pain with us. He suffers a suffering of love, becoming something which because of the greatness of his nature He cannot be, and endures human suffering for our sakes.⁸

It is one thing to quote the text, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son' but it is quite another thing to recognise that this giving flowed out of the fulness of love which is within the unity of the Godhead. The Father, Son and Spirit are one in love, quite apart from the creation. Jesus prayed, 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because *you loved me before the foundation of the world*' (John 17:24).

⁵ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity: Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly's Catechism*, Banner of Truth, London, (1692) 1965, p. 47.

⁶ πάσχω.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, SCM, London, 1981, p. 23.

⁸ Quoted in Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 24.

He also said, 'The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:20), and 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again' (John 10:17). And the incarnate Son responded by crying, 'I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father' (John 14:31). Psalm 40:8, 'I *delight* to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart' (cf. Heb. 10:5-7) is the true nature of love. So is, '[m]y *food* is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (John 4:34). And why should the warning of Mark 3:28-29,

Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin

not be understood as a strong jealousy for the honour of the Holy Spirit, who has empowered the incarnate Son to do the work of the Father?

Given that the goal of God is our 'participation in the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), we should understand that the love of the Father, Son and Spirit, is not fearful of anything outside of itself. On the contrary, this love is *full*, so full that it can and does overflow to all that God has made, without in any way being diminished. God *loves* the world.

With this as a base, statements such as 'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God' (Eph. 4:30), and warnings against those who 'outrage the Spirit of grace' (Heb. 10:29), must not be reduced to mere theory. 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:31) is no less a reflection of the passion of God. So also are statements about God's anger and jealousy: 'You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me' (Ex. 20:5); 'When you have had children and children's children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, and provoking him to anger' (Deut. 4:25); 'A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies' (Nah. 1:2).

We may well be suspicious of anger and jealousy in others, but if we are we should remember that human sinfulness makes love turn from giving into using, turns pure jealousy into a vicious self-protection and makes righteous anger become a matter of personal reaction. Hence the instruction, 'Be angry *but do not sin*' (Eph. 4:26). There is a great distinction between the anger of God and the anger of a human being. The anger of men and women does not produce God's righteousness (James 1:20; cf. Gen. 4:6; Jonah 4:1-4). In strong contrast, God's anger has been expressed in such a way that his righteousness was firmly established (Rom. 3:25-26).

I want to suggest, then, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not in any way 'without passions'. The reason for such a conclusion is not that we have reasoned it out, it has nothing to do with logic. The conclusion is forced upon us by our being confronted by God, in particular by God at his most passionate. This was the point made by Origen (above).

For a long time the Cross of Christ has been presented in cold legal terms, in accounting terms, and even in terms which tend to reinforce our guilt rather than declare its removal. For instance, the legal approach says that there is a broken law for which there is a due penalty which Christ bore. The accounting approach argues that there was a debt to be paid and that Christ paid it, so that his credit cancelled our debit.

Of course these are quite true, as far as they go. The moral guilt approach, on the other hand, says things like, 'Christ suffered for you and now you are in his debt; how will you repay that? Answer, by a life of service.' That approach is frankly a hideous distortion, especially since we are constantly reminded of our inability to offer due service. Our noses are constantly rubbed in our debt and our failure to meet it.

The truth, however, is far greater. All that was done on the Cross was done because God *loves* us. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to endure the unimaginable horror and shame of actually becoming evil and bearing the judgment of holiness upon it. 'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14-15); 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). Hebrews 12:2-4 puts it strongly: Jesus is

the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

He *endured* the Cross. This was no placid scene. The language about blood is not symbolic but horribly real. The *shame* was awful. He was despised and rejected by men, hanging naked and humiliated before the world. The *hostility* of sinners is well described in the Gospel accounts. This *struggle against sin* meant the shedding of *his* blood. But what makes this so amazing is the fact that 'God put [him] forward as a propitiation by his blood' (Rom. 3:25), 'He ... did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for us all' (Rom. 8:32). This death of Christ was God doing in history what he had determined before the foundation of the world, namely he had purposed to have a redeemed, pure bride for his Son, a bride drawn into the extraordinary love of the divine family.

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

We could add such references as Jeremiah 31:3; Galatians 2:19-20; 1 John 4:9-10 and Revelation 1:5b-6, but sooner or later we will have to speak out our response. Moltmann has the following to say:

... the First Epistle of John (4.16) defines God by saying 'God is love'. It is not just that God loves, in the same way that he is sometimes angry. He *is* love. His very existence is love. He constitutes himself as love. That is what happens on the cross. This definition only acquires its full force when we continually make the way that leads to the definition clear to ourselves: Jesus' forsakenness on the cross, the surrender of the Son by the Father and the love which does everything — gives everything — suffers everything — for lost men and women. God is love. That means that God is self-giving. It means he exists for us: on the cross. To put it in trinitarian terms — The Father lets his Son sacrifice himself through the Spirit. The Father is crucifying love, the Son is crucified love, and the Holy Spirit is the unvanquishable power of the cross. The cross is at the centre of the Trinity. This is brought out by tradition, when it takes up the Book of the Revelation's image of 'the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev.5.12). Before the world was, the sacrifice was already in God. No Trinity is

conceivable without the Lamb, without the sacrifice of love, without the crucified Son. For he is the slaughtered Lamb glorified in eternity.⁹

The Passion of the Preacher

What brings this passion to its goal is equally staggering. In 1 Timothy 1:11 Paul spoke of ‘the gospel of the glory (or, ‘the glorious gospel’) of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me’. Then, in 2 Timothy 1:8-10, speaking of the suffering he endures for the gospel, he urged:

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

The gospel he preached related to the grace given in Christ Jesus ‘before the ages began, but ... now ... revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus’. But Paul knew that *when he preached* the abolition of death and the breaking in of life and immortality was powerfully experienced. To the Thessalonians he said,

...we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. (1 Thess. 1:4-5)

Paul knows that his gospel is far more than good information to be digested and hopefully applied by his hearers. In fact he knew all too well that his hearers were quite incapable of digesting the information. He knew that they were men and women living under the wrath of God, who were futile in their thinking with their senseless minds darkened, their minds debased (Rom. 1:21, 28). He knew that his hearers were ‘hostile in mind’ (Col. 1:21), ultimately incapable and thoroughly unwilling simply to digest or apply what was said.

If the gospel is powerful it is because in the proclamation there is a revelation of the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:16-17). This is a revelation which *breaks into* the life of the hearer. If there is a response of repentance and faith it is because God himself *gives* repentance and faith (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; 2 Tim. 2:25, also Acts 5:31 and 11:18). So what happens when the gospel is preached?

...hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:5-8)

The love which took Christ to the cross (vs. 8) is actually, that is, really and effectively, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The passion of God for the world breaks into the lives of men and women. They are loved into life. They don’t just know *about* God because he knows *about* them, they know God because he knows them (Gal. 4:9), he has become personally intimate with them. The revelation in

⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 82f.

the gospel is certainly in words which can be understood, but that is because it is God himself personally speaking his word¹⁰ and work into us.

How could we possibly preach ‘cold information’ when there is such power in the proclamation? How can we be satisfied with keeping our traditions intact when God is in such passionate action?

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ...²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:17-18, 21-24)

Of course it is possible to be cold in our preaching (and this is by no means a reference to ordained ‘clergy’ alone). There could be a number of reasons why this could be so. One reason might be that this mere imparting of information is what we were told was correct. In other words, we have never been taught anything different. Another, related, cause might be that the gospel which came to us was couched in such terms that we ourselves have never been given the slightest idea of the magnitude of the work of God in us. As a result we expect little because we have experienced little.¹¹

But there is a reason which, I suspect, stands out above all the rest. It is simply that we will not live in the fulness of what God has done. We have left our first love (Rev. 2:4). We prefer the apparent safety of correctness and established tradition to the hard slog of living in the truth in the midst of a hostile world and of fighting against the constant attacks of Satan and his powers. Given ‘the increase in lawlessness, the love of many [has grown] cold’ (Matt. 24:12). The word has been preached to us, and we have heard it, but ‘when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, [we ...] fall away’ or ‘the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing’ (Mark 4:19).

In Luke’s account of the parable of the sower, he records Jesus warning as: ‘Then pay attention to *how* you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away’ (Luke 8:18). So how do we hear? With simple faith, or with filters working at full power, protecting our security, our comforts and our rights? Does the great transforming work of the gospel confront our refusal to be done with sin? If it does we need to hear again what our passionate God has done for us.

¹⁰ While I am totally committed to the authority of the Scriptures as the word of God, I am also bewildered by those who want to argue that the word of God only means ‘the Bible’. In *Acts*, for example, the ‘hero’ of the story is ‘the word’. On almost forty occasions Luke describes the responses to the ‘word’: ‘the word of God increased’ (6:7), and when announcing the response of the Ephesians he concluded, ‘So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed’ (Acts 19:20). What ought to be plain is that this *cannot* be a reference to the Bible! The Bible as we know it did not exist for almost 150 plus years after this, even if a small number of the New Testament documents had already been written. ‘The word of God’ must be that which ‘proceeds from the mouth of the Lord’ (see Deut. 4:8; Matt. 4:4).

¹¹ I suspect that this is the reason why the Pentecostal and Charismatic message of a subsequent ‘baptism in the Spirit’ has found such a ready response. Men and women were never recreated for a deficient experience and so when a rich experience is offered they will quite properly respond. The theological explanation may be debatable, but surely the main fault lies with those who provided half a gospel in the first place.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. (Rom. 6:1-12)

Small wonder that Paul wrote that it was on the basis of ‘the mercies of God’ that he urged the Romans to ‘present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’, that they should ‘not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of [their] minds’ (Rom. 12:1-2). In words which sound quaint to us, he told the Philippians that ‘I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 1:8, AV), translated elsewhere as ‘the compassion of Jesus Christ’ and so on. But if nothing else, he meant that he *ached* for them. He told the Ephesians that ‘for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone *with tears*’ (Acts 20:31).

Paul knew the mercy of God. He understood that sin was not that we have done wrong things, as we are repeatedly told Sunday by Sunday, but that humanity is deeply evil, horribly polluted by sin and fallen far short of the created glory. He knew, as did the other writers in the New Testament, that nothing less than a radical action of God could rescue us from our miserable estate. That is the mercy of God. What is more, he knew it because he had experienced mercy.

I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 1:13-14)

Paul had received mercy — and so have we! In his passionate fulness, God has come to us and taken us into himself. We are ‘in God the Father’ (1 Thess. 1:1), ‘in Christ’ (Eph. 1:4 etc) and ‘in the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:9; Col. 1:8). So if we have left our first love, we need to remember from whence we have fallen.

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. (2 Pet. 1:9).

We need simply to return to the reality of what God has done, to the reality of his great love with which he loves us.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4-7).

We need to accept the fact that

Although you have not seen him, *you love him*; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy (1 Pet. 1:8).

and that 'we love because he first loved us'. 'Ian Pennicook, do you love me? Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' So, 'keep yourself in the love of God' (Jude 21).

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:9-11).

Nothing less than a continuous living in the reality of sins forgiven can give us the joy of Christ, the 'joy of the Lord' which energises us for the great work which God is doing. Nothing less than being in living communion with him will make communion with the world repugnant to us. Good information, without doubt a vital necessity, cannot, of itself, make one iota of difference. But the refreshment of the everlasting love of God will make us cry out with joy, 'Lord here am I, send me'.

This is 'a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus' (Rev. 14:12).

© Ian Pennicook, January 2001

A Passion for Christ

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

Coming after Paul's description of his stand against the demand for Gentile submission to the Jewish law and his strong disagreement with Peter (Gal. 2:1-15), this statement sets out the relationship between law living and faith living. 'I died to the law': 'I live by faith'.

What is easily recognised is Paul's stress on the fact that it is what Christ has done and continues to do which is significant. So far, so good. What, perhaps, tends to be forgotten is the amazing context of the whole subject. By that I am not referring to the theological or literary contexts; I am referring to the fact that here is a situation where a man whom we know as Paul says that when 'Christ' died he died and that now 'Christ' lives in him.

What makes that context 'amazing' is that 'Christ', another way of saying 'the Jewish Messiah', is the designation of a *man*. If, as some argue, the letter to the Galatians was written as early as the late forties, or even as late as the mid-fifties of the first century,¹ then we have this declaration at the most about twenty five years after the death of Jesus. I suggest that something quite extraordinary is being said when Paul asserts that 'Christ lives in' him.

Paul knew that Jesus was a human being. He told the Romans that Jesus Christ was God's 'Son ... descended from David according to the flesh' (Rom. 1:3), he refers to stories in the Gospels as actual events, as in the account of 'the Lord's supper' (1 Cor. 11:20, 23-26) and he certainly knew that Jesus had been crucified and raised on the third day. What is more, he knew that 'there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human' (1 Tim 2:5).² And yet within the whole of the New Testament, outside of the four Gospels, there is very little attention given to the 'stories of Jesus'. The words of the old hymn, 'Tell me the stories of Jesus, I love to hear'³ are not really reflected in the documents of the New Testament which explicitly describe (Acts) or are addressed to (the letters and Revelation) a post-Pentecost situation.

We might well argue that, given the existence of the four Gospels (actually there were *many* more than four) and the common knowledge of the events, at least in Judea and Galilee, there was very little need for recounting the stories of Jesus.⁴ But, in contrast to the way the actions and words of Jesus are used to *prove* points today, particularly when dealing with ethical matters, we could ask why Paul and the others did not do the same.

¹ For a recent evaluation, see Paul Barnett, 'Galatians and Earliest Christianity', *Reformed Theological Review* Vol. 59 No. 3, p. 114ff. For the point of this discussion, however, a difference of five or six years is of no consequence.

² See S. Kim, 'Jesus, Sayings of' in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1993, pp. 474-492.

³ A hymn written for children by William Henry Parker in 1885.

⁴ Kim ('Jesus, Sayings of', p. 486) quotes Martin Hengel: 'It was simply impossible in the antiquities to proclaim a man crucified a few years ago, as Kyrios, Son of God and Redeemer, without saying something about who this man was, what he taught and did, and why he died'. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. 187.

It was not that Paul was indifferent to Jesus. His statement in 1 Corinthians 16:22 should be evidence enough of that: ‘Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come!’⁵ Peter put it that ‘without having seen [Jesus Christ] you love him’ (1 Pet. 1:8). Paul often described himself and others as ‘servants of Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 4:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:10 etc). In 2 Corinthians 11:23 he asks, ‘Are they servants of Christ?...I am a better one’ and proceeds to catalog the sufferings he has experienced for the sake of this service. But there is no virtue in suffering. Paul had already made that plain.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

So there can be no doubt of Paul’s attitude towards Jesus. So why is that ‘Paul tells us next to nothing about the life and ministry of Jesus apart from its climactic finale’?⁶

Who was Jesus?⁷

Why should anyone ‘love’ Jesus? Why should they worship him? And why should anyone long for his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8)? Sometimes today there is the attitude towards Jesus within the Christian community which seems to go as far as treating his name as a talisman to ward off evil or as almost a *mantra* which leads to a heightened expectation in worship. Then there is the unthinking, yet still Christian, attitude which accepts that Jesus is important, but which is largely uncertain exactly why. He just is. But why ‘love’ him? Who was he? And the next question, why tell anyone about him?

Jesus was a Jew. He was ‘born of a woman (i.e. a human being), born under the law’ (Gal. 4:4). Furthermore, he was a human being with a mission to other Jews: he was ‘born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law’ (Gal. 4:4-5). Whatever else, the immediate focus was the Israel of his own day.⁸ Those under the law (i.e. of Moses) were in need of redemption. He had come to ‘save his people from their sins’ (Matt. 1:21).

But in his preaching, Jesus made little mention of that bondage. His primary reference was to the kingdom of God. This pointed to Israel of the Old Testament, the people through whom blessing was to be restored to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). However, the nations themselves, the Gentiles, do not figure greatly in the story. Instead, he told the twelve disciples, ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6). P.T. Forsyth put it:

⁵ The phrase ‘the love of Christ’ in 2 Cor. 5:14 is ambiguous, meaning either Paul’s love for Christ or Christ’s love for Paul.

⁶ Dunn, *Paul*, p. 184.

⁷ Those who want to find the answer to this question had better be prepared for a very big task. The amount of secondary material is enormous and much of it contradictory. See Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1997 for a summary of the various approaches. A recent historical treatment of Jesus is Paul Barnett’s, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1999.

⁸ Some of what follows is prompted by P.T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, N.C.P.I, Blackwood, 1997. This contains material originally published in 1915 and thus predating much of the discussion which has occupied twentieth century scholarship.

Insofar as He was preacher and teacher, insofar as the influence of His historic personality went, He was a prophet to Israel alone.⁹

This will certainly affect the way we use the Gospels. For instance, many regard ‘the Sermon on the Mount’, Matthew 5-7, as a manual for Christian living.¹⁰ Now to a certain extent that may be correct, but that was not its intention. Jesus was addressing Israel and the way that nation lived and, in doing so, was exposing the way that Israel and its leaders had reduced the demands of the kingdom to a minimum. As a result the purpose of God was being contradicted.

Here was a people intended to be ‘the salt of the earth’ (Matt. 5:13) but who had become quite tasteless. They were intended to be ‘the light of the world’ (Matt. 5:14) but having received the amazing revelation of God had chosen to hide the light. So Jesus made it plain that he was there precisely to fulfil the law and the prophets (i.e. the Old Testament scriptures), something which the scribes and Pharisees were not doing (Matt. 5:17-20). Jesus then proceeded to expose the minimalist approach to the law of Moses taken by the Jewish teachers and to show the full demands of God (Matt. 5:21-48).

The rest of the ‘Sermon’ deals with false piety and its corrective, genuine living under the generous care of God (Matt. 6), a true evaluation of others and of God’s good giving (Matt. 7:1-11). Matthew 7:12, the so-called ‘Golden Rule’, ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets’, is in fact a common saying in many religions, and was also attributed to Rabbi Hillel. It points again to the way Jesus is focussing on true law keeping.

In contrast were those who made the way to true kingdom living ‘easy’. Those who followed them would find that the coming judgment would bring their destruction (Matt. 7:13-27). Matthew concludes by observing that in all this teaching Jesus was clearly different from the scribes (Matt. 7:28-29). Of course, Jesus’ miracles of healing and exorcism were as much teaching as were his words (Mark. 1:21-27) and as such they and his other actions as well as his spoken teaching brought him into continual conflict with the authorities. As a prophet to Israel he failed. Israel did not rise up to the command to repent (Matt. 3:2; 4:17).

But Israel did rise up, and they had Jesus the prophet to Israel silenced. It was inevitable that they would.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,³⁰ and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’³¹ Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets.³² Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.³³ You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

³⁴Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town,³⁵ so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.³⁶ Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

⁹ *Preaching of Jesus*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Volume One, Inter-Varsity Press, 1959) put it: ‘we are not told in the Sermon on the Mount, “Live like this and you will become Christian”; rather we are told, “Because you are Christian live like this.” This is how Christians ought to live; this is how Christians are meant to live’ (p. 17). Whatever value the Sermon may have for Christians, if it was really preached by Jesus then it could not have been for Christians. There were none. It was preached for and to his disciples.

³⁷Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸See, your house is left to you, desolate. (Matthew 23:29-38).

Whatever else he was, Jesus was not a source of wise sayings, or a unique miracle worker. Most of his sayings appear elsewhere, in particular they are anticipated in the Old Testament, and the working of miracles was known far beyond Israel. He was a prophet and by being a prophet, or *the* prophet, he was actually provoking fruitless Israel to kill him (Matt. 21:33-46).

To all appearances, Jesus had failed. The two on the road to Emmaus represented the sense of grief of many;

He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. (Luke 24:19-21).

Who would love a failed prophet, a dead Messiah who had failed to redeem?

A Revelation of Jesus Christ

Sometimes we might think that a person ‘converts’, that is, they decide to change codes, they choose to become Christians. The testimony of the scriptures is that such choices are not the result of independent thinking on our part but of the overwhelming action of God. Lamentations, a book which ponders the judgment that came on Israel though the Babylonians, closes with this prayer:

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old — ²²unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam. 5:21-22).

The AV has ‘Turn thou us unto thee... and we shall be turned’. Unless God turns us, changes us, there can be no change. Even Jesus told the disciples, ‘You did not choose me but I chose you (John 15:16), and ‘No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me’ (John 6:44). It is impossible even to see the Kingdom, of which Jesus spoke, without a great, and to us incomprehensible, work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3, 5).

What I am saying is that that is the very thing that has happened to us. And time after time, that is how the scriptures describe it. In his own case, Paul wrote,

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:11-12)

No one would say that Paul was not educated, nor that he had not discussed the matter of Christ with others. He was educated under one of the leading rabbis (Acts 22:3) and early on he did spend fifteen days with Peter (Gal. 1:18) and also later on spent time discussing what he had been preaching with others (Gal. 2:2). But his claim was that he understood what Jesus Christ had done because Jesus Christ himself had shown him.

Three times in Acts the story of Paul’s conversion, not his ‘converting’ but his ‘being converted’, is told (Acts 9, 22 & 26). He told it to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:12-16 and Gal. 1:13-16). On each telling, Paul was the, initially, unwilling object of God’s action.

Paul's understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, came as the result of his meeting Jesus. The man who had been crucified had met him on the road to Damascus, just as he had also met the others in the upper room, and so on. The only difference is that when Paul met Jesus it was after Jesus' ascension.

Paul could now see that 'it was [Jesus'] failure as prophet that extorted His resources as Redeemer. The Kingdom, His great theme, could only be established in His Cross.'¹¹ Jesus' death had actually been the way that redemption from sin had been accomplished. Israel could not have 'converted' and so could never, of itself, have fulfilled its role to the nations. So his prophetic role had provoked Israel to such depths of sin that his final goal was accomplished.

But the only way anyone could know that would be if the final goal came to them. The revelation of Jesus Christ actually gave Paul his gospel. Having met Jesus, Paul was confronted with all that Jesus had done. It was impossible to meet him and not, at the same time, to encounter the total forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, adoption, faith, repentance and so on. Jesus did not offer Paul anything. He gave it all.

What I am suggesting, then, is that Paul's *explanation* of Jesus Christ and all that he had done was informed by many sources. He was highly educated and well read. But his *knowledge* of Jesus Christ and all that he had done was the result of a revelation of Jesus Christ.¹² Furthermore, in seeing the risen and ascended Jesus, Paul was now seeing himself clearly. For instance, he had told Timothy that he 'had acted ignorantly in unbelief' (1 Tim. 1:13). He was saying that when he was so violently opposed to the Christians he really didn't have a clue what he was talking about. But now, it's all different.

And what of his guilt before God, the sin from which he needed to be saved? That was now simply explained.

...the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim 1:14-16).

How could this have happened, meaning, what had taken place that removed the deep guilt of the man? It was not that Jesus had loved him so much because he could see the potential in the man, if only he could be given the chance to develop it, so that the passed was just 'forgotten. Nor was it just that 'God had a plan for his life', although that was certainly true. These are ploys used to appeal to the egos of audiences. On the contrary, Paul was first and foremost a man under judgment. There was a record that stood against him with its legal demands (Col. 2:14); sin had killed him (Rom. 7:11). He was not a man who had some blemishes on his character, he was a man with deep guilt on his conscience and with the offence against the holiness of God to be reckoned with. Even as a believer, he understood the dark nature of sin in his life (Rom. 7:21-24).

So what did he see when he saw Jesus? The words of Galatians 2:19-20 must surely tell us something of it.

¹¹ Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus*, p. 5.

¹² It is possible that the phrase 'of Jesus Christ' could mean either 'by Jesus Christ' or 'concerning Jesus Christ'. In the long run both are true, though the likelihood of ambiguous statements being deliberate seems to me to be slight. In 2 Corinthians 1:13 he insisted that 'we write to you nothing other than what you can read and understand'.

- (i) 'I through the law, died to the law that might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ'. It was the law of Moses which took Christ to the cross. In dying, Jesus was not merely the victim of rebellious Israel, although that accusation is valid. But it is that, in dying, Jesus was rebellious Israel, indeed he was rebellious humanity. All the rebellion, the hatred of God, the evil expressed throughout history and that which had not been expressed, was all laid on him. Indeed he became that. He who knew no sin became sin for us' (2 Cor. 5:21). And the law of God did what it must; it judged him and in judging him it judged us all. 'I through the law died to the law.' Paul could see that when Christ was crucified *he* was crucified.
- (ii) 'That I might live to God ... it is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me.' That must mean that Paul has come through the judgment. He is alive, he is free (Gal. 5:1). The risen Jesus is all there is. Either Paul lives in his participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus or he does not live at all.
- (iii) 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.' Faith means no less than utter dependence. It is not some mental assent to a set of doctrines. It means hanging on to Christ at all costs, because Christ loved him and gave himself for him. Faith was the response to love. This response was no debt to be repaid, it was a recognition that without Jesus Christ there is nothing, and there never can be anything. That love had come to Paul. and the love of Christ urged him on (2 Cor. 5:14).

You Love Him

The full statement in 2 Corinthians 5:14 is important.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.

Someone might say, 'I am not Paul and that all happened then, but no one has seen Jesus today'. Leaving aside the matter of the many documented visions of Jesus, especially those in such places as Nepal,¹³ it is true that the New Testament claim is that Jesus cannot be seen. We are waiting for his appearing (see 2 Tim. 4:8; Heb. 9:28 etc), we walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and we hope for what we do not see (Rom. 8:25).

What is not true is that because we cannot see Jesus we are in some way worse off. Jesus said to Thomas,

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. (John 20:29)

Any sense of deprivation is dispelled. What is more, there were many in what we call the early church who had also not seen Jesus, but the Galatians were told that 'It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!' and that they received the Spirit by believing the proclamation (Galatians 3:1-2). Or the Thessalonians:

...we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit

¹³ I refer to testimonies of those who have worked with organisations such as Interserve. I well recall one Anglican bishop describing the way illiterate peasants, nominally Hindu, had come to Christ because he had appeared to them in visions. That same bishop, once apparently highly suspicious of such things, told the audience that he now believed in signs and wonders because he had seen them for himself.

and with full conviction; ... ⁶in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, (1 Thess. 1:4-6).

In fact, all the churches mentioned in the New Testament, apart from those in Judea, had never seen Jesus. So how could Peter make his astounding claim:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

The answer lies in understanding what has happened. Peter wrote later that 'baptism ... now saves you' (1 Pet. 3:21), though it was Paul who gave greater detail.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:1-11).

We must understand what has happened to us. When we were baptised we did not merely recall past events or even copy them. We became participants in the death of Christ. His death was our death, just as it was Paul's death. And if we participated in Christ's death then our baptism was a dynamic event (irrespective of its mode). With his usual energy, Luther summarised the issue.

*Your baptism is nothing less than grace clutching you by the throat: a grace-full throttling, by which your sin is submerged in order that ye may remain under grace. Come thus to thy baptism. Give thyself up to be drowned in baptism and killed by the mercy of thy dear God, saying: 'Drown me and throttle me, dear Lord, for henceforth I will gladly die to sin with Thy Son.'*¹⁴

This is being overwhelmed by grace, being 'in Christ'. So to the Colossians Paul said that the riches of the glory of the mystery are 'Christ in *you*, the hope of glory' (Col. 1:27).

Peter said that 'to you who believe he is precious' (1 Pet. 2:7). That is because faith is receiving *all* that he has given. So, in the words of 2 Corinthians 13:5,

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?

Are we men and women of faith? Have we come to Jesus as the redeemer of sinners, as our redeemer, and do we trust him to do for us what we could not and would not otherwise do for ourselves? If we have, then it is because of his great work in us. Christ is in us and the faith we are exercising is his gift to us. And now we love him, and it is with a great eagerness that, having heard the promise, 'I am coming soon', we join the cry of the Bride for the day of the wedding, 'O Yes, Come Lord Jesus!' (Rev. 22:20).

©Ian Pennicook, 17th February 2001

¹⁴ Quoted in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Trans), Oxford University Press, London, 1933, 1968, p. 194.

Glory in the Cross

It is probably obvious that the major part of the story in the four Gospels is devoted to the final week of Jesus' life. Matthew devotes chapters 21-28, Mark chapters 11 to 16, Luke from halfway through chapter 19 to chapter 24 and John chapters 12 to 20; almost one third of the total describing Jesus' death and the events immediately leading up to it. Besides this, there are numerous comments anticipating the final events.

In the Gospels we see a man drawing inexorably closer to what he knows will be a horrible and excruciatingly painful death. We see the hostility of the opposition intensify, often with some provocation from Jesus himself (see Matt 23). For instance, the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-12) was aimed directly at the elders of Israel and that led to the otherwise unthinkable coalition of Pharisees and Herodians in order to trap him (Mark 12:13; see also Mark 3:5).

Jesus' final night was spent in rather intense discussion with the twelve disciples. Whether it was a Passover meal, as in Matthew, Mark and Luke, or whether it was a meal anticipating the Passover, as in John, there was none of the usual rejoicing. Their hearts were troubled. The discussion focussed on his impending betrayal, death and absence from them, with all that that absence implied. There were also warnings about the disciples suffering because of their association with Jesus. Then, in the early hours of Friday morning, Jesus went with the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where the agony of anticipation was greatly intensified.

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."³³ He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.³⁴ And said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake."³⁵ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.³⁶ He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."³⁷ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?³⁸ Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:32-38).

Some ancient manuscripts tell us that, at that time, 'In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground' (Luke 22:44).

Jesus' arrest took place before sunrise on Friday morning. He was taken first to the house of Annas, then to Caiaphas, then to Pilate, then to Herod and then back to Pilate. All the while it was cold. And all the while Jesus was in the hands of his enemies whose hatred at last had an opportunity for expression. They mocked and beat him, having blindfolded him and ridiculed him (Luke 22:63-65). There should be no doubt of the intensity of their hatred. But there was one thing the leaders of Judea could not do, that was legally to inflict the death penalty. For that they needed the authorisation of the governor.¹ Furthermore they wanted crucifixion!

The New Testament gives few details of crucifixion; probably there were few needed for the first readers would have seen crucifixion often enough.² On reflection,

¹ See A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1963, pp. 24-47.

² The account of Jesus' death in the Gospels is actually the most detailed of all the ancient descriptions of crucifixion.

though, the physical side of crucifixion was not the major issue, as the apostolic gospel would later reveal. But still

after flogging Jesus, [Pilate] handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ³⁰They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matt. 27:26-31).

The flogging was a routine part of the execution. It was carried out with a whip with many strands, each strand having pieces of bone or lead tied into it. Not only did the flogging reduce the condemned person to a physical wreck, it often did kill if not administered carefully. The soldiers of the governor were quite possibly recruited from Syria³, and Josephus notes their hatred of Jews,⁴ but even so their treatment of condemned prisoners was savage. Much has been made of the crown of thorns, mentioned briefly in Matthew, Mark and John, but that was probably more for the purpose of ridicule than of inflicting pain. Perhaps there was an ironic element to the mention of thorns, given the initial curse (Gen. 3:18)? But there is small wonder that, when forced to carry his own cross, it became necessary to have Simon of Cyrene carry it behind him (Luke 23:26).

Crucifixion was intended to be both a means of execution and a warning to onlookers of the severity of Roman law. Those crucified could take up to a week to die, being left to hang in a public place for all to see. It has been described as 'a "barbaric" form of execution of the utmost cruelty' and as 'the supreme Roman penalty'⁵ The prisoners were evidently stripped naked, to heighten the indignity, and were nailed in both hands⁶ (or wrists⁷) and feet to a wooden 'cross' (of whatever shape) where they were left to hang until they died. Often, to heighten the disgrace, the bodies were left on the cross after death, as carrion for birds or to rot.⁸ 'Crucifixion itself damaged no vital organs, nor did it result in excessive bleeding ... Death came slowly, sometimes after several days, through shock or a painful process of asphyxiation as the muscles used in breathing suffered increasing fatigue.'⁹

Immediately prior to Jesus' crucifixion he was offered a drink of wine mixed with gall (Matt. 27:34) and again later (Mark 15:36; John 19:29). The wine was bitter, and

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 958.

⁴ B.J. 1.87.

⁵ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, SCM, London, 1977, p. 22, 33.

⁶ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, p. 31.

⁷ J. B. Green ('Death of Jesus' in Joel B. Green *et al* (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1992, p. 147) says that this was an assumption based on initial examination of the bones of a man who had been crucified in northern Israel about the middle of the first century. R. E. Brown (*The Death of the Messiah*, Volume Two, Doubleday, New York, 1994, p. 950) points out that 'nails through the palms would not carry the weight of a body but would tear away'. This would be more likely as there is evidence that often the feet were not nailed and the condemned person was supported by their 'hands' and a block of wood to support the buttocks. This support was not an act of mercy but was intended to prolong the suffering.

⁸ There are references to animals attacking while the condemned were still alive.

⁹ Green, 'Death of Jesus' p. 147.

was possibly offered not to refresh but to ridicule. The thirst would become intolerable and the only relief offered was undrinkable.¹⁰

Jewish sensitivities about the sabbath made them approach Pilate and request the removal of the bodies of the executed before sunset. This ran counter to the normal procedure, but the request was granted. To hasten death, possibly by making it impossible for the condemned to relieve the pressure on their hands and chests by supporting themselves on their nailed feet, or possibly simply to impose one final climactic session of suffering, the Jewish authorities asked that the legs of the prisoners be broken (John 19:31). In Jesus' case, however, they were too late. After the two thieves crucified with Jesus had their legs smashed, the soldiers discovered that Jesus was already dead. So instead they 'pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out' (John 19:34).

Burial followed. Although the full burial procedure was not carried out, the body of Jesus was wrapped in linen cloths along with 'about a hundred pounds' of a mixture of myrrh and aloes. So the body of the dead Jesus was laid on a stone shelf in a stone tomb, where it remained.

The Scandal of the Cross?

In 1 Corinthians 1-2, Paul wrote about his preaching. Although his message was regarded as foolishness by the Greek philosophical mind and as a scandal by the Jewish religious mind, Paul declared that he 'decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). Elsewhere, in the face of those who were determined to 'glory' in the way they had maintained contemporary Jewish rules and taught others to do so, he had said, 'May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gal. 6:14).

If we admit that crucifixion was a horrible death, and was regarded as such even by those who used it against others, then why should we 'glory in the cross'? The answer to that lies in the nature of the gospel which the early Christians preached.

Humanly, Jesus, like so many before and after him, was a failure. He came and preached to Israel and although many 'believed in him' their belief, their faith (the same Greek word is used for both), was either not genuine at all or was quite defective. In the end, 'they all forsook him, and fled' (Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:50). This had been anticipated previously when Jesus, having fed a large crowd with five loaves and two fish, told them that eternal life depended on them eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:53-57). Many turned away from him when he said that. Finally they all turned away.

So why did some return, and even more, why did they enthusiastically spread the news of his death? The answer is simple.

*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*

¹⁰ Mark's account has 'wine mixed with myrrh', possibly indicating that the wine was intended as an anaesthetic. However, in Jesus' determination to endure the sufferings set for him (Mark 10:34, 38) with full consciousness, he refused it.

whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then *he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*
⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, *he appeared also to me.* (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

They did not preach about a dead Messiah but they proclaimed that Jesus, the man who had died and been buried was now alive and that they had met him! Peter, the one who, only a few weeks previously, had vehemently denied even knowing him, stood up at the festival of Pentecost and said ‘This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses’ (Acts 2:32). Later he told Cornelius

We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (Acts 10:39-41).

Resurrection may be the ‘correct’ thing to say about Jesus in Christian circles today, but it was hardly ‘correct’ then. Many had seen, spoken with, eaten with and even touched the same Jesus who had been crucified, who had died and who had been buried! They proclaimed ‘Jesus and the resurrection’ (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10, 33; 17:18 etc).

However, even if we could ‘prove’ the reality of Jesus’ resurrection, that would still hardly be foolishness or a scandal. On the contrary, it might even be a cause of amazement, on a similar though grander scale to those, say, who claim to have ‘died’ in surgery. We might ask, ‘What was it like?’ or something like that. And, accepting that Jesus did rise from the dead, why should anyone ‘glory’ in the means of his death? Given the vast supply of crosses in jewellery and grave markers and so on, we would have to say that the mere existence of a cross, whether sanitised for wearing or more closely identified with death, does not provoke much of a response.¹¹ Obviously, there must be a lot more to be said.

Why the Cross?

We might possibly be offended by the hideous nature of crucifixion but, in an age when computers and other technologies can mimic real suffering or present it in acceptable ways, there are many, even in our comfortable cultures, for whom the discussion of pain and torture and death means little. But the New Testament, as we have seen, says very little about that aspect. Instead it speaks to the moral and not the emotional heart of men and women.

The word of the cross is not an appeal to our sentiment: ‘See how he loved you, will you not respond?’ Of course the cross was the expression of love, and there are many statements in scripture which attest to that, but the word of the cross concerns *holy* love. As such the word of the cross first speaks to the conscience.

The whole message of the scriptures is built around the moral structure of creation and of mankind. Man is made in the image of God and, if nothing else, that involves every human being in holiness and purity and righteousness and truth. Men and women are created to reflect *actively* the whole dynamic of God’s moral being. To be truly human is to live in the holiness of God, to be pure in all things, to be completely consistent with God’s being and character. That is truth, things as they really are

¹¹ This would not be the case in cultures which have quite positive views of the correctness of their own religions, such as in Islamic countries.

because that is how God is. And, what is more, all these elements of human life are energised in the wonder of *knowing* God, so that these elements are not our own but always his life in us. God is the fountain of living waters and we are *being* his image when the fountain flows into us and through us. We are *being* in the image of God when we love in the love which flows from him.

What we call ‘the fall’ of Man is not simply a matter of rebellion against an instruction not to eat of a particular fruit in Eden. It was, and is, a deep rejection of God as Father, Creator and King, and as Redeemer, and so a rejection of the true nature of a human being. In place of true human nature, men and women attempt to construct their own identities and to generate their own ‘flow’. The effort is tragic, because they are digging out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. All the efforts are doomed to fail, if for no other reason than that human beings cannot be other than what they were created to be.

But the efforts do not only fail because of some inherent weakness in them. They fail because God himself cannot and will not permit them to succeed. His blessing upon men and women and upon the creation is withheld and his curse comes upon those who refuse him. The ground is cursed (Gen. 3:17) and the creation subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it (Rom. 8:20).

God’s holiness, which is his own being, cannot be set aside. Unless holiness acts against unholiness then God is denying himself, something he cannot do (2 Tim. 2:13). This action against unholiness, against evil, against sin, is his wrath and his wrath is ‘revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth’ (Rom. 1:18). God is personally against all sin and so against all those who oppose themselves to him.

This wrath is fearsome. Romans 1:18-31, for instance, tells us of God handing rebellious humanity over to its own choices with degrading consequences. Twice in that passage, Paul specifies that the sinful mind is affected: ‘they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened’ (v. 21) and ‘God gave them up to a debased mind’ (v. 28). To the Colossians he wrote that men and women are ‘hostile in mind’ (1:21) and then to Titus that ‘To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted’ (1:15). They are given up to self-deception. And all these statements go on to say that where the mind is debased then only debased actions can issue.

‘Debased’ does not mean that a human being has reached the limits of evil behaviour, as the list in Romans 1:28-31 shows.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

But it does mean that humanity is given over to ‘every kind of wickedness’. To the Ephesians Paul wrote that, apart from the revelation which God gives of himself, Gentiles are

darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. ¹⁹They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. (Eph. 4:18-19)

We should see that the source of this evil lies in the human heart.

Glory in the Cross

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder; ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. (James 3:16)

The fact of evil being immeasurably evil is not readily admitted. Sin is deceitful.

Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (Isa. 5:20)

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matt. 6:22-23)

In Israel, the depths of evil were present. Apart from the revelation of God's holiness, Israel could never see that even its worship had become fatally polluted.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' (Isa. 6:1-5)

Isaiah was forced to recognise the depths of his own and Israel's evil and the great wrath which that evil drew upon them: 'I am lost!'

What is more, the testimony is that God has not been precipitous, or quickly bad tempered, in his judgment.

You are righteous, O LORD, and your judgments are right. (Ps. 119:137)

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Ex. 34:6-7).

However, this is not an attempt to justify God before those who accuse him. The truth of his judgment is first known in the conscience as men and women are forced to know that their hatred of God, in will and action, has brought this upon them. The deeper agony lies in the refusal to come in simple repentance.

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. (Ps 130:3-4)

Over against that is the persistent refusal to accept responsibility for sin, so that men and women live self-deceived lives and so suffer the action of God's wrath.

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is *no deceit*. ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. (Ps 32:2-4).

Continuously humanity attempts to salve the demands of a troubled conscience. But being in the image of God, men and women cannot be satisfied and at peace unless they are functionally one with the truth of God. Or as someone put it, nothing can satisfy the conscience of man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God.

Consequently, self-justification cannot succeed, since self justification, the rationalisation which says that I can deal with my guilt by my actions and attitudes, always has to minimise the offence done to the holiness of God. Self-justification says that I have to deal with me, hence the absurd statement that I have to forgive myself. But the psalmist says to God,

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. (Ps. 51:4)

The assumption that I must forgive myself is based on the foolish premise that the wrath to be feared is my own. On the contrary, 'God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day' (Ps. 7:11 *NIV*).

While ever God's holiness remains unsatisfied, that is, while ever sin remains unjudged and wrath has not destroyed evil, men and women remain in fearful bondage.

What Happened on the Cross?

Many passed by the cross of Christ. Some may have been friends and family of the two thieves who were crucified alongside of Christ. Certainly Jesus' enemies were there, their mouths open wide 'like a ravening and roaring lion' (Ps. 22:13). They were present in their triumph; they crucified him (see Acts 2:36 etc).

But it is more certain that the enemies of Jesus, while expressing their vicious hatred of him, were doing nothing beyond the plan of God. They had been given up to their evil and, in that, they were bringing about the climactic judgment of that evil.

this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. (Acts 2:23)

It was not the wrath of Man that was the effective cause of the cross of Christ but the wrath of God. Such statements as these are stark:

[Christ Jesus] whom *God* put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (Romans 3:25).

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32).

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, *struck down by God*, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. ...¹⁰*Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.* (Isaiah 53:4-6, 10)

It might be harrowing for us to see the crucifixion of a human being, to hear the awful cries of pain and to watch as death claims another victim. But that is not the cross of Christ. His death was not that of *a* man but the death of all humanity. There the words of Lamentations 1:12 are fulfilled.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.

Here is the judgment on humanity. Here it is the man Jesus, the last Adam, crying out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). He is the propitiation for our sins, meaning that he is the one given to bear the wrath of God so that we might be free from it. Here is the wrath which satisfies the offended conscience of God. Here is the judgment which can never be understood until it is known in its purifying power.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (Rom. 5:8-9)

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! (Heb. 9:14)

Christ has fulfilled all righteousness. The judgment is finished and we must simply *receive* that. The guilt has been destroyed in the winepress of God's wrath. Will we receive that? 'Here is love, vast as the ocean'; will we receive such *holy* love which cannot rest until the unholy are made holy and pure in the blood of Christ. And will we move beyond the sentimental into the action of the redeemed? Until we will do that, we have never understood the cross of Christ.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. ALAS! and did my Saviour bleed ?
And did my Sovereign die ?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I ? | 4. Thus might I hide my blushing face
While His dear cross appears,
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt mine eyes to tears. |
| 2. Was it for sins that I had done
He groaned upon the tree ?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree! | 5. But drops of grief can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe
Here, Lord, I give myself away:
'Tis all that I can do. |
| 3. Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut his glories in,
When Christ, the mighty Maker, died
For man, the creature's sin. | <i>Isaac Watts (1674-1748)</i> |

‘Abba, Father!’

There is a certain ‘orthodox’ sound to the words, ‘God the Father Almighty’. The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed both contain the phrase, so it has been in Christian use for about sixteen hundred years. Of course, the title ‘Father’ for God has been in use ever since Jesus and the first Christians used it.¹

Actually, there is nothing unique about calling God ‘father’. There is evidence that from ancient times ‘peoples, tribes and families pictured themselves as being the offspring of a divine ancestor’.² There are also some significant differences between these Ancient Near Eastern³ texts and the Old Testament, but a general similarity exists.

What is unique in the New Testament is the way ‘Father’ is used. On at least three occasions, in Mark 14:36, Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15 the word is used to express the deepest feelings of the heart (for want of a better phrase), by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit and by men and women who have received the Spirit. Somehow it is more than simply the words which are used; instead it is the *way* that they are used which is so potent. Perhaps we could say that there is something ‘revelatory’ in the utterance. For instance, when Jesus said ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’ (John 5:17), the Jewish leaders were incensed. This was not a matter for scholarly debate; rather, here was a man evidently functioning in a reality which confronted them.

What is more, that reality had broken in upon the first Christians as well. They knew that they had received the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 3:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5), and others could also see the evidence of the Spirit’s presence (Acts 10:45-47; 8:14-19). In Romans 8:15 Paul explained the significance (or, at least, *a* significance) of the gift of the Holy Spirit in terms of what must have been a common experience, namely that ‘we cry, Abba, Father’. We can say this because, he has been saying that ‘*you* did not receive a spirit of slavery ... but *you* received a spirit of adoption’ and then says that ‘*we* cry Abba, Father’. A similar picture emerges in Galatians 4:6; ‘And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into *our* hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’⁴ However, given that when Paul wrote to the Romans he had never been to Rome, the language of Romans 8:15 is important.

Paul was not the only one to speak to believers in this way. Peter wrote to those who ‘invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds’ (1 Pet. 1:17). John said, ‘I write to you, children, because you know the Father’ (1 John 2:14) and adds ‘everyone who confesses the Son *has* the Father also’ (1 John 2:23).

¹ There is also the use of the title ‘Father’ in modern prayers (especially liturgical prayers). It sometimes seems to me that there is every attempt to make sure that the words are correct; we must pray *to* the Father, *through* the Son and *by* the Spirit. It is not cynicism so much as sincere disappointment when I say that any sense of personal communication appears sometimes lost in all this theological correctness.

² Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1964 (1978), p. 11.

³ The ‘Near East’ is now more often called the ‘Middle East’, but in some works (e.g. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton, 1955) the older name persists.

⁴ There is a textual variant which is adopted only in the AV, which reads ‘*your* hearts’. The manuscript evidence in support is quite late, and the reading ‘*our* hearts’ is supported ‘by early and diversified witnesses’ (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, London, 1971, p. 595). There are no doubts concerning the text of Romans 8:15.

If we add the statements in the Gospels which address God as Father, or which instruct the disciples as to how they should address God, the picture becomes even more vivid. Rejected by whole towns and cities, Jesus responded by saying,

‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Matthew 11:25-27).

He told the disciples to pray, ‘Our Father in heaven’ (Matt. 6:9) and that is precisely what they did when the Spirit came to them. I am suggesting that what happened to the disciples was nothing like a spirit of pedantry coming upon them, whereby they used the right words; it was the Spirit of adoption whereby they knew themselves to be sons of God and the cry was one drawn out from them by the love of God which the Spirit had brought to them.

God is Father

P.T. Forsyth wrote of those who ‘do not rise to regard God as Father at all’, then added:

Few of us now make that mistake in theory: But most do in practice. Their practical thought of God is not always as Father even if they speak much of the Fatherhood. By practical I mean what really and experimentally affects their religion, colours their habit of soul, moulds their silent tone of mind, helps and sustains their secret heart. They treat God as power, judge, king, providence of a sort. He is for them at most a rectorial Deity. But it is the few perhaps who in their living centre and chronic movement of the soul experience sonship as the very tune of their heart, the fashion and livery of their will. Most Christians are not worldlings, but they are hardly sons. They are only in the position of the disciples who stood between Judaism and Pentecost, who received Christ but had not as yet the Holy Ghost. They are not sons but have only received power to become sons. The fatherhood has not broken out upon them through the cross and caught them away into its universal heaven. The great mass of religion, real and practical as it may be, is not yet sonship. It is more or less earnest, active compassionate. It is Catholic or it is Protestant⁵; it is ecclesiastical, political or pietist; it is eager for the kingdom and set on some form of God’s will. ... But what it does not enough realise in experience (the preacher himself accuses his own) is the centre and summary of God’s will and kingdom, the fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.⁶

Many Christians today defend the words (if they do even that), but we must ask if we know the reality that God is Father.⁷

By ‘reality’ I am trying to say that to call God ‘Father’ is not to use a metaphor.⁸ The word ‘father’, while understood as representing a human relationship, is not merely a convenient term. God *is* Father and human relationships are a reflection of that. In Ephesians 3:14-15, Paul prayed to ‘the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name’. Another translation has it, ‘the Father from whom

⁵ We might add, Anglican, Baptist or Pentecostal, or whatever. The preoccupation with denominational distinctives is a violation of the true nature of the work of God.

⁶ P.T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, N.C.P.I., Blackwood, 1987, p. 6.

⁷ I well recall one pastor, a ‘charismatic’ leader well before the Charismatic Movement of the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s had even been anticipated, telling me that he had never known God as Father. I suppose that what was even more sad was that the rest of the large number of pastors who were present remained apparently disinterested in the whole topic.

⁸ The ‘application of a name or descriptive term to an object to which it is not literally applicable’ (C.O.E.D).

everything that is called Father derives its name’.⁹ This is another way of saying that everything that is authentically human is the image of God.

Sadly, the opposite of that is often the way things are understood. People start with an understanding (perhaps!) of fatherhood which is derived from their experiences of human fathers (and mothers) and then assume that fatherhood is a metaphor based on that to describe God. Two extremes, with everything between them, result from this approach. On the one hand there is the complete rejection of God as Father because of the association of that term with ‘patriarchy’, with the subjugation of women and the denial of their rights and so on. On the other hand there is the elevation of fatherhood to a romantic ideal, where fatherhood means no more than loving (sentimental) compliance with our perceived best interests.

Human fatherhood is far more realistically presented in the scriptures. There were fathers whose godly concern was to protect their children. Job was an example.

And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, ‘It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.’ This is what Job always did. (Job 1:5)

Others were persistently evil, so that the example they set to their children had awful consequences. There are many in this category. For instance:

Ahaziah son of Ahab began to reign over Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah; he reigned two years over Israel. ⁵²He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the way of his father and mother, and in the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. ⁵³He served Baal and worshiped him; he provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger, just as his father had done. (1 Kings 22:51-53)

Most would seem to fit the description by Jesus in Matthew 7:9-11

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Human fatherhood is hardly a consistent paradigm for true fatherhood. But somehow human fathers, with all their inconsistencies, become a filter through which we tend to view the fatherhood of God. The reason why the failures and weaknesses of human fathers dominate our thinking like this is hardly considered. It is this.

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. (Titus 1:15)

Were we to be pure then we would see purely. If we were pure as sons and daughters of our human parents then we would be able to see them as they are, to appreciate their strengths and to forgive their weaknesses and sins against us. We would understand that sin has affected their expression of the image of God and yet we would see that our obedience to them and/or our honour of them need not be avoided, even if it is made more difficult. But where sin has corrupted not only them but also us, then everything is seen though distorted eyes.

For a moment, let us ask why the gift of the Spirit results in the cry ‘Abba, Father’. Surely the answer is simple: ‘Adam [was] the son of God’ (Luke 3:38). Humanity was created to know complete intimacy with God the Father, so this is what

⁹ See, Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1960, p. 116, n.3.

is seen in the new creation, the re-new-ed creation. The spirit who was breathed into the first Man comes wonderfully into believers.

Take John’s Gospel as an expression of this. John the Baptist declared that Jesus was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). Jesus spoke of being aware of the deep things of the kingdom of God only when someone ‘is born of the Spirit’ (John 3:8). He told the woman at the well that anyone who came to him would know the wells of living water bursting out again within them (John 4:10, 14). The strong flow of the spring of the water of life had been stopped but would flow again. Then at the feast of tabernacles, Jesus cried out,

‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’

³⁹Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)

Once again, it is the picture of the amazing flow of living water. When Jesus is glorified then the Spirit will be given and men and women will know the flow not only bursting up within them but flowing through them.

We are probably familiar with the language, but if we go back to our understanding of Adam’s intimacy with the Father then we would be justified in saying that all humanity, all those in Adam, were created to know the life of the Father as their own life and to know that life flowing through them at every point. They would be those who drink from the river of his delights.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.⁸ They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.⁹ For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Ps. 36:7-9)

Those who drink from this river are drinking from the deeps of God. It seems strange to have to say so, but surely this must be the most rich intimacy with God that a creature can ever know. This is what is meant by the word *theosis*, a word meaning the participation by men and women in the divine nature. It is not a mystical thing, a theological ‘concept’; it is the very heart of what it is to be human. Adam the son *lives* in his intimacy with the Father. All that he is expected to be and to do only makes sense if he about the will of the Father.

The spirit of Anti-Father

Although the psalmist recognised that the truth of Israel was that ‘All my springs are in you’ (Ps. 87:7), it was the prophet Jeremiah who recognised the deep evil of the human heart.

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.¹² Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD,¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. ...²⁷ [they] say to a tree, ‘You are my father,’ and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth.’ For they have turned their backs to me, and not their faces. But in the time of their trouble they say, ‘Come and save us!’ (Jer. 2:11-13, 27).

Israel had been called with a view to its being a revelation of the truth of God. Adam, at the fall, had rejected the truth of God as Father and so the truth of his own being. Even though the language of ‘fatherhood’ (etc.) does not often appear in the

Old Testament it is conspicuous enough to make it plain that Israel was to be a testimony to the true fatherhood of God, especially in contrast to the way the other nations depicted the fatherhood of the deity. Thus, Israel is called the ‘firstborn son’ (Ex. 4:22-23 cf. Jeremiah 31:9), they are ‘children of the LORD [their] God’ (Deut. 14:1). The nations of the world were to be confronted by godly Israel who showed the fatherhood of God to all.

But Israel had been rebellious like all humanity. Moses called them ‘degenerate children’ (Deut. 32:5). It was Jeremiah who highlighted Israel’s rebellion; rather than drink at the fountain of living waters, Israel tried to generate their own ‘flow’, though when they gave their filial homage to trees and stones it is little wonder that they could not see that their cistern was cracked and leaking. Israel still insisted that God was their Father (Jer. 3:4) but could not understand why they were the objects of his wrath. They could not see that the Holy Father must have holy sons.

A son honors his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due me? (Mal. 1:6)

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors? (Mal. 2:10).

What must be made plain is that Israel’s Father could not simply forgive.¹⁰ He must judge the rebellion of his children and do so in such a way that the nations will know that his fatherhood is holy and his love strong and purposeful.

His purpose was that the river of living water would again flow from his people and so from all humanity. This is the picture of Ezekiel 47:1-12. When the living water flows again all creation will be transformed.

Seeing the Father

Perhaps it seems a commonplace to us, but ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). That statement is quite staggering. At last the glory of the Father is clearly revealed. Here is Adam at last! Here is ‘God the only Son, who is close to the father’s heart’ making him known in a way that had never happened previously (John 1:18).

It not that God was not called ‘Father’ previously. He was, as we have seen. But there was nothing like this. The incarnation meant that now there is a man, a human being, who says, ‘I am the declaration of the Father: to see me is to see the Father, since our intimacy is so deep that we are one’ (John 1:18; 14:9; 10:30). Here is a man who not only calls God his Father, but who lives and functions freely as the Son.

We do not have all the details of Jesus’ life, but it is plain that at his baptism by John, he was also given the Holy Spirit in a way that was significantly different from his previous experience. With the gift of the Spirit came the declaration that ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ (Luke 3:22). John the Baptist recognised this:

I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God. (John 1:33-34).

¹⁰ Jeremias notes that ‘God always answers [the] appeal of Israel with *forgiveness*’ (*Prayers*, p. 14), but does not note *why* this could be so.

The Synoptic Gospels record that immediately following his baptism he was thrust by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. But what could be tested? The answer is, simply, his Sonship. God had spoken to him and the truth of that word was called into question, just as it had when God spoke the word of command to Adam in the garden. But this Adam did not yield. His food was to do the will of the one who sent him. He did nothing other than what he saw the Father doing, and was obedient unto death, all because he loved the Father (John 4:34; Phil. 2:8; John 14:31).

The passion of the Son was the glory of the Father. Indeed, the Son had no glory apart from the glory of the Father (John 1:14). For that reason, receiving glory from human beings is anathema. Jesus asked the Jews, ‘How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?’ (John 5:44).

The Son and the Sons

It has been testified somewhere,
‘What is man that thou art mindful of him,
or the son of man, that thou carest for him?
⁷Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels,
thou hast crowned him with glory and honor,
⁸putting everything in subjection under his feet.’

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.

¹⁰For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. (Heb. 2:6-10 RSV).

The Word did not become flesh simply so that there might be one human being who showed out the glory of God. That function was God’s gift to all humanity, as Psalm 8 shows. The reason why Jesus was born¹¹ was that there might be ‘*many* sons in glory’. Jesus stands as the Adam to whom all glory is given and as the pioneer who brings many sons into that glory with him.

Therefore he had to die. As we saw earlier God does not simply ‘forgive’; he must judge all that denies his glory and he must destroy the spirit of anti-Father. Jesus was one with the Father in this. He told the disciples that it was ‘necessary that the Messiah should suffer ... and enter into his *glory*’ (Luke 24:26). He said to them,

I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father ...yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. (John 16:28, 32)

We should read through John 17 to see the Son in intimacy with the Father, the Holy Father (vs. 11), the Righteous Father (vs. 25), to see him longing to glorify the Father.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you...’ (John 17:1)

We may be correct to say that Jesus died for us. But we would be more correct to say first that Jesus, the Son, died for the Father.

¹¹ For the sake of clarity, we ought not say ‘the reason Jesus *came*’ because prior to the incarnation there was no ‘Jesus’ and prior to his baptism there was no ‘Christ’. There was the Word, the eternal Son, but ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ designate the human being born in Bethlehem.

‘Abba, Father!’

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ (John 12:27-28).

With that promise from the Father, Jesus then added,

‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (John 12:30-33).

Only from the heights of the cross will many sons be drawn to him. Only through the judgment of evil and the bearing away of our sin can we be free to truly worship the living God (Heb. 9:14).

And that is why the cross without Pentecost is inconceivable. Only as the Son deals with our guilt and leaves behind an empty tomb, only when the risen man Jesus is glorified in the Father’s presence can he receive the Spirit *as his to pour out* (Acts 2:33). Only in the ongoing flow of Pentecost is the promise of John 16:12-15 fulfilled.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

All that Jesus had become the right of those who receive the Spirit. Jesus knew the Father in deep intimacy and he knew that the Father had given all things to him. Small wonder that the early church, in knowing that Jesus is Lord, through the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3), knew that

for us there is one God, *the Father*, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

This statement is usually seen in the context of discussions of Jewish monotheism¹² and that would be correct, but it comes not as a discussion point but as a shout born of revelation. God is Father! When I pray, I bow my knees before the Father (Eph. 3:14). In Christ Jesus we are all sons¹³ of God through faith. Divisive distinctions are done away with (Gal. 3:26ff). Through Christ we all have ‘access in one Spirit to the Father’ (Eph. 2:18). The Spirit of the Son cries ‘Abba Father’, so we cry ‘Abba, Father’! This is not a matter of theological precision, *it is the only way it could possibly be*.

Living as sons

Forsyth spoke of those who live as if Pentecost had not yet taken place. For all sorts of reasons that is possible. But how tragic for the church to be satisfied with less than ‘sonship as the very tune of their heart’, for us to live unconscious of our fellowship ‘with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’.

¹² See N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, Chapter 6, ‘Monotheism, Christology and Ethics: 1 Corinthians 8’.

¹³ There is nothing ‘sexist’ about this. Our sonship has nothing to do with our gender but everything to do with our participation in the sonship of the Son..

Sadly, Jesus was correct when he observed that many, offered the new wine of the kingdom, say ‘the old is good’ (Luke 5:39). It is as if they do not trust God to ‘give good things to those who ask him’ (Matt. 7:11), as if the gift of the Spirit (Luke 11:13) was likely to cause pain and distress. But if the fruit of the Spirit is ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (Galatians 5:22-3), then surely that is the overwhelming truth of the Father.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)

If the action of living purely is seen as a threat then it can only be because we *will not* see the love which the Father has given us. But we *must see* what sort¹⁴ of love the Father has given us:

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

This is the sort of love that the Spirit has flooded into our hearts, evoking the deepest cries of the Son and the Spirit from our hearts. *We cry ‘Abba, Father’.* We love the Father and we are distressed when our lives do not testify to the holiness of his great name, Holy Father’. And so we long for the day when, without any contradiction from devil, flesh or world, we rejoice in the declaration, ‘I will be his God and he will be my son’ (Rev. 21:7), when our full glory as sons of the Father is seen (Rev. 21:11).

1. Abba! Abba! Father God!

You have filled us with Your love,
Abba! Abba! You are dear:
How we feel Your presence near.

5. All the longings of our heart

Bid us from this life depart
That our eyes Your glory see,
That we may be one with Thee.

2. Thou great Heart—Eternal Love—

Pour upon us from above
Freedom from each bond and chain,
That we may be Yours again.

6. Abba! Abba! Father God!

You have filled us with Your love,
Abba! Abba! You are dear:
How we feel Your presence near.

3. As that son returned from sin

To the father's arms of love,
So we turn, O Lord, to Thee,
Ever in Thy Home to be.

7. Abba! Abba! Father dear,

You will bring us yet more near;
Take us to Your heart of love,
Make us one with You above.¹⁵

4. In the night-time of our soul,

You have healed and made us whole;
You have banished pain and dread,
With Your hand our spirits fed.

© Ian Pennicook, April 2001

¹⁴ Greek, ποταπήν ἀγάπην.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Bingham, 1986.

Did You Receive the Holy Spirit When You Believed?¹

The story of the twelve disciples in Ephesus, told in Acts 19:1-7, raises a number of questions: Who were these people? Is this the story of the founding of the church there? Is it possible to receive Christ and not to receive the Holy Spirit? and so on. What is more, some of these questions tend to be divisive, for there are many who are strongly convinced that their's is the only position which can legitimately be held and that this section of Acts naturally supports their conclusions.

Before we examine Acts 19:1-7, it should be clearly established that Luke did not write Acts 19 — or Acts 18 for that matter. In fact he only wrote Acts. The chapter divisions and verse numbers with which we are so familiar (and the section headings that appear in some translations and which are often read as if they were part of the text!) are all additions to help readers find their way. So, if nothing else, we should ask if there is a connection between this section and what has gone before.² That does not mean, of course, that we will have all of *our* questions answered.

Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11). He began by spending time in the synagogue, trying to persuade both Jews and the Greeks who were attending the synagogue (Acts 18:4). While in Corinth he met a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who had been expelled from Rome along with the rest of the Jewish population (Acts 18:2).³ They were probably already believers when Paul met them, although the text does not specify this. However, it is possible, since the Roman historian Suetonius says that the Jews were expelled 'because [they] caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus',⁴ a pattern they were to follow in Corinth (Acts 18:12ff).

When Paul left Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him as far as Ephesus. After staying only long enough to have a discussion with the Jews in the synagogue, Paul then proceeded to Caesarea and then Antioch, before starting another journey through Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:18-23).

¹ This study has a narrow focus. It is not my intention to provide anything like a detailed theology of the Holy Spirit, nor am I wanting to cover again the material provided in previous studies. There is much about the Holy Spirit in the first four papers this year (2001). What is in my mind is the question of whether we really know what it is to receive the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to even raise the question, since many have already worked out an answer for themselves and are strongly committed to their own position. But I am not really interested in promoting any particular form of experience.

² For a more detailed discussion of the issues, see Max Turner, 'The "Spirit of Prophecy" as the power of Israel's restoration and witness' in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (eds), *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, pp. 327-348; James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, SCM, London, 1970, esp. chapter VIII; *The Christ and the Spirit: Collected Essays of James D. G. Dunn, Volume 2, Pneumatology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998. See also the various commentaries on Acts.

³ It was evidently not a long absence from Rome, for when Paul finally arrived in the city he was able to meet freely with the Jewish leaders (Acts 28:17-28). Of course, when Paul wrote to the Romans, Priscilla and Aquila were back among the believers there (Rom. 16:3-5).

⁴ *The Twelve Caesars, Claudius*, 25, Robert Graves (trans), Penguin Classics, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979, p. 202. 'Chrestus' may be a mistaken form of 'Christus', indicating that the Roman Jews had been disturbed by Christian preaching.

Apollos

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures.²⁵ He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.²⁷ And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers,²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus. (Acts 18:24-28)

In verses 24-26, we discover that Apollos was from Alexandria, where there was a large Jewish community. He was eloquent, well-educated concerning ‘the Way of the Lord’, presumably meaning Christianity⁵, and spoke accurately about Jesus. However, there are two matters which call for attention; the first is the description of him as having ‘burning enthusiasm’ (*NRSV*) or his being ‘fervent in spirit’ (*AV, RSV*). Literally this phrase is ‘being fervent in the spirit’⁶; however, the presence of the definite article (*the*) proves little and the translations all seem to refer this phrase to Apollos’ spirit and not to the Holy Spirit, while the commentators are divided.⁷ If this is a reference to Apollos’ own spiritual fervour, then we may go on to assume that he was not able to speak of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the world because he had not yet discovered it himself. Perhaps that was what Priscilla and Aquila taught him? On the other hand, perhaps, as James Dunn suggests, he was already ‘aglow with the Holy Spirit’.⁸

The second and related matter is that Apollos ‘only knew the baptism of John’ (Acts 18:25). That means that his entrance into the things of Christianity would seem to be limited to those things anticipated by John the Baptist. It would also mean, then, that he knew about Jesus and knew many of the details of his life, death and resurrection, but possibly not that the Holy Spirit, promised by John had actually been given (see Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; cf. John 7:37-39). If that is so, then until he ‘was given further information’ (perhaps we should read, ‘experienced something of the Spirit’?) he could only pass on this limited view.

Luke does not tell us everything, but we read that when he was more aware of the Way of God, he went across to Corinth with the warm approval of the Ephesian ‘brothers’, an indication that there was a functioning church in Ephesus.

The ephesian disciples

Why have we gone through all this about Apollos? The answer is simply that we are most likely intended to understand these Ephesian disciples as the fruit of Apollos’ early activity.

⁵ Cf. verse 26, ‘the Way of God’.

⁶ ζέων τῷ πνεύματι (*zeōn tō pneumatī*) Cf. the similar phrase in Romans 12:11, where the *RSV* has ‘be aglow with *the* Spirit’. See Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1994, p. 611ff.

⁷ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Anchor Bible), Doubleday, New York, 1998, p. 638f.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Epworth Commentaries), Epworth Press, Peterborough, 1996, p. 250; *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 88.

Did You Receive the Holy Spirit When You Believed?

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ ³Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ ⁴Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷altogether there were about twelve of them. (Acts 19:1-7)

My somewhat simplistic analysis of this story is as follows. While Apollos was in Corinth (and see the references to him in 1 Corinthians) Paul arrived back in Ephesus. There he found some people who called themselves ‘disciples’. This title is used in Acts to refer to Christians and that is the way Paul took it, at least at first. However, for reasons that are not given, he suspected that those whom he met had not received the Holy Spirit.

Now a disciple is someone who believes his teacher and who, therefore, learns from him.⁹ So Paul’s question, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ is another way of saying, ‘Whose disciples are you?’ Their answer to his question focusses the problem; ‘We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit’, if nothing else, tells Paul that these disciples are not disciples of Jesus. In his own writings he shows emphatically that a person cannot belong to Christ without having received the Holy Spirit. This is what he said to the Romans:

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Rom. 8:9)

To the Ephesians he said this:

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. (Eph. 1:13)

The point, then, in Acts, is that here was a group of people who evidently did not have the Spirit and yet who claimed to be disciples of Jesus. This was simply impossible. Put another way, Paul would *never* have asked a Christian if he or she had received the Spirit! No one could ever confess that Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

So what of the answer, ‘we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit’? First, we should note that, given what comes next, this is perhaps not the clearest form of the reply.¹⁰ Take John 7:39 as an example of the problem. There, Jesus has promised that those who believe in him will know the wonder of rivers of living water flowing out of their inner being. But he was speaking of the Holy Spirit and John recognised that ‘*as yet there was no Spirit*, because Jesus was not yet glorified’ (John 7:39 NRSV). I suggest that that is actually a strange translation. Of course it is rather a literal translation, but it simply cannot be what the author intended. John has already clearly described the way that Jesus himself received the Spirit (John 1:32-33) and there has been discussion of the result of that giving in John 3:34 (‘He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure’).

What is more, anyone with any experience of the revelation given in what we now call the Old Testament would have heard of the Holy Spirit. The next question, ‘Into

⁹ ‘Disciple’ translates the Greek μαθητής (*mathētēs*) which is related to the verb μανθάνω (*manthanō*) ‘I learn’.

¹⁰ ASV has ‘they [said] unto him, Nay, we did not so much as hear whether the Holy Spirit was [given]’. The words in brackets have been added by the translators.

what then were you baptized?’ is another way again of Paul saying, ‘Whose disciples are you?’ Their response must have made the penny drop: ‘Into John’s baptism’. John had promised that the Holy Spirit would be given. Therefore, if they were baptised into John’s baptism and the instruction which accompanied it was at all accurate, and Luke insists that Apollos was accurate, those who were baptised would have known that the goal of their water baptism was the baptism with the Spirit.

If these disciples were in fact disciples of John the Baptist (in whatever form¹¹), then their answer, ‘We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit’, must mean that they have not heard that the promise has been fulfilled. Whatever they have heard about Jesus to this point, they have obviously not heard of his saving work, for had they heard and believed they would have received the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:38).

The conclusion which I reach is that these disciples were not, at that point, Christians. If a person has not received the Holy Spirit then he or she is not a believer. This is filled out in the small section which concludes the story. When Paul explained to them the full details of Jesus, they were then baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus (cf. ‘the name of Jesus the Lord and Messiah’ in Acts 2:36, 38) and as Paul laid his hands on them (in baptism?) the Holy Spirit came upon them.

I would argue, then, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is part and parcel of the gift of faith, repentance and rebirth. Paul’s question to the Ephesian disciples only re-enforces that. Similarly, when Peter heard Cornelius and his household ‘speaking in tongues and extolling God’ (Acts 10:46) he reminded his fellow Jews that this was precisely what had happened to them: ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have?*’ (Acts 10:47). Later, when recounting the events at Caesarea to the church in Judea, he said,

If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God? (Acts 11:17)

Here is the point again. When a person believes in the Lord Jesus Christ he or she simultaneously receives the Holy Spirit.¹²

So What is happening?

What does it mean to say that a person has ‘received the Holy Spirit’? Or, more specifically, what does it mean to say that *you* have received the Holy Spirit?

Before I attempt an answer to that, I would like to clarify the use of the phrase, ‘to be baptised with the Holy Spirit’. The phrase is only used six times in the New Testament, four times by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33), once by Jesus (Acts 1:5) and once with reference to Jesus (Acts 11:16). What they all have in common, actually, is the baptism by John the Baptist. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is always described as being the filling out, or completion, or whatever, of the water baptism administered by John. In fact, I suspect that the words ‘baptise’ and ‘baptism’ etc. are used *because* of what John did; this is what John the Baptist did — this is what Jesus will do. Where that contrast is not being made in those words,

¹¹ If Apollos has been their teacher, then I am suggesting that they are disciples of John the Baptist to the extent that they have adopted his teaching and the baptism that went with it, not that they believe him to be the Messiah or whatever.

¹² The use of the Aorist participles for ‘believed’ in both Acts 11:17 and 19:2 is expressive of action coincident with the main verbs (‘gave’ and ‘received’).

other phrases, like ‘receive the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 19:2), ‘be filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 9:17), and so on, are just as appropriate.

So, those words aside, what does it mean for you and me to receive the Holy Spirit? One thing seems certain: Whatever it means, the description of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 (and elsewhere, including Acts 19) points to a somewhat dramatic experience for the people there. Just precisely what that experience was is, perhaps, not quite as clearly described as we might prefer. But we should look at those events before we examine our own, if only because our experiences are probably quite diverse and because our understanding of them has equally probably been governed by what other people have told us anyway. But more than that, we should look at the events and other descriptions in the New Testament because they are the apostolic testimony to what took place.

Let’s begin with Acts 2. First there was the experience in the house.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

Who was there? Was it the twelve only (as Acts 2:14 might be taken to suggest) or was it the one hundred and twenty mentioned in Acts 1:15? What did they hear? It was a sound *like*¹³ the rush of a violent wind. What did they see? They saw divided tongues *as of*¹⁴ fire, and each tongue of the fire rested upon one of the assembled group.¹⁵ What did they do? They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke in ‘other tongues’, other languages’. Even this is not completely clear. Elsewhere in Acts and in 1 Corinthians, the only places where ‘tongues’ are mentioned, the word ‘other’ is not used, leading some to suggest that this occasion was different.¹⁶ Here the languages were recognised by the crowd in the city while, in 1 Corinthians, Paul insists that an interpreter is required. However, that there are two different but similar gifts seems unlikely given that Peter later saw a parallel between this experience of ‘other tongues’ and the experience of the people in Caesarea who were ‘speaking in tongues’ (Acts 10:46-47).

Could it possibly be that Luke is describing what is essentially indescribable? What Luke is describing is absolutely amazing and the closest he can come to a definition is to say it is ‘like’ the sound of a mighty wind and ‘like’ fire. What is more, those who were filled with the Spirit at Pentecost were transformed by the experience. Their new speaking was concerning ‘God’s deeds of power’, the mighty things of God (Acts 2:11). They evidently saw what God was about in a way that transcended their previous understanding.

To whom were they speaking? Certainly the crowd which had gathered at the feast of Pentecost came from all over the world — ‘Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem’ (Acts 2:5) — but were the new believers really out preaching? If Paul’s account is any indication then we would have to say ‘No’. They were telling *God* how wonderful his works were. They were speaking not to men but to God (1 Cor. 14:2). This was worship.

¹³ Greek ὡσπερ (*hōsper*).

¹⁴ Greek ὡσεὶ (*hōsei*).

¹⁵ The Greek is not easy, since the verb used is the singular ἐκάθισεν (*ekathisen*).

¹⁶ See Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* p. 236, 239.

Exactly why they were accused of being ‘filled with new wine’ is not given. It seems reasonable here to assume that the charge was because of the enthusiasm with which they were praising God. It would not have been because of any loss of physical control, otherwise the commands to disciplined use of the gifts in Corinth would be pointless. No, these people had received the Holy Spirit and they had realised the magnitude of God’s works and they could only express that new awareness in wonderful worship. And, quite obviously, when Peter began to speak to the crowd, they stopped.

The assertion that people filled with the Spirit lose control is flatly contradicted by the Scriptures. Paul told the Corinthians, as we have seen, that there was to be a disciplined use of the gift of tongues (and of prophecy, too).

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. ³²And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, ³³for God is a God not of disorder but of peace. (1 Corinthians 14:27-33)

Part of the fruit of the Spirit is ‘self-control’ (Gal. 5:23), so the gifts which the Spirit distributes will hardly result in loss of control. At the same time, they will not result in timidity or cowardice either.

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:6-7)¹⁷

Likewise, the Thessalonians were those who received the gospel in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much confidence (1 Thess. 1:5). This must mean with much confidence in God! Indeed, the result was the same as with those in Acts 2.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. (1 Thess. 1:6-8).

Surely receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit was wonderful. In all the descriptions, the picture is one of delight in God and a strong desire to worship him and to tell others of him.

O for a thousand tongues?

There are many for whom speaking in tongues is almost the apex of Christian experience.¹⁸ There are others, on the other hand, for whom the gift of tongues is almost anathema. So what are we to say? How normative is the experience of the people in Acts 2 for us? Or, for that matter, how normative was their experience for other believers who appear in the New Testament?

¹⁷ As to whether ‘spirit’ refers to Timothy’s own spirit or to the Holy Spirit, see, for example, George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, (NIGTC), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 371.

¹⁸ Some Pentecostal groups will insist that the gift of tongues is the essential evidence of the baptism with the Spirit.

When Peter addressed the crowd at Pentecost, he told them what God had done. God had raised Jesus, whom they had crucified, from the dead and made him both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36). At this the crowd responded with a sense of great urgency, ‘Men, brothers, what shall we do?’ (Acts 2:37), to which Peter replied:

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).

Three thousand people responded to that instruction. So what happened to them? The answer is that we are not told that they spoke in tongues, but we are told that

they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

Later on, Luke is clear that Cornelius and those with him were ‘speaking in tongues and extolling God’ (Acts 10:46) and that those in Ephesus ‘spoke in tongues and prophesied’, but these are the only ones he describes as speaking in tongues. But then he does not say that Paul did either, though Paul himself readily admits to it: ‘I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you’ (1 Cor. 14:18). But Paul also tells us that not all speak in tongues, in the same way that they are not all apostles or prophets or teachers and so on (1 Cor. 12:30). All the same, he would be quite happy if all did speak in tongues, though he does qualify that (1 Cor. 14:5).

Knowing the Spirit

Only two of the three initial outpourings of the Holy Spirit are described as being accompanied by the gift of tongues, Pentecost and Caesarea, the giving of the Spirit to Jews and Gentiles. The other occasion was the time when Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans ‘that they might receive the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 8:16). ‘Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit’ and, what is more, Simon the magician ‘saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands’ (Acts 8:17-18). The ability to produce that sort of powerful effect appealed to him.

We are not told what the effect was but it could be seen. And when Paul wrote to the Galatians, plainly he could assume that the reception of the Holy Spirit was a moment all could recall and understand.

The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? (Gal. 3:2)

But how many of *us* can recall that moment? Many of us have been believers from birth, brought up in Christian homes and willingly trusting in Christ from earliest memory. Others have come to Christ in more memorable ways, perhaps even more dramatic ways, but we did so without being conscious that it was the Holy Spirit’s presence that had transformed us. Of course, there are those who came to Christ with full awareness of the Spirit’s presence and power, but for many others that awareness came sometimes many years after their conversion.

For whatever reason, there are Christians who would reply to Paul's question, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' with an answer more like that of the pre-Christian Ephesian disciples, 'We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit'. Would it be wrong to suggest to them that they should ask God to show them more of himself? Would it be wrong to suggest that they might be willing to receive whatever gifts God himself may choose to give, and that they might be eager that he might fill them with his presence and power and use them in ways far beyond any previous expectations?

Would this mean speaking in tongues? Possibly, but then possibly not, though I suspect that God is far more generous than we might allow. But would it mean that we may become far more aware of the sin in our lives? Almost certainly. But would it also mean that we have a fresh understanding of the forgiveness of that sin? And would it mean that we would rise up eagerly to the command to put to death those things which are earthly in us, that we would no longer look to our own needs but to the needs of others, while putting away from us all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, being kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us? O, Yes!

And what of our plans and programs, our expectations? How wonderful it would be to learn the meaning of Galatians 5:25, 'If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit'. That is, after all what we see in the early church.

[Paul, Silas and Timothy] went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

And even more, it is what we see in Jesus. He did nothing apart from the Holy Spirit, so why should we opt for anything less?

Are we fearful that our comfortable lives might be disturbed? And what of our cosy churches which we like to control so carefully? Might they become places where there is worship which takes up, and at the same time totally transcends, all our human patterns. It may seem like I am bribing us, but it is, in fact, the word of Jesus:

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt 7:11)

To be filled with the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit, would be *good* because the heavenly Father only gives good gifts to those who ask him. Of course, if we persist in the sin of Adam and Eve by demanding the right to determine what is good then, yes, we will be fearful and threatened. We may even be found to be fighting against God! But how sweet to say, though the Holy Spirit, 'Jesus is Lord!' and to say it to him. 'Jesus, you are my Lord, you are our Lord, and we know that only when we are filled with your Spirit can we know you as you are.'¹⁹ Then we will echo the decision of the early church, by saying, 'If it seems good to the Holy Spirit, then it seems good to us!'

© Ian D Pennicook, May 2001

¹⁹ See John 16:12-15.

Support in the Whelming Flood

One hymn writer put it that:

His oath, his covenant, his Blood,
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.¹

The matter of *Covenant*² is not a mere theological item but a great joy to people who are only too aware of their own weakness and remaining sin. When confronted by our own obvious inability to do any good thing, so that our best efforts are persistently tainted by our corruption, what confidence can we have that we will ‘persevere to the end’? And when we are opposed by the seemingly triumphant evil of the world and the powers of darkness, and when the church stands helplessly impotent, what can sustain us?

A possible cause of our sense of unease may be the misunderstanding of the basis God’s action with us and with the world. It may be that we do not know of covenant, or it may be that we have a view of covenant which is distorted. Either way, there can be great rest for those who come in simple trust to the God of the covenant who has revealed himself to us in Christ and in all the scriptures.

The Nature Of Covenant

The word ‘covenant’, in English, refers to a compact, where parties are joined to each other, formed as the result of a process of bargaining in some way. In legal terms it is a formal agreement. Generally, the word is synonymous with ‘contract’. However, what concerns us is the way the word is used in the scriptures. This is because the basis for our knowledge of God is his revelation of himself. Dictionaries, English or otherwise, only reflect the way words are used today. At the same time, words used in the Bible had to be intelligible to the first readers, so we must ask what they understood by covenant. Then we can discover whether the modern usage reflects the biblical usage or not.

People formed covenants between each other. The Old Testament Hebrew word *b’rith*³ and the New Testament Greek *diatheke* were used to refer to human contracts. Abraham formed such a contract with Abimelech (Gen. 21:27), as did Isaac (Gen. 26:28) and so on, and the New Testament uses *diatheke* to refer to the will made by someone prior to death, as in Galatians 3:15 and Hebrews 9:16.

But the primary use in the Scriptures is of the covenant between God and humanity. Here that pattern was set by the way a covenant was imposed on a conquered people by a victorious king. In such cases, there was no possibility of a bargain or of mutually acceptable terms and conditions being discussed. In Israel’s case,

¹ Edward Mote, ‘My Hope is built on nothing less’.

² A brief but very helpful introduction to *Covenant* is by Geoffrey Bingham, *Comprehending the Covenant*, N.C.P.I., Blackwood, 1999.

³ Another word, *eduth*, sometimes translated as ‘testimony’ or ‘treaty’ is also used.

God had created and formed them, redeemed them, called them by name, so they were his (Isa. 43:1).

Israel's whole identity, then, was understood in those terms. Their name reminded them of their history, a history of God's call of and covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Their land was 'the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them' (Deut. 1:8 etc).

Israel's formation and redemption from Egypt was because God remembered his covenant with these three men (Ex. 2:23-25). Their continued existence, too, was a matter of God's covenant:

But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them; he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them; nor has he banished them from his presence until now. (2 Kings 13:23)

And even the significant circumcision was a matter of the covenant.

You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. (Gen. 17:11)

Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. (Acts 7:8)

So also was the observance of the sabbath:

Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. (Ex 31:16)

Israel's behavior was largely prescribed in the Torah, which was essentially a covenant document.

Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' (Ex. 24:7)

The LORD will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law. (Deut. 29:21)

Israel could not regard its obligations as in any way optional. They were the possession of the LORD alone. They must not be a multi-covenant people!

For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars. (Judges 2:2)

Israel was bound to the LORD.

Its prosperity or its suffering were to be understood not as the inevitable results of the global economy but of the blessing or cursing of the LORD as he had set out in the covenant. But while blessing or cursing were a feature of covenant life (as they were with ancient covenants of this type⁴), the covenant remained operative because God remained the covenant God. Israel might suffer judgment, but it simply could not cease being the covenant people. That was never an option.

⁴ Cf. Meredith Kline: 'This element of promissory and penal sanctions which [Deuteronomy] chapters 27-30 have in common [finds] its counterpart in content, context and function in the extra-biblical covenant documents' (*The Treaty of the Great King*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1963, p. 33).

Covenant From The Beginning and To The End

Why should Israel be in covenant with God.⁵ Why were there covenant obligations placed upon them? Put another way, why should we be interested in Israel and its covenant?

The answer is that Israel's covenant was not first in the plan of God. First was God's covenant with creation. That can be seen from the way the word 'covenant' was initially used. The first occurrence of the word is in the story of Noah (Gen. 6-9). Genesis 6:18 says: 'But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you' (cf. 9:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17).

The phrase '*establish* my covenant' is significant. The usual way of saying that a covenant was being commenced was to '*cut* a covenant', but here the implication is that an existing covenant was being established or ratified. Following the flood, the covenant was established in language almost completely identical with the language of creation: 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'(Gen. 9:1). Genesis 9:9-10 make it plain that the covenant being established is not only with Noah and his family (a new Adam and Eve?) but:

As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. (Gen. 9:9-10)

The covenant is later described as being with all the earth;

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. (Isa. 24:5)

The conclusion must be that all creation, including the nations (see Acts 17:26⁶), came into being 'in covenant' with God. It was not that he had somehow conquered a rebellious creation, but that he was and remains its Lord.

Having noted that Israel had obligations under the covenant, we should now observe that, as covenant Lord of creation, God has indicated that *he* is committed to the creation. He is not some watchmaker who winds up the creation and sets it loose on its own. He is 'the faithful creator' (1 Peter. 4:19) who continues to sustain his creation.

He has a purpose in all this, although the best that Israel could know of it was that its given role was to be the agent through whom blessing was restored to all the nations. Indeed, Israel was able to see itself almost as the new Adam and Eve and their land as the new Eden.

It could be seen that the many covenants described in the Old Testament were all contributing parts of this plan, which rested on the covenant with creation. And we might add that while the obligations laid upon Israel were unique, in that the laws and commandments etc. were intended for Israel alone, to mark them out as distinctively belonging to God, they were still an expression of the eternal nature of God and so his requirements for his whole creation. Israel's law, the *Torah*, was the God-given expression of the eternal law of God. An example of this would be Israel's sabbath observance. Simply taking the ten commandments and applying them directly to

⁵ In the words of Norman Ewer (1885-1976; in *Week-End Book*, 1924):

'How odd — of God — to choose — the Jews'.

⁶ Possibly also Deut. 32:8. 8 'When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods'.

Christians may overlook the fact that Moses was told that the law of sabbath observance, with its severe penalty for failure, was expressly for Israel.

The LORD said to Moses: ¹³You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: ‘You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. ¹⁴You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ¹⁵Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.’ (Ex. 31:12-17)

Later, Paul told the Romans that

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. (Rom. 14:5-6).

This was not indifference to the *Torah*; it was merely recognising that the role of *Torah* was to lead Israel to be the source of blessing to the nations, not so that the nations could become observant Jews. True sabbath observance is to be found in the new creation, in Christ.

Torah was always intended to ‘pass away’ (Matt. 5:17-18), because its distinctive role would be accomplished. But the eternal law of God never changes. Put another way, the *old* covenant had to be superseded, not because it was evil, but because it could only ever lead to the new covenant. The plan of God was always the new covenant, the renewed, fully effective covenant, where the curse on the ground because of humanity’s sin was completely removed and the first blessing restored.

God’s covenant commitment to creation is not for the sake of creation itself. Here we must be clear that we are Christians and not merely an extension of Judaism. In Christ, something totally new has come. No Jew, no member of Israel, no matter how godly or faithful, could know what has been revealed to us:

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit... (Eph. 3:5)⁷

So what has now been revealed? Well, much in every way but, in particular, the following statements indicate the scope of God’s plan for the whole creation.

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. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-17)

yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

Creation came into being *through* the one Lord, Jesus Christ, but the purpose of the Father is that the creation is *for* his Son (Col. 1:13-14), who, as incarnate, is the image of the invisible God, the second man, the last Adam. God is committed to the creation because he is committed to his Son.

⁷ Paul’s point that what was not made known was the participation of the Gentiles in the promises of God in Christ Jesus is based on the premise that until Christ was revealed nothing could be known of the full plan of God.

The Son, Jesus, knew that. He told the people: ‘Everything the Father gives me will come to me’ (John 6:37). He then said:

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. (John 6:44)

On the last day, creation will be complete. There will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. That does not mean merely moral correctness; it means that the eternal law of God will not be challenged at any point. The ‘very-goodness’ of the creation will not only be restored, it will be fulfilled.

The Heart of Covenant

What is it that tells the parties to a contract that all is secure? At some levels it may be a handshake or perhaps just a pledge given, at a higher level the signed documents. But even these can be voided at times. However, covenant is not contract. God is not a contractor; his relationship with the creation is in no way dependent on the response of his creation. The heart of covenant is the love relationship of Father, Son and Spirit which has moved out and caught up the creation. So, for example, John 3:35: ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands’ and John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’.

This is a matter of great significance. Speaking of Malachi 2:13-16, Geoffrey Bingham has written:

This passage shows that marriage is a covenant, and a covenant which is a relationship of love to which the couple are to be faithful. Today many look on marriage as a contract. That is part of the reason marriages often do not last. The couple live not by covenant obligation but by contract. They watch each other to see whether the contract is being kept. What a dreadful situation! If we could only see that God did not create us to be contractors with a God who is a Contractor, then we would view Him differently. It is a fact of life that many people view God as a Contractor. They feel heavy guilt if they do not keep the imagined contract, and they are angry with God for having put them under this arrangement. They look at God as the God of law, and they do not know the real meaning of law, which is certainly not a contractual one.

In passing, I would observe that if we see God as a Contractor, then we will see human beings in the same way, and so the husband-wife covenant is viewed as contract. We will see that the Fatherhood and the sonship of Man are of the essence of covenant. In a family, a true father will not have a contract with his family but a love relationship, however inadequate he may be to express it. This would be the same for the mother and the children. All—father, mother and children—live in a relationship which is covenantal, but not contractual. Certainly there will be a law of family living and an obligation of love to obey that law. We are by no means claiming that this is the way all families live, but it is the true way of family living.⁸

This is not the point to focus on marriage and family, but the emphasis is clear. God’s commitment to his creation is based on his unswerving love for his Son.

There was in Israel a visible expression of the covenant which took place at Sinai. The covenant with Israel, which was itself patterned on the eternal covenant (see Ex. 25:40), according to Exodus 24, was ratified with the sacrificial blood being ‘dashed against the altar’ (representing God, verse 6) and the other half on the people. That being done, Moses declared:

⁸ *Comprehending the Covenant*, p. 11f.

See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words. (Exodus 24:8)

Why should Israel be confident that there would be future deliverance? Obviously not because of any contractual arrangement with God, but:

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. (Zech. 9:11)

The covenant with Israel was ‘cut’ once, and the ‘blood of the covenant’ shed once. It did not require repetition since the heart of the covenant was God’s faithfulness and love. But when the covenant with Israel had fulfilled its purpose, when the renewed covenant was declared, then the words of Jesus ring out.

...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26:28)

and the letter to the Hebrews sets the matter out in great detail.

For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people,²⁰ saying, ‘This is *the blood of the covenant* that God has ordained for you.’ (Heb. 9:19-20)

¹³For 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, ¹⁴how 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! (Heb 9:13-14)

²⁰Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by *the blood of the eternal covenant*, ²¹make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20-21).

It is small wonder, then, that believers should look back with delight and faith to that once-for-all-sacrifice by which the eternal covenant was ratified (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Faith consciously participates in that sacrifice which is the powerful declaration of God’s covenant faithfulness (Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 10:16).

In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, ¹⁸so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. (Heb. 6:17-18)

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. (Rom. 8:31-34).

The Blessings and The Cursings

As we have observed above, Israel had no option about the covenant of God, primarily because they were not the object of the covenant, the Son of God was. They were the recipients of great privilege in the calling, and if they would live in obedience to the covenant then they would know rich blessing. If, on the other hand, they refused to be obedient then the cursings would be on them. Deuteronomy 27:1-29:1 set this out with great force. In summary, Moses said:

Support in the Whelming Flood

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

Now if we keep in mind the purpose of the covenant, namely the presentation of all things to the Son, and the provision of a pure bride, richly adorned with righteous deeds (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:8), then we will understand that refusal on our part to participate in that goal must bring the discipline of God upon us.

It is not that God is vindictive or spiteful; on the contrary, it is because he is love that he will not permit the objects of love to fail to reach the goal of love. 'I reprove and discipline those whom I love' (Rev. 3:19). The letter to the Hebrews, with its strong emphasis on covenant, *must* issue the warning:

For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ²⁹How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' ³¹It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26-31)

How could it be otherwise? The letter continues:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children —

'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.'

⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:5-11)

The experience of the Corinthians was recorded for our learning:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

While his oath and covenant and blood will support me in the whelming flood, they will certainly not encourage me in any presumption upon his grace or permit me to indulge in ungodly behavior without consequences (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6-13). It is by God's pure mercy that he disciplines his church. Where there no discipline for the children of God, then God himself would be in violation of his own covenant.

The final word will be God's. When the new heavens and the new earth are seen, when the bride is revealed in all her God-given splendor, then we will see Eden fully restored.

No longer will humanity feel afraid at the voice of God; instead, it will be said:

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 'he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' (Rev. 21:3-4)

Then God himself will then pronounce the words of the covenant, heard in a different form so many times before:

Those who conquer will inherit these things, and *I will be their God and they will be my children.* (Rev. 21:7)

© Ian Pennicook, July 2001

Another hymn writer put it:

1. A debtor to mercy alone,
Of Covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on,
My person and off'rings to bring.
The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.
2. The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
This promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now,
Not all things below or above,
Can make Him His purpose forego,
Or sever my soul from His love.
3. My name from the palms of His hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on His heart it remains
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure,
As sure as the earnest is given;
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven.

Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778)

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)¹

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)

¹ 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)²

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 news³ 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 Berea 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 word⁴, 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 speaking⁵ 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.⁶

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

² 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’.

³ Literally, ‘the word of the gospel’.

⁴ Literally, ‘occupied with the word’.

⁵ Literally, ‘he extended the word’.

⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸

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 being 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

⁷ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, (1963) 1979, p. 18.

⁸ 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*,⁹ 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.¹⁰

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,

⁹ John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1976, p. 30f.

¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

¹¹ 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.