

**26/12/24**

John Owen is one of the best known Puritan writers of the seventeenth century in England. He was also a vice-chancellor of Oxford University where he was appalled at the unholy mixture of unchristian philosophy, based on the classical writings of the Greeks that had been revived in the Renaissance, and Biblical theology. So his book called 'Biblical Theology' was first published in 1661, which he regarded to be his "greatest and most enduring contribution to the advancement of Reformational theology." At over 850 pages it has taken some time to read! He traces how the knowledge of God given at creation was gradually lost and replaced with idolatry, the great sin of Israel.

Owen is absolutely sure of two fundamental truths. (1) The 66 books of the Bible are the complete and trustworthy Word of God. (2) Human thinking after the Fall is totally unable to find out the truth. And even to understand the Bible needs the work of the Holy Spirit. He asks why it was that heresies entered into the early church. The answer is this mixture: professing Christians "who had been educated in the various schools of secular wisdom," were basing their theology on non-Christian thinking. He gives three examples. "Heresies are fuelled by philosophy. Valentinus has been a disciple of the Platonic philosophy, and so he makes much of his '30 eons,' which he maintains are lesser gods, to the confusion of the doctrine of the Trinity. Marcion, ... who gave himself out to be Christ, derived his teaching of a 'better god' and of 'tranquillity of mind' from the Stoics. The Epicureans say that the soul is mortal, and so the resurrection of the body is vehemently denied by all under Epicurean influence." He cries out, "What correspondence has Jerusalem with Athens?" Paul in Colossians warns about such philosophy (2:8) which brings in asceticism and the worship of angels and so dethrones Christ (see 2:18-19). Then there were those in Corinth who denied the bodily resurrection because of Greek philosophy. This is why Paul was mocked in that philosophical centre of Athens (Acts 17:32).

You might ask if this is relevant to us today. The great majority of people are educated in secular schools where they are indoctrinated in secular, humanistic, atheistic philosophies, as opposed to Biblical truth. Consider the following areas where worldly thinking has entered the church and the church has compromised.

- Science and evolution. Evolution is everywhere taught as the truth. Yet the Bible so clearly testifies that God is the creator of all things. So many Christians have come up with a fusion of the two called 'theistic evolution' = God guiding the whole process of evolution.
- Male and female. If God has not specifically made male and female in His image and determined their respective responsibilities, then a man may choose to live as a woman and vice-versa, and a woman may do everything a man does and vice-versa. The Bible is seen as culturally outdated in order to make Christianity more palatable to the modern mind.
- Abortion. The philosophy of the world is autonomy, 'I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.' So a woman has the right to do what she wants with her own body, no matter what God says in the Bible.
- Worship. The most important thing is the self. I must never be offended. Things must always be pleasing to me. So says the world. Gone is the idea that worship is centred around what is pleasing to God, what He has revealed.

- Infallibility and authority. The writers of the Bible are just fallible men, like any other, it is said. The world says that we no longer believe in miracles, our culture is different, the Bible writers got many things wrong, so it is not our final authority. Our reason and science are final.

### **19/12/24**

Turning again to Malachi, this time the last verse of the prophecy (4:6), especially the phrase, “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, ...” These words are used to describe what John (the Baptist) would accomplish (Luke 1:16-17). Perhaps our first thought is to think of families, where father and children are together, and their unity. Is that really what John, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah, did? No, for we must think in far larger and more important categories.

We often use the word ‘father’ in a less literal way. We talk about the founding father(s) of our nation, for example. Malachi 3:7 goes back to “the days of your fathers”, all the time from the beginning of the nation. “The semantic domain of ‘turn’ is not so much the projected social order but the covenant relationship as such. When Elijah comes he will restore the covenant relationship. In this process He will turn about the hearts of the wicked posterity to the hearts of them with whom God has entered into a covenant at Horeb (Sinai)... The present order must be reconciled with the previous state of things when God has entered into a covenant relationship with the ‘fathers.’ We have an interesting parallel in Is. 63:16. The ‘Israel’ in the time of the prophet laments because their actual communication with Abraham and Jacob seems to have been broken... The fathers are of no significance any more when the ‘children’ become apostate. That relationship can only be restored by way of the renewal of the covenant.” [Verhoef, The Books of Haggai and Malachi, p. 342]

This is a matter of importance. (1) We must not impose on words (such as ‘father’) the first meaning that comes into our heads. We must consider possible meanings (the ‘semantic domain’) and see which one best fits the immediate context and the wider context of the book. In this case Malachi often compares the present generation with past generations. “He compares the priesthood of his day with that of the classical times (2:1-9), and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem in his time with that ‘as in the days of old and as in former years’ (3:4). The present generation has through mixed marriages profaned the covenant entered into with their fathers (2:10), with the verdict that they will be cut off ‘from the tents of Jacob’ (2:12).” [pp. 342-343] (2) The prophets also looked forward to the time of the Messiah when He would establish a new covenant and evil doers would be punished. John’s ministry, as the forerunner, was to ‘turn’ people to God in repentance in preparation for Jesus’ ministry, otherwise there would be the judgement of fire (Matthew 3:11-12). I write this because there is so much careless handling of Scripture. May God help us to rightly handle the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

### **11/12/24**

I have been reading a commentary on Malachi that seems to be a transcription of sermons on the book. I have found careful exposition but also sustained and thought-provoking application. So often application is just a sort of add-on, yet here it is obviously the main point.

1. The fundamental importance of application. There are 13 pages on Malachi 2:13-16 under the heading, 'Guard your spirit.' Most of us would probably preach about divorce, how God hates it, and so preach against it. But Benton digs deeper and asks why there is this problem of divorce in the first place. The problem is not first of all one of divorce, but the people's question that God is not answering them (verse 13). This is how Benton puts words into the mouth of the questioner: "I've come here to bare my soul and seek spiritual counsel about my prayer life and you are asking me about my marriage? What sort of counsellor are you, Malachi? What's my marriage got to do with my private prayer life?"

2. He does not pay inordinate attention to exegetical problems, but rather serves up the conclusion as a cook does a finished meal. Verse 15 is difficult to understand, and you will note that there are many footnotes in the Bible (4 in ESV). Many preachers will spend a lot of valuable time with these difficulties, but Benton simply points to the translation before us (the NIV for him). What he does is to cut through the difficulties and emphasize what is obviously the point of the verse, even if all the difficulties can not be ironed out. Whatever the "portion of the Spirit" is (God could have created more than one partner?), God is seeking "godly offspring" from these marriages. "He is looking for our children to become disciples." He immediately presses it home: "We must realize that an unhappy Christian marriage, where the thought life (and therefore probably the words and actions) of the partners is far from perfect harmony, will be a profound obstacle to our children becoming Christians."

3. What really struck me about the exposition was the penetration of the application. Benton wants us to be sure what is involved in 'guarding ourselves.' The last 3 pages are on 'the practice of guarding our spirits.' It is this sort of implementation, the 'how to,' that is so often lacking in our preaching. He has four suggestions:

- Recognize the problem of these thoughts.
- Recognize the kind of family situations which promote disunity between you and your partner and do something about them.
- Take any appropriate action to eradicate the sin.
- Work at improving the loving relationship within your marriage.

He even goes so far as to reveal possible thoughts. No doubt in his long pastoral experience he has come across such confessions. "Let us be blunt. Church-going, respectable people can be a very strange breed. They are so respectable that even their fantasies must have an air of respectability. Aren't there some Christians who in their extra-marital fantasies, wishing to avoid the stigma of adultery, have considered the possibility of their partner dying, and in that fantasy have stood by the very graveside of that partner with the thought of now being free to move on their way, free to go to that other women, or that other man?"

[John Benton, *Losing Touch With the Living God*, pp. 73-85]

**3/12/24**

As Christians although we are 'in' the world, we know that we are not 'of' the world. So we can't be exactly like the world, but how different should we be? There are those who have completely withdrawn from worldly life into monasteries. At the other extreme there are those who try to identify with the world as much as possible in order to win them. I suspect that today the latter is more of a problem than the former.

John Newton deals with this in one his letters to a nobleman. This is how he sees common spiritual development. "There is no doubt that first religious impressions are usually mingled with much of a legal spirit; and that conscience at such a time is not only tender, but misinformed and scrupulous; and I believe ... that when the mind is more enlightened, and we feel a liberty from many fetters we had imposed upon ourselves, we are in danger of verging too far towards the other extreme." He lays down two basic principles for Christian living: "to maintain communion with Him in our own souls, and to glorify Him in the sight of men." To live like this he first he makes application to the Christian himself, "who must avoid and forebear ... whatever has a tendency to damp and indispose his spirit in attendance upon the means of grace." Secondly he makes application to the Christian in his life in the church, where "the law of charity and prudence will often require a believer to abstain from some things, not because they are unlawful, but inexpedient." Thirdly he points out how the Christian must live in the world, and it is this that particularly struck me.

"This seems to require, that though we should not be needlessly singular, yet, for their instruction, and for the honour of our Lord and Master, we should keep up a certain kind of singularity, and show ourselves to be a separated people; - that ... we are not of the world, but belong to another community, and act from other principles, by other rules, and to other ends, than the generality of those about us. I have observed, that the world will often leave professors in quiet possession of their notions and sentiments, and places of worship, provided they will not be too stiff in the matter of conformity with their more general customs and amusements. But I fear many of them have had their prejudices strengthened against our holy religion by such compliances, and have thought, that if there were such joy and comfort to be found in the ways of God as they hear from our pulpits, professors would not, in such numbers, and so often, run amongst them, to beg a relief from the burden of time hanging upon their heads." We don't show Christian joy by enthusing about sport, holidays and entertainment, not that these are wrong in themselves. Rather we enthuse about the triune God, salvation and the church. He has this conclusion: "It is more honourable, comfortable, and safe, ... to be thought by some too scrupulous and precise, than actually to be found too compliant with those things which, if not absolutely contrary to a divine commandment, are hardly compatible with the genius of the gospel, or conformable to the mind that was in Christ Jesus, which ought also to be in His people." He goes on to give examples, and I commend this subject to your meditation.

[You may access this at <https://archive.org/details/cardiphoniaothe00newtuoft/>, letter 25]

**26/11/24**

Habakkuk 2:4, the last line, is quoted 3 times in the New Testament – Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. It is a very important testimony to the Old Testament

teaching about faith in both salvation and the Christian life. In the ESV it reads: “The righteous shall live by his faith.”

1. In the context of the prophecy of Habakkuk chapter 1 has revealed that God is going to use the wicked Babylonians (Chaldeans) to punish His people. This is a problem to Habakkuk because he sees them as even more wicked than Israel. They are the proud ones (2:4-5), “whose own might is their god” (1:11). How will the remnant of God’s people survive this destruction? This is the meaning of “live” in the context. The answer is “by faith.”

2. It is used in Romans and Galatians for the doctrine of justification by faith.

- Romans 1:17. Paul is explaining why he is not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God because it reveals “the righteousness of God.” He proves it by quoting Habakkuk 2:4. He then goes on to show that we have no righteousness of our own (1:18-3:19). The gospel is that there is a righteousness available, one “of God”, and it is found in Christ and received by faith. Habakkuk testifies to this.
- Galatians 3:11. The subject is justification, whether it is on the basis of works or of faith. If one relies on his works of obedience to the law then he will be cursed for that obedience must be spotless, which is impossible (3:10). So justification by works is not only impossible in itself, but also because the Old Testament Scriptures teach that justification is “by faith.” And so he quotes Habakkuk.

So Habakkuk is referring to “the righteous”, not one who is obedient to the law, but one who has been justified by faith and continues to live by that same faith. This goes back to Genesis 15:6, the justification of Abraham by faith, and the reckoning of righteousness to him (see Romans 4:1-5, Galatians 3:6)

3. It is used in Hebrews to encourage the persecuted and discouraged Christians to keep on with that same faith to the end (10:38). The Christian life is one of faith from beginning to glory, and the writer to the Hebrews gives many examples in chapter 11.

Robert Martin outlines the basic principles for understanding the quotations of Old Testament texts in the New Testament. We should “recognize that Paul quoted Hab. 2:4 (in Rm. 1:17) because he believed that it contains the same doctrine of justification, i.e., an imputed righteousness from God by faith ... We must affirm that he believed that Hab. 2:4 taught justification by faith. Apart from this assumption, his use of the text has no defensible rationale. Further, we must assume that in his judgement he was using the text in accord with its meaning in the Old Testament context in which it originally occurred. Apart from this assumption, what possible proof could it afford of the gospel principles that he is declaring? Paul uses the verse as a proof that the basic principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the same as the basic principle of the religion of the Old Testament. And far beyond the question of Paul’s judgement in these things, we believe that the Holy Spirit caused Hab. 2:4 to be used in this place.”

[Robert Martin, The Just Shall Live By Faith, in Reformed Baptist Theological Review, Volume III, No. 2, July 2006, pp. 16-17]

## **19/11/24**

The Banner of Truth magazine and publishing house celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup>. birthday next year. In the first issue of the magazine, September 1955, there was an article titled, Ignoring the Analogies. This is part of what was written, and it breathes a sense of mission and urgency.

“The work of regeneration or conversion is an operation performed by the Lord the Spirit in the hearts of all the elect, and in none else. The prophet Ezekiel attributes it to the sovereign will of God (36:26) ... It has pleased the Lord to show His people the nature of this work by giving it various names, or descriptions, each of which is designed to teach that it is performed by His almighty power and that the creature’s will can have no share in it. These names are God-given types or analogies of regeneration, and to the minister of the glorious gospel of the grace of God it is essential to observe them, for they carry the most important instruction. Among those that are found in the Scriptures three stand out prominently. They are the analogies of Creation, Birth, and Resurrection.”

1. Creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). “Paul under inspiration calls conversion a creation. What is the main teaching of this figure? Surely it is this, that God created the heavens and the earth, the old creation, without the co-operation of any creature, and that He performs the new creation, a far more stupendous work, likewise without creature assistance.”

2. Birth (John 1:13). “Is there a living creature in the whole universe who asked to be born? Can one be found who exercised his own will in the matter of his birth or who had any say in it initially? The answer is in the negative.”

3. Resurrection (Ephesians 2:5-6). “Can the power of man call the dead to life? No! In the frightful presence of death man is powerless to do anything.”

The writer goes on with application to talk about “so-called evangelists whose method of preaching betrays an ignorance of basic truths... The slogan of contemporary evangelists shows that they believe that human nature can exert its will and generate the great work of regeneration.” He references terms that are used such as, ‘will you let God,’ and ‘decide for Christ.’ “How can the dead decide?... Evangelism that is not based on the truth is the most fertile soil for the production of counterfeit Christians, but that which has God’s authority is productive both to His glory and the salvation of sinners.”

At the end of this first issue the reader is directly addressed as to the purpose of the magazine and such articles. “The object of the ministry of this paper is to send out sound words of truth, with the conviction that there can be no greater matter of concern to the church of God than the truth of God. ‘When a nation is to perish in its sins, ‘tis in the church the leprosy begins,’ says a godly poet. A great part of knowledge lies in the knowledge of causes: the true cause of a disease found out goes far to the reaching of the cure. What is the cause of the dread leprosy upon the church which has sapped its strength and rendered it incapable of giving a cogent answer to the power of Satan today? We believe it is this, that THE CHURCH HAS DETHRONED THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF GOD AND HAS ENTHRONED THE SINFUL WILL OF MAN IN ITS PLACE. This is the root cause of our trouble today.”

[Sidney Norton, The Banner of Truth, September 1955, pp. 17-18,20]

**13/11/24**

Following on from the last post, I have been looking at Malachi 1:1-5, and in particular the words, “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” We are OK with God loving, but God hating makes us question exactly what that means. Certainly we must not first consider what love and hate are in us, and then project that back to God. God’s love is not changeable as ours is. Nor is His hate explosive, but a settled disposition of opposition and

judgement. We must understand God's love and hatred first of all from what the Scriptures reveal.

A common way of dealing with the word 'hate' as it is applied to God is to note that it can mean 'love less'. This is certainly what 'hate' means in many places – read Luke 14:26 with Matthew 10:37, as well as the teaching that parents must be honoured; and Genesis 29:30-31. However, it is a dangerous method of interpretation to take the meaning of a word from another place in the Bible without first considering the context in the place under consideration. In this way a meaning from outside the passage can be wrongly imposed. Sadly, in word studies this is done too often. For example, we read, "God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10). If one reads into the word "Saviour" the idea of being saved from sin, then others apart from believers are saved! See also the words "saved through childbearing" in 1 Timothy 2:15.

Let us return to Malachi 1:2-3.

"But it is difficult to understand 'hate' as being used in a lesser, comparative sense here. It is directly contrasted with 'love'. The consequences that are spelled out in the punishment and devastation of verses 3 and 4 are not a matter of 'loving less'. Nor does Paul understand that matter in that way when he cites these words in Romans 9:13 to show how God sovereignly makes a difference in electing Jacob and passing by Esau. His mercy does not derive from any commendable qualities in the one loved. It is an absolute act of His sovereign choice. It cannot be talked of in terms of 'more' or 'less'. It either is or is not. It is not a matter of ranking or priority. It is a Yes/No, on/off matter. It is not something that we can explain, but rather we are to wonder at the riches of God's glory made known to the objects of His mercy." [MacKay, The Books of Haggai and Malachi, p. 334]

Very practically, Malachi is dealing with the question of Israel, "How have you loved us?" "As the people of God who had been given such great promises by the prophets, they wanted to know why none of them had been realized. The Temple had been built, but the nations were not streaming to it (Zechariah 8:20-22). The city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it (Nehemiah 7:4): what had happened to the promise of it being without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it (Zechariah 2:4)? There was a Persian governor ruling over them: where was the great victory the Lord was going to win for them (Zechariah 9:14-15)?" [p. 331] If that is our question because of our difficult circumstances then we need to remember how God has loved us in sending His Son, how He has graciously saved us, how He orders everything for our good, and how He has given us a sure and eternal hope of glory. The wicked have none of these things.

## **6/11/24**

To the church leaders of Ephesus Paul declared "I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26-27). Eryl Davies clearly demonstrates that the wrath of God, final judgement and hell are all an integral part of the counsel of God. He begins: "There are more references in the Bible to the anger and wrath of God than to the love of God. There are also in the Old Testament alone over twenty Hebrew words used to describe the wrath of God, and these words are used nearly six hundred times. Contrary to popular opinion, the New Testament retains and develops this emphasis so that one writer claims that with justification that 'the Bible could be called

the book of God's wrath, for it is full of portrayals of divine retribution, from the cursing and banishment of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 to the overthrow of 'Babylon' and the great assizes of Revelation."

God's wrath is not just something future but is "God's permanent opposition to sin", and reference is made to Romans 1:18 and the following verses. This wrath is continuously being revealed, such as the disharmony within nature, the existence of pain and death; the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God's dealing with disobedient Israel in the wilderness, under the Judges, and the exile; the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. God also shows His wrath as He withdraws His restraints from sinners (see Romans 1:24,26,28). Then, of course, there is the final day of wrath (Romans 2:5), culminating in everlasting Hell as separation from God and punishment for sin.

The purpose of the book is to ask, in an age when many professing Christians deny these truths, if they are being preached, and as part of the gospel. "Although as preachers we may not deny the doctrine of hell, yet we still need to ask whether we preach it with the clarity frequency and urgency that is demanded of us." Davies quotes an old preacher who stated, "Omitting any truth intentionally in a sermon leads to the denial of it." We are challenged as to whether the fact that all are children of wrath by nature, that the sentence of condemnation lies on all, that none can save himself, that none deserve to be rescued, and that none will come to Christ to have life, are preached as part of the gospel. We must sound this note of warning loud and clear so as to warn sinners of their urgent need to trust in Christ for salvation. God Himself does this! He warned Adam of the consequence of disobedience. He sent Jonah to tell Nineveh of impending judgement. Jesus, especially, warned people of the consequences of unbelief and sin (read Matthew 7:13-14, Luke 13:1-5, John 3:15-18), and there is a whole chapter devoted to our Lord's example. Above all such preaching must be full of compassion.

[Eryl Davies, Preaching – An Awesome Task]

## **29/10/24**

The city of Jerusalem is so much in the news today. It is also so prominent in the Bible! God told Moses that when the people come into the land of Canaan, "you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there" (Deuteronomy 12:5). When his throne was established, the first thing recorded that David did was to conquer Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-9). And it was here that God later revealed this was where the altar and temple was to be built (2 Samuel 24:18-25, see 2 Chronicles 3:1). It became the place associated with the dwelling of God in the Old Testament (Psalm 135:21). It was central in the history and worship of the old covenant people. Jerusalem (and Mt. Zion) came to stand for the people of God. Read Psalms 122, 137, and 147, for example.

Jesus spoke of the destruction of the city, and specifically of the temple (Matthew 23:37-24:2, Luke 21:20-24). We know that it was totally destroyed by the Roman armies in A.D. 70, just as Jesus had predicted.

While Jerusalem has remained a city to this day, one that Jews, Christians and Muslims honour, how does the New Testament consider it? Jesus saw a day coming "when neither on this mountain (Gerizim) nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (John 4:21).

Christianity is not based upon the significance of places, not even modern church buildings! We know a church is not a material building, but the people, wherever they might meet. In the Old Testament Jerusalem was the governmental and religious centre. Where is that for the Christian? Where Christ is, in glory! So Jerusalem for the Christian is “above”, “heavenly”.

Galatians 4:25-26. The Jerusalem above is contrasted to the present Jerusalem, the earthly city. The contrast is not between the now and the future Jerusalem, for the Jerusalem above is present now. It is the church of Jesus Christ to which all believers belong.

Hebrews 12:22. Once again, there is contrast between Sinai and Zion/Jerusalem (from verse 18). In the new covenant, to which the writer is referring, in Christ already we “have come” to this Jerusalem. This is our present experience. So the earthly Jerusalem has no spiritual significance for us, except historically. The eternal dwelling of God’s people is also pictured as the city of Jerusalem/Zion, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb (Revelation 3:12, 14:1, 21:2,10). These are references to the great spiritual reality, not an earthly one (see Hebrews 11:10). This helps us to understand those Old Testament prophecies about Jerusalem being surrounded by enemies in the final days and the subsequent victory of God (Joel 3 & Zechariah 14, and Revelation 20:9 – “the camp of the saints and the beloved city”). This is the final attempt to destroy the church of Jesus Christ, whatever exact form it takes. Jerusalem on earth may yet be destroyed, but the Jerusalem above is secure.

## **22/10/24**

We remember that after Jesus rose from the dead He gave much instruction to His disciples. Specifically, “‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (Luke 24:44-47). So we want to find Christ in the Old Testament, and He is there on page after page! Yet we need to be careful and rightly handle the word of God and not let our imagination carry us astray.

An example is Haggai 2:7. The King James Version reads: “And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come ...” This is reflected in the well-known hymn, Hark! the herald angels sing, and the last verse: ‘Come, Desire of nations, come, fix in us Thy humble home’. This makes the ‘desire’ Christ Himself. Modern translations however, such as the ESV, read: “And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in”.

Why is this understanding correct, so that it is not referring to Christ’s coming? There are two problems with the older understanding, one grammatical, and the other theological.

1. Grammatical. “The immediate problem with this is that ‘the desired’ is a singular noun and ‘will come’ is a plural verb in Hebrew. There is therefore now a consensus in favour of taking ‘the desired’ as a collective noun, equivalent to ‘the desired things’, with which the verb agrees in sense. The reference then is to what the nations consider precious and desirable. The noun is also used in the phrases ‘articles of value’ (2 Chronicles 36:10) and ‘all kinds of valuables’ (2 Chronicles 32:27), and in ‘costly gifts’ (Daniel 11:38) and ‘riches’

(Daniel 11:43).” Close attention must be paid to the grammar, the relationship between the verb and the noun which is its subject; and the way the noun is used elsewhere in the Bible. 2. Theological. The basic problem is “... that elsewhere it is stated that the Messiah is one not desired, but rejected when looked upon with natural eyes (Isaiah 53:2-3, John 1:11).” “Although the coming of the Messiah is not here directly foretold, prophecies of the wealth of the nations being brought to Jerusalem are found elsewhere (Isaiah 60:5-7, 61:6, Micah 4:13, Zechariah 14:14), and so this prophecy is indirectly Messianic, that is, it describes features of His reign rather than of His person or work. Here it is clear that the gifts are donated by the nations for sacred purposes.” Examples are support by the Persians (Ezra 6:4,8-9), gifts by the Jews of the dispersion (Zechariah 6:10), even what the Magi brought to the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:11). “But these are pale shadows of what will ultimately occur when the glory and honour of the nations are brought into the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:26).”

What do we learn from this? First, the importance of hymnody in bringing the truth to God’s people, or otherwise. Second, the need to carefully examine the grammar of the text. We have so many resources at our disposal now with the internet. Then third, what we call the analogy of Scripture, that is, our interpretation of one passage must fit in with the teaching of the rest of the Bible. Christ is seen in the Scriptures, not only specifically His Person and work, but in the salvation and kingdom that He came to bring.

[The quotations are from John L. MacKay, Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi, pp. 43-44]

## **16/10/24**

John Newton wrote two letters on the depravity of the heart, considering Galatians 5:17 and Romans 7:19 respectively. One might have expected him to follow this up with exhortations to keep struggling against sin, which surely we must do. But no, his next letter outlines “the gracious purposes to which the Lord makes the sense and feeling of our depravity subservient.” He knows we need encouragement in the fight. “If the evils we feel were not capable of being over-ruled for good, He would not permit them to remain in us.” What a pastoral heart, as well as good theology, is displayed!

(1) When we feel our own depravity, God’s “own power, wisdom, faithfulness, and love, are more signally displayed. His power – in maintaining His own work in the midst of much opposition, like a spark burning in the water, or a bush unconsumed in the flames; His wisdom – in defeating and controlling all the devices which Satan, from his knowledge of the evil of our nature, is encouraged to practice against us; ... The unchangeableness of the Lord’s love, and the riches of His mercy, are likewise more illustrated by the multiplied pardons He bestows on His people, than if they needed no forgiveness at all.”

(2) “The Lord Jesus Christ is more endeared to the soul; all boasting is effectively excluded, and the glory of a full and free salvation is ascribed to Him alone ... When, after a long experience of their own deceitful hearts, after repeated proofs of their weakness, wilfulness, ingratitude and insensibility, they find that none of these things can separate them from the love of God in Christ, Jesus becomes more and more precious to their souls. They love much, because much has been forgiven them ... They would not have known as much of Him, if they had not known so much of themselves.”

(3) "A spirit of humiliation, which is the strength and beauty of our profession, is greatly promoted by our feeling, as well as reading, that when we do good, evil is present with us. A broken and contrite heart is pleasing to the Lord: He has promised to dwell with those who have it; and experience shows, that the exercise of all our graces is in proportion to the humbling sense we have of the depravity of our nature." "Every day draws forth some new corruption, which before was little observed, or at least discovers it in a stronger light than before. Thus, by degrees, they are weaned from leaning to any supposed wisdom, power, or goodness in themselves; they feel the truth of our Lord's words, 'Without Me you can do nothing'... It is chiefly by this frame of mind that one Christian is differenced from another; for though it is an inward feeling, it has very observable outward effects." Newton references Ezekiel 16:63, and explains the difference it will make to our speech. What a big statement that this is what makes a real difference between Christians! [You may access this at <https://archive.org/details/cardiphoniaorthe00newtuoft/>, letter 6]

### **9/10/24**

So many times when I pick up letters of John Newton I am struck by his doctrinal faithfulness coupled with his penetrating analysis of the spiritual struggles which we all face. There are scores of letters under the title of 'Cardiphonia, or The Utterance of the Heart.' One has to do with "the remarkable and humbling difference ... between their acquired and experimental knowledge, or ... between their judgement and their practice." He gives various examples of acquired knowledge in the form of a challenge, the first being: "To hear a believer speak his apprehensions of the evil of sin, the vanity of the world, the love of Christ, the beauty of holiness, or the importance of eternity, who would not suppose him proof against temptation?" But he laments that when this same person is described from experience how different he is! "Though he knows that communion with God is his highest privilege, he too seldom finds it so; on the contrary, if duty, conscience, and necessity, did not compel, he would leave the throne of grace unvisited from day to day. He takes up the Bible, conscious that it is the fountain of life and true comfort; yet, perhaps, while he is making the reflection, he feels a secret distaste, which prompts him to lay it down, and give his preference to a newspaper." He goes on with further examples that speak of a reality we are rarely willing to admit.

But lest we despair, he asks, "How can these things be, or why are they permitted?" What a thought that God actually permits such things! He is sovereign, so of course He does permit them, and Newton gives reasons why and what our responsibilities are to grow in grace. (1) "By these exercises He teaches us more truly to know and feel the utter depravity and corruption of our whole nature, that we are indeed defiled in every part. His method of salvation is likewise hereby exceedingly endeared to us: we see that it is and must be of grace, wholly of grace; and that the Lord Jesus Christ, and His perfect righteousness, is and must be our all in all." "His strength is manifested in our weakness." Lastly, "Nothing more habitually reconciles a child of God to the thought of death than the wearisomeness of this warfare." (2) Newton is aware that we can do nothing spiritually by ourselves, yet there is a part assigned to us. "The apostles exhort us, to give all diligence, to resist the devil, to purge ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, to give ourselves to reading, meditation, and prayer, to watch, to put on the whole armour of God, and to abstain from all appearance

of evil. Faithfulness to light received, and a sincere endeavour to conform to the means prescribed in the word of God, with a humble application to the blood of sprinkling, and the promised Spirit, will undoubtedly be answered by increasing measures of light, faith, strength and comfort.”

[You may access this at <https://archive.org/details/cardiphoniaorthe00newtuoft/>, letter 2, pages 15-18]

### 1/10/24

B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) from the United States is known as “one of the greatest of Reformed theologians.” In addition to teaching theology, he had Sunday afternoon classes with his students to bring to them “the deeper currents of Christian faith and life.” One of these classes was entitled ‘The Eternal Gospel’ and based on 2 Timothy 1:9-10. It is a masterful exposition, but brought forth in a very practical way.

2 Timothy is the last letter we have of Paul as he awaited execution (4:6-8). He is being put to death because of the gospel, and he writes to exhort Timothy not to be ashamed of that gospel. What a temptation this was to Timothy (and us?). “The propagation of the gospel through the Roman world had hung largely on the arm of Paul. But that arm was now stricken down, and Paul was lying in the Roman prison with nothing to anticipate except an inglorious death. Something like a panic seems to have fallen upon the little circle of helpers on whom he was accustomed to depend as on hands and feet in the prosecution of his great missionary task. Though in prison and nearing the fatal issue, the burden of the churches still rested on his stricken arm. He enumerates the disposition of the forces he had made and was making. For the work at Rome, however, he was short-handed and felt helpless. One of those he had depended on for the dangerous work there had fled. Only Luke remained with him; he needed two additional helpers.” Timothy was one, and he needed ‘very special courage and boldness for such service.’ From where could he get the strength needed? The answer is from the **gospel** which is the power of God to salvation. “His endurance was to be limited only by the power of God, of that God who had saved him and called him with a holy calling, not according to any works of his own, but according only to God’s own purpose and the grace that was given him in Christ Jesus before times eternal, and has now been manifested by the epiphany of our Saviour Jesus Christ, in His making naught of death, and bringing to light of life and incorruption through the gospel.

Warfield points to 3 things calculated to bring spiritual strength to Timothy.

(1) “He lifts the eyes of Timothy from himself to **God**.” It is God who saves and calls with a holy calling. He does this not according to our works, but according His own purpose, a gracious purpose given in Christ in eternity. Timothy, “Do you not remember how you were brought into relations with this God? Was it of yourself that you were called with this holy calling? Nay, no works of your own entered in. It was of His own purpose that He called you; the grace that has come to you was given you from all eternity.”

(2) “He fixes his eyes firmly also on an eternal **Christ**.” Grace was given in an eternal transaction in Christ. Christ’s “eternal existence ... is the actual reality and His historical manifestation is described as an ‘epiphany’, ... a glorious apparition of what already exists.” “This eternal Jesus – may He not be relied on quite independently of the temporary

appearances of the things on earth? For how many ages did He abide above – before He was manifested as Saviour?”

(3) “He fills Timothy’s heart with a sense on an eternal **salvation.**” In eternity God gave us grace in Christ. “In accordance with this grace, existent eternally, and only manifested in time, when Jesus burst on the astonished view of man and abolished death and brought to light life and immortality. This salvation, thus manifested, therefore, is an eternal salvation. There was no time when it was not. Can there be any time when it shall cease to be?” Warfield concludes by pointing out the force of Paul’s appeal to Timothy to have courage in his trials: “The salvation brought thus to Timothy is not only eternal in its inception but eternal in its endurance.”

[B. B. Warfield, Faith and Life, pp. 402-414, <https://www.monergism.com/faith-and-life-b-b-warfield>]

## **24/9/24**

On the evening of His betrayal, Jesus’ disciples are troubled of heart. He has told them that He is leaving them and they cannot immediately follow Him. What Jesus tells them in John chapters 14-16 is designed to comfort them by assuring them of the future. Yes, they must expect to receive the same hatred that was directed towards Him (15:18ff.), but He will send the Holy Spirit, which will be to their advantage (16:7). As a consequence, what does He expect of His disciples in His absence? Fruit, which is the theme of John 15:1-17. While the responsibility is upon us to bear even “much fruit” (v. 8), fruit is guaranteed by being united to Christ “the true vine”, and the care of the Father, “the vine dresser” (v. 1). This fruit is not how many souls you have won to Christ, something we do long to be used of by the Lord. It is far more basic, Christ’s word abiding in us (v. 7), keeping Christ’s commandments just as He kept the Father’s (v. 10), summarized in ‘loving one another as He has loved us’ (vv. 12,17). A professed Christian who does not produce any fruit is not a true disciple of Christ (v. 8). But of genuine Christians, who prove their genuineness by loving one another, the Father is not satisfied with just some fruit. Like every farmer, He wants more and more fruit. How does He do this? “Every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (v. 2). “The fruit of Christian service is never the result of allowing natural energies and inclinations to run riot.” Ferguson considers the Father’s pruning of His people as being in two stages.

(a) For a plant, “in the early years of its life, the basic function is not directly to produce fruit, but patiently to prepare it for future fruit.” For the young Christian, “God’s purpose is to lay the foundations in our lives on which He may build for the future.” “Our primary task in the fundamental relationships of life is this: to be shaped and fashioned in character in obedience to God’s clearly revealed will, so that His presence will shine through our transformed lives.” Ferguson decries the practice of “the press-ganging of fresh converts into the most public forms of Christian service – testifying, singing, preaching the gospel and so on – when their greatest need is to be taken and patiently shaped by the influences of God’s word and Christian fellowship.”

(b) Further pruning “aims to prune back the growth in order to produce a balance between new growth and the production of fruit.” For the Christian “God intervenes in our lives, bringing painful experiences, allowing us times of disappointment and sorrow, in order that

here may be room for us to grow.” He references 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. Two principles are necessary in order to benefit from these pruning experiences. First, “there are no accidents.” It is the Father’s loving hand that is firmly holding the pruning knife. Second, “there is no waste.” Pruning is always with the purpose of producing more fruit. We need to learn to pray not so much for deliverance from troubles, but for their use in our sanctification.

[Sinclair B. Ferguson, Add To Your Faith, pp. 32-37]

## **17/9/24**

I want to return to letters of John Newton. Letter 35, with Philippians 4:8 as its heading, deals with “improprieties of conduct, which, though usually considered as foibles that hardly deserve a severe censure, are properly sinful.” He considers various Christians whose influence is clouded by comparatively small faults. He has seven such individuals and gives them Latin names.

1. Austerus (austère). This individual has a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. But he lacks courtesy. He is harsh, seemingly proud, dogmatic, and self-important.
2. Humanus (human). He is generous and benevolent, having a heart that burns with love to the Lord. But he does not know how to bridle his tongue.
3. Prudens (prudent). This brother is disposed to love and good works. But he is “a great economist; and though he would not willingly wrong or injure any person, yet the meanness to which he will submit, ether to save or gain a penny, in what he accounts an honest way, are a great discredit to his profession (of faith).”
4. Volatilis (volatile). He is always expressing his desire to help others, “but for want of method in the management of his affairs, he is always in a hurry, always too late, and always has some engagement upon his hands with which it is impossible he can comply.”
5. Cessator (ceasing). In some respects, as regards Bible reading, praying, hearing sermons, and spiritual talk with others, he seems an eminent Christian. But “he greatly neglects the duties of his station (place in life).” “His affairs are in disorder, and his family and connections are likely to suffer by his indolence.”
6. Curiosus (curious). He is generally godly, but “He would be a much more agreeable companion, were it not for an impertinent desire of knowing every body’s business, and the grounds of every hint that is occasionally dropped inn discourse where he is present.”
7. Querulus (querulous). This man “wastes much of his precious time in declaiming against the management of public affairs; though he has neither access to the springs which move the wheels of government, nor influence either to accelerate or retard their motions.”

I think each of these seven deserve our thoughtful meditation. We need to display all the nine characters of the fruit (singular) of the Spirit of Galatians 5:22-23, and be well-rounded Christians, “blameless”. This last one is particularly relevant in this politically charged time. Let me quote further from Newton. “Our national concerns are no more affected by the remonstrances of Querulus, than the heavenly bodies are by the disputes of astronomers. While the newspapers (now internet) are the chief sources of his intelligence, and his situation precludes him from being a competent judge, ... why should Querulus trouble himself with politics? This would be a weakness, if we consider him only as a member of society; but if we consider him as a Christian, it is worse than weakness; it is a sinful

conformity to the men of the world, who look no further than to second causes, and forget the Lord reigns. If a Christian be placed in a public sphere of action, he should undoubtedly be faithful to his calling.” Don’t forget that Newton did have that influence and used it to campaign against slavery. He has written more, which you can read for yourself.

[You may access it at <https://www.monergism.com/letters-john-newton-ebook>, and search for the letter, ‘Blemishes in Christian Character’. This source has more than 150 of his letters!]

## **10/9/24**

I have been reading about the wonders of creation and I want to share some of these wonders that have to do with navigation/migration.

(1) Fish. “Salmon have the stamina to travel long distances at sea and then to travel back to the stream where they were born for mating and spawning... Young salmon survive without any help from their parents. They have to swim downstream navigating all the tributaries to find an ocean they do not know exists. When they reach the ocean they then mature over several years, instinctively knowing when to return to mate and spawn. Salmon are yet another example of incredible design that defies evolution. In particular, the young could never have gradually evolved the ability to perform such a complex migration because they cannot survive unless the whole migration cycle is fully programmed in their brain.”

(2) Turtles. “Leatherback turtles have been observed to migrate over 16,000 km, crossing the entire Pacific Ocean from Indonesia to the USA. Scientists have discovered that turtles navigate using magnetic sensors to determine latitude and longitude. Research has shown that newly hatched turtles use these magnetic signals to head towards the open ocean immediately they reach the water... After laying her eggs and covering the nest, the mother returns to the sea. This means that when the eggs hatch, the young turtles have to survive alone and they may never meet their parents. They dig themselves out of the sand and make their own way to the sea by heading towards the brightest place. Despite the power of the waves and the difficulty of breathing for such tiny creatures, they instinctively head for the sea and the open ocean. These tiny creatures then follow their instincts for swimming, navigating, hunting, mating, migrating and, in the case of females, returning to the same beach where they were born to lay their eggs. Like baby salmon, turtles are born fully programmed so they know how to live their entire lives, including complex migrations and reproduction. As with salmon, such a complex lifecycle cannot evolve step by step but must be fully designed from the beginning.”

(3) Birds. “The Pacific Golden Plover migrates between Northern Canada/Alaska and Hawaii – a distance of around 4,800 km over part of the Pacific Ocean. As if this was not enough, it is accomplished in two phases. The adults go first in August followed by the young making the journey on their own..., never having done this before! The challenges involved are considerable... Not only do the young birds need to know where to go, they also need to eat enough to make sure they can make the journey. During the trip the plovers use up approximately half of their bodyweight and have to make sure they eat enough beforehand to survive the trip. But not too much as that would then make them overweight for the trip. Too much or too little means they will not make it. Trained pilots of conventional aircraft have to do careful calculations concerning fuel load and weight to assess whether they can

reach a destination over open water safely. Yet these birds, which have never done it before, arrive without difficulty. This feat of engineering requires complex knowledge which cannot be obtained by a trial and error approach.”

(4) Butterflies. “In 2012 it was discovered that the painted lady butterfly colony flies through the UK from tropical Africa to the Arctic Circle in the spring and then returns in the autumn at a high altitude of approximately 500 m. The round trip is a phenomenal 15,000 km and involves up to six generations of these butterflies over the year making the journey. A report was made by Butterfly Conservation ... and ... the survey leader admitted, ‘The extent of the annual journey taken by the painted butterfly is astonishing. This tiny creature weighing less than a gram with the brain size of a pin-head and no opportunity to learn from older, experienced individuals, undertakes an epic intercontinental migration in order to find plants for its caterpillars to eat.’”

[Burgess & McIntosh, Wonders of Creation: Design in a Fallen World, Leominster: DayOne 3<sup>rd</sup>. edition 2020, <https://www.dayone.co.uk>]

### **3/9/24**

Imagine reading a blog, ‘On the advantages of a state of poverty’! So much of the Christian world thinks that to know the blessing of God is to be delivered out of poverty. Yet this is exactly what John Newton wrote to a friend of his who was “pinched by poverty” and suffered “the want of many things”. He starts with an eternal perspective. “Whether the rich or the poor, who live without God in the world, are most to be pitied, is not easy to determine. It is a dreadful case to be miserable in both worlds; but yet the parade and seeming prosperity in which some live for a few years, but will be no abatement, but rather a great aggravation, of their future torment.” But “we shall find that the believing poor, though they have many trials which call for our compassion, have some advantages above those of the Lord’s people to whom He has given a larger share of the good things of this present life.” The God who has chosen so few of the rich, wise or mighty (1 Corinthians 1:26-29), “knowing what is in their hearts, the nature of the world through which they are to pass, and what circumstances are best suited to manifest the truth and efficacy of His grace, He has, in the general, chosen poverty as the best state for them.”

(1) Sanctified poverty is an honourable state. Such are in “the nearest external conformity to Jesus” who made Himself poor for our sakes (2 Corinthians 8:9). Poverty “affords a peculiar advantage for glorifying God, and evidencing the power of His grace, and the faithfulness of His promises, in the sight of men.”

(2) Poverty is comparatively a safe state. Although attended with peculiar temptations, poverty “is not near so suitable to draw forth and nourish the two grand corruptions of the heart, self-importance, and an idolatrous cleaving to the world, as the opposite state of riches.”

(3) The believing poor have the advantage in regards to spiritual comfort. First, “As they are called to a life of more immediate dependence upon the promise and providence of God (having little else to trust to), they have a more direct and frequent experience of His interposition in their favour. He references the difference between the experiences of Obadiah and Elijah. Second, “the humble and believing poor have, in general, the greatest share of those consolations, which are the effect of the light of God’s countenance lifted up

upon the soul, of His love shed abroad in the heart, or of a season of refreshment from His presence.” “Blessed are the poor, who are rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which God has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:9, 2:5).

What an antidote this is to the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which is no gospel at all.

[You may access it at [https://archive.org/details/bim\\_eighteenth-century\\_twenty-six-letters-on-re\\_newton-john\\_1775](https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_twenty-six-letters-on-re_newton-john_1775), letter 22. I have only given you the bare outline. Newton has very helpful illustrations and applications.]

## **27/8/24**

Last Sunday I preached on ‘True Religion’ from Mark 12:28-34. I asked the provocative question, ‘Does true religion consist in keeping commandments?’ Obviously it does as Jesus summarizes God’s will for us in the two great commandments, love God and love your neighbour. This is not just love shown in outward conduct, but total devotion. Yet, it is not just when we feel like it, as it is a commandment! As sometimes happens, that very morning I was reading a commentary on Amos where the very same truth was being emphasized.

Drawing attention to 5:14-15, the following observation is made.

“... Amos puts the action before the emotion, *seek* (i.e. settle upon it as the target of your daily life) before *love*. Ordinarily the Bible represents holiness as starting in the ‘inner man’ and working outwards. [Proverbs 4:23 and Romans 12:2 are referenced.] But there is also this truth, that many, many times, if we were to wait for emotion to prompt action, we would wait in vain and long lists of Christian duties would rot in the pipe-line because we did not ‘feel’ any stimulus to perform them. It is therefore a salutary jolt to our tendency to exalt emotion over duty, to think that it is more godly to ‘feel led’ than do something because ‘I ought’, when Amos puts ‘seeking’ before ‘loving’. It turns to practical account that to which we pay lip service in our better moments: that emotions are a fickle and false guide. As far as holiness is concerned emotions may be nothing but a rationalization of moral idleness. But there is more to Amos’ emphasis than shocking us into action. It is abundantly true that to act lovingly towards a brother or sister Christian will bring in its wake the emotion of Christian love for that one, and that if we give ourselves to obeying, God will graciously add the bonus of prompting in us the corresponding feeling. But more than that: even if we were never to feel the emotion we are still bound by the duty; therefore Amos is simply putting first things where they belong, at the head of the list. Right must be done because it is right and not because there is emotional satisfaction in doing it.”

[J. A. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion*, pages 123-124]

## **20/8/24**

I have been given a copy of John Newton’s Works, published in 1831. John Newton is the celebrated composer of the well-known hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Included are 41 letters originally published under the signatures of Omicron and Vigil. What has struck me is how he writes so moderately and spiritually. This is so clearly shown in Letter 16 entitled, ‘On the Inefficacy of our Knowledge.’ He addresses those who possess great knowledge of the scriptures. “... they who possess it are exposed to the temptation of thinking too highly of themselves, and too meanly of others, especially of those, who not only refuse to adopt their sentiments, but venture to oppose them.” He aims to illustrate this by “how little

influence our knowledge and judgement have upon our own conduct.” There are 4 illustrations.

(1) We are firmly persuaded that God is omnipresent. “If the eyes of the Lord are in every place, how strong a guard should this thought be upon the conduct of those who profess to fear Him!” “Is it not strange, that those who have taken their ideas of the divine majesty, holiness and purity from the Scriptures, and are not wholly insensible of their inexpressible obligations to regulate all they say and do by His precepts, should, on many occasions, be betrayed into improprieties of behaviour, from which in the presence of a nobleman, or a prince, would have effectually restrained them, yea, sometimes, perhaps, even the presence of a child.” He gives the example of how easy it is to be distracted when in prayer by the “merest trifles.”

(2) We Calvinists assert God’s sovereignty and we “contend for this point in our debates with the Arminians, and are ready to wonder that any should be hardy enough to dispute the Creator’s right to do what He will with His own.” “... occasions frequently arise, when they who contend for the divine sovereignty are little more practically influenced by it than their opponents. This humiliating doctrine concludes as strongly for submission to the will of God, under every circumstance of life, as it does for our acquiescing in His purpose to have mercy upon whom He will have mercy.”

(3) We further believe that “the Lord’s appointments, to those who fear Him, are not only sovereign, but wise and gracious.” So “... we are at no loss to suggest motives of patience and consolation to our brethren that are afflicted. (So) ...we can infer, not only the sinfulness, but the folly of finding fault with any of His dispensations.” “But when the case is our own, when we are troubled on every side, or touched in the tenderest part, how difficult it is to feel the force of these reasonings, though we know they are true to a demonstration.”

(4) Finally, with reference to ourselves, “We seem to be as sure that we are weak, sinful, fallible creatures, as we are that we exist; and yet we are prone to act as if we were wise and good.” “Without renewed and continual communications from the Spirit of grace, he (a believer) is unable to withstand the smallest temptation, to endure the slightest trial, to perform the least service in a due manner, or even to think a good thought.”

His very humbling conclusion is: “... believers who have the most knowledge, are not, therefore, necessarily the most spiritual ... He who experimentally knows his own weakness, and depends simply upon the Lord, will surely thrive, though his acquired attainments and abilities may be but small ...”

[You may access it at [https://archive.org/details/bim\\_eighteenth-century\\_twenty-six-letters-on-re\\_newton-john\\_1775](https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_twenty-six-letters-on-re_newton-john_1775), letter 16]

### **13/8/24**

Daniel chapters 11 and 12 are amongst the most remarkable in the Bible! They are about “what is to happen to your (Daniel’s) people in the latter days” (10:14).

(1) Chapter 11:1-20 begins with Darius (see ch. 6) and the kings of Persia and proceeds to give a very detailed history of the next three plus centuries. This is history “written before it took place!” It can only be God’s word therefore. It shows that “history is His story” that it is totally under His control and is certain to happen. This is all the more remarkable because God’s name is absent from the prophecy, yet He is the One telling it will come to pass.

(2) From chapter 11:21 we are introduced to a “contemptible” person, unworthy to be a king. This is Antiochus Epiphanes who died in 164 B.C. and who sought to destroy the Jewish religion (see verses 30-35). We have already come across him in 8:23-25.

(3) From chapter 11:36 and through chapter 12 it is as if it continues to be about Antiochus. But not only do the details not fit him, it is the end of the world that is being spoken about, the resurrection and eternal destinies. “The Lord causes Daniel to look through Antiochus Epiphanes to the person of whom he is a prefigurement – the man of sin,” the Antichrist. All too often this passage has been the source of speculation and date setting. Olyott wants us to face reality. “None of us is free to dissent from the truth that a personal Antichrist will come at the end of the world, and this should give our Christian lives an element of real seriousness ... (2 Thessalonians 2:3). There are some who nurse prophetic views which lead them to believe that the whole world will at least be ‘Christianized’ ... Such dreamers are going to be very disappointed indeed ... (2 Timothy 3:13) ... This is why we are against the frivolity and shallowness which characterizes so much contemporary Christianity. There are awful days head for the Christian church – worse than anything that has gone before. There are going to be martyrs again. Nobody should embark on the Christian life without calling these facts to mind and without counting the cost.” What encouragements are there? “History is in God’s hands” (verse 36).

“No amount of persecution can hinder our communion with God” (verse 32). “Cruel oppressors can close down all public worship and forbid all Christian meetings. They can take away our printed Bibles and our Christian books. They can outlaw Christian work, remove all our liberties, threaten us with cruel penalties and allow the Lord’s people no visible presence whatever. But they cannot take away our communion with God.”

“We can be certain that evil will not ultimately triumph”. Revelation 19:5-6.

[Stuart Olyott, Dare to Stand Alone: Daniel Simply Explained, pages 140-159.]

## **6/8/24**

The words “new covenant” only appear in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 31:31, although the idea is present in many other passages such as Ezekiel 36:25-27. Sam Waldron deduces from this that the content of this new covenant forms the constitution of the church, i.e. the guiding principles, the fundamental laws. He emphasizes four things about the new covenant, as found in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (and Hebrews 8:8-12, 10:16-17) by comparing them with common errors:

(1) Dispensationalism teaches that the fulfilment of the new covenant is still in the future when, they say, God will again deal with the Jews as a people. This is because they believe God has two people, the church and the Jews, and they are never to be confused because the words must be taken literally. So because the new covenant is made “with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” it cannot be for the church, they claim. Waldron seeks to show that all the references to the new covenant in the New Testament prove that it is now in force, Christ being the mediator through His death (see Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3:6, Hebrews 8:13, 9:15, 12:24). He further shows that, therefore, the church **is** Israel and Judah, the people of God (see Romans 11:17-24, Galatians 3:29, Ephesians 2:11-22).

(2) Antinomianism is a teaching that so emphasizes grace that the law of God, and especially Old Testament law, has no place in the Christian life (a wrong view based on Romans 6:14). A commonly held view today is that of New Covenant Theology which only allows instructions that are found in the New Testament. Waldron points out that it is precisely that law which was written on stone, the 10 Commandments, that is now written within the people of God. Therefore, what we call the moral law abides as the rule of life of the Christian, including the Sabbath.

(3) Arminianism makes place for the will of man to freely choose or reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. Waldron emphasizes that God's sovereign grace is everywhere in the new covenant! It is He who determines to put His law within people. It is He who just states that He will be merciful and remember their sins no more (Hebrews 10:17-18), because of the one offering of Christ Himself. This is the basis on which all the blessings of the new covenant come (Hebrews 8:12 begins with "for"), and not because of anything in them.

(4) Paedobaptism is the baptism of the infants of a Christian parent because the offspring of Abraham were circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup>. day. Waldron is adamant that the new covenant is 'new', and 'not like' the old covenant. One of the great differences is that "they shall **all** know Me" (Hebrews 8:11). Only some of the old covenant people of God knew the Lord. For example, when Samuel was young he did not know the Lord (1 Samuel 3:7); neither did the sons of Eli although they were priests serving in the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2:12). There is no remnant knowing the Lord in the new covenant, but all savingly know the Lord, all have the law written within, because all have their sins forgiven through Christ's blood. [The New Covenant Constitution of the Church, 4 addresses by Samuel Waldron, accessed at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/>]

### **30/7/24**

I have always thought that Baptists tend to avoid the word 'sacrament' for baptism and the Lord's Supper because of its association with Roman Catholicism. But both the Protestant Westminster and Savoy Confessions use the word sacrament. It is then often wrongly assumed that the Baptist Confession uses 'ordinance' to promote a Zwinglian view of the Lord's Supper, that it is simply a memorial of Christ's death. Renihan shows that there is a far more positive reason, having to do with the Baptist view of the sacraments as New Covenant institutions. So why was ordinance substituted? "... ordinance was a handy word with powerful polemic implications. According to the OED (Oxford English Dictionary), ordinance carries the sense 'something decreed, ordained, or prescribed.' The linguistic relation between 'ordained' and 'ordinance' must be noted... Writing in defence of immersion as the proper mode of baptism, Thomas Minge said, 'The very word (ordinance) denotes the institution, a subject capable of obedience.' In their debates with various paedobaptists, these confessional baptistic congregationalists emphasized the nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper as positive commands, an accent fundamental to the argument for their position." A 'positive command' is one that can only come from divine revelation rather than being moral or natural. For example, we know that God must be worshipped, but that one day in seven is set aside for worship is a positive command. "If baptism was ordained by Jesus Christ, and was of positive institution, it must be defined by the New Testament revelation, not the Old." This is Renihan's conclusion: "It seems that the

use of this specific term has more to do with the nature of the argument for credobaptism (baptism of believers) and defence against paedobaptism (baptism of infants) than it does with any objection to the use of 'sacrament'." The Confession states (28/1): Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution; appointed by the Lord Jesus that only Law-giver ...

[Quotes are from Renihan, Confession the Faith, pp. 615-619]

It should be noted that the 1689 Baptist Confession teaches the real presence of Christ in the Supper (30/7): Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally, and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 10:16) and all the benefits of His death ... This is where the word 'communion' comes from.

### **23/7/24**

In order to accurately understand something we are studying it is vitally important to know both the geographical and the historical situation of the writer. For example, when we read the 1689 Baptist Confession we must remember that it was written against the background of the religious situation in England in the seventeenth century. Renihan helpfully shows this, for example, in chapter 25 on Marriage. "Questions about marriage and divorce were at the very heart of the English Reformation. Ever since King Henry VIII failed to receive a papal annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and proceeded to separate the English Church from the Roman communion, the issue remained on the minds of theologians and politicians. By the time the 2LCF (1689 Confession) was written, it was necessary to wrestle with difficulties such as these: Were marriage and divorce religious or civil matters? How much of medieval Roman Catholic doctrine on marriage could be accepted? What were the purposes of marriage – procreation, companionship, prevention of sexual immorality – all these? How practical was the possibility of divorce?" [Renihan, Confessing the Faith, Volume 2, p. 527] Such questions determined the content of this chapter of the Confession.

Therefore, Confessions of Faith are never the final word on everything. New questions arise, and new teachings are put forward. So in 1978 the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was written by more than 200 evangelical leaders because of the increasing denial of the inerrancy of the Bible. In 1988 the Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood was published because of the modern attack on the Biblical teaching.

This consideration of the historical background is more important in our study of the Scripture. In hermeneutics (the method of Bible interpretation) the basic principle is 'grammatical-historical', that is using the common rules of grammar, and the meaning in the original historical context. What would the original hearers/readers understand? An obvious example is the gross misuse of Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans that I have for you". It is quite clear from the context that the plans are those for Israel that after 70 years of exile they will return to the land of promise. No doubt such a statement has application to us in 2024, but it must first be considered in light of the situation about whom it was spoken in the sixth century before Christ.

### **16/7/24**

In the 17<sup>th</sup>. century three groups of churches composed their Confession of Faith. The first was the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians (1647). The later Savoy Confession of the Congregationalists (1658), and London Confession of the Particular Baptists (1677/1689), largely followed the Westminster, thus showing the basic agreement between these three groupings of Protestant Churches. However, both the Savoy and London Confessions add a totally new chapter on 'The Gospel, and the Extent of the Grace Thereof' (ch. 20). It is instructive to think of the reason for this and to re-emphasize the truth declared.

The chapter is not about the gospel itself but is "an explanation of the reason why the gospel has reached to the places it has, and to answer questions about its further dissemination." Renihan thinks that the background is that "both Arminians and Socinians broadened the way of salvation to include those who had no explicit faith in Jesus Christ but who lived up to the precepts of their own cultures." In other words, if you are a good pagan you will be saved even if you have never heard the gospel proclaimed from the Bible. The great question is, and it is still with us today, 'Can anyone be saved without hearing the gospel?' If the answer is 'No' which is surely what the Bible teaches (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:13-17), then the question comes, 'Why are there so many who never hear this gospel?'

There are 4 sections to chapter 20 in the Confession, as follows: (1) After the Fall God gave the promise of Genesis 3:15 as the means of saving the elect, (2) This promise is only found in the word of God, so that no one can believe without this written word. (3) The spread of this gospel to sinners around the world depends upon the sovereignty of God. See Psalm 147:19-20, Matthew 11:26, Acts 16:6-7). (4) For this message to save sinners who hear it, the further inward work of the Holy Spirit is necessary.

Such teaching from a Confession that is more than 300 years old shows that many (most?) questions we have today have been considered and answered by God's people of old. We neglect the history of the church to our own peril. A good place to start with doctrine is to read such Confessions of Faith. It should also humble us as we tend to think we are so knowledgeable today, yet in reality we are so ignorant! This chapter is not a denial of our responsibility to take the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). The sovereignty of God is not the rule of our duty.

[based upon James Renihan, Confessing the Faith, Volume Two, Chapter XX, pp. 447-460]  
[access the Baptist Confession at <https://www.the1689confession.com/chapter-20>]

## 9/7/24

There is a very informative Christian newspaper called Evangelical Times which I would encourage you to read. In the July 2024 paper there is an article by Robert Letham, 'Are Evangelicals getting indifferent to heresy?' He gives a few examples of what could just be careless statements in preaching, and then zeros in on the ancient heresy of 'Monothelism' = the Lord Jesus Christ has only one will. "This idea was anathematized at an ecumenical council, Constantinople III in 680-681, accepted by all major branches of the church." Without naming him, Letham says that a leading evangelical, now deceased, has written arguing for Monothelism. The conclusion is that hardly anyone is sitting up and taking notice, as if it does not really matter. He asks, "Why have many evangelicals become so indifferent to sound doctrine?" He says that, unlike the Reformers and Puritans who

constantly referenced the early church Fathers and the medieval theologians, there is today an ignoring of the past teachings of the church in the name of sola Scriptura.

You may never have heard of Monothelism and so wonder why it is a matter of such importance. We confess that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is both fully divine and fully human. He is all that God is, and all that man is (sin excepted). "... our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin" (Chalcedon Creed, 451 A.D.). How important is this?

Letham reasons: "If Christ did not have a human will He would not be fully human. If that were so He could not save us. We would have no gospel, for we would have no high priest, no advocate with the Father, nor could He have taken our place or made atonement for our sins. You and I could not be saved"!

Paul tells Timothy to "charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine," to "keep a close watch on ... the teaching," and to "guard the deposit" entrusted to him. He dismisses as proud and ignorant anyone who "teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that does not accord with godliness." Strive to know as much doctrine as possible. Remember that true doctrine accords with godliness. A good place to start is the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 which you can access at <https://www.the1689confession.com/>.

[based on Evangelical Times, Vol. 58, No. 7, July 2024, p. 10]

## **2/7/24**

Why did Jesus come and what was the role of miracles in His ministry? A direct answer is found in Mark 1:32-39. Please note the following helpful comments by Lane.

- Commenting on verses 32-34, he reflects: "It is not adequate to read this narrative as a report of success in the initial phase of the Galilean mission. The people come to Jesus, not because they recognize His dignity and function but because it is rumoured that a miracle worker has come in their midst. Jesus had come to preach repentance and the nearness of the kingdom (so Mark 1:14-15) but the people think only of relief from pain and affliction. They fail to perceive the significance of Jesus' conflict with demonic power (so Mark 3:27). In compassion and grace Jesus extends to them authentic healing, but it is not primarily for this purpose that He has come. In the morning He withdraws from the village and the clamouring crowds."

- Commenting on verses 36-39, he writes: "There is a note of reproach in the statement, 'All are seeking for you,' which means, What are you doing here when you should be in the midst of the multitude who are clamouring for you?... Jesus' answer indicates their failure to understand Him or His mission. Acts of healing and expulsion of demons, as much as proclamation, entailed a disclosure of the nature of the kingdom of God and constituted a demand for decision. By his decision a person was qualified for participation in the kingdom or marked for judgement. The crowds that gathered in Capernaum had made their decision, but it could not be the appropriate one because it involved not repentance but attraction to Jesus as a performer of miracles. That is why Jesus interrupts the miracles to go elsewhere to proclaim 'the gospel of God.' His purpose is not to heal as many people as possible as a

manifestation of the kingdom of God drawn near in His person, but to confront men with the demand for decision in the perspective of God's absolute claim upon their person... In pursuance of His mission Jesus went throughout all Galilee, using the synagogue as a point of contact with the people. Preaching and the expulsion of demons are related facets of this ministry, the means by which the power of Satan is overcome. In this connection it may be significant that there is no reference to acts of healing in the summary statement. Healing is an aspect of the redemption but it demonstrates Jesus' confrontation with Satan less graphically than the restoration to wholeness of those who had been possessed by demons." [William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, pp. 78-83]

**25/6/24**

John Newton is most famous for the hymn, *Amazing grace*. I have been reading through his Memoirs and have been struck by the following statements.

"I was in some degree affected with a sense of my enormous sins; but I was little aware of the innate evils of my heart. I had no apprehension of the spirituality and extent of the law of God." [Describing the progress in his Christian faith]

"It was this abasedness of heart towards God, combined with the most singular largeness of heart towards his fellow-creatures, which distinguished JT among men." [A description of one of his patrons]

"The trial did not seem to have affected him as a painful operation, so much as a critical opportunity in which he might fail in demonstrating the patience of a Christian under pain... 'I felt that being enabled to bear a very sharp operation, with tolerable calmness and confidence, was a greater favour granted to me than deliverance from my malady.'" [On the occasion of an operation for a tumour]

"When God is about to perform any great work, He generally permits some great opposition to it." He gave Pharaoh's opposition as an example.

At 80 years of age it was suggested by some of his friends that he should stop public preaching. His robust response was: "I cannot stop. What! shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?"

When his health was failing and he was asked about the last expressions of an eminent believer, he said, "Tell me not how the man died, but how he lived."

"What some call providential openings are often powerful temptations; the heart, in wandering, cries, Here is a way opened before me; but, perhaps, not to be trodden, but rejected."

"My principal method for method for defeating heresy, is by establishing truth. One proposes to fill a bushel with tares; now if I can fill it first with wheat, I shall defy his attempts."

"The religion of a sinner stands on two pillars; namely, what Christ did for us in the flesh, and what He performs in us by His Spirit. Most errors arise from an attempt to separate the two."

"We blame an Arminian for his want of submission to divine sovereignty; yet let a shower of rain fall on a suit of new clothes, and we cannot submit ourselves."

"The Lord has reasons, far beyond our ken, for opening a wide door, while He stops the mouth of a useful preacher. John Bunyan would not have done half the good he did, if he

has remained preaching in Bedford, instead of being shut up in Bedford prison.” [It was in prison that Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*]  
[Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton, by Rev. R. Cecil, 1831]

### **18/6/24**

I want to pick up from last week the statement of John Owen that the main purpose of the Lord’s Supper is “the exercise of faith”. It is not enough just to meet together; we must exercise faith in order to be present with Christ, and so He with us.

(1) Recognition (remembrance). At Passover there was a remembrance of what God did to deliver them from Egypt. The lamb was to be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:8) as a reminder of sin. In the same way, the Lord’s Supper is to be a time when our hearts are affected with the death of Christ for our sins. We are not to draw near with our hearts far from Him.

(2) Admission (reception). For Owen this is the main work for the Christian. Christ is offered to us in the preaching; then we must receive Him into our hearts “by faith and love”. We must stir up ourselves “as having a more especial interest in this duty, than in any other duty of the church whatsoever”! Christ has not invited us to “an empty, painted feast or table”.

(3) Sealing the covenant (giving ourselves to God). Finally, we give ourselves to God “universally and absolutely”. He has given Himself to us, to be our God. We gladly give ourselves to live as His people from henceforth. If we are not ready to resign ourselves unto Him in all that we are and do, we will not meet with Christ in the Supper, Owen warns. [The Works of John Owen, 9, Discourse XIX, pp. 574-575]

In the same way Barcellos urges us to see in the Lord’s Supper more than just a remembrance. So the subtitle of his book is “More than a Memory”. “One of the means instituted by Christ to bring grace from heaven to elect and gospel-believing souls on the earth is the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a soul-changing, soul-altering, nurturing ordinance as blessed by the Spirit of God to that end.” Many refer to the Lord’s Supper as ‘Holy Communion’ with the language of ‘communion’ taken from 1 Corinthians 10:16 (King James Version). ‘Communion’ is variously translated ‘participation’ (NIV, ESV), ‘sharing’ (NASB). Just as partaking of the table of demons brings us into communion with them, so that they have some influence over us (10:20-21), so also with the table of the Lord. “Through the Lord’s Supper we receive something from Christ – the benefits of His body and blood.” It is one of the means of grace – “It is not a means of special grace, but a special means of grace.” May we experience this more and more!

[Richard Barcellos, *The Lord’s Supper as a Means of Grace*, pp. 41-54]

### **11/6/24**

Owen has many discourses that he gave at the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. He regards the main purpose of the Lord’s Supper to be “the exercise of faith”. The ultimate and supreme object of our faith is the attributes of God as they are manifested and glorified in the death of Christ. Owen makes this great statement why it is faith alone that is the instrument of justification, and so of salvation: “... it is the only grace whereby we give glory

to God, and can do so.” The following 4 things are to be meditated upon in order to glorify God.

(1) God’s righteousness (Romans 3:25-26). We have not understood the death of Christ until we see it displaying and magnifying the righteousness of God. God did not ignore His law and the curse it brings upon us sinners, but gave Jesus in our place. He suffered what we deserved to suffer; His righteousness is imputed to us (= put to our account) (Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:21).

(2) God’s love (John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 1 John 4:10). ‘There is no attribute which God so eminently designs to glorify in the death of Christ as His love.’ God is love, the Father Himself loves us, and He has sent Jesus Christ to save sinners out of His eternal love. It is the eternal and sovereign God who loves. He loves very small creatures, yes, but as rebel sinners. He gave the greatest possible gift, His Son. He freely gives all things in Christ (Romans 8:32).

(3) God’s grace (Ephesians 1:6). How glorious is His grace in pardoning sinners by giving Christ to die for us. We deserve the opposite, eternal judgement. Then why did He do it? Not because of anything in us, but “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy” (Romans 9:15). That is why we call it sovereign grace.

(4) God’s wisdom (Ephesians 1:8, 3:10, 1 Corinthians 1:24). How could God, as a righteous Judge, justify us when we are sinners deserving condemnation? This is the great question of all time!! He gave Christ in our place who, by Himself, did all we sinners need for eternity. What amazing wisdom.

This is how Owen wants us to stir up our faith, especially in the Lord’s Supper.

- It is not enough that we agree these things are true, that is, that Christ came into the world to save sinners; but we must have a vigorous assent that this way of salvation is that in which God will be glorified to eternity.
- Gather up our minds to this institution. If we are able to see in the elements of bread and wine that represent the death of Christ, let us see the glory of God in His death and so have communion with God in the Lord’s Supper.

[The Works of John Owen, 9, Discourse XIX, pp. 603-606]

#### **4/6/24**

Owen has a series of ‘Discourses’ where he poses a question and then gives his answer. One question is: “When may any one sin, lust, or corruption, be esteemed habitually present?” This is a very important question as it marks the difference between one who is a true Christian and one who is not. “If grace does not cure constitution-sins, it has cured none.” We cannot make excuses such as, ‘I am passionate in my nature,’ so that I cannot help sinning. A Christian is a new creation, the heart of stone is replaced by a heart of flesh. But Owen is a wise pastor because many of us would condemn ourselves knowing the sin that still dwells within us. So he assures us, “when the mind and soul is frequently and greatly ... urged upon and pressed with a particular lust and corruption, this does not prove that particular lust and corruption to be habitually prevalent; for it may be a temptation.” He continues and lays out five evidences to show when sin is habitually prevalent.

1. When a man willingly chooses the known occasions of his sin. No Christian man chooses sin for sin’s sake. What is known to be sin is to be rejected when it presents itself.

2. When a man finds that arguments against the sin, such as fear, danger, shame, and ruin, begin to lose their force.
  3. When a man, being convicted, is turned aside from the sin, but not from his desire for it. He gives the example of a covetous trader who cheats every time he has the opportunity to do so.
  4. When only restraining grace and not renewing grace keeps him from the sin. In other words, he would sin for the rest of his life were it not for fear of shame, danger, death, and hell.
  5. When sin has laid hold of the will. Sin may entangle the mind and disorder the affections and not be prevalent, but when it has laid hold of the will it has the mastery.
- Practically, Owen urges that mortification of sin is a continual duty of even the best of saints (Colossians 3:5). We need to take sin far more seriously, which is why reading the Puritans such as Owen is of such great value.
- [The Works of John Owen, 9, Discourse VIII, pp. 381-385]

### **28/5/24**

As I read through the sermons of John Owen I am struck by their relevance to today, by Owen's gift of bringing all of Scripture to bear on a subject, by the way he challenges his hearers, and (as here) by his dealing with subjects rarely heard yet of great importance. He brings forth the subject of our death, the one thing in the future which is sure for every person, unless our Lord returns first. He does not want us only to die "safely", but also "cheerfully and comfortably – so as to have a free and abundant entrance into the kingdom of God in glory." Is not this how we should be able to look upon our death, whether we have evidence it is approaching or not? So Owen asks, "Upon what grounds can a man be ready and willing to lay down this tabernacle in the dust?" He gives two reasons, from specific Biblical texts.

(1) Philippians 1:23. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Desire is a strong word, sometimes called lust (Matthew 5:27-28), coveting (Romans 7:7). It is an "habitual, constant inclination." The only way a person can have such a constant attitude towards the separation of body and soul is because it is the means of enjoying Christ. "I tell you, your bodies are better to you than all the world, than all your goods, or anything else; but Christ is better to the soul than anything ... Grow in that desire of coming to Christ, and you will conquer the unwillingness of death."

(2) Romans 8:10. "The body is dead because of sin." He states that the only way sin can be rooted out of the body is by its dying. This is because sin has taken up such a close residence in the body. It is the experience, even of the most godly, that no matter how serious one is to put all sin to death total success is never achieved in this life. "All other attempts to eradicate sin have failed ...; they have brought me to be ashamed of myself, in the frowardness, darkness, and unbelief of my nature; I will therefore be willing to part with my body." Death will be the end of sin, our greatest problem and enemy.

He concludes his sermon with the exhortation, "Let us take heed of being surprised with death." In Owen's day, 350 years ago, life expectancy was much shorter, and infant mortality very common, so he faced death far more than many of us do. Yet death is as certain today as it was then, and so we must take heed to this teaching.

[The Works of John Owen, 9, Sermon XXIX, pp. 346-352]

### **21/5/24**

When we read the Bible and seek to understand it we are aware that we do not come with a blank mind. We have had previous teaching which may or may not be accurate. There are also specific word associations (see 'still' below) yet words may have a wide range of meanings. I have been going through a book that studies Psalms 38-51 and there are at least 3 previous understandings that I have had to question.

(1) Psalm 45. The Psalm "seems to portray a real marriage", yet it does not fit any royal marriage of which we have knowledge. The king is described in such ideal language (verses 2-9a) that he does not appear as an ordinary figure. In fact Hebrews 1:8-9 says it is spoken of the Son. So how do we take the description of the queen (verses 9b-11)? Do we "idealize the queen as a cipher for the people of God" when she appears as a real woman? So we should look at this as a real royal wedding rather than an allegory of Christ and His church. "This king will have a continuing kingdom and ... will be remembered and delighted in for all time" (verses 16-17). The description of the queen and her attendants is designed to show the glory of the king and so the kingdom of God and, "by implication, the final descendant of that line, Jesus our Lord." By allegorizing we are in danger of missing the point of the Psalm (verse 2), which is to be taken up with the king.

(2) Psalm 46. Verse 10 is the climax of the Psalm, God Himself speaking after the declaration of victory (verses 8-9). Have not many of us simply read into the English words, "Be still!", words designed to be a calming influence for the people of God? The following application then may follow: "In the middle of the world's turmoil, you must 'be still,' draw apart, and commune with God." But these words are probably addressed to the nations that are raging (verse 6). They are to know "I am God", which is not the covenant name, but the name Elohim that is more suitable for pagans. So "Be still!" is not "a calm invitation to engage in personal devotions" but "a demand to the warring nations to 'Stop it!'" Stop your hostility and acknowledge God's sovereignty. How different an interpretation this is because we just look at the word 'still' and not the context in which it is found.

(3) Psalm 50. The Psalm begins with correcting the way His people worship (verses 7-13). Yes, they offer all the sacrifices required, but in doing so they have the wrong attitude about God. They think He is deficient (verses 9-11), and so dependent upon them (verses 12-13). The correction is that such worship must be thankful and faithful (verse 14). We might think that instead of an animal sacrifice, thanksgiving is to be the sacrifice (see also passages like Isaiah 1:11-15). But he is not setting aside the sacrificial system for the Old Testament people of God. So, "It is not ... that thanksgiving is to be a *substitute* for their sacrifice but that their sacrifice is to be an *expression* of thanksgiving." This will help us to interpret those passages in the Old Testament that seem to speak against the sacrificial system.

May the Lord help us to rightly interpret His word.

[Dale Ralph Davis, *My Exceeding Joy: An Exposition of Psalms 38-51*]

Psalm 46 (Dale Ralph Davies), even Psalm 45,50?

**14/5/24**

I am back with a sermon of John Owen from 2 Timothy 3:1 on 'Perilous Times'. He says: "Nothing is more hateful to God than a secure frame (that is, an attitude of security instead of concern) in perilous days," and then goes on to show the character of such days. He preached this in 1676, a few decades after the heyday of Puritanism. He believed he lived in

such perilous days. Do we? Is it just revealed for information, or does such teaching lay a serious duty on us? He has the following 5 descriptions of perilous days.

1. When there is an outward profession of true religion, but “horrible lusts and wickedness” predominate. (2 Timothy 3:2-5) This is formal, hypocritical Christianity.
2. When professing Christians people forsake the truth, and there are many seducers (false teachers) ready to welcome them into their fold. He makes this statement that ties in with my last post. “Little did I think I should ever have lived in this world to find the minds of professors grown altogether different as to the doctrine of God’s eternal election, the sovereign efficacy of grace in the conversion of sinners, justification by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.” (1 Timothy 4:1, 2 Peter 2:1-2) Are not these 3 vital doctrines? Can we afford to go soft on them?
3. When professing Christians mix themselves with the world, and follow their way of life. (Genesis 6:2, Psalm 106:35) In other words, when the church is much like the world.
4. When there is great attention to outward duties, but there is inward, spiritual decay. At the time of the Reformation Latimer said, ‘When the devil gets in to the church, up go the candles (that is, ceremonies), and down goes the pulpit (that is, preaching).’
5. “Times of persecution are also times of peril.”

Owen is not content just to describe such times. He pointedly asks what our duty is in such times. He has three things we must cultivate.

(1) Do not be content with what you judge a sincere profession of truth, but labour to be found in the exercise of all those graces that peculiarly respect the truth. Love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10); labour to experience the power of the truth (Ephesians 4:22-24); be zealous for the truth (Jude 3).

(2) Cleave unto the means that God has appointed the ordained for preservation in the truth, the present ministry. Be faithful in your local church (Acts 2:42).

(3) Carefully remember the faith of those who have gone before you (Hebrew 13:7).

Referring to his Puritan forebears he challenges us: “Were they half Arminian and half Socinian; half Papist and half I know not what?” Are we whole-hearted?

[The Works of John Owen, Volume 9, Sermon XXVI, pp. 320-334]

## **7/5/24**

I have been reading a book about the theology of Robert Hall Jr. (1764-1831). Although he has been described as one of the most popular preachers of his day in England, because of his oratory, you have probably never heard of him. Why then am I writing about him in this post? Hall was brought up in Particular or Calvinistic Baptist circles that adhered to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, and served in such churches. Yet precisely because he was so popular he became very influential in those churches losing their distinctive Calvinism. What did he do to set this loss in motion? We who have come to embrace what the book calls ‘Evangelical Calvinism’ have lessons to learn lest we also unknowingly start a process of turning away from what we presently hold dear. The book points out the following aspects of Hall’s ministry, aspects that are inter-related.

1. He sought to avoid controversy. So there was a down-play in presenting distinctive doctrines. He did not want to see the distinctives of Calvinism or any doctrinal system promoted as this only encouraged disputing. While it is true we should not be eagerly controversial, yet we are commanded to contend for the faith (Jude 3).

2. He was not in favour of creeds or confessions of faith. He believed that creeds and confessions of faith create schism and disunity among Christians, something that Hall hated.

To Hall the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism were secondary and not fundamental. How different was Spurgeon who in 1855 republished the 1689 Confession stating, "Here the younger members of our church will have a body of divinity in small compass, and by means of Scriptural proofs, will be ready to give a reason for the hope that is them." For Spurgeon Calvinism was just biblical Christianity. Remember that creeds and confession were drawn up to make clear the truth believed over against false teaching.

3. He neglected doctrine in his preaching. The Scriptures were the final authority for him but he did not always explain scriptural doctrine fully and clearly. There was no attempt to explain the significance of such doctrine, nor to defend that Biblical view over against contrary teaching. Yet this is a responsibility of elders/overseers (Titus 1:9). "Hall's failure to steadfastly propagate and staunchly defend Calvinism ... was one reason why Particular Baptists lost their distinctiveness." It was impossible to tell whether he was distinctly Calvinistic or Arminian. He did not regard these differences as very important. "Truth not clearly preached in one generation is invariably lost in the next."

4. He emphasized piety over theology. It did not matter so much what a person believed, so long as he was marked by Christian character and conduct that was the result of the grace of God in the heart. He was probably reacting against a 'frosty spirited' Calvinism he had experienced. It is right to emphasize piety, but cannot be divorced from doctrinal truth and integrity. The truth accords with godliness (1 Timothy 6:3, Titus 1:1).

These observations should make us to fully cling to such a confession at the 1689 Baptist or 2<sup>nd</sup>. London Confession of Faith.

[Austin Walker, *The Theology of Robert Hall Jr.*]

## **23/4/24**

Last week I attended the annual Banner of Truth Ministers' Conference. The theme was the question, What Is Man? One speaker pointed out that in the early church the question was, Who Is God? In the Reformation it was, What is salvation? Now with the sexual revolution we need to be sure of the Biblical teaching on who we are! This has been made clear by the unwillingness of many to answer that simple question, 'What is a woman?' The final session dealt with the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the true, perfect man. We were directed to Isaiah 53:2, and to the words "he had ... no beauty". [The whole passage 52:13-53:12 is about the servant of God, our Lord Jesus.]

First, it was explained from the immediate context in verse 2.

- No beauty in His genealogy – "He grew up before Him like a young plant." The language goes back to 11:1 where a shoot grows out of a tree stump. He is not the topmost bough of a cedar of Lebanon! Just look at His genealogy in Matthew 1:13-15, ancestors about whom we know nothing. God can do great things with a stump.
- No beauty in His setting – "and like a root out of dry ground." His birth is prophesied in 7:14 in the context of poverty with the collapse of farming (verses 23-25). He grew up in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23), a proverbially despised place (John 1:46).
- No beauty in His appearance – "no form or majesty." He was no film star, with no commanding presence. How He humbled Himself (Philippians 2:5ff.).

Second, it was explained from the wider context.

- His trajectory. He became appaulingly disfigured (52:14). He was unrecognizable as a human being. Crucifixion itself is barbaric, and there were addition cruelties inflicted.

Our sins were laid on Him (53:6). Sin is foul, it is moral ugliness. 'Lord, take away our love of sinning!'

- The sequel. None of this is true any more. He is exalted. He is now praised by the choirs of heaven, receives the homage of angels, and is Himself the Judge. Now He is stunningly beautiful (John 17:5). 'The Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel's land.'

Note that this was all "before Him", i.e. in God His Father's presence. From His incarnation, through His suffering, to His exaltation, He was watched by an enthralled Father who delighted in Him, at His baptism (Matthew 3:17), on the mount (17:5), in Gethsemane, on the cross, and raised from the dead. A Christian is one who shares the Father's perception that Jesus is truly beautiful.

[Closing address by Dan Peters, minister and professor of Westminster Seminary, Newcastle.]

### **16/4/24**

Following on from last week from John Owen's sermons on 'Walking Humbly With God' from Micah 6:8, he wants to show us how to humble ourselves to "the law of His providence".

This is what he means by the law of providence: "God's sovereign disposal of all the concernments of men in this world, in the variety, order, and manner which He pleases, according to the rule and infinite reason of His own goodness, wisdom, righteousness, and truth."

(1) There are some general observations.

He notes that so much of God's providence cannot be understood by the wisest of men, and is often contrary to our thinking. He references Psalm 36:6, 77:19, Job 11:7-12. There is 'visible confusion' so that where there is wickedness in the world there might be prosperity. There is 'unspeakable variety' so that, for example, some are forever persecuted and others at peace. Owen gives this clear example: "Should you come into a great house, and see some children in scarlet, having all things needful, other hewing wood and drawing water, - you would conclude that they are not all children, but some children, some slaves: but when it shall be told you that they are all one man's children; and that the hewers of wood, that live on the bread and water of affliction, and go in tattered rags, are as dear to him as the other; and that he intends to leave them as good an inheritance as the rest; - if you intend not to question the wisdom and goodness of the father of the family, you must resolve to submit to his authority with a quiet subjection of mind," There are 'sudden alterations' as with Job.

(2) He clearly lays out how and wherein we are to humble ourselves.

Before God's sovereignty. God may do what He wants with His own (Job 33:8-13). "Let us lay our mouths in the dust, and ourselves on the ground, and say, "It is the Lord; I will be silent, because He has done it." So David in 2 Samuel 15:25-26.

Before God's wisdom. God has promised that "for those who love God all things work together for good." We may not see how it is possible, or think it would be better if it were done another way. But God wants us to humble ourselves to His wisdom in all providences (Is. 40:27-28).

Before God's righteousness. God wants us to know that all His ways are equal and righteous, He does not do wrong. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25). Four things are to be considered. God does not judge as man judges. God is the great judge of all the world. God judges here, not finally, but in a way of preparation for the

final judgement. God is a God of goodness, kindness, love, tenderness. See Hebrews 12:1-6, Hosea 14:9.

By way of conclusion he points to Paul having learned it (Philippians 4:11), David expressing it (Psalm 131:1-3), James advising it (1:9-10). "Let everyone rejoice in the dispensations of God, willingly bowing their hearts to it." Amen.

[The Works of John Owen, Volume 9, Sermon VIII, pp. 112-119]

## 9/4/24

I am returning to the sermons of John Owen. He has 5 sermons on 'Walking Humbly With God' from Micah 6:8. Having explained the text he points out that there are two things where that humility is especially seen, what he calls 'the law of His grace' and 'the law of his providence'. Here Owen shows his skill as a preacher. He can deal in a scholarly way with the original languages of the Bible. He is able to present the topic of walking with God in the context of the whole Bible, and he is eminently practical as he reasons with his hearers. He brings 6 evidences of walking according to this law of grace, which means God's way of obedience unto this duty.

(1) 'We know ourselves to be a lost, undone creature, an object of wrath, and that whatever we have of God, we may only have it in a way of mere mercy and grace.' 1 Timothy 1:13-15, Philippians 3:7-9.

(2) 'We confess there is not a righteousness to be obtained before God by the performance of any duties or obedience of ours whatever.' Romans 4:13-15, Galatians 2:21.

(3) 'We believe and accept of a righteousness which is not our own, nor at all wrought or procured by us; of which we have no assurance that there is any such thing, but by the faith we have in the promise of God: and thereupon, renouncing all that is in or of ourselves, we must merely and solely rest on that for righteousness and acceptance with God.' He reasons thus to show what a great humbling this is: "Now, for a man to cast away that which he has seen, for that which he has not seen; to refuse that which promises to give him a fair entertainment and supportment in the presence of God, and which he is sure is his own, and cannot be taken from him, for that which he must venture on upon the word of promise, against ten thousand doubts, and fears, and temptations that it belongs not to him; - this requires humbling of the soul before God; and this the heart of a man is not easily brought unto."

(4) 'We humble ourselves to place our obedience on a new foot of account (Ephesians 2:10), yet to pursue it with no less diligence that if it stood upon the old (our own efforts).' He has this wonderful statement: "Though works left no room at all for grace (before salvation), yet grace leaves room for works, though not the same (works) they had before grace came."

(5) 'We address ourselves to the performance of the greatest duties, being fully persuaded that we have no strength for the least.' John 15:5, Philippians 1:29.

(6) 'We are contented to have the sharpest afflictions accompanying and attending the strictest obedience.' 1 Peter 4:12.

In typical Puritan fashion he concludes with 'Uses' and for the first he challenges us with 3 questions. Is the bottom of our obedience a deep apprehension and a full conviction of our own vileness and nothingness? Does this always abide in our thoughts, and upon our spirits, - that, by all we have done, do, or can do, we cannot obtain righteousness to stand in the presence of God? Do we, then, humble ourselves to accept of the righteousness that God in Christ has provided for us? What a clear gospel preacher!

[The Works of John Owen, Volume 9, Sermon VII, pp. 102-112]

**2/4/24**

You may know that the book of Psalms is divided into five books. We might just take it for granted and not consider if there is a purpose for this structure. Robertson (and others) consider each book to have a specific focus. The fifth book has Psalms that minister to God's people as they returned from exile (see Psalm 107:2-3). Within this fifth book are 15 Psalms (120-134) that have the heading *A Song of Ascents*. In these Psalms there is no mention of a king, but there are many references to Zion and Jerusalem which fit in well with the exile and return to the land. Psalm 127 stands in the middle of these. "On both sides there stands a heptade [a group of seven] of pilgrim songs, consisting of two Psalms composed by David, and five new ones, which have no name ... Each heptade contains the name of Yahweh twenty-four times." This shows a deliberate arrangement. Considering these Psalms to be arranged like a pyramid, Robertson sees Psalm 127 as the 'pinnacle' and notes that it is Solomonic. Looking more deeply, there is far more than references of house building, city protection, and family growth. In the context of these Songs, the house is the house of the Lord (122:1, 134:1). The city is Jerusalem (122:3). The sons are first of all the sons of David (132:11-12). These all have to do with the covenant God made with David (we are back to covenants again!). Psalm 127 clearly teaches that the success of the covenant totally depends upon the Lord. That in turn is the assurance that it will be fulfilled, despite the exile, and their lowly condition on returning. This does not deny that there is application to the ordinary domestic scene in life, but that depends upon God's redeeming work through the covenant. I found this interpretation of the Psalm compelling so that such a Psalm is not seen as isolated from the Psalms around it, and so that the Psalms are seen as a well-organized book, with redemptive-historical structure.

[O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, pp. 210-215]

**26/3/24**

The last two posts have been about covenants and it would be wrong to drop the subject now without writing something about the glorious **new covenant**. It is not just a newer version of the old covenant (Jeremiah 31:32). It is a better covenant because it has better promises (Hebrews 8:6). Renihan tells us that the new covenant is founded on the covenant of redemption, by which the Son was sent from the Father with "a work to complete, with a reward suspended on condition of His obedience" (for example, John 6:38-40). Jesus completed that work, and the new covenant mediates the blessings He obtained by His obedience. Renihan lists four:

(1) Justification. There was no real forgiveness of sins based on the sacrifices of the old covenant (Hebrews 10:1-4). But with Jesus as the perfect priest and Himself as the perfect sacrifice, there is the perfect (full, everlasting) forgiveness of sins. "I will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12, from Jeremiah 31:34). In addition to forgiveness, the perfect obedience of Christ is reckoned to all who believe, so that we are counted righteous in Christ (see Romans 5:18-19).

(2) Regeneration and sanctification. "The new covenant promises to perform an inward work of renewal in the people of God" (see Jeremiah 31:33-34). "The people of the old covenant were brought into being through natural generation within the confines of the offspring of Abraham. In the new covenant, the people of the covenant are brought into being by supernatural generation, that is, regeneration and these children know the Lord

because their supernatural birth grants them faith in Christ through whom they have confidence and access to God (Romans 5:1-2).”

(3) Adoption and preservation. “Regeneration is the birth of a child of God, but the fullness of adoption is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of Adoption (Romans 8:15).” God disciplines His children, but will never condemn them (Jeremiah 32:40), unlike the old covenant where His people were exiled from the land of promise.

(4) Resurrection and glorification. The Father sent the Son to gather a people to be raised up on the last day. He accomplishes this by laying down His and taking it up again in order to bring many sons into glory (Hebrews 2:10). “The supreme blessing of the consummated new heavens and earth ... is the beatific vision, that is, for the soul to find eternal rest, rapturous delight, unfathomable knowledge and infinite satisfaction in the presence of God Himself (Revelation 22:4).”

These new covenant blessings are ours by grace alone, not by our works, but by the saving work of Christ on our behalf. So these blessings are guaranteed. Praise the Lord!

### **19/3/24**

I have continued to benefit from reading Renihan’s book on the covenants. I hope you will find the following two quotes helpful.

(1) What is the “old” covenant (as Hebrews 8:6)? “The Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants ... all have the same parties, precepts, promises and penalties. They are all directed to Abraham’s offspring in the land of Canaan. Abraham’s federal headship continues to define the people in view in this kingdom. Abraham’s inheritance of Canaan continues to determine the boundaries of the kingdom. The Mosaic covenant simply expands the obligations of the people in that land. The Davidic covenant focuses the kingdom into one person through whom obedience must be rendered and through whom blessings and curses will fall in the nation... That is why the old covenant includes the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants. Moses controls Abraham and David. The Mosaic covenant is the most prominent covenant in the Old Testament because it controls whether you enjoy Abraham’s covenant and it stands over the Davidic kings who must copy and keep the law.”

(2) What was the purpose of the old covenant? “The Kingdom of Israel and its covenants were scaffolding around the kingdom of Christ and His covenant... Many construction projects put up ‘coming soon’ signs and conceptual art of what the final product will look like. The Kingdom of Israel was one giant ‘Coming Soon’ sign concerning the Messiah. From their land to their temple, to their own genealogy, to their sacrifices, they were a picture of the Messiah and His kingdom. Israel, chosen in Abraham, redeemed through Moses in the Exodus, under David’s kingly rule, sacrificing lambs and goats while living a blessed life in Canaan was a tapestry of typology, the threads of the mystery of Christ.

God gave Israel the supreme privilege of being the temporary tenants and construction workers of the Messiah’s kingdom. However, scaffolding, concept art and sketches are not needed when the building is completed. The benefit for Israel was that though they were tenant workers in the Son’s vineyard and though their kingdom and covenants were dismantled, they were still invited to take their place along with the rest of the world on the same free and gracious terms (Matthew 20:1-16, 21:33-46).”

*[The Mystery of Christ, His Covenant & His Kingdom, by Samuel Renihan, pp. 132-133,186]*

### **12/3/24**

Covenants in the Bible are vitally important to our understanding of the ways of God. God works out His purposes by covenants, first covenants with creation (Adam and Noah), then covenants with Israel His people (Abraham, Moses, David), and finally the new covenant. This is what we call Covenant Theology. I am finding the book refreshingly clear and simple. Yet there is a depth of teaching which has greatly edified me! One thing that has struck me is that while we think we have greatly advanced in knowledge over those who have gone before us, Renihan shows that his exposition of the Scriptures was preceded by men in the seventeenth century, especially hitherto unknown (at least to me) Baptists.

He begins by calling to attention the distinction between 'natural religion' and 'instituted religion'. "Natural religion is the worship man owes to God by virtue of the Creator-creature relationship. This is part of natural law. All mankind knows that they must worship God. However, the way in which God is to be worshipped, i.e. instituted worship, is regulated by God's commands." Many of us know instituted worship as The Regulative Principle. He references the different offerings of Cain and Abel, only one of which was accepted. "If God requires the firstfruits of the flock, that does not mean, by inference, that the firstfruits of the field are likewise acceptable."

He then applies this to covenants. They have no natural necessary, but are what God has sovereignly instituted. There is no necessary connection between one covenant and another unless God has revealed that there is. "The features of one covenant cannot be used to determine the features of another covenant." Renihan proceeds to give examples where this has been wrongly done. "... circumcision was given to Abraham as a seal (Romans 4:11)... Some conclude that therefore all covenants have seals and apply the term to baptism, not as an illustration to explain baptism, but as part of their theological system to be received and believed. Some have noted that blood is spilled in connection with a covenant and conclude that apart from a blood ritual, there is no covenant. Some have noted that families are included in covenants and have concluded therefore that families are a necessary feature of all covenants." Baptism is not a seal like circumcision; the Holy Spirit is the seal (Eph. 4:30). There is no record of blood being spilled in the inauguration of the covenant with David. The new covenant is for all who are believers (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

I post this to encourage you to get the book and to get to grips with God's covenants.

*[The Mystery of Christ, His Covenant & His Kingdom, by Samuel Renihan, pp. 10-13]*

### **5/3/24**

Reading Paul's letter to Philemon, I have been struck by the relationship between Paul, Onesimus and Philemon.

(1) Paul and Onesimus. Onesimus is a slave who had done wrong by running away from his master (Philemon). Now because he has become a Christian Paul calls him "my child" (v. 10), "my very heart" (v. 12), "a beloved brother" (v. 16). Philemon is urged to receive him back as he would receive the apostle himself (v. 17)! Do you have any other Christian of whom you use these words? Truly in Christ Jesus there is neither slave nor free (so Galatians 3:28). Whatever other differences there may be being a Christian unites us so, so closely. What a rebuke to all the divisions that there are between professing Christians.

(2) Paul and Philemon. Paul knew he could count on Philemon to do even more than he was asking as he had showed himself a man full of love (vv. 5,7,9,21). He could have commanded him as an apostle, and one through whom he came to faith (see vv. 8,19), but he preferred to appeal to him reminding him of his age and situation (v. 9). We have to ask

ourselves if we have such a reputation that if asked we would be willing to do even more than we have been asked? Then consider the place some person has had in your life, such as Paul in Philemon's, and act accordingly – a Christian older than you, one who was the means of you coming to faith in Christ, someone you consider a partner (v. 17). Such a Christian wants some benefit from you in the Lord (v. 20)!

### **27/2/24**

I have started reading volume 9 of John Owen's works in which are a collection of his sermons published after his death. He has two sermons on Romans 4:20, the faith of Abraham, the fact that he did not doubt when God gave to him such amazing promises. The second sermon is application, how it is possible to be steadfast in believing God's promises when every circumstance seems against them. I found his reasoning with me from the written page so convincing and heart-warming. Let me give you a taster! He has three lines of application, the third being from the promises of God and "the infinite condescension the Lord uses in them for the obviating of all the objections and fears of our unbelieving hearts." From Isaiah 43:22-26 he shows that there is "unexpected relief ..., exhibiting grace and mercy when anything in the world might rather be looked for." He continues concerning those who are "guilty of various sinful follies."

"But see, now, what God says in this case, and what an unexpected condescension there is in the word of promise. Is it, Be gone? Take a bill of divorce? ... No, says God, 'This is an estate and condition whereof I am weary, and you are weary; I am weary of your multiplying the guilt of sin; you are wearied in serving the power of your sin. I will put an end to this state of things; we will have peace again between us I will blot out your sins, and remember your iniquities no more. I, even I, will do it.' He redoubles the word passionately, emphatically, to call to mind who he is with whom in this condition we have to do: 'I, even I,' who am God, and not man; I, whose thoughts are not as your thoughts; I, who am great in mercy, and who will abundantly pardon; I will do it."

[Then Owen imagines an objection] "Yes, but says the poor convinced soul, 'I know no reason why you should do so, I cannot believe it, for I know not upon what account I should be so dealt with.' Says God, 'I know full well that there is nothing in you upon the account whereof I should thus deal with you; there is nothing in you, but for what you deserve to be everlastingly cut off; but quiet your heart, I will do it for my own sake.'" There is only one response to this, to humbly praise the Lord and to trust all his promises!

### **20/2/24**

I have been studying Colossians and using a commentary by O'Brien (Word Biblical Commentary 44). Let us consider the exhortations in 4:5-6.

"Walk in wisdom" = live wisely, as opposed to the empty wisdom of the false teachers (2:23). Wisdom has to do with the knowledge of God's will (1:9), walking worthily of the Lord (1:10), as something real and practical. Wisdom means being tactful while being bold in witness to outsiders. The reaction of non-Christians to the behaviour of believers is significant (1 Corinthians 10:32-33, Philippians 2:14-15, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 1 Timothy 3:7, Titus 2:7-8). Wisdom involves making use of every opportunity (see Galatians 6:10). The word for

“time” does not focus on the quantity of time, but taking note of the specific providences God brings as we meet with outsiders. For example, at the bus stop, on the plane. It probably suggests that such opportunities are not to be taken for granted but may not be repeated – ‘the time is now’.

“Let your speech always be gracious” – not only the content of what we say, but also the manner of speaking is important (so 1 Peter. 3:15-16). We think of the way God has so graciously – with patience, forgiveness, understanding, gentleness – dealt with us. Salt is used in seasoning food, to make it tasty so it is desirable. Each person we answer is different and we must seek to suit our words to each, just as a cook might season food according to the taste of each one.

Conclusion: May our speech be both wise and gracious. We have received God’s grace, and that should be obvious from the words we speak. Our conversation ought not to be dull, but the right words are to be chosen in response to each non-Christian who asks questions. I fear we do not give enough attention to our speech patterns. We have a great responsibility.

### **13/2/24**

Turning to Revelation 20:4-6, there is the question as to what the “first resurrection” refers. We must assume that there is also a second resurrection, as if there is a second death there also must be a first death! There are three views about the first resurrection – it is conversion, or it is when we are taken to glory after death, or it is a future physical resurrection of saints. Beale, in his commentary, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 1003-1017, gives the following reasons why it refers to the second view, to spiritual life after death.

1. The 2<sup>nd</sup>. death is the lake of fire (20:14), the place of eternal torment (20:10). This is where all whose name is not written in the book of life will be thrown, body and soul. By implication the ‘first’ death is specifically martyrdom (20:4), the body ceasing to live. The two concepts of death are different, one having to do with place, the other the loss of physical life. May this not also be true with the idea of resurrection? It may be used in a spiritual way as in Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 2:12, 3:1, for regeneration. Beale also notes that “bodily resurrection does not provide protection against the second death”, as 20:6 clearly states. The wicked will be raised and be cast into hell.
2. Those who experience the 1<sup>st</sup>. resurrection “reign” with Christ (20:4,6). They are seated on thrones (20:4). In Revelation thrones are always in heaven, and this is where Christ is!
3. If the first resurrection refers to the physical resurrection of believers just before the beginning of a millenium on earth then there is the following problem. There would be those with glorified, newly created bodies living in the old creation with others who have corruptible bodies during this millenium.
4. A further problem is that this would mean that there are two times of physical resurrection, one of believers before the 1000 years, and another afterwards. Yet the Bible is clear that there is only **one** general resurrection, that of all on the last day. See Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15, Revelation 20:12-15.
5. A common view that the 1<sup>st</sup>. resurrection refers to regeneration brings a problem to the order of events recorded in the passage. First is martyrdom, *then* resurrection, and then

reigning during the millenium. Regeneration is not a solution to physical death, but the reward of heavenly spiritual life is.

6. It has often be responded that if, in the same passage, resurrection is first spiritual, then literal, “there is an end of all significance of language.” Yet there are other examples where the concept of “life” (as in 20:4,5) changes. John 5:24-29 – there is passing from death to life upon believing (v. 24), and then there is the resurrection of life (vv. 25,29). Romans 6:4-13 – Christ was raised bodily, but our resurrection in these verses is spiritual. Further, the idea of “life” is used for the state of believers after death (Luke 20:38, Revelation 2:10-11). Conclusion: Those who die in the Lord, especially the martyrs, have the promise of a spiritual life in Christ’s presence until the day of bodily resurrection.

## **6/2/24**

Recently, in preparing for a study on Revelation 20 I read through the lengthy section in Beale’s very detailed commentary, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 974-983. Many note that as chapters 17-19 deal with second coming of Christ (see especially 19:11ff.), chapter 20 about the millenium must take place afterwards in time. This is the teaching known as premillennialism. The problem with this view is that it is false to assume that because one chapter follows another therefore they follow one another in time. Beale presents the following evidence that this is not true here, that there is a “nonconsequential temporal relationship between 20:1-6 and 19:11-21”.

(1) 20:1 begins with the conjunction “and” (KJV), or “then” (NKJV, ESV). Remember that John is having a vision and in a vision only one thing can be seen at a time. Something may be ‘seen’ taking place in heaven, and then afterwards something is ‘seen’ on earth that happened at the same time, but the one will be written after the other. Beale notes that when the context it about an angelic movement the “and” is always a visionary sequence (see 7:2, 10:1, 18:1), and not an historical sequence.

(2) 20:8-10, about Gog and Magog, is a recapitulation of 19:17-21. Chapter 19 is about the final defeat of the beast, and chapter 20 about the final defeat of the devil at the same time. In turn they are a repeat of 16:12-16, the great final battle, where the nations are gathered together for war (16:14,16, 19:19, 20:8). These are not 3 different battles, but the same.

(3) The nations are destroyed in 19:15, yet they still exist in 20:3. Obviously 20:3 refers to a time before 19:15. [In the same way Gehazi is struck down with leprosy in 2 Kings 5:27 “for ever”, yet in 8:4 he is in the presence of the king so obviously not leprous.]

(4) 15:1 states that the 7<sup>th</sup>. plague brings to an end the outpouring of God’s wrath. Therefore the wrath of 20:9 cannot be after the 7<sup>th</sup>. plague, but is part of it.

Conclusion. The millenium (1,000 years) of Revelation 20 does not take place after chapter 19 in time, but only as a visionary experience. Chapter 20 focusses on the history of the dragon, first introduced in 12:9, where his defeat by Christ at His first coming is described. This millenium is the period between Christ’s first and second coming and, as with all numbers in Revelation, it is symbolic. [More next time.]

## **31/1/24**

I have yet to start Volume 9 of John Owen's works which are more sermons. But I have just noted that the Banner of Truth has modernized some of these sermons in two recently published books, *Gospel Life*, and *Gospel Ministry*. I am not the only one recommending his sermons!

Sermon 13 in Volume 8 has the title, 'How We May Bring Our Hearts to Bear Reproofs', and is based on Psalm 141:5. Owen wants us to benefit from faithful reproofs (rebukes) by counting them as being of great value to our souls, because we find it difficult in our pride to receive them. Here are two weighty statements he makes.

- "Reproofs, though accompanied with some sharpness, if rightly received and duly improved, are a mercy and advantage above all the satisfactions which a joint consent with other in sin and pleasures can afford" (page 480). In other words, it is better to receive even sharp reproofs than to be in agreement with another in sin.
- "The neglect of it (reproof) is that which has lost us not only the benefit, but also the very nature of church-societies" (page 484). He references Matthew 18:15, Romans 15:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Hebrews 3:12-13, 12:15-16. In other words, if there is no genuine reproof, then there is no true church fellowship! Reproof is a central part of our love for one another.

If Owen is correct then we need to ask ourselves how much reproof is a part of our preaching and interaction. It is commanded because it is a spiritual blessing. But culture says, 'you will offend the other person', 'you may lose their friendship and not have them by your side when you need them in the future', 'you are judging', 'you will bring division', etc. Of course, it must be done in love, in humility (Galatians 6:1), and there must also be lots of encouragement and comfort. May the Lord help us to be a real blessing to one another.

## **16/1/24**

The truth of the imputed righteousness of Christ is glorious! Not only were our sins reckoned to Him, but His perfect righteousness is reckoned to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). There is this 'great exchange' and it is the only way we can be acceptable before God. We not only need the forgiveness of every sin, but also a perfect righteousness so that we might be able to come to God. This we can never produce ourselves; it is only found through faith in Christ, and forgiveness together with imputed righteousness is what makes up the doctrine of Justification by Faith in Christ. However, I have noted a tendency to take any statement about righteousness, even holiness, in the Bible to refer to this imputed righteousness. The danger in this is to fail to give the proper place to 'imparted' righteousness. We must have a righteousness worked in our lives as the evidence that we have been saved. I will give two examples:

(1) Some teach that the righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20) is Christ's righteousness imputed to us. But Jesus goes on to explain how it exceeds in the rest of chapter 5. For example, the minimal righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees only covered external actions, but Jesus clearly teaches that the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, You shall not murder, includes words and attitudes of the heart (verse 22), with eternal consequences. This is clearly a righteousness that we must have.

(2) I have even heard that the holiness for which we are to strive without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14) is this imputed righteousness. But holiness means to be set apart unto God and so to live a life of obedient service to Him. This is something that we must continually strive for, so cannot be imputed righteousness.

This is serious, for it not only is a wrong interpretation (as I have briefly shown), but it also tends to play down the necessity of imparted righteousness, the necessity of living a righteousness life of obedience to God's law. See 1 John 2:3-4,29. Romans 6:1-14 answers the objection that grace encourages sin by emphasizing that we have died to sin, the Christian no longer lives under the power of sin. He goes on to say that a Christian is no longer a slave to sin, but a slave to righteousness (Romans 6:17-18). The evidence that you have received the imputed righteousness of Christ, is that you now seek to live a life of obedience. This is not to be saved, but to express your love for the One who saved you!

### **9/1/24**

I want to ask the question as to how committed we really are to the Bible as the very word of God, with specific reference to 1 Timothy 5. We rightly point out that women are not "to teach or to exercise authority over a man" in the church, and that this is grounded in creation and fall (1 Tim. 2:12-14). I wonder if we have the same considerations about the clear instructions in chapter 5? Are these commands equally authoritative with us?

(1) "Do not rebuke an older man, but encourage him as you would a father" (v. 1). It may not be cultural any more to treat the elderly in this way, but it is Biblical.

(2) "Honour widows who are truly widows" (v. 3). This must include financial support, and is the responsibility of the church (v. 16). If there are near relatives they are to take care, and this is specifically commanded (vv. 4,7).

(3) Paul writes, "I would have younger widows marry, ..." (v. 14). Some societies do not have this culture, but it is what the word of God teaches regardless .

(4) "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching" (v. 17). This is not advice, or only to be done if there are the resources. It is a duty of the church that has chosen such elders.

(5) "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" (v. 19).

(6) "As for those (elders) who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, ..." (v. 20). Timothy is to keep these rules without partiality (v. 21).

(7) "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, ..." (v. 22). What harm has been done by setting aside men who are not ready for the work.

(8) "Use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (v. 23). We should not be afraid of this as if we are wiser than God.

May the Lord help us to keep all His word.

### **2/1/24**

Am I correct that we are very quick to judge Bible characters rather negatively when the Bible does not? Samson is actually a hero of faith, as is Jephthah (Hebrews 11:32)! Why do we psychoanalyze in order to find wrong (which may well be there) when this is not the approach of the Bible? What about ELIJAH, the so-called great example of spiritual

depression and prophetic burnout? He could face the host of false prophets on Carmel but cowered before Jezebel. Or did he? Back to Dale Ralph Davis and his commentary on 1 Kings, see pages 253-270. Let me outline his 7 points to show that Elijah is not presented as a failure after the Carmel victory, but is commissioned for further ministry.

1. In verse 3, instead of “he was afraid” (NASB, ESV), the KJV and NKJV reads “when he saw”. Davis gives his reasons why ‘saw’ should be the reading. Elijah saw that despite the victory at Carmel, Jezebel had not changed, and he did not want to give her the victory by dying at her hand. Yes, he asked to die, as did Moses and Jonah.

2-3. He goes south to Beersheba and beyond out of Jezebel’s grasp. Instead of death his life is sustained by the Angel of the Lord and is directed further south to Horeb. This suggests that God has a plan for him. Horeb (or Sinai) is significant, having to do with the covenant established with Israel. Davis suggests that God is not dealing with Elijah personally, but is accomplishing His redemption in history.

4-5. It is the Angel of the Lord Himself who gives Elijah the strength to go to Horeb, so he goes with divine authorization. This changes the way we look at the words, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (verses 9,13). It is not a criticism of Elijah but an invitation for him to consider why God has brought him thither.

6. In his answer (verses 10,14) Elijah is not whining but telling the sober truth. He is rightly upset for God’s sake, “your covenant ... altars ... prophets”. He is charging Israel with apostasy. Davis’ conclusion: “Elijah’s mission at Horeb was to bring covenant accusation against Israel for breach of the covenant.”

7. Verses 15-18 back this up because Hazael, Jehu and Elisha were to be Yahweh’s instruments of judgement upon Israel. So God’s ‘passing by’ was not to rebuke Elijah, but to confirm his diagnosis of the problem. God assures him that He is present in the quiet word given to His prophets, the word that directs history (verses 15-17) and preserves a people (verse 18).

I hope this gives you an appetite to rethink this passage, and even to read this commentary on 1 Kings. You will have to read for yourself the four practical applications Davis makes!