

Contemporary Issues as seen by George Canty

<http://www.canty.org.uk>

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I Was Thinking 1

Think? Should we? Isn't Scripture enough? Well, the Bible recommends it. "*Whatever things are beautiful ... think on these things*". I had combative letters signed "Yours sincerely in the name of Jesus", scorning my writing as 'Man's word not God's Word'. How penetrating! I can't write God's Word. Could he? Were my critic's own words 'God's Word?'

Should we only quote Scripture, like animated tape recorders? Well, thinking is a weakness to which some of us are prone. The Bible itself tends to bring it on!

Today Christians have to meet '*the thinking man*', when we stand up for Jesus. The thinking man thinks he thinks anyway, even if he only swims along with the stream of popular agnosticism. Newspaper writers, unabashed, proclaim their brilliant achievement of unbelief looking down upon us believers like H.G. Well's giant-brain Martians looked upon mere earthlings.

It is very clever how unbelievers attain religious conclusions lacking any basic knowledge either of God, Scripture or what Christians say. Watch TV's 'Do you want to be a millionaire?' with contestants firmly 'not into religion!' One puzzled man had to ask the audience which garden Adam and Eve lived in, and some said it was the Garden of Kent.

Scripture commands "*Preach the Word*" and surely doesn't mean 'recite it'? Reading a verse or passage is like looking through a telescope, or a microscope, to see new things, living things. Naturally then we want to say what we see, like having a companion in Switzerland to talk about the majesty of the scenery.

That is what Christian songs are for – just our exclamation in the face of the wonders of Christ in God. They excite us, especially when articulated by gifted poets and composers. '*Singing, and making melody in our hearts to the Lord*' we can savour the great Bible truths.

The Gospel is compacted of the most exalted themes on earth. The glory of the Son of God! The mystery of His incarnation! His incredible life! The fathomless depths opened at Calvary and the awesome vistas of His Resurrection! Such transcendent themes make, and need, more than jingles.

Worship may be about God's greatness, but Christian worship extols what Jesus was, what Jesus is, Jesus did, and what Jesus does. He is the reason we worship. Acts 2 says the Spirit gave the disciples utterance. That is our experience also. It is a distinction possessed by no other faith on earth, echoed by the redeemed myriads in heaven and earth like the sound of many waters. Sing! Make His praise glorious!

Thinking about fasting

It is Lent, "*the period including forty weekdays extending from Ash-Wednesday to Easter-eve, kept as a time of fasting and penitence in commemoration of Our Lord's fasting in the wilderness*". So the Oxford Dictionary informs us and that Ramadan is "*The ninth month of the Muslim year, rigidly observed as a thirty days' fast during the hours of day*". It is a strict obligation.

Fasting has always been a fairly universal religious custom but not strikingly Christian except in the Roman Catholic church. Ancient idolaters, pagans, and Greeks consulting their Oracles fasted. The Roman centurion Cornelius fasted, following Jewish custom, before his conversion. So do shaman spirit worshippers, Eastern and mystical cults seeking transcendent experiences. Aboard a doomed ship the non-Christians fasted but Paul encouraged them to eat.

The importance of fasting in the early church is measured by only two references in Acts, at special times. Religious leaders complained to Jesus that His disciples did not fast, He defended them. Devout Jews fasted Mondays and Thursdays but only till the afternoon. Jewish Christians kept up the practice, voluntarily, not by compulsion. Under persecution by Rome, Christians believed martyrdom was a sure way to heaven until Christianity became the religion of the empire and deprived them of martyrdom. Severe self-affliction and asceticism was then substituted as a way to heaven. An early two-day Lenten fast was extended on the fourth century to forty days self-denial. Ember days were added. The Vatican modified this recently, ruling that what was saved by missing meals should go to the Third World hungry. Other Christians also do that. Fasting is slimming, quite a good thing for couch potatoes!

Out of some 200 positive references to prayer in the New Testament only five to fasting and prayer, and that merely incidental and no mandatory significance.

Strangely, some Pentecostals and charismatics have treated it necessary and vital. *The Voice of Healing* gave great publicity to some who fasted for forty days or more. Their purpose was not explained, and it had no theology. It was simply assumed it would bring great spirituality and healing power. Looked at impartially the idea seemed to be to impress God, gain His special esteem, and oblige Him to act. It was no different from the practices of self-affliction of the medieval '*saints*' denying themselves food and comfort as a means of grace and to curry Divine favour.

I think that fasting is more an instinctive reaction than a religious invention. In a prolonged spiritual crisis years ago I became so desperate that continued fasting seemed natural. But all it did was weaken me until I could not walk. On another occasion, going a month with one meal a day, I became very irritable. It proved far more a distraction than a help, my hunger forcing itself upon my attention. Yet actually, I've never been that fond of food. I have two meals but consume practically nothing during 18 hours each day. So without these minimal calories I soon become too faint to concentrate.

Christ and the apostles make little of fasting. The New Testament seems to me ambivalent on the subject, but the Lord does not forbid it. He does warn us about its abuse and mistaken motives. He emphasised fasting as personal and private. We are not to fast and tell or even look as if we fasted. No doubt we can fast to impress friends with our spirituality.

Fasting having been strongly advocated by some Pentecostal-charismatics, one wishes their theology and purpose was clearer. Practised as a physical act to draw near to God, it becomes a sacrament, but Pentecostals are not sacramental believers.

Fasting can never pressurise God. It is an excellent way of expression and emphasis in prayer, the same as calling loudly, or weeping. Physical conditions do apply to prayer. Some kneel, or walk about, are silent, or shout, prefer to be alone, or in company, use aids, the Bible, prayer books. I heard of a young man who always prayed naked to be utterly real. Fasting is in the same category, useful to some, but not to others. If people eat and do not fast they should not feel guilty or unspiritual. We read of only one occasion when Jesus fasted, and that was probably involuntary, food not being available in the wilderness. Otherwise He was criticised for indulging in food and wine. But He is the One who has given us all things to enjoy. '*The Lord satisfies the desire of every living creature*'. To refuse His rich provision and goodness it is hardly a way to please Him.

Fasting is self-denial. But there are other greater forms of self-denial spoken of in the Word of God and with more actual practical effect and purpose. For the Gospel's sake millions constantly embrace real denial, sacrificing careers, money, time, fame, pleasure, home, fellowship. That kind of fasting renders us more useful and able to do God's will. In summary, miss meals to serve God if necessary, but we had better have a pure motive and articulate reason.

The big bang 'explained' ?

How did everything start? The cosmologists say it began 15 thousand million years ago with a tremendous explosion, the Big Bang. But what made it explode and what stuff was there to go bang? The boffins wanted a theory of everything.

Stephen Hawking of Cambridge the now famous cosmologist worked on 'Black Holes'. They are thought to be a mass of condensed matter, so dense that their gravity draws in everything, nothing escapes the pull, not even light, so it is a black hole in space. As matter is compressed, the size of the mass gets smaller. If it shrinks to no size at all, it goes out of existence and that would mean infinity. This state is a "Singularity." Stephen Hawking speculated that a Singularity might reverse and everything that was compacted to nothingness would burst open. Such a happening could have formed the universe.

One question was left – what triggered off the reverse? Even scientists, including Stephen Hawking himself, mentioned God as a possibility. Some scientists were convinced that the incredible beauty of the universe, formed with such delicate balance, indicated an intelligent Creator.

In February (2002?) BBC 2 ran a programme to tell us the answer. They said everything in the programme was 'fact'. (Actually it was all theory). The ultimate long-sought theory of existence emerged from cosmologists talking together on a train journey. They visualised many other universes, an infinity of them like ours, but with every possible variation of events. These universes are completely separated by an invisible membrane, only one particle thick. But the membranes move or wave.

Then, two membranes collided, the universes shattered and there was an explosion, the Big Bang, and everything came to exist. The great answer to the quest of Einstein, Hawking and company.

The BBC failed to bring up the obvious problem. If the crash of membranes caused the Big Bang, where did the membranes come from and all the other universes?

If we are ingenious enough, and we are it seems, we can explain anything, in theory, God, miracles, the universe. All we want is imagination and the riddle of Creation is solved. So ... ? Except ... we still want to know how anything anywhere exists. Unless we say God, there is no answer.

I Was Thinking 2

"Separation" or isolation?

When I was young all adults were Victorians. They reared me and taught me. We had less comforts and conveniences, but 100 times less crime than today because children went to Sunday school and learned Scripture at day school. Church and chapel were barriers against the lawlessness which is now an uncontrollable flood. Civilised decency then did not need today's detailed legislation or Politically Correct fanatics policing our family affairs and legislating how to be 'sensitive' with what words we used.

I lived with grandparents, non-religious but who accepted Christian ideas of right and wrong as a law of nature and also the Sabbath with no working, buying, shopping, shows, gardening, cleaning, knitting, sewing, card playing, dominoes or children's games. We honoured a remote God by wearing our best boots.

At 12, I became a Christian in a church of grown-ups all born in the 19th century. Additionally they also followed the 19th century holiness culture. "Spirituality", meant separation from all worldliness. I first met the pastor at a church tea and saw him put his hand to his face shocked when a woman helper wore a sleeveless dress. Flesh-coloured stockings and lipstick would have shocked him more. Some disapproved of the church tea, saying "When the cups begin to rattle the devil begins to prattle."

"Separation" was mostly against things, rightly so sometimes, smoking, drinking, betting, pubs and clubs, horse-race and dog tracks, bad language and it extended into the fields of jazz music, cinemas, Sunday travel, the 'wireless', shows etc. Theatres had been sinful since the Globe Theatre of Shakespeare's days. A Press card authorised me to gather sports reports for the local newspaper until I realised my church did not favour professional matches. I read only religious books and played only religious music. Later I signed up in a symphony orchestra but after a while resigned, feeling I was 'sitting in the seat of the scornful'. It lost me the opportunity to play under the baton of famous Sir Henry Wood.

Maybe it is early training and my separation-conditioned conscience, but a bell still tinkles against crossing the old well-marked lines of demarcation. Once I did cross and went to a West End cinema. After 10 minutes I had savoured the world and walked out protesting at the infuriating blasphemy on the screen. In music 'pop', is simply beyond my comprehension. As for fiction - well I have even written some.

So there you are, my personal confession and recollections of formidable "separation"! But I was thinking about it, because it struck me how long it is since I heard the word separation.

First. I know it made Christian witness difficult. I could not answer arguments against my austerity where I worked with qualified men. To them it was quaint, eccentric and made Christianity unattractive. My argument was that 'Jesus satisfies'. Yes, but hardly in the way I went about it! In my teens I had no truck with girls except lift my hat as I walked on past them in the street leaving church.

'Separation' is outward profession, not an inward virtue, but there should be outward profession for all that, though not as a sacrament to trigger God's approval. 'Do's and don'ts' may breed only an illusion of spirituality. The devil's temptations are more subtle than not going to the pictures. Real godliness is concerned with character weaknesses and ghastly imperfections. Outwardly separated people keeping the strict rules with an appearance of godliness, (and there's no law against that), may yet be guilty of other kinds of sins, even the most gross failures. Outstanding leaders have exemplified this tragic fact.

Some weaknesses are very strong! Scripture declares the heart of man is desperately wicked. We are never anything else really but sinners walking on the brink of the abyss, kept by the hand of Christ. Wriggle out of His grasp and like even great Bible characters, fall. Moses gave the world its basic laws of civilised behaviour but died because of indiscretion. Scripture even warns 'they that are spiritual among you' that while restoring the lapsed they themselves are vulnerable. But, thank God, if we crash, by His mercy we

can get up, find forgiveness and restoration, and then like David in Psalm 51 determine to honour God and tell the world of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Outward piety may be easy but integrity a struggle, with absolute purity of motivation, goodness, and bringing every thought into the captivity of the Holy Spirit. To 'love not the world' means not loving what the world loves - money, fame and power. Godliness has ten thousand qualities and they are all spelled l-o-v-e. We live only as much as we love.

One vital thing must be said. We may fault Victorian rules but has separation no meaning at all nowadays? Is un-worldliness outmoded, old school? Can we now live like non-Christians, be born-again without it being noticeable and indulge in the same pleasures like Israel adopted the idolatry of their neighbouring Canaanites? 'Separation' perhaps had indefensible interpretations, but are there no off-limits to Christians today? Being like the world is no way to change it. Abraham changed the world for ever by steering clear of it. A cartoon showed a swearing, drinking, parson leaving a pub after telling dirty stories. A patron watching him leave remarked "I can't stand these UN-holier than thou types!" Narrow separationism may handicap Christian witness with its hair-shirt image but a pendulum swing to liberalism is worse.

Things once disapproved may change. The old rule was against football, but few think that way today. It seems innocent enough. Except - the world has stamped it as its own religion, a priority 'more than life and death' as one club manager said. For the non-Christian "These be thy gods O Israel!" TV, radio and Press force-feed us with the 'beautiful game'. Every newscast ends with football like a devotional epilogue. If the game can be enjoyed, why not? But should we be more passionate club followers than Jesus followers?

The Gospel is our supremely important business. If it isn't, then perhaps it is time for repentance, renunciation, and revival. Should followers of Jesus know pop songs better than songs of the faith? Or be greater fans of the world's 'stars' than of dedicated men and women serving God? A woman said to be 'the greatest comedienne', said in a TV interview that Christianity was 'rubbish'. Rubbish, yet it commands the devotion of far greater minds than hers! What admiration can we have for people like that?

The world has unworthy passions. "Lovest thou me more than these?". The love of Christ is backed by a million reasons. It ought to infuse all we do, where we go and what we say. It need not be a raucous shout in the market place, but it can be a subtle perfume that everybody notices.

Sanctity is not sanctimonious, not repellent but appealing, not judgemental but understanding. It has grace, not airs and graces. It looks up, but is not uppish, in the world but not of it, comes to save the world, not condemn it, loves the world but only as God loved it.

The thrice holy God, the Wholly Other One, came to earth, so gracious that sinners drew near Him and the common people heard Him gladly. That is our great ideal and example. That's what I've been thinking anyway.

Prophets, past and present

"Too often, modern 'prophets' stream through our churches, fellowships and homes giving words almost like fortune tellers. But is God really speaking?" So I read on the back page blurb of John Bevere's book "Thus saith the Lord?" It is American 'comfort

writing', small bytes of teaching sugared heavily with tales, but this time the tales are needed as exemplary warnings.

From it I gather that prophesying in the USA has taken off in a big way. John Bevere accepts that everybody could prophesy to everybody else but his concern is the frequent tragic consequences. From my crows' nest I don't see prophets clustering yet on British horizons. However, western winds do blow fashions our way sooner or later, like the awful American litigation culture, British lawyer's now encouraging greedy claims for compensation here.

The Church of God USA is holding a conference on "The Place of Prophets in the church today." In preparation, Chris Thomas, the *Church of God* Professor of Biblical Studies has drawn together the New Testament references taking in turn each writer. They say surprisingly little and or even nothing about prophecy. For that matter the New Testament says just as little about other spiritual gifts, but prophecy is the most heavily emphasised today.

Preachers coming with a 'prophetic ministry' are usually from overseas. I'll surprise many when I admit I am a little hazy about what their claim means. Donald Gee, that original global patriarch and guide of earlier Pentecostals insisted prophecy often could be preaching. Well, what is higher than the Word? Is the prophecy better than the Word?

In the New Testament the word 'prophet' occurs 150 times but 139 are Old Testament prophets. 'Prophecy' and 'prophesy' come 47 times, 16 Old Testament references. The total of 42 references are preponderantly warnings about false prophets and prophesying.

Prophets have always been a worry, way back to Balaam. Moses laid down tests for the true and the false. All prophecy needs a cautious approach and safeguards. Self-appointed prophets have brought huge divisions and spawned new religions and sects. Mahomet proclaimed himself a prophet and so have other religious founders. Jesus, by the way, did not. There are allusions to Jesus as a prophet but He was not a prophet in the Old Testament sense. They spoke in the name of the Lord, but Jesus spoke in His own name.

Paul said 'despise not prophesying' so it looks as if they did despise it. It lifts the lid off the early churches. Christ left warnings about prophesy as did His apostles. Commentators say Paul wrote to Corinth to correct the misuse of tongues, but I see less of that than to ensure that prophecies were judged. I've heard one individual in a service prophesy at another, and no pastoral check. Often 'prophets declaim "I the Lord do say unto thee" at considerable length but what actually eventually is said is trite and trivial, hardly the hallmark of the Almighty.

Paul ruled that prophecies should be judged, but I don't see it done too often today. How much is Divine inspiration and how much verbal inebriation? Denominational decisions have been taken following untested prophecies. Subsequent results stripped their away pretentious disguise. Extreme caution must be exercised especially for one-to-one prophecies. Personally I would doubt them unless Biblical checks and balances are applied and they are linked to supernatural validation of some kind. It hurts me too much to recall the ruin I've seen wrought by private prophecy.

I heard a woman tell another that she would enquire of the Lord about a problem she had, and would let her know what the Lord wanted her to do. She spoke as if it was Old Testament times when prophets communicated the mind of the Lord. Today every

believer has equal access to God. That fundamentally changes the function of the prophet. I asked some ultra Pentecostals to sell me their redundant church recently, and they said they would 'ask the prophet'. They then sold it to Jehovah Witnesses. Professor Thomas, John Bevere, and many others write as if 'prophet' always means the same thing. But it clearly does not. Christ said "All the prophets prophesied until John". John the Baptist, Jesus said was "more than a prophet". The word changed its meaning from that time. Every true prophet speaks by the Holy Spirit, but the New Testament role is different. For example, Hebrew prophets were sent to the people of God, that is, the whole nation of Israel. Apart from Scripture, no apostle or prophet ever addressed nations, nor even all the people of God at large.

The Corinthian letter indicates that prophecies are normally within the church, where they can be judged by hearers, and only held fast if good. To judge a prophecy it would be necessary to know the prophet and his Divine credentials. Otherwise it needs supernatural authentication. Within the church the speaker of a prophecy is known. Anonymous prophecies are not envisaged in Scripture, and it would be naïve to accept them. Such prophecies arrive by post sometimes, perhaps from a group consensus.

Common sense safeguards are common sense. Prophecies duplicated or printed are circulated wide-cast from a computer list of names. It is hard to think that the Spirit addresses people in anonymous and indiscriminating fashion. Individuals claiming a 'ministry' send 'words from the Lord' to whoever they think. One came to me recently, judgemental, and quite pretentious, so wide of the mark I could not see what it had to do with me at all. Another warned me I was in 'great danger' and could die with cancer like another person he didn't like. I've survived beyond his cheerful anticipations.

Nobody ever prophesied to me face to face, yet more than once a colleague has dropped an apparently casual word as if direct from heaven, correcting and building me up, comforting and encouraging. No prophecy has mandatory force. A leading Pentecostal figure said he also had known a casual remark to bring assurance of God's will, with tremendous and far reaching results. Prophets had come to 'minister' to him but he did not need them as he knew already what God wanted. Prophecy giving explicit direction is unknown in the New Testament. In the book of Acts the apostle Paul refused to be deflected from his course by prophets, saying 'none of these things moved me'.

I wonder if the present popularity of prophesying is to get God to say something? Why must God be always speaking to us if we are already doing His will? How does it serve God for prophets to know about the private lives of members of the congregation? Just to bolster their prophetic ministry? Like John Bevere says, it is like fortune telling. In a current TV programme, subjects are told by psychics about themselves. Didn't they know already! The point escapes me.

Early Israel had no churches or synagogues, few people could read, and few Scripture copies existed. The only way was laid down in Scripture that fathers must memorise the words of God and teach them constantly to their children. Prophets meanwhile came to keep the people in the way of the Lord. The 'schools of the prophets' had the same purpose, a form of preaching. Lacking regular Bible instruction it is not surprising that Israeli people fell into the idolatrous ways of their next door Canaanites.

The Spirit of the Lord rested only upon individuals, such as Moses. It was regarded as the Spirit of Moses, or the spirit of Elijah, and 'the spirit of the prophets'. The prophets did far more than prophesy by the Spirit of God or just to foretell. Their work was to

safeguard the people of God. Samuel kept the whole nation together, an ideal example. David believed He had the Spirit of God to fight Israel's enemies. Prophesying is only one aspect of the Spirit of prophecy.

When Joel said God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh it was an incredible prediction. Jesus said that if we asked for the Holy Spirit we would receive it. That was revolutionary. The disciples spoke with tongues on the day of Pentecost but Joel did not mention tongues, Nevertheless Peter said tongues fulfilled the promise that 'your sons and daughters will prophesy'. They had received the Spirit of the ancient prophets, The Spirit rested on Moses, the greatest of the prophets, empowering him for his delivering and world changing work.

The Spirit of the prophets, or the Spirit of prophecy, is the Holy Spirit. He has other functions than prophecy, very particularly to empower us witnesses of Christ to fulfil the Great Commission. Mystical messages between church members is a minor operation.

"Prophets" are in the list of five gifts in Ephesians 4, but their precise work is not described, except it was for the founding of the early church. For the first Christians there was no New Testament to read, no words of Christ and the apostles available except by word of mouth. The role of prophet was something like that of the Hebrew schools of the prophets, to bring the Word to remote groups of Christians. They were itinerants. They might come with false teaching, and that was an ever-present anxiety to the apostles with little of the Word available to check.

I suppose preaching when anointed partakes of the character of prophecy. Without the anointing how valid is it? A 'prophetic ministry' I would assume is one aspect of the Spirit coming under the category of the word of wisdom or the word of knowledge. Most people in the ministry have experience of such gifts, though whether we can call up such a 'word' on command is a question to be studied. For me, there are times such 'words' of revelation, and times when I know nothing. I don't guess.

However the Holy Spirit does not need to accommodate Himself to our preconceived ideas, except to witness to Bible truth, especially about Jesus. Jesus is the focus, not supernatural phenomena.

Is Britain under judgment?

When something unpleasant happens to an unpleasant character we say it was a judgment on him, "he got what he deserved". Well, now a question. If the same misfortune fell on somebody else, did it show they also deserved it, secretly?

That's the question in the book of Job. Were his troubles appropriate? The three 'comforters' said yes, that Job must have sinned to be so greatly afflicted and that the Almighty never chastises without cause. Job indignantly disagreed. Chapter 42 portrays God as saying Job had spoken that which was right.

Jesus handled the same question saying "Do you think that these Galileans (killed by Pilate) were worse sinners because they suffered this way? Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them - do you think they were more guilty than all others living in Jerusalem?" Job said that man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble as the sparks fly upwards. In other words, don't judge people by what happens to them.

On what grounds is it said that Britain is under judgment? Calamities? Are they evidence? Scripture indicates not. Trouble in our fallen world is indiscriminating. If

events are the criteria some believe God has blessed Britain, considering the economy, affluence and general conditions, considerably better than countries in Europe.

Of course the whole sinful world is under judgement for that matter. All nations exist in conditions of permanent catastrophe. But we are living in the age of grace and mercy. But are there special acts of judgement? Scripture shows that we can't take events as grounds so we need New Testament grounds. Where are they? They are not very conspicuous. Rather the Book declares the goodness and mercy of God in the land of the living.

A prophecy of impending national distress circularised 16 years ago by a respected leader I kept on file. The author said he 'stood in the counsel the Lord' (don't we all now?). Perhaps Britain deserves judgment, but I find it hard to discern any correspondence between the prophecy and subsequent events to this time. This is only one instance.

The Bible teaches us that we reap what we sow, good or bad. Sin is a reproach to any nation and automatically brings evil consequences. In that sense it is God's judgment but not by special Divine edict. The godlessness of people in Britain is wickedly inexcusable and deliberate. Such culpable wrong brings inevitable effects, particularly crime and corruption. The Christian task is not pronouncements of judgment but the Gospel, the Good News, and the call to repent and believe in Christ.

About 'I was thinking'.

Requests for (free) copies of IWT come to me daily, together with letters of extraordinary comfort to any writer, some telling me that over the years IWT has been a major influence. Putting forth my thinking is not egotism, I trust. My qualifications are, first that people with my length of Pentecostal activity and experience is a shrinking company. I am with good memory and perfect health. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth but with a pen in my hand. Having knowledge and experience from really early days of Pentecost, knowing many leaders personally, and being a devouring bookworm with a special taste for theological and historical print, I am investing my own money as an offering and service to God, to inform, inspire and encourage the ten thousand to whom I send this second issue as well as those who made personal requests.

I Was Thinking 3

Archbishop's TV lecture

Cynical TV comedy presents Anglican bishops and clergy as only tongue-in-cheek believers. The Archbishop, who has just stepped down, Dr. George Carey, was a charismatic man of faith with a humble spirit and great heart. My personal contact came when he reviewed and wrote well of one of my books, a Pentecostal exposition, and wrote to me in encouragement.

The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Welshman Dr. Rowan Williams has been introduced to us by the Press as a liberal, easy going on homosexuals, and the most intellectual Archbishop for some time.

Dr. Clifford Hill in '*Prophecy Today*', says he had a half 'hour conversation and prayer with Dr. Williams, in a car park and found him "likeable, warm-hearted", "one who loves the Lord Jesus" and "has had a personal experience of the Holy Spirit."

Dr. Rowan gave the annual Dibleby Television lecture. I think I grasped his general thoughts. His language was "Guardian Newspaper" idiom. He analysed relationships in today's world and the developments shaping human order.

His thesis suggested that society had first held together around the monarch, then around Parliament, the Empire, the democratic grouping of the nation, but now the world is linked markets over-spanning boundaries.

We need a far bigger and permanent order with which to identify than world markets. It calls for religious faith. Only God alone brings meaning to our lives.

Dr. Rowan did not exactly 'make an appeal for souls', but he indicated that without God the future is empty, however big our confederation. That seems to me a fundamental, desperately urgent message. The Kingdom of God alone has any future and gives its subjects a future.

Christianity - the bare facts

Jesus Christ came. That affects everything that matters, this world and the next. It is the supreme gift setting the bells of thanksgiving ringing alone among all the religions on earth, peeling out the glory of Divine favour and grace.

Jesus' being here, living, even dying, puts firm ground under our feet. Jesus didn't set us on another pilgrim path climbing and striving to reach God. He said "Come to me. I am the way". He came and is accessible. We can come to him. He is the 'somewhere' that all religions hope to reach. Where Jesus is, that's heaven, and there's nowhere else. He came to seek us. Some search for the truth, but Christ is the truth. Christians live in the truth.

Religions start with prophets. Jesus is no mere prophet. He is the one the prophets prophesied about. He is not a messenger from God, he's the message.

Christ's way is not laws, rules, directions, do and don't ways to God, but the miracle gift of a new heart. His teaching is about himself and he said "Follow me! I am the way. I am the door" - the door to goodness".

The Bible is not visions and dreams of just one individual man. Many godly people wrote as they saw God at work across 1500 years. It is a miracle Bible all 66 books coming together in Christ.

Christian worshipers don't seek God just to curry favour with him about their sins. Jesus is with every believer, already, all the time. They have found grace with him. Their sins blotted out by his sacrifice on the Cross. Christians are not made by words, ceremony, joining a church, or by belonging to a special race or country, but it is a personal relationship with Jesus.

Christians don't await judgment to know their eternal destiny. They belong to Jesus now and always will. He gives them eternal life, and they will never come into judgment.

Christianity is power, not just words or a way to worship. Christians don't have to keep 'holy days', but they have days when they rejoice. Days that have no parallel in all the world. At Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost Jesus wrought historic and eternal victories, releasing the power of salvation to all who believe.

Jesus only asks for trust and love, not ritual. He demands no pilgrimages, no visits to holy shrines or places. Christians need no holy clothes or special physical posturing; Christianity is of the heart, not the knees. Jesus does demand love and concern, to do good, and to pray even for one's enemies.

Whatever benefit or quality any religion or system offers, old or New Age, in Jesus people find far more peace, strength, goodness, and purpose. "In him is life, and the life is the light of men". Without Christ there's no life, only .substitutes, self-help, possessions, excitements.

What does not relate to Christ, has nothing to relate to, neither people nor the whole world itself. Christ is the one positive certainty known. Death vitiates all hopes, but Christ conquered death and rose from the tomb in the power of his immortal Deity. Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Man, Son of God.

"The revival party" of George Jeffreys.

With the death at 94 years of age Albert Edsors, the famous five have all gone who shook cities in the 1920's and 30's. Albert was the pianist secretary, and his great hero was George Jeffreys. If I wrote anything about the Principal (as he was called) it had to be very clearly in his praise or I had a swift response from Albert. His close intimacy with George Jeffreys produced great admiration. That is a testimony indeed to the greatness he saw in him. Nobody preached with such authority. He faced bigoted opposition but founded a world-wide church that is a movement rather than a mere denomination. Privately Albert called George Jeffreys "Prince" and not inappropriately as he was a prince of an evangelist.

Traditional or contemporary?

*Thousands have drifted **from** churches they belonged for many years, unable to tolerate the music now in vogue. **This is** not the first time music has brought division.*

On TV 'Countdown', Richard Whiteley mentioned 'Hymns Ancient and Modern' to a competing Anglican vicar. The vicar enlightened him. "We don't use it now. We have Mission Praise". Yes, but to come up to date, Mission Praise also often sits with hymns Ancient and Modern gathering dust in church cupboards.

There is a revolution in church worship and much of the old has been guillotined, the greatest disturbance for a century. Thousands have left churches they attended for a lifetime to find somewhere more traditional. Contemporary styles however are a bridge to the pop, rap, rock generation. It is a touchy matter but there are things that ought to be said.

Facts first. "Worship music" "worship leader" are new terms. Churches want fresh music constantly rather than the familiar. The fashion creates a vast market and is big business; companies exist by it, and encourage it with hype for their output of the new. Songs come off the production line never intended to be immortal or used for centuries like hymns. An Australian composer said she wrote her most popular song in 10 or 15 minutes. To me, that goes without saying. However such Christian songs for what they are meeting the spirit of an aged calling for the spontaneous and changing.

Church music has always been a vexatious issue. One must try to move with the times and accept that the pop age will affect modern church services like everything else from shaved heads and torn jeans to the Tate Gallery's 'art' of unmade beds.

Music is only a matter of taste and taste always comes by conditioning, but what we sing about is not a matter of taste. The best of the older Christian praise came from inspired and mature Christians with poetic and creative genius. Charles Wesley, a classical scholar wrote about 7300 hymns. The liberal magazine, 'Expository Times' (December 2002) analyses Wesley's hymn "*Let earth and heaven combine*". Admiring Wesley's poetry the writer shows it had a background rich with Scripture, theology, Latin songs, and doctrine drawn from east and west. "full of faith and profundity in easily singable form". The apostle Paul said "teach one another" in spiritual songs, always a major means of instruction. Wesley's "Hark the Herald angels sing", is a real Gospel packet. His best-

known hymn "Love Divine all loves excelling", takes us through Bible truth to the new creation ending with "Lost in wonder, love and praise". The Expository Times says, "Only the most ecstatic can be offered for such a theme."

My point is that Christian worship in song should give passionate expression to the wonderful works of God in Christ. A new book title is *"Why I left The Contemporary Christian Music Movement. (Confessions of a former worship leader)"*, author Dan Lucarini. He complains contemporary worship programmes are often worldly performances. Well ... perhaps that depends on the worshipper, not the music. Another well-known musician confessed he had written songs we've all sung before he even knew what true salvation was. I've wondered if other songsters really know either, judging by their lyrics. Basing songs on the Psalms alone won't do when we have the New Testament. We have a right in church to expect songs with Christian content. John Wesley was always anxious that Charles' verses should have sound theology. Today congregations fervently sing lines that have no identifiable Bible base. Often no deity is named, some could be sung by followers of any religion. One I heard recently addressed fervent love just to 'you' in language that would have suited any secular song. In any case it is His love, not ours that should be our theme. The new also includes the bizarre, such as asking an (unnamed) potter to mould and fill us and we will soar on eagles' wings. Potters don't remould or fill pots, and pots don't fly off on eagle's wings. One song often sung speaks of building a throne and asks, "Come Lord Jesus and take your place". It is very queer theology. The name of Jesus, is used less and less, substituted by you and your, so unless songs express unmistakable Christian truth they might be songs to Allah or Buddha. John Lennon's 'My sweet Lord', meant Krishna. We used to sing "Oh how I love the Saviour's name!" Don't we love the name of Jesus anymore? Are Bernard of Clairveux's inspired verses of *"Jesus the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast"* too passionate for our lips in 2003? People may have Jesus in mind when singing about 'you', but His name itself is vital to our prayer and worship. *"Whatsoever things ye do, do all in the name of Jesus"*. Surely this applies to worship songs? At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, not at the name of 'you'. By popular request I never sing solos, they are nobody's preferred music, but I can let go, indulge, in church. Well, once I could, but every church has its own ever-changing repertoire, not the universal and familiar, so visiting churches I may not know a single song. Still it keeps the music industry going.

Lovely modern compositions are being produced which I greatly appreciate; if they exalt Jesus the music is secondary. We can discard the old-fashioned but what is old is not always old-fashioned. Sing to the Lord!

Once saved, always saved?

Recently I had the privilege of a Baptist invitation but to spell out my views on "Predestination".

Two churches in Ireland agreed to unite, then one insisted the Unity Document must include a clause declaring that John Wesley had gone to hell, he being a non-Calvinist! Kind thought!

Theological writings on the subject of Divine election are vast. One of the latest volumes of Systematic Theology, that by Wayne Gruden, uses 15 pages even to outline the subject. Minds more incisive than mine have pondered the questions involved so what was left for me to say? However, I have reactions to years of exposure to these

questions, so to offer my thoughts to an interested group asking questions, was an opportunity.

First. I am suspicious of hard-cast views on predestination, and on other debateable issues. Protagonists have taken firm positions totally opposite to one another. How can they both be so sure? In the past such certainty has been horrible. The pages of church history smoke with the battle and mayhem of conflict. Merciless miseries have overtaken inoffensive people just for mere ideas passing through their head. Claiming to be Christian, bigots have domineered and foisted upon others, even whole nations, views that in the nature of things cannot be other than unsettled questions, resorting even to government laws to force belief with fire and sword. The associated subject of , grace, for example, has been debated with appalling lack of grace.

Second. I am suspicious because election theories have led to such rationalising and doctrines formed by logical deduction. The doctrine of double predestination is certainly not set out in Scripture but is a logical deduction.

Anyway a story will illustrate. A Baptist minister told me that after the first service in his new pastorate a young man puzzled him with a curious question:

"Are you a supralapsarian or an infralapsarian". His theology was not so advanced. He did not know what either was, so he thought, *"I'll plump for the big chap"* and replied, *"Oh I'm a supralapsarian"*. Fortunately for his whole future acceptance he had said what was wanted. If you are wondering, a *supralapsarian* argues logically that Divine election took place long before the fall and God allowed sin so that he could save elected people, while an *infralapsarian* believes God allowed sin and decided afterwards to save people. So - now you know - yes? It makes me not believe in logic.

Third. The Bible certainly reveals God as sovereign, and His will overarches all human life and the universe. He created all things with a purpose and that purpose must eventually be realised. But certainly also the Bible describes us all as free beings, God holding us responsible for whatever we do. God cannot be charged with evil or with obliging anyone to commit evil. Even if prophets detail what we should do, we can't blame them or God for what we do.

Fourth. Pre-determination went on in the mind and heart of God. It took into account all considerations, reasons, factors, circumstances and even meanings involved. God alone knows how human freedom and God's sovereignty are possible, and our attempts to pre-empt God's own eternal mind on that matter is arrogant impertinence that can only lead, as it has, to frightful pride and strife.

Only recently has science even seen contraries things can be related. The logically impossible can be witnessed and still beyond understand. The universe is queerer than we CAN think. How can one atomic particle communicate instantly across infinite space to another - even if it is another! - when light itself would take millions of years to cross the space between? Jesus himself said that if we speak of earthly things and cannot understand them, how can we understand if we speak of heavenly things? An element in the fall was the devil's promise that the tree of knowledge would make them as gods. It is still there - we must equal the infinite, and we will take the nearest guess and transmogrify it into a divine revelation when it is only a human dogma. Humility says, "I don't know!"

Fifth. Election is by God and unless He tells us, nobody will know whether they are elected or not. Those with strong ideas of election have tried to find assurance of

salvation by performing good works to prove to themselves they are saved. They rest their hopes of salvation on their will to do good, making void the Word of God.

Sixth. Scripture clearly indicates that we are saved by believing, and that we can have the assurance of salvation. The Bible certainly sets forth the possibility of knowing we are saved, here and now. "We know that we have received eternal life," says John. Salvation and the mind of infinite God carry mysteries. So do most of the things God does, from the quark of an atom to the greatest stellar galaxy, from light to love. But we can enjoy it all, and not bother our heads about the how's and why's. God will always be beyond our thinking, but faith's hand touches the crucified hand of our Lord, and we know His grasp will never let us go. The Bible is written for human assurance and faith.

"God-chasers"... ?

I began reading the book of this title but felt I was on queer ground, where God is reported as smashing up the church platform. Somehow it is not the sort of thing I think Jesus would do. I heard Dr. G. Campbell Morgan say about a certain parable interpretation saying that it made him feel like falling from grace for five minutes. That's how the title "*God Chasers*" affects me. .

I hope the book contents modify the title, which for me conjures up a God doing nothing while people labour to get to him. I am surprised that many Christians have read it without questioning such theology. The author sets up an Aunt Sally as if churchgoers in America just go to church, as the beginning and end of their Christian experience. My times in American churches gave me a different impression.

However, the title '*God Chasers*' may simply indicate that we should exert ourselves and '*follow on to know the Lord*'. Casually drifting along picking up a text or crumb of blessing is not what Paul meant when he cried, "*That I might know him and the power of his resurrection*". The greatest thing in life, its whole purpose, is to cultivate closeness to Christ, fellowship Jesus established when He sought and found us, not something achieved by human initiative and struggle. The Lord stands at the door and knocks. Open the door an inch and He will come in.

It always moves me to think of Christ's incredible act, coming down in fleshly form, becoming one of us with all the attendant miseries of those cruel days. The wild dogs of wickedness hounded him and savaged Him to death on the Cross. But He was relentless in pursuit of us, crashing through every impossibility and barrier to get to us. Dare we even think of us chasing God, after that? That is the grace of God. It is never an abstract idea, or mere force, but always takes on a practical form.

Grace is known only in Christianity. To dialogue with non-Christian religions begins with the handicap of two different bases, fundamentally different. We say God pursues us, they pursue God. Christ's came "*to seek and save that which was lost*". Amazing love!

This truth also produced another unique Christian characteristic - thanksgiving. It sets the joy bells ringing. God chasers will be more stressed than glad. Labouring along a religious path for a lifetime is hardly likely to make anyone joyful.

But I am writing this at Christmas 2002 and a song persists in my head "*Joy to the world, the Lord is come*". Last Christmas my wife was here. This Christmas she has gone, I am alone, but Christmas reminds me that HE is here, '*Immanuel, God with us*'. Many cards decorate my house wishing me a 'merry Christmas' Merry? When the prodigal son came home Jesus said, "They began to be merry". 'Merry' is as good a translation of the Greek

as I can think of, a word for home, warmth, feasting, the Father's house. *"The Word is nigh thee"*.

Thinking about God

God reveals no academic information about Himself, nothing for our curiosity. All we are told about Him is for our appropriation and use. We need to know only what is practical and beneficial. He is light but dwells in mystery. If His ways were obvious, uncomplicated, and we never needed to ask "Why?" God would be too little to worship. He surpasses thought yet is devoted to be with His creatures, for ever.

George Canty became active in Elim when only three Elims existed in England, before the Assemblies of God was formed, knew many Pentecostal fathers and leaders and was later elected Elim President. His long ministry involved every type of Christian work, 45 years evangelism and pioneering some 20 churches, much administration. Pastoral, academic lecturing, and children's work, plus TV artistry contracts, radio broadcasting, and extensive musical ministry. Specialising as a journalist he authored 20 books and other literary work going out in 100 languages. With worldwide experience, theological knowledge and Bible insight he has partnered Reinhard Bonnke in 15 years of CfaN literary output. .

I Was Thinking 4

Jahweh Rophi, the Lord the Healer

The full Gospel includes Jesus the Healer. Without that proclamation the Gospel trumpet sounds as if it had a sticky valve. Jesus the Healer is a corner stone of Pentecostal revival, though the hardest faith challenge. Healing is where Bible teaching and teachers are put to the test. I'm asked more questions about healing than anything else. This special IWT article was suggested by people in the ministry. It is not a summary of a vast subject, but a look at the roots. Countless books on healing still find people hesitant, Healing is sometimes put aside as problematic, left to those who 'have the gift'. Basic theology is needed and this IWT piece is a contribution towards it

There are varied attitudes about healing. Healing is often taken as subsidiary side issue, or a curious possibility of faith. Some relate healing to the 'charismata', gifts. Others see it as accessory to the Gospel. More often it is thought of as resting on God's special promises. Many wanting to exercise a healing ministry think of it as a natural endowment, a healing touch or the special favour of a Divine gift. Actually no gift to heal is mentioned in the Scripture.

Healing must be seen as part of the theology of God Himself. Teaching needs to begin with teaching on God. Truth is always truth about God, never isolated. Faith expectancy must come within the revelation of what and who God is. For instance some suggest God heals or does not heal according to how it strikes Him. With what revelation of God does this accord? He has never shown Himself as temperamental.

The basis for all faith in God is that He is faithful, not volatile, fluctuating in interest. The Bible stresses that all His works are *"done in truth"*. That applies to His work of healing.

JAHWEH ROPHI The Bible's proper name for God is JAHWEH, (the LORD.) Exodus 6:2 says *"I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty (el shadday) but by my name The LORD (Jahweh) I did not make myself known to them."* Abraham also called God *El Olam* (God Everlasting). So it may be said that Moses introduced the LORD to the

world during convulsion of the Exodus. Further knowledge of the Lord presently emerged, One of the first revelations was an addition to His name Jahweh = Jahweh Rophi. the LORD who heals. (Exodus 15:26)

God's name describes His character. We know God by His name, for it describes Him. This is extremely important. His name does not denote some passing action past or future. God does nothing incidental, and nothing out of character. His name is not about what He may do, but what He is, and what He does comes only from what He is, His name, for example, the God of healing is a permanent truth, His character eternally. The Hebrew tense is timeless.

Healing is not secondary to His will. It is His will. *It is His nature or instinct to heal.* We see that in the first words of Genesis, where God broods over chaos. God reveals Himself by deeds, not words, and His actions tell us what He is, and what we can expect Him to be and do. Any healing is a window into the heart of God and part of His essential glory. God has no temporary interests, no phases. God is not a process. Everything about Him subscribes to His eternal state.

God's first healing word In Exodus 15: 26 was not exclusive to Israel. It came before the tribes had any national unity. It was not exclusive to Israel, and is more than a promise. It was a declaration of what kind of God had attached Himself to them. Now obviously God is always God, the same for ever whether He appears to Israel or any other race. You are always you and I am always me wherever we go, and so is God, in all His fullness. The God Moses met and who was made flesh among us. He is not more the *Jahweh Rophi* for Israel and less for anybody else. What He is remains, unchangeable.

Obviously healing is for a fallen world where sickness prevails. There's no sickness in heaven to heal. Sin means rebellion "*I did it my way!*" – instead of God's way. That had to be when He created us in His own image with a free will. That is why Christ told us to pray "*Thy will be done*", because it is not being done.

However God said "*If you listen to the voice of the LORD and do what is right in his eyes I will not bring on you any of the distresses of the Egyptians, for I am Jahweh Rophi.*"

This obliges us to face that God ties Himself to conditions for healing. His desire is within the framework He set for Himself, certain conditions. This verse, for example makes our attitude to His word a condition. That can have very broad implications indeed. A direct instance is that God laid down rules of good health which would have saved countless lives in the past. Plagues blamed on God were due to ignorance of practices of hygiene stressed in Scripture.

God does not usually override in imperious omnipotence the blunders and corruptions of our fallen world. We reap what we sow. The exception was the ministry of Christ. He healed without discrimination, but for a unique purpose, to reveal God's heart to a sinful world in an overture of active forgiveness.

He showed what the reign of God really was. Christ WAS the Kingdom and in His kingdom sickness would be unknown. I cannot heal like Jesus did because my role and mandate are totally different. He was the Son acting in the image of the Father. That is not my position. Jesus' didn't heal by faith in God as we must. He healed by His own Word of authority.

The most frequent question is why are all the sick not healed. It should be seen as part of the larger question of unanswered prayer. Exodus 15:26 is the key to that problem. What God does is according to circumstances and conditions. We don't always know

what they are, and sometimes God will override all considerations. One factor hinted at here is our attitude to the Word of God. Today the atmosphere of vast moral pollutions and hostile, aggressive unbelief, nation and world-wide are prejudicial to the miraculous. It creates a dense fog of unbelief as in Nazareth where Jesus could heal only a few sick folk.

To demand that every sick person be healed is to demand prematurely the conditions of the Millennial reign of Christ. It does not accord with a sensible reading of the New Testament. One sees everyone healed in some services, but they are special moments.

Healings, in my earlier days were my problem. I knew God healed but my theology was built around what I saw, and I saw no miracles. A healing rattled the framework of my logic theory, and upset my world of precise calculation. So, I am nervous about any kind of speculative thought that limits God. His heart of love is bigger than our tape measure. I've known for years the common doubts and hesitations but in Pentecostal circles I have never heard anyone justify their doubts from the Word of God, Usually doubt arises from a weak grip on the theology of God. Some are openly discouraging. But to weaken faith in healing is to weaken faith in all God says He will do. We have enough discouragements without anyone raising impossible questions.

I understand healing only as much as I understand God,

I understand God only from my daily focus upon the Word of God. We know nothing about Him and His ways except in His Word. Experience is not a valid Bible. The Bible explains and judges experience. Jesus saves because He is the Saviour. Jesus heals because He is Jahweh Rophi.

That No. 3 'IWT' article - "Traditional or Contemporary" –

"Did I say that?"

Hearing others say what we said often surprises us. Responses to my piece "*Traditional or contemporary?*" (No. 3 IWT) drove me to read my own article to see if I had said things some believed I had.

I intended it to sum up the pros and cons briefly, not give vent to my own prejudices. But ... I make no bones about insisting that Christian worship relate to Christ Jesus. I realise that great doctrinal and Gospel themes are not easily fitted to a single repeating musical phrase, and I do accept that melodies, tunes, belong the "traditional" school, but I still claim the Christian right to sing about the work of God in Christ. and by name, whatever the music.

However one issue arose that should be mentioned. It was said that people leaving their church because of the music, were intolerant, putting the brakes on progress. Well, those I know are not intolerant die-hards in any sense. They simply can't stomach the particular music at their church. To them it is earache, especially long sessions. The fact must be understood that we only like what we are brought up to like. Popular music is a matter of conditioning. an acquired taste. There are different brands of contemporary music and a church may adopt a form hard on the ear and as foreign to some as Chinese music. Not even all younger people want the more aggressive and clamorous performances. The under-40s took in the disco sound with their mother's milk, but half the British public was reared with an instinct for different sounds than a 2003 pop group. An aversion for contemporary pop is not intolerance. Many stay with their churches who prefer the traditional but try to get along with the new..

Part of the difficulty is that churches now use only recent songs, unrelieved. The range used to be very wide, from different periods, 18th, 19th 20th century, as any hymn book shows.

Incidentally one or two defended songs I criticised, but too long for me to reply sentence by sentence. It bothered me that such songs were defended, as if they were of ranking importance. Are they then the kind of worship songs now wanted, as standard? Brought up on better spiritual fare people are likely to shop around to find it.

One or two also stood up for songs composed in a few minutes. What did I say about them anyway? They have a niche in the temple of praise for "*everything in his temple cries glory*," big or small. But is the 'inspiration' of a few minutes competing with the thought and verse of greatly gifted men and women? Shouldn't we love God with all our mind? They have their merit, but can a five minute refrain really cope with the great themes of the faith? They can contribute however to the symphony of praise, but they are not a symphony themselves. God's glory and greatness is worthy of our best efforts of mind and heart.

"Worship" ? leaders

The greatest change in our churches for a century has taken place. Here is a short survey. Actually this short article arises from a reader's perceptive question "Should worship leaders really be called music leaders?"

Music leaders or worship leaders? Obviously it depends. To lead worship needs more than the ability to play a guitar. Ideally leaders need the leadership gift, mature spiritual experience and sensitivity to the winds of the Spirit. However not every church can call on people so ideally qualified. Thankfully God uses people, even young folk, who humbly seek to promote His praise and are not out to cut a dash themselves on the platform.

Now, regarding "worship leaders". They are an innovation brought in about 20 years ago. Evangelistic meetings always had a 'song leader' for community singing. This followed the pattern of Torrey-Alexandra and George Jeffreys' campaigns. In church Gospel meetings some younger man would lead 'chorus time'.

But worship then was the essential responsibility of a pastor, as part of his ministry. He did not 'conduct' it. Nothing was programmed. Prayer and worship in some churches hardly needed a leader. It arose spontaneously from the whole congregation, the pastor only guiding it. Often for an hour or more I remember I did not have to say a word. The musicians followed the congregation. The congregation was not led by musicians.

Many pastors do keep their original privilege to lead worship themselves, usually with a guitar.

A change came when worship and Gospel meetings lost their distinctness. This came mainly when a New Zealand musician, promoted here about 1980, taught church pianists to 'lead worship' (instead of the pastor) from their keyboard and 'singing in the Spirit' was sparked off by the pianist beginning to play rolling cords. This free worship was sometimes led by the drummer.

Musicians having become the worship leaders, they also led in what was then the Gospel meeting using the same kind of songs. Piano and organ were largely replaced by guitar and percussive instruments. Evangelistic hymns were hard to play on guitars. This gradually changed the traditional Gospel meeting.

I think this is the basic change that so many feel anxious about with the loss of the revivalist atmosphere, and community singing of hymns of appeal and redemption.

That is how remember the change. Younger pastors, I imagine, fitted into the new pattern without knowing or even realising it was new or how it had come about.

However, God will have His way. People now are far more sophisticated. The Government's recent census revealed 72 per cent call themselves Christians in the UK. But folk have become wary about meetings they know very well are directly designed to convert them! But they have far less aversion for Christian worship as such, especially with warm fellowship and good preaching.

Preaching the Gospel means preaching the whole counsel of God, not a few evangelistic texts from John 3 and Romans 10. My own recent converts have come through Bible teaching. In a truly Pentecostal Bible church people will find the Lord. Every service will carry an implicit Gospel appeal. Many years ago I wrote insisting that Communion was ideal for winning men and women for Christ. At that time the Lord's table was almost a cult secret and the presence of outsiders embarrassing.

In evangelism the body of Christ breathes. It should be in the music, the worship, and the ministry. The salvation Gospel should be undiluted, leaving nobody in doubt about Christ and the need to repent and pass from death to life.

Those millennial predictions ... what happened to them?

In the months leading to AD 2000 everybody, press, broadcasting, all talked as if hanging up the AD 2000 calendar would magically switch on a new spirit for a new world. But time is powerless. The third year of the third millennium and crime, terrorism and war are livelier than ever.

Church leaders set targets for 2000 which were never achieved. Religious cranks had a field day. Leader of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star Olumba Olumba Obu 'confirmed' 72 hours of total darkness would take place and "After 1999 something spectacular will happen, end of times, last call".

Priestess Sri Patricia of the Morningland compound declared Jesus would arrive in Long Island in a UFO as big as Texas, piloted by her late husband. The last decade was expected to end with Christ's return. During the 19th century it drove Christians to prayer for power to evangelise the whole world by AD 2000. A respected American pastor laid down a positive date, a mistake

One popular line was that the first 2000 years was Adam to Abraham, the second 2000 years Abraham to Christ, the third would be from His first to His second advents and His 1000 years Millennial reign making up the Divine pattern of 7000.

A similar theory said man would rule for 6000 years, then Christ would rule. . Christian Fathers and scholars back to the first century held this expectation, including Irenaeus (born AD 140). Even the Jewish Talmud has been quoted "*The world will stand for 6000 years, 2000 in confusion and void, 2000 with the law, and 2000 to the time of the Messiah*".

There was also the Y2K panic. Computers mark years in two digits. To register 2000, they would switch off and bring civilisation to a dead stop and a world recession. The 1998 London Times issued a 1000 word warning. The USA technology Information Association described the effect as "Titanic"

In 1988 The Daily Telegraph reported a British World Bank expert warning at the Royal Geographical Society that by the year 2000 unless the world changed its industrial processes, the Earth's life-support system would breakdown.

Then came Mrs. J. Z. Knight with messages from a man who died 35,000 years ago. Hundreds went to live in north west USA to escape the predicted natural disasters to fall on cities across the continent. A wealthy owner of a chain of hamburger cafés sold up and built a pyramid shaped house 'to catch the energy of the universe.' Actress Shirley Maclaine is a follower and bought a remote farm out of the predicted danger zone.

But meanwhile some Bible wielding prophets made fame and fortune with their predictions – all unfulfilled, but AD 2000 was just too good an opportunity to miss. John Gass complained of a Christian writer selling 20 million books of predictions that failed but he goes on writing just the same. I have a few books like that as museum pieces. The damage to faith is incalculable.

The desire for Christ to return is universal and will not be disappointed. Meanwhile human prophesying has been shown ten thousand times to be one of our greatest follies. They all do it and fail, the financial and economic pundits, the social experts, the scientists, the governments, the Bible students and charismatic prophets. It is worse when Scripture is exploited. God does not divulge too much detail about the future except about Himself, that He is faithful. We can't rely on human prophets but we can rely upon God, though the seas roar and the mountains are cast into the midst of the seas.

Tyranny of fashion

The lady on TV had paid the hair dresser a small fortune to make her hair look as if he had never touched it since she got up. . Fashion!

Our changeable weather calls for daily reports, Perhaps we also need daily fashion reports?

In my more tender years many church folk dressed years behind the times under strong 'Holiness' influences. The latest style was always considered worldly.

Christians need be neither frumps nor fashion models. I want scrupulous cleanliness and an appearance which is a credit to the Lord I belong. They laugh that I wear a tie, but I look more awful without one, as most men my age. I am put off by men appearing on screen with crumpled collars and scrawny throats. Ugh!

Fashion often dictates what is plainly ridiculous, like jeans buried in soil and then ripped to render them 'mod'. Casual wear now means any old cast-offs fit for gardening or road sweeping. The worst we have can hardly be a mark of honour to our God when we attend worship. The Gadarene sat at Jesus' feet 'clothed and in his right mind' – it sounds normative? Myself I need to wear whatever will make me easier to look at!

The prevailing winds of fashion have been blowing us the wintry cult of ugliness. We men must make the worst of ourselves with shapeless oversized bags for trousers, lunatic hairstyles, body piercing, scarring with ugly tattoos, foul language like halitosis polluting the atmosphere, with revolting art exhibits and mindless scrawls destroying the meaning of art. As for high class music, as a musician I've listened and read about new works for decades, one dedicated to me and another written for me, and am convinced they are just as bad as they sound.

No fashion is *de rigueur* for Christians. Our job is to shape the future not preserve the old nor the status quo. A competing couple on "Who wants to be a Millionaire" had never heard of "*An eye for an eye ...*" That degree of fashionable Bible ignorance leaves people unprotected against whatever goes. The Bible out of fashion means truth out of fashion, trampled in the street.

Children of God don't melt into the background of this world, like social wallpaper, to be like everybody else. We leave our mark in truth, wisdom, righteousness, every thought brought into captivity in the service of Christ. The future is ours in Him. We are new creatures, becoming like Christ. That sets the fashion direction for us all

I Was Thinking 5

Church constitutions don't constitute power

Anne Boleyn and all that.

The history of the Tudors has been treated like new news by Press and TV lately, the story of Henry viii and Anne Boleyn for instance. Henry, a 16th century Saddam Hussein monster sent his pert young wife for a French sword to slice through her slender neck, At least it brought her permanent, legendary and romantic popularity. More than that, it triggered off religious disturbances for centuries. Those disruptive upheavals concerned church order.

A book received great notice about 20-odd years ago suggesting all churches and property be sold, all ministers resign, and everything be unshipped so God could show us the right way. Hailed 'to make us think'. I thought that if God had failed to show people the right way for several centuries, were likely to do better now? Well, we learn by the past, but dismantle the whole church?

When Elizabeth I reigned the Bible was beginning to be read. It was expected to provide answers to all religious question. The 17th century was explosive with powerful new political moods intertwined with varied religious views. People seized upon any odd Bible text to confirm their particular perspective with dogmatic certainty. Sure that the Bible must tell us everything, 'nonconformists' and radicals found Bible proof they were right appeared in fighting mood - Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, Quakers. An Act in 1667 tried to force everyone to be Church of England. That 400 year old history still repeats.

Church order has been and remains a major cause of division and puts the brake on Christian expansion. The Ecumenical Movement tackled it but 50 years of conferences have produced only paper bridges between Christian bodies.

I recall my own sufferings - ah! Newly ordained, I sat for eternities while speakers argued for completely opposite theories, namely central government as against local government. Listening, I felt that many passages and texts quoted were barely relevant and like the Irishman's jacket fitted only where they touched.

Then 20 years ago fresh dogmas upset Pentecostals and some whole congregations seceded from their parent bodies. We were challenged then with the cry "What is the Spirit saying to the churches?" Adopting an attitude of imperial spirituality various leaders seem to know, and admonished us to re-structure our churches their way.

Now long before that 1980's storm, some of us, Bible teachers, had met to examine the question of church structures. After many meetings over two years testing Scripture for

competing dogmas and theories of church order our report was published. It had the answer to the later agitation bit alas our labours had been shelved.

The search for the true church pattern is like the search for the Holy Grail, or rather the Will-O'-the Wisp, somebody always at it. Hope never dies! Not long ago the Scripture about 'new wine skins' was dragged unwillingly into the debate to argue that the Holy Spirit would only be happy in a new kind of church (their kind!) Why 'new wine skins' were interpreted as churches I have never fathomed.

The most emphasised 'discovery' on church order today is Ephesians chapter four which states that Christ gave apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists and pastors. The conclusion had been drawn that these five (or four?) offices are how churches should be structured. This is pure assumption read into the chapter. The church is not actually mentioned and nothing about "structuring", nor even that Christ gave these officers to the church. The Greek original needs to be better handled, The AV reads - "He gave some apostles, some prophets, etc." which is a bit shaky, and the NIV says Christ gave some to be apostles which the Greek definitely does not say.

The original uses the definite article before each gift "THE apostles, etc", The best rendering is perhaps "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers" It is a general statement about what Christ has done, 'he gave' not 'he gives'. But these five (or four) gifts are not the only gifts, but only examples, according to verse 7 - "To every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ".

Every one of us is a gift, often gifted.

Going back to our old committee's conclusions. The report was shelved, but has never been challenged, namely that we found no specific directive, blueprint, pattern, order or clear basis for church order in the New Testament whatever beyond the appointment of oversight. It was clear that Apostolic leadership arranged matters in whatever way they saw best in the circumstances.

God not give directives. He gives wisdom, not only in church order but in all earthly issues. God made us responsible free beings, in His own image, and promised that whatsoever we do will prosper. He leaves it to us exercise wisdom in our ever-changing world, do our best, run our churches, our affairs and lives as Psalmist 32:9 says "Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle". God doesn't treat us like trams and He the tram driver.

It isn't appointing apostle or prophet that is effective and there's no Bible warrant to do it. Out and out effort for God, with the Holy Spirit, faith, love and the Word are the open secrets. No new formulae overlooked for 2000 years exists. The Holy Spirit isn't waiting for Bible patterned organisations but Bible-patterned lives.

"Unworthy" eating and drinking

1 Corinthians 11: 27, 28. What lies behind this warning?

Paul talks about eating and even drunkenness at the Lord's Table. We hear it read nearly every week, but I who understands what it is all about? "When ye come together therefore in one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper (Greek dinner) for in eating everyone takes before other his own supper, one is hungry and another is drunken. What, have you not houses to eat and to drink in? Wherefore, when you come together to eat, tarry one for another. Therefore if any man hunger, let him eat at home, that you come not together unto condemnation."

The reference was thought to refer to a 'love feast' like the old Methodists had, Obviously it refers to customs and practices of that day, not ours which needed regulating. It was the gross behaviour at this meal that called forth Paul's warning about eating and drinking unworthily, "not discerning the body", i.e. that the communion bread and wine had no meaning for them, only food. They should "eat at home".

The Corinthian church had both Jews and Gentiles and Paul could talk familiarly about the Passover. But Corinth was Roman, re-built by Rome after destruction and strong elements of Roman culture and customs were practised in a rare cosmopolitan atmosphere. Outside the church the Roman world was pagan with practices that would shock and bewilder us.

Eating together was a Roman custom. There were two types of dining. For some occasions people came together bringing their food. A different public meal was open with food provided for whoever came, perhaps a rich man's or government's charity meal. Romans talked about bread and circuses. The church formed its own area of social contact, and Roman type meals were part of church life. To eat and drink together was natural - to them, if not to us. However the Corinthian church was notoriously riddled with partisanship - the whole of 1 Corinthians is about disunity. So rival church members adopted the Roman private dinner custom. Some came but the food was already eaten. They were not invited. Paul said they should 'tarry' one for another, that is they should follow the open meal custom for all who came.

Paul's refers to Passover. The Lord's Table was instituted 'after supper', following the Passover meal. Eating at the Lord's table seemed to have been warranted by the Passover meal associated with the Lord's supper. Paul mentions 'the cup of blessing', the third cup which Jesus had taken 'after supper'.

Degrading behaviour, greed, even drunkenness at the Corinthians Communion service, brought Paul's warning about eating and drinking unworthily.

One hears this warning read to good Christian congregations today often with great solemnity, warning communicants to examine themselves. It produces introspective scrupulosity and anxiety. What good is that?

What is 'unworthy?' If I feel worthy then what has Christ's blood to do with me? Christ calls sinners, the unworthy. Many are worried in case they eat bread with some unknown sin in their lives. It is an oppression and I have known those who never took communion because such heavy stress had been laid upon the perfection needed for participation. If we are that fit, are we fit at all? The common failures of every day life were not in mind in this Scripture, but gross hostility openly displayed by participants in the Passover-type meal at the Lord's Table.

Disciplined church members have been told to stay away from the Lord's Table for a few weeks. Instead the church should insist that erring members DON'T stay away. Where else but at the Table is there restoration, re-assurance, and cleansing?

Communion is a profound act of oneness - that is Paul's point. It is not a "help yourself ordinance but for each to bless another like Melchizedek blessing Abraham and offering him bread and wine. It should be ministered. Communion is both a physical and spiritual act, the very heart of our heart reaching out in desire to God. Servers are not mere handers-out, one hand in pocket, but should convey their sense of holy privilege bringing bread and wine in Christ's name. Don't you think so?

About women

Queen Victoria called Women's Rights 'mad wicked folly'. Did Paul prefer men to women and do some pastors?

A man was given a book entitled "What Men Know About Women". The 200 pages were blank. Actually what men know about women often surprises them, usually pleasantly. John Knox raged against the 'Monstrous Regiment of Women' i.e. Queen Mary in England and Mary of Lorraine regent for Mary Queen of Scots, but the greatest people I have known were women, starting with my own mother, absolutely unselfish and totally self-sacrificial. She was not always reasonable but always right. A Christian magazine said "When God made Adam, He looked at him and said "I think I can do better!". I've wondered myself whether God would have made Adam if He had made Eve first. Would he have said "It is not good for woman to live alone?" Eves seem born to cope. I disagree with Alan Lerner that women should be more like men - exemplified by Anglican women priests in male priest attire. The effect is bizarre,

One can't be a pastor and not be inveigled on to committees discussing women. I escaped one such committee but their weighty treatise fell with a thump through my letterbox containing countless thousands of words. Automatically I disagreed with every word. Mostly it concentrated on Paul's strictures, text by text, with endless sections, and paragraphs.

Paul's guidance dealt with special situations in the strange culture of his day. Now, 2000 years later and in a very different culture his guidance is construed as mandatory principles. Nobody seems to take into account how Paul actually treated Christian women himself. He certainly encouraged them, which should make his rules better understood.

God did not make Eve as Adam's servant. Both had dominion over all things. Only after they sinned did male dominance appear. The Bible, especially the Hebrew Old Testament is a picture of a very male society. But it does not confirm that is how it should be. It simply describes the world after the fall, a dominant male society. But it no more approves it than other consequences of the fall.

Jesus chose 12 men for apostles, and that is the only time he seemed to show preference, but He had wise reasons for it. He had both men and women disciples, a revolution in rabbinical times, He chose to reveal His identity directly only to women. After the resurrection he came first to women. They believed. The men did not and Christ rebuked them.

A lady on the phone asked if I would attend their seminars on how to get more men in church, (Sexual discrimination?) I wouldn't be attending, so she asked "Don't you want to learn how to bring more men into your church?" I replied "No. I would be just as happy with more women. But why more men?" My question rather stumbled the lady. Her answer lacked incisiveness and failed convince me.

It happens that I have had a high or equal proportion of men in my churches, but there's no technique of formula, just the locality or the personality of the pastor.

It seems to me without contradiction that the church would not get far without women and their unique qualities of loyalty, natural inclination to serve, loving concern, and extraordinary spiritual sensitivity for the truth.

What can they do? There is no apostolic law against loving God and serving Him. God gives women gifts and abilities and means that they should be used. A woman, as much

as a man, should do what God has fitted her to do, and not be told to hide her talent in the earth.

Dr. Johnson said some wise things and some silly thing "A woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to see it done at all".

So? Well, the greatest preaching I ever heard was by a woman, Mrs. Aimee Semple McPherson. Old men were jumping out of their seats with excitement, and hundreds turned to Christ, and everybody wanted to touch her. "Let women keep silence?" Women like her?

One woman worked as hard as me alongside me all my life in total loyalty until last year, often with her hands, never grumbled at the lack of money, many hardships, travel away from home, or anything else. She was my wife. That's where I gained my knowledge of the equal worth of women.

Un-grammar ?

Just in passing, more than 46000 pairs of eyes have seen IWT since August last year, and only one pair (not mine), spotted the spelling error in 'Contemporary'. A keen friend had pointed out that 'maybe' in IWT No.1. should have been 'may be', but even he missed 'Contemporary'.

Anyway, 'English as she is spoke' - and spelled, suffers deliberate deformations. 'Going to' has gone and 'gonna' has arrived, got to is now 'gorra'. In TV dramas I have no idea about what actors sometimes mean - too street slick. Today a reader sent me a column from a northern newspaper with 'English' examples, "gotta", 'thingy' 'blokes' and "soz, but we ain't gonna change". The columnist justifies slang claiming 'ours is a living language'. But if slang strangles it completely English will be a dead language and will the next-generation-but-one understand English Bibles? Cool innit? I wrote previously about the current fashion of ugliness and the way we talk is also infected. Still, even I am not ready to revert to Jane Austin style.

Missing possessive apostrophes are annoying. Despite complaints even public documents make this gaffe, e.g., 'Peoples interest', or 'Governments plan'. This same un-grammar has spread to prayer with "In Jesus Name", (no apostrophe). We used to say "In Jesus' Name" or "In Jesu's Name" but what does "In Jesus name" mean? 'Jesus' becomes an adjective describing some kind of name, Do we say "In Fred name" or "In Janet name" We say (pronounce) "In James' name", not "In James name". So why "In Jesus name?" Anyway, just thinking!

Chapter and verse?

It may shock some, but chapter and verse divisions in Scripture were not inspired by God. Their introduction was a 'tour de force'- verses by Robert Estienne (born 1503) and the 1189 chapter divisions by 13th century Stephen Langton

If you like figures, an American Pentecostal counted 7847 promises of God in the Bible, mostly Old Testament, over 1000 in Isaiah. The New Testament has about 1000 as it is mainly fulfilment. "All the (7847) promises of God are Yea and Amen in Christ Jesus." Paul meant Old Testament promises, the New Testament promises were not then written.

A Hebrew and Greek scroll or codex (book) had no chapters or verses, and little in the way of punctuation or even gaps between words. We owe Robert Estienne and Stephen

Langton real thanks. We rely upon their work when we begin at verse one of a chapter. However, "even Homer nods". And some divisions interrupt the intended flow of thought. I read across chapter divisions. Here are two examples.

John 2:23- 3:1. Here's the text. "Many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man for he knew what was in man. Now there was a man named Nicodemus, a member of the ruling council. He came to Jesus by night."

Nicodemus was different. He had been impressed by Christ's miracles and saw beyond the wonder of them. He said "No man could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God was not with him." His insight singled Nicodemus out from the crowd. John 2:24 tells us that Jesus did not believe in them who believed in his name -actual Greek. They saw him as just a wonder worker, a magician. The multitudes whom Jesus fed were just as dull in perception, and understood nothing, only that He produced bread. What it signified never entered their heads, or who He was.

The disciples also could be obtuse. Jesus stilled the storm. They were awed - terrified in fact, but only remarked "What manner of man is this?" - hardly penetrating insight.

In Like's Gospel the feeding of the five thousand is set in a textual framework about Christ's identity, who he was. This miracle should have made it obvious, but the disciples missed it. Jesus expressed surprise that they had not caught the truth behind it. The performance and the scale of it bore the hallmarks of God the Provider, who "satisfied the desire of every living thing."

Preconceptions and prejudice are scales on our eyes. Miracles don't remove them. Oddly, Christ's enemies expected Him to work miracles, which is more than some of His friends expect today, but they remained His enemies. Jesus went into a synagogue where was a man with a withered arm. The synagogue's strictly pious but hard unbelieving leaders watched to see if Christ would heal him - on the Sabbath. Of course, He did. (Mark 3:1-6) They were furious. The miracle brought no light to dawn on their minds, but it had found an un-curtained window in the heart of Nicodemus. He said, 'No man could do these miracles except God be with him'.

I have seen God's healing wonders for 50 years, but I don't rely upon healing miracles to bring in converts. Only the Gospel can do that. Signs and wonders simply "confirm the Word", and demonstrate something more than just power. They bring home the truth of truth, the Gospel. Healing might be as attractive today to the crowds as bread was to those following Jesus. But God has chosen to save people by the preaching of the Word, - preached not in word only but in power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel 'comes with' the Spirit, if we have that sort of faith.

For another example of reading across chapter divisions. John 13, 14. Chapter 14 is deservedly extremely popular. Read from the opening verse it is a powerful and almost perfect beginning. Yet Jesus did not begin speaking at that point, apropos of nothing. Verse 1 continues what He was saying in the 1st verse of chapter 13. "Simon Peter asked him 'Lord where are you going?' Jesus replied 'Where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.' Peter asked 'Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!' Then Jesus answered 'Will you really lay down your life for m? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows you will disown me three times. Do not let your

hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. I am going to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me"

Peter, anxious to follow and be with Jesus, was told by Him that he would crash down in horrible defeat and humiliation. Jesus knew they would all flee and forsake Him within hours and be gripped by desperate failure. He graciously pre-empted their distress saying "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust in me"

Perhaps some feeling of shame always fluttered like dirty rags around the edges of Peter's memories. But Jesus understood! Against those unforgettable memories He left these assuring words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled". The disciples were troubled, stunned by Christ's words to Peter, but Jesus lit a lamp of hope and love that burned for years through the dark nights of self-reproach and regret, Peter wept bitterly, but his tears did not extinguish that lamp.

For me, for us all, who have bitter consciousness of failure the words of Jesus are for us also. They were addressed to prospective failures, not prospective martyrs.

These two examples of cross-division readings exemplify the miracle of Bible unity.

I have to read critical and liberal comment. The prevailing theories see Scripture as edited bits of this and that. Each Gospel writer is taken as expressing his own personal outlook. This critical method leaves out the essential factor of Divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit. It is flawed treatment of the Scriptures.

The Bible is not just a potpourri of various people's experiences and reactions, Received as the Word of God every word is bound in the bundle of life in never-ending wonder. Faith takes the Word and it becomes an explosive force. People study and ponder but we are asked only to read. Read right on, across chapters and books. It is the only Word of life

I Was Just Thinking 6

God's special gift just for me. More than a ministry gift.

At 14 heaven crashed into my 84lb body, and I found myself speaking with tongues almost without realising it. All I could think about was that God had broken in upon me. The effects continue, but - I had joined the battle.

For decades it was reckoned that if people spoke with tongues they must have many other faults too. Pentecostals were useful aunt sallies in many a sermon. Our reputation was condensed from rumour. Why tongues objections? We shall see, but for a long time our Pentecostal image was hardly prepossessing, I suppose. We were poor, struggling. The church world would forgive that, but - tongues! Spirit-baptism attested by glossalalia!

However, criticism can't kill. In 1906, the first chiropractor (bone setter) was jailed, and the medical world didn't finally accept the practice until 1974. Even football! In 1796 a Derbyshire court jury said "(Football is) a custom which, while it has no better recommendation for its continuance than its antiquity, is disgraceful to humanity and civilisation, subversive of good order and government, and destructive of the morals, properties and very lives of the inhabitants" The 'beautiful game' survives and so does the Pentecostal movement, lately projected to number a billion by the year 2040.

But why object to tongues? Behind the dislike is fear, fear of an 'outside' power invading us. Naturally we guard our personal sovereignty. "I am me". But at Pentecost the Holy

Spirit claimed His right to His people. 'They 'let go and let God' and tongues were heard. I myself yielded, though I could have resisted, but knowing this was God I did not. Yield yourselves unto God, "yield your members (as) members of righteousness."

The church started with tongues, though some churches would rather forget their embarrassing lowly beginnings in a mere upper room, with disciples their poor relations. Tongues established the true character of Christianity as spiritual-physical union. For centuries Christianity was regarded as just a spiritual religion. When the Pentecostals began teaching the baptism in the Spirit, traditional teachers opposed it saying the baptism takes place at conversion unnoticed. The Spirit is not in the habit of coming unnoticed. However the Bible is interpreted the unassailable fact is that Jesus offers every believer a direct, spiritual-physical experience of power.

At 14, I easily yielded to the Spirit being used to yielding to others - especially my mother. Although my breeding as a north-easterner meant no 'soft' feelings, tears especially, I was overwhelmed. But the fish-and-chips north east was a million miles from the impassive dignity of Eton and Harrow. Sadly, nobody with a stiff upper lip has ever spoken with tongues. Why fear it? God is always to be feared, but His desire to bless living people is plain enough.

Supernatural tongues are also natural. We didn't invent tongues. Why would we, such a peculiar thing? It was God our Maker. He formed us, so that we could speak in tongues. We are not freaks - it is all the others who clam up on God. All first Christians spoke in tongues and Peter said it was for all, even those far off.

From their early 20th century appearance, Pentecostals suffered opposition and isolation, being driven into a corner, but God was in their corner. They knew the truth. That kept the Pentecostals They knew it could change the world.

Pentecost is an intense encounter with the Spirit of God. The baptism in the Spirit is an unique and wonderful experience. To operate other spiritual gifts for ministry, such as healing, bring no special feelings except to the patients, no tingling hands or electric vibrations.. We heal by faith, not feeling. But tongues, a dynamic down-rush from heaven upon one's whole being, is an awesome personal experience, It is mainly for one's self and personal edification.

For decades the Christian world admitted Pentecostals existed only like mice behind the skirting. But they endured rejection knowing this was the power Jesus promised for world evangelism. Judging by the earlier struggling Pentecostal churches, it didn't look like it Their 'power' apparently amounted to three tongues 'messages' on Sunday mornings. But it had vast implications. For half a century the Pentecostal banner looked a poor fluttering rag, but it betokened that the King was in residence.

The 19th century saints prayed for power to win the world for Christ. The answer came with the 20th century understanding of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Until then believers had no way to know when power had come. They were never sure they had prayed enough. Some came to suppose that praying was power. More prayer, more power! It is still a common idea with talk of 'prayer-power', instead of the power of the Spirit, a gift. Power is not to be generated by effort and time, but comes by the anointing, the baptism in the Spirit.

Just as with any subject, arguments can be brought up against Spirit-baptism and tongues. To despise this unique and wonderful confrontation with the Spirit of God, is revealing. Why be like that? It is hard to know why anybody would not want what the

disciples had, but nobody can speak against the truth without revealing their own character. The Bible is our judge. Our reactions show what we are made of, but the truth goes marching on.

When the Creator became a Creature

Christ came into the world to save sinners but in any case He would have come. He loved us "while we were yet sinners" but not because we were sinners. There's nothing endearing about sinfulness.

God could save us only by coming, He did come. and salvation is achieved, But that 'coming!' The how of it is awesome. He was the Creator, and His condescension brings worship and praise, but it was infinitely more than coming as a visitor in an act of Divine humility, He became one of us and part of His own material world, I had to think about that. He owned the world and then the world owned Him.

"The Word was made flesh". The Word by whom "All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made." To save us was possible only by the stupendous act and mystery of incarnation. He was not a special form or appearance and didn't put on a temporary guise for the occasion distinct from His eternal self. He WAS His eternal self, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and for ever", 'very God of very God'. The invisible joined Himself with the visible, Spirit with matter, Divine nature with human nature. He entered the heart of His own world, for ever.

That is the truth about the world, a new work of God. The Lord and His world united, Nature subject to God, and God subject to nature. He shared our material and mortal experience, even death. The Builder occupies the house. "In Him we live and move, and have our being." Made one with us, His hand is in everything. His local Bethlehem coming was a cosmic occasion.

Christ "upholds all things by His word of power". He clothed Himself with a material garment, His mighty arm a human arm, sleeved in nature. When He died on the Cross the planet shuddered and the sunlight flickered. The universe reacts to Him, for the whole natural order has met its Lord (See Romans 8)

However, that Creation has been cankered by evil. The Holy One took our nature upon Himself, and suffered to be one with the world as it was. But its corruption did not corrupt Him. The world reeked like an abattoir with the blood of murder and war but the smell did not cling even to his robes. Then In His own body He experienced the horrors of sin and knew what it was like to stand in the shoes of the guilty, or rather hang on the cross of the guilty.

Bernard Shaw said forgiveness of sin is impossible, because what's done can't be undone. Clever but misinformed! Christ broke into the dark world where all our past sins still muttered threats against us. He invaded the past where all wrongs can be righted, justified the wrongdoer as if he had done no wrong, and saved His people from their sins.

But God can't forgive and leave everything as it was. Sin had not left everything as it was. It turned Eden into a wilderness, and "the heavens are not clean in His sight". To forgive, God did this incredible thing, joined us and our world, worked from within the sinful order and tore the very roots of evil. Salvation affects heaven and earth.

When God created this world He had another act in view, the coming of Jesus. It was not an afterthought in an emergency but pre-planned. This world was made for Christ,

and also for His Cross, "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev.13:8). He died for our sins according to the Scriptures". The gross weight of everything God detested rested upon Him crushing Him in the garden to the ground in bloody sweat, but He carried the mountainous load up the Calvary road, and left it there. That dark Friday afternoon He tasted death in solidarity with sinners at the heart of things. From Him flows a stream of holy cleansing through the universe. Calvary built concrete hope into all existence, and saving power. The hell He knew we shall never know. The Carpenter turned the wooden cross into the door of life.

But the crucial fact was that the crucified One was also the Eternal one. No physical grave could contain the life-power of the universe The resurrection was bound to happen. He rose, and planted resurrection life in the world for ever. The upholder of all things said "I am the resurrection". From Him a resurrection cataract pours through the old order with renewal and life.

The world is not what it was. Something new is here, and that something is all Christ was, salvation, renewal and power. He did not slip into the world and out again, but belongs to us all for ever. Our world environs Him. He cares about it all. He has an eternal purpose, beginning with a new heaven and a new earth.

God eternally linking Himself with this material universe makes it more than a pro-tem arrangement until God can do something different. Humans will always be human, just as the Son of Man is, but joined to His immortality, are transformed into the children of God, never to be bodiless, gibbering, bloodless ghosts, as the ancient pagan world believed. Christ saves people, not just souls. We shall see Him and be like Him, body mind and spirit adapted to be with Him for ever. Amen!

Where eagles gather

I was asked what Jesus meant in that great "second coming" chapter, Matthew 24, (v.28) about eagles gathering where there was a carcass. Luke 17:37 says, 'body' but a dead body. Eagles are vultures.

Well, no I did not know what Jesus meant, but I had a look first at scholars, Dr. Manson, Dr. Donald A. Hagner, Dr. John Nolland. Disappointingly, they didn't know either, but offered their speculations and all disagreed with one another - typical anyway. Dr. Nolland wasn't seriously interested despite his three volume commentary on Luke, remarking there are many explanations. Here are their suggestions.

One, the eagles are the Roman legionaries who would destroy Jerusalem 40 years later.

Two, the eagles are the people gathered by Christ at His coming. (!)

Three, Jesus meant the swiftness with which judgement would come on the day of the Son of Man.

Four, nobody can miss Christ's coming like nobody can miss vultures coming to a dead body.

Each takes it that Christ's enigmatic saying is about the day of His coming. But it just doesn't fit! How can vultures have anything to do with Jesus' return in glory? Their scholarly suggestions were bound to be odd. Dr. Nolland said the vultures are the elect caught away with Christ! I ask you, would Jesus make such a crude comparison? By the way, there's nothing in the passage about judgment either.

Well, we can all think. My basis of enquiry is different. Obviously Christ's saying has nothing to do with His return. That was not all He had been talking about in this

discourse. He spoke of what the world would be like from His times to the end. He sums it all up, saying, "Where the carcass is the vultures will gather". A world of vultures! Christ's saying was a penetrating comment on the state of things as He prophesied they would be.

History is a story of vultures. So much distress is due to avarice and selfishness, everyone seeking gain at the expense of others. Jesus did refer to earthquakes, but otherwise the evils He listed were mostly man made. Troubles, great dangers, wars, persecutions, nations against nation, civil strife like the raging sea, false prophets, self-appointed messiahs, famines and pestilences, all traceable to avarice and selfishness in individuals or nations. Commerce and industry often show no more feeling than vultures for the mass of people. Where there is something to gain, the human predators pounce. History is made up of such stuff. "The love of money is the root of all evils".

This proverb of Jesus actually alludes to a Bible theme from the time of Abraham. God isolated Abraham from the world to get the world out of his system. The ways of nations and city states in the ancient world were brutal, murder, rapine, and oppression. To help their economy cities pillaged their neighbours. Genesis 14 is there as an example. Abraham had been in Ur, Egypt, Haran, and the Cities of the Plain. They all depended on rapacity, the bounty of war, vulture-like scavengers swooping down and making off with their neighbours' property. The great empires were typical. Nebuchadnezzar portrayed Babylon as a beautiful golden image. (Daniel 2) God described it as a preying beast trampling the earth, and also the empires of the Medes, Greeks and Romans.

The King of Sodom followed the world system. He offered Abraham the spoil of battle, but the patriarch refused it. God then said "Abraham I am thy exceeding great reward". God gave him a vision of another city whose foundations were not military power and whose wealth was not stolen gold stained with blood. The foundations were righteousness, laid by God. It was a vision of a civilised age we have scarcely achieved yet. We see riots about capitalistic practices, but what would our newscasters do if people stopped trying to get what wasn't theirs? Abraham was ahead of our times.

Jesus indicated that the future would be dominated by vultures, wanting what's going, first come first served "and the devil take the hindermost". Mankind's prehensile hand and predatory heart brought about conditions which Jesus said would precede His second advent. We used the emblems of Cross and Crusade when "Christian" armies slaughtered and plundered their way to Jerusalem 900 years ago. But there were many episodes before and since.

This 'proverb' of Christ is typical of His great wisdom. He flings it across the whole human scenario and sums it up. We have had 2000 years of vulture like economies and the inevitable distress.

In contrast, come other words of Jesus "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness". No wonder great criminal powers hate Christianity. Jesus challenges their systems of imperialist loot and exploitation. Stalin's 18 million Gulag slaves have just recently become newspaper revelation. What were Genghis Khan, Napoleon and Hitler but vultures? Has any nation a righteous aim except their own gain? The current God is Mammon.

Christian believers can't implement Christ's radical teaching by imposing it on nations. We should, and I hope do, exemplify it in our own lives. We are the light of the world.

Christian standards clash with the way of the world, like Abraham clashed with the King of Sodom. But, let the vultures gather to satisfy their greed, Christ calls us to follow Him. "If any man love the world, the love of God is not in him" said the apostle John. He meant universal cupidity.

Abraham looked for a city, the Kingdom of God, to which Jesus opened the door, and in which dwells righteousness. Twice-born believers are its citizens

Does God hurt to heal?

Only one place in the New Testament reads as if God brought hurt just to heal, John 9. Meeting a blind man the disciples asked Jesus about him, and Jesus' reply in the AV reads "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him, I must work the works of him that sent me!" Jesus then healed the man.

In fact one can read it differently with different punctuation. However it creates a problem as if God made the man blind so Jesus could heal it. That is morally repugnant, never a Bible idea.

Now this verse hinges on the Greek word, "hina". It occurs several times in John's Gospel. Bible translations usually render it "but that" or "in order that" like the AV. The NIV emphasises it "This has happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life". The words "This has happened" are not in the Greek text at all. This implies that God destined the man to be blind just so Jesus could heal him.

Does God cause misfortune so He can step in and rectify it, for His glory? The New Testament has no such teaching. Anyway, there were enough blind people in Israel without God making one more just so He can heal him.

Now the question rests on the Greek word "hina", rendered "so that" or "in order that". But this meaning is not fixed. It also means "Let it be". That is the meaning in John 9:2 and can be in other places in John. It is not a conjunction but an imperative. "let it be". The word 'hina' for "let it be" comes in the Greek Old Testament " more than once.

What Jesus actually said was "Neither has this man sinned nor his parents, but LET the works of God be done", He then healed the man.

The disciples were uselessly speculating about the man's blindness and its cause. Jesus never did and He wasn't interested in the disciples' question, only in healing the man. It is as if He said "Never mind who or what is to blame, let the works of God be manifested".

My early ministry consisted largely of the whys and wherefores of suffering. Library shelves are full of volumes philosophising on the subject. With a shock, long ago, I saw my intellectualised concerns about the sick had little relevance and anyway the problem was beyond my poor brains. Jesus said "heal the sick!" It never entered my head to ask "Why?" - not even in the recent inconsolable loss of my wife. Debating evil has little to do with faith, except knock it flat.

We are ministers, not philosophers. Our calling is compassion, prayer, faith and the Word. Our terms, full Gospel or 'Foursquare" meant the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour, Baptiser. King and Healer. He is being 'proclaimed', but is Christ as Healer being toned down to general and less specific terms? Is our theology wobbling under the test of objective faith? The term "Foursquare" was coined by healing pioneers of the 19th

century, for "Christ the Saviour, Healer, Coming King and Sanctifier". If Healer is no longer written in capitals, is it the Foursquare Gospel?

We must obey Jesus. "Let the works of God be manifest!" It is a command. So is "Heal the sick!" Is church practice in line with Christ's will? His compassions express His will, but does our will express His compassions?

I Was Just Thinking 7

Suppose Wesley came back!

I once preached in George Whitfield's pulpit. (He was dead then!). Earlier in my preaching ambitions, by way of experiment I thought of memorising and delivering one of this mighty man's sermons. Reading it I soon realised it would suit my congregation like a meal of hard ships' biscuits. I decided to move up a century and I chose one of Spurgeon's 19th century masterpieces. This I managed to commit to memory and delivered it verbatim.

I waited for amazed reactions to my eloquence. They came - from just one newly converted lady, complaining "Why didn't you preach like you usually do?" Well of course, Spurgeon spoke brilliantly to his own generation. God sent me to do my best for my own generation - well, some of them!

I've heard prayers enough asking God to send another Wesley. (On horseback?) Would he really draw 20,000 miners spellbound at Moorfields again? And no microphone? Time doesn't change, but times do and times change people. That is why I contributed thousands of my old sermon notes to enhance the nation's waste retrieval. My preaching began at 14 - to stoics, bless them! Since then, powerful new influences like sculptors have carved out the shape of modern man - war, technology, education, new culture. Space travel alone has planted a new instinct in us, a sense of wider worlds. My first sermon wouldn't do today!

Have you heard of 'contextualising'? Well, stay with me, but it often means placing the Gospel 'in context' of one's hearers, making it suit them. Of course people alter, so should not the message alter? Actually that is ridiculous because people don't change in that way at all, any more than they change by not needing to breathe. The truth stays the truth and obviously it can't be adjusted because we happen to have been re-shaped. We always need the truth. It is basic to our nature, like water, food, sleep, music, beauty and love.

Human nature can never become so different that the truth doesn't apply any more. Two and two will always be four and we shall never want it to be five. The modern man is a TV and Press brain-washed species, but he is not yet an alien species. God made the Gospel for humans and we are still human. We die without water, and likewise without God we never really live - people only kid themselves they do. It is true for ever that "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God".

The pulpit is where Christian values, morals and belief can be upheld. If not, use it as firewood. My own bookshelf carries temptations to an easier, liberalised Gospel of popular interest. Dr. Thomas Bowdler produced "The Family Shakespeare" a sanitized edition with all words eliminated he thought improper. If we (or our songs) bowdlerise the Gospel, performing excision on words like blood, conversion, redemption,

repentance, we would be left with a useless "the whole counsel of God". Preachers can preach aspects of truth but select lines that don't carry the heart blood of the Gospel. The world's merry-go-round is like a potter's wheel constantly reshaping us all, but we are still vessel of clay made to carry the wine of God's eternal Word. We are stewards of the mysteries of God. How we present those mysteries is left to our wisdom, but the object is to conform the world to Christ. Diplomacy is not our job. Our friendships should not leave unconverted people supposing that any differences between them and Christians is just a matter of viewpoint. We betray them and the truth. "Be ye not confirmed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2.

Reading articles on 'identity' by Christian leaders there was little about Christianity being human identity with Christ. Baptism pictures it. We are saved by identifying with Him in His death and have life by becoming children of the resurrection. The shame of Jonah was that the heathen shipmen had to wake him up to ask who His God was - he a prophet of God! My late wife used to try to identify born again Christians on television and in real life had a pretty shrew eye. Darkness cloaks the corruption around us, but our faces are towards the rising sun. We should be noticeable.

Sitting in local ministerial fraternals where I knew nobody, listening with one half of my brain and the other part seeking occupation, I wondered which denomination each minister belonged. Neat dress - Anglican. Tweed jacket, Methodist, Jeans and tea-shirt and sandals, URC. The same but with shoes, Baptist, Dressed nicely, Pentecostals and smaller groups wanting to give a good impression among the clergy.

Clothes may or may not tell us what a man is. We are exhorted to 'put on' Christ, which means a positive act, studying to be like Him. We don't like people "putting it on", using an accent which is not theirs, or acting above themselves. But nobody was ever put off by anybody 'putting on' Christ. He is what we aim to be like. They say even a dog becomes in some way like its owner - or is it the other way round sometimes?

The searching question is whether people notice our identity with Christ? Can it be said of us "They took notice of them that they had been with Jesus." ?

Must we analyse people to save them?

One of my seven deadly sins is to scribble comments in the margin of books and magazines. I fell greatly yesterday reading a scholarly periodical. The editor stated that "modern man is seeking an identity". I wrote "I'm not, nor anybody else I know". Well perhaps it was just too scholarly for me.

The commercial world has to form some generic notion of the sort of folk who might buy their products, buyers like you and me. I learned that they class ify us to be either the "explorer-producer entrepreneurial mode", or as "the sensation-seeker/gatherer" type. I didn't know I was either.

Jesus sent us to preach to every creature. Obviously today's people are the product of influences like the high-tec age, universal education and entertainment on tap. John Wesley did not preach to anybody like that. Obviously for practical purposes we must take modern developments into account; But evangelism itself, the Gospel message, is unalterable, for all human beings for ever, always relevant.

People remain sinners needing a Saviour. The water boards don't need to consult how what people are like. Everybody needs their 'product'. The NHS too just treat sick

people without bothering whether they are modern or old fashioned. We are not technological specimens. We need Jesus. A drowning man, professor or ignoramus needs a lifebelt. The Gospel is for 'every creature', the whosoever, and it works with anybody.

I used to lecture on 'Modern Confrontation', adapting everything, 'worship', buildings, language, music, advertising, to the current styles, using normal English, avoiding evangelical jargon and clichés, and setting our whole general approach to the age in which we live. Myself I had felt this to be a need and at the beginning had studied to find new expressions for religious words, especially 'saved', to give it impact on people today.

We can change the jargon but not the message. By the Gospel God confronts His rebellious world. It is not an anachronism, dated and useless, any more than Euclid's 2300 year old geometry. The Gospel is His Word, not our word. God has 'put us in trust' to say what He wants said. That is our simple obligation, tell it as it is, without fear or favour, in season, whether it increases our congregations or not. It is our right to preach it, and we have no right not.

The Gospel was first heard in Roman times. There is a distinct impression that it was designed for that time. It seems that the message was considered highly inappropriate in those days. For example Paul planned to go to the Romans who had just crucified Christ as a criminal and preach Christ crucified! It looked ridiculous. He said "to the Greeks it was foolishness and to the Jew a stumbling block". But "I am ready to preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also for I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ".

Neither was Peter ashamed to preach Christ crucified to the very people who crucified him. He boldly blamed them. In any case the world of the disciples was not substantially different from our world. The great Roman and Grecian civilisations were as pluralistic as ours, nobody then believed in truth and were no different from our postmodern generation. Not a glimmer of truth illumined the old world and today except for Christians people still walk in darkness. Sex obsession dominated the Roman world the same as it does ours. Corruption was typical of every age.

The first preachers went into a world totally devoid of any pre-evangelism or notion of God. They tackled the work head-on, simply proclaiming salvation in the name of Jesus, and they conquered. The Gospel carried power in the first century and carries power in the twenty-first century. Our vision is the whole world for Christ.

A friend drew my attention to seven words in Revelation 19:9 "These are the true sayings of God" and said it refers to the whole of the Scriptures. God speaks by the Word. It is not to satisfy academic interest, nor to answer all our impertinent 'why?' questions. God speaks with a purpose and with effect. . Psalm 119:50, "Thy Word has quickened me". His Word never returns to Him void says. Isaiah 55:11. If He says "Let there be light!", there is light; "Be made whole", we are made whole; "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee", we know they are. He waits for us to speak His word so that He Himself can speak.

The present in-word is 'postmodern', meaning the general mood is to be uncertain. Even science has lost popular credibility.

Leaving the "modern" behind that swore by reason and logic, the mood today is that there are things beyond reason. We believers have always pointed that out, so that sounds fine but anti-modern reactions have now attained sheer imbecility. Many thinkers say that words have no real meanings. One 'thinker' declares that nobody ever wrote a

sentence that meant anything. (Oddly, they all write book to prove words mean nothing!) Seventy per cent of Americans are reported to believe that there is not ultimate truth. Anything is true if you think it is. It is relative.

Meanwhile, there's nothing to breathe but air, nothing to eat and drink but food, and nothing to believe but the Gospel. No variation of truth can redeem a soul or save a sinner. All the vast panoply of modern business, modern technology and sophisticated thought must stand aside when a broken soul cries " Lord save me!" Only Jesus saves.

Preach? Preach what?

The Dean (ex army Captain) shouted up the stairs of my student quarters, "George, go to Reading tonight and give 'em something to get their teeth into".

That constituted my total college tutoring on what 'to give 'em".

I had had church history, systematic theology, Romans and Acts, and crowd psychology to handle our congregations, but what was the point of my six times a week job of talking to a congregation? I arrived at my first church appalled at the prospect of speaking at all kinds of meetings and occasions. What was I suppose to say? I blanched at the thought as if hearing a sentence of penal servitude.

I studied furiously but in those days of limited books and tools I was reduced to spending six Bible Studies nights to prove that the 'sons of God' in Genesis 6 did have children by earthling women. People still came, to my astonishment and admiration. But beyond Pentecostal premises, preachers are known to say whatever they think about anything - Thatcherism, the environment, the health service, or whatever happens to be in the news.

Now I had a keen interest in church history and looked to see how this preaching business began. Services followed the synagogue pattern, Scriptures read and members commenting, as shown in Luke 4 and other Scriptures. Paul took advantage of synagogue readings and propounded the new Gospel message. Gentiles followed theatre styles and preaching took its cue from public orators like Demosthenes, with applause and handkerchiefs waving. Appolos was judged as a more able orator than Paul.

The apostles preaching was to establish the original teaching of Jesus. They were the true authorities although hundreds of others undertook the same task. The letters of apostles were treated as Holy Writ.

The apostles taught converts in the things of God. But they needed help, auxiliaries, men who reliably brought the Word and could move from church to to confirm believers in the faith. These were the 'prophets' named in Ephesians 4. There are several kinds of prophets and not all prophets prophesied supernaturally. Ephesians links "apostles and prophets' as the vital workers on which the church was founded in the beginning, that is by their teaching. This type of itinerating teacher-prophets is not needed under modern conditions.

The 'schools of the prophets' in the Old Testament were similar. Ancient Israel had almost no public means of communication, not even synagogues until after the captivity. But the schools of the prophets aimed to keep the law of the Lord before the people. Their work was not particularly supernatural.

"Preaching" in Scripture is not sermonising, Sermons today may be Bible teaching or exhortation, but are often a kind of church entertainment justified by the hope of doing

some good. To preach (Gr. 'kyrussein') is strictly 'to proclaim'. We may sermonise the proclamation but proclaim it we must.

An address of some sort is the main feature of all church services, so considering its importance I am surprised how little the subject is studied. The only preparation for it usually are courses in Bible introduction, systematic theology, church history, which have little to do with the pastor's obligation to keep everybody happy several times a week with his pronouncements from the platform. What should he talk about?

I've listened to many perorations, my soul open for some enheartening word from God. Much of it is good, but I still feel that preaching is an indefinite subject. The pastor will always say something but is it what must be said? Before I hardly knew the Bible I had to give Bible studies every week (imagine that!), For six weeks I fed my sheep on Genesis 6 regarding "the sons of god" having children by earthling women.

There are certainly different ideas about the job. Some mount the pulpit to crack the whip and say 'do as I tell you!' or to get at people they are not happy about, or to challenge their hearers, or amuse them, or inform them.

If a preacher only opens his Bible to find something to say, his own soul will be too starved to help anybody. What to preach means knowing the leading of the Spirit and familiarity with the whole Book. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks. They drew wine at Cana only because they had worked hard bringing in water.

Pastors are not oracles on every subject and people don't come to church for his opinions on the environment, government policy, or welfare. They want a word from the Book.

"Times of refreshing" - what's that?

The first Pentecostal meetings I attended as a boy were held in a large hall accessed by a narrow wooden stairway and heated in winter by one huge combustion stove. That was before the days of fire regulations!

I caught the general spirit. We were all keenly aware of the Holy Spirit. In our innocent theology there was more Spirit present sometimes than others. The hall was lighted by single bulbs with warehouse shades, hanging from the high ceiling on very long flexes. Sometimes they would begin to swing, no doubt due to the rising currents of warm air. But in that faith-filled atmosphere it was a sign of the power of God.

Those very early days were led by little Pentecostal experience. It was all new. Schoolboy as I was the preaching fascinated me. We often heard sermons about things that provoked God's displeasure. We had no doubt that the quality of blessing in a service depended on how God felt about us, and that how we went on could encourage or discourage the favour of His presence. I learned early about, "sin in the camp", perhaps a secret smoker, or 'bobbed hair' of the young ladies, for example, and the Spirit would be absent. It was dangerous doctrine breeding suspicions unless the church was being very successful.

However our sense of the Spirit was not all uneducated imagination. Power did descend sometimes. After being in services practically eight times week for two years, one night unexpectedly I had an Acts 2 experience, nobody 'helping', just as I took communion. But most Pentecostals can recall occasions when they have sensed that God had 'drawn near'. For me sometimes it was as if I was being baptised in the Spirit again.

God is God and odd phenomena is surely not unlikely? More than once I have closed a meeting and nobody moved, as if glued to their seats, perhaps 200 people, with people white faced under Holy Spirit conviction. "Falling under the Spirit" may sometimes be dubious, but during the war it took place when I was preaching, and I did not approve at all, putting it down to nerves and nonsense. I told people to get up again.

One such experience was so powerful it changed my ministry to this day. My work now is mainly as a writer exploring for Bible truth. In that very way the strange grip of the Spirit comes sometimes suddenly upon my mind. Some occasions are different. Talking to the late Duncan Campbell, who led the 1949 Lewis 'revival', he told me of unusual evidences of God's presence, especially people being deeply convicted of sin. He also mentioned hearing the angels singing, and in my own church we had had the same experience, but only once. In Birmingham a pastor told me that everyone in the meeting saw Jesus literally standing before them.

The subject is very practical. Why do these special occasions happen and can we pray for them? What is the 'theology' behind them?

Are they 'special' at all? I am sure we are not to interpret them to mean God is unpredictable. We may see these events as odd, unusual, but God doesn't . He doesn't do odd things as He fancies. Some put it down to His 'sovereignty' - meaning that He just made up His mind suddenly and for His own inscrutable reason to do something abnormal. I don't like that definition of sovereignty. God is faithful, never erratic.

Our basic theology about God is in the hymn "Great is thy faithfulness. His faithfulness is not just to His promises, but to the revelation of Himself in His the Word. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal His disposition, character, nature, that is, His essential heart. He Himself never changes and never does anything which conflicts with His nature. That we can lay down as true. He never acts in an uncharacteristic way. What He does, we can say "That's Him!"

So how do we account for times when to us He seems to excel Himself, and something greater happens than usual? What does it mean?

We must see from Scripture, and from experience, that God is not tied down to any routine. He will do the exceptional, but it is all part of His ongoing purpose and will. In anyone's career they will have to go beyond what they usually do, but it is a necessary for their general objectives.

God is a living God, not a machine that will do exactly the same things all the time. He is not only living, but personal, with eternal purposes beyond our present awareness. In fact we should rely upon His doing the unusual when the situation calls for it. He doesn't open the Red Sea every day. He sent the Spirit with fire and wind, only once to signalise age of the Spirit. He opened prison gates a couple of times - it was essential then. We cannot so define God as to predict everything He is likely to do.

Nevertheless when God acts, it is as Spurgeon said "a sign and promise" of what He will do. When God told Abimelech to ask Abraham to pray for his healing, that's God, right from the start, and He has never been any different about sickness.

I've noticed that when something special happens, people want to cling to it to happen some more. A church I knew had had a wonderful burst of glory one prayer meeting that continued for two more nights. Bu ever after they looked around and wondered why it wasn't like that all the time, feeling there must be something wrong among them.

There was no need. The three days were their mountain experience seeing Jesus, but like the disciples work awaited them in the valley.

What is not the normal to us, is normal to Him. His immutability, His changelessness, is not that of a mountain glacier. He comes as a living visitor. He describes Himself as a fountain, a constant uprush with ever changing beauty and form. I have fine a water feature in my garden. I notice people stand and watch it and it never seems to bore anyone as the same old thing. A fountain is a constant up-rush of water, but it is a new explosion of cascading beauty every second. God is the infinite author of all change and activity. We see His changelessness in His constant love and kindness

I Was Just Thinking 8

Christmas

It was Christmas, and I had just attained my teens, a hungry year of malnutrition and rickets, but in my hand lay a valued gift. There I sat, trying to extract my 'merry Christmas' from it and determined to revel in the spirit of the day with my special present, a tin of home-made toffee. That evening it filtered into my head that chewing toffee was not a catalyst of Christmas joy. This realisation could be early evidence that I had crossed the gap between childhood and adolescence except that millions of adults still think the Christmas spirit derives from comestibles, and from bottles in particular. A TV character once said she wasn't celebrating Christmas so had sent it back to the shop. However, after I became a Christian, I did not depend on eatables as a source of delight, though perhaps that was because food in the depressed north-east was hardly of delightful quality. Jesus said "Is not life more important than meat?" and I think we had begun to prove it.

My earliest theology was rudimentary but adequate. I knew Jesus had come to Bethlehem, lived, been crucified for me, and gone back to heaven. Only, at 15, I was not surprised that Jesus having been killed left us. (Although of course I knew He had been raised from the dead). I attended regular teaching which in those early years did not reach very high or plumb very deep so I soon picked what everybody knew. It was enough for us to rejoice in salvation. While singing Christmas carols at home around our old American organ, some complained that we sang them as if we meant them. Well we did. Christmas set me pondering. Aren't they one sided (joy to us, joy to me, joy to the world)? Wonderfully true of course, and the greatest fact about this planet is that Jesus came here. But what about Him and His side? He became human – a stupendous event for Him as well as for us.

So we come to Bethlehem, shepherds, wise men, lowing cattle, and this tiny new baby. A door had opened in Bethlehem's skies and He had come through accompanied by the music and trumpets of ranks of angels. From where, from what vastness? We have heard of a dominion of joy, of glittering-winged angels, lords of ancient worlds, dazzling living creatures, great intelligences, and glorious spirits that populate unknown heights and depths of that other world. This baby had emerged from there, His glory disguised in gross flesh. Incarnation!

This is shattering drama. The implications are beyond human imagination. "*The Word made flesh*"! The greatest Bethlehem impact was not on us, but on Him, the babe in the manger straw. What we must see is that what impacts God impacts all things. Thinking

about that, the incarnation was a Divine event that crashed across the entire universe. It is an ocean of truth to explore. God's view of Christmas is deep and imponderable. How did the Father "feel", surrendering Jesus to us? He is infinite God. Did He 'feel' it at all? Could it really 'cost' the Almighty and unchangeable Creator anything?

One thing we know. The Father not only gave us His Son, but meant it as a supreme sign of His love. If it cost God nothing, how could it show He loved us? A gift that costs nothing proves nothing. God had made the world just by saying "Let it be!" Was the miracle of Jesus in the same category? Obviously not! What value would that express?

Jesus was never the product of a word. He was THE word, born to the Virgin by the eternal passion of a God bent on saving His world. "*O generous love*", unknown, incomprehensible. The truth is we will never know what this gift actually did to God. The human can never encompass Deity. Yet, we know He expended all He had. This is the Christmas mystery for which we adore Him.

God gave. He could not give meanly. Infinite God can only give infinitely, to the utmost. Jesus is the declaration of His immeasurable greatness. What a gift Jesus is! Even God was proud of Him. "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*". He is the love gesture of the Sovereign Majesty of the Almighty, and worthy of our praise.

God didn't loan Jesus. God doesn't do things on a temporary basis. He has no pre-tem or occasional interests, no one-off phases, no past, no yesterdays and no dispensations. What He ever was, He is for ever. The greatest paradox and mystery is how the unchangeable God became Man, and became what He wasn't. But "*great is the mystery of godliness, God was manifest in the flesh.*" 1Timothy 3:16.

Putting on manhood He never cast it aside. He didn't doff humanity like a diver taking off his suit after a plunge into an alien element. The greatest name in heaven and earth today is Jesus Christ, a human name, and "*Jesus Christ (is) the same yesterday, today and for ever*".

Time after time the New Testament names Him as the undying Mediator and changeless Man Christ Jesus. "*There is one God and one mediator between God and men, THE MAN Christ Jesus*" (1Timothy 2:5). He presents us to God as Man and presents God to us being Himself God, always 'this same Jesus'.

Such a transcendent mystery of God becoming Man, the mystery of the Person of Christ, God's most profound act, shakes all creation. It is like looking into the face of God. Deity suffering human experience. The old deists' "natural religion" said "God's in His heaven and all's well with the world" - their two-tier world. That isn't our world. Christ has tied heaven and earth together, the Divine and the physical. On Calvary He outstretched His arms, his feet off the earth, and His head lifted to heaven, bound us all in the bundle of life with Himself and made us citizens of the Kingdom of God. What lies beyond it?

This cross-over of God and man is the second phase of creation that was always intended. "*The lamb was slain from the foundation of the earth*" (Revelation 13:8). The earth was God's stage, made for Jesus, on which eternal redemption would take place. He was not an afterthought or an emergency measure. He always was the keystone to the complexities and architecture of the Divine purposes arching eternity.

When God became man, it happened in Bethlehem but it was the epi-centre of a cosmic earthquake. The Lord of all things affected all things, impregnating them with a new

reality, new forces and new possibilities. Healing, restoration, resurrection and cleansing are planted in earthly soul. Today has become the day of salvation! Powers of regeneration are part of the new order of spiritual potential. Forgiveness flows in our mundane channel. The explosion of life in Christ's tomb ripples for ever across the universe, bringing the death of death.

This Christmas time, that is our world, Christ-visited. Ring the bells! Disguise the drab day with the prettiest decorations! Eat, drink, cast off dull care, rejoice and be glad in the Lord, let all creatures in heaven and earth rejoice! The Lord has done it! He has wrought salvation and His victory is ours.

Art and greatness.

Professional musician friends told me they plan a classical arts festival at Oxford in 2004 as a means to promote the Gospel, mainly music, an art form well commended and also commanded in Scripture.

I play instruments, but what about art? Exodus 20:4 says "*Thou shalt not make unto thee any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*". Well! Most readers of IWT will know, I have "made the likeness" of many things "on earth", in some 2000 landscape sermon illustrations painted in church and on TV, also a few portraits. So, the First Commandment? Because of it, Israel produced no great artists, only musicians.

Recent bereavements took away my pleasure for music and painting. I could not bring myself to pick up a brush, open my violin case, or sit at a piano. But, at the moment I find these activities demanding my attention again. Why? God given instinct insists on them.

Of course, I quoted only part of the First Commandment. It continues "*Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them, for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God*". So in defence I don't paint a mountain or a person to bow down and worship them!

Now the fascinating truth is that for thousands of years very few owned any kind picture. Then came photography. It developed and a practical method was found by W.H.F. Talbot. So recent that it was after my grandfather was born. Photography swiftly brought a world revolution. Today we are swamped with pictures, photographs, films, television, videos, prints. I have a colour photo of myself taken by mobile phone! "*No likeness of anything in heaven or earth*"? We have the likeness of *everything* on earth!

Moses law came when he was dragging Israel reluctantly out of idolatry. It was the way of life throughout the earth. Israel had known nothing else. Men drew and carved and then worshipped what they produced. It always surprises me when my brush produces likenesses. Possibly pagans credited it to spirit forces investing the work.

However, it is incredible but pictures are in many people's minds the real world. If you don't watch "The Street" you don't know what is going on in the world. Fictional characters are the most important. Television determines who is "great". It presents super humans. But it is false greatness, hollow glory, pseudo fame for doing nothing except being seen on screen.

Films and television produce the likeness of things on earth. Then - the world bows down to them. "Stars" appear, stars of the sacred turf, stars of stage and Hollywood. Millions adore them, with a frightening similarity to religious worship. Never since the

Pharaohs have men and women been treated so much like gods and as if it was a religious rite, vast wealth is laid at their sacred feet.

Baseball players in America paid about £1 million a year, went on strike for more. In politics the main plank in the platform of one political party was the re-distribution of wealth. It has been quietly omitted. The government approved the national lottery handing large portions of the national wealth to non-creative people but the new 'great' of the screen are honoured with titles and wealth as if they were the heroes of war.

God's First Commandment was against "likenesses" because they drew false worship. How near is that danger now? Our technology brings grossly undeserved fame to mortals often with small talent, and often whose personal lives will not bear looking into. These are the new 'great, whose fans are excited even to touch them, but whose character is such I would not touch them with a padded gloves.

This world of pictures is part of the world system which Christ resisted. We are not to be conformed to it, but to the godly standards and ideals of greatness, with Christ the supreme role model. True greatness is not fame and fortune, but love, humility, and selfless service. Jesus coined the word Mammon for money as if it was a devil.

The Bible I think praises only one person as 'great' an unknown farmer's wife in Shunem. (2Kings 4). She had no great riches, no stunning talent. The Bible describes only her extraordinary and courageous faith and that alone brought her the supreme Bible accolade of greatness. "*Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?*"

Few of the truly great appear on television. Their way of life doesn't suit the character of broadcasting. They follow Jesus, serving everywhere, dedicated, humble, living for others, seeking no reward but Christ's '*Well done!*' They are the bringers of decency, peace, hope and succour to the least and lowest. Paul described them "*Unknown yet well known, as poor yet making many rich!*" Disciples, martyrs, witnesses, missionaries, preachers, scholars, teachers, doctors, nurses, venturing where nobody but Christians will dare.

If Hollywood wants great drama, let it turn to the annals of the Christian church, beyond all the ferocity of a money-crazed world and the hyped and pseudo famous, and look again at the noble armies of Jesus. . But - how great are we?

Bibles I have known

It is Christmas, so let me tell stories. The technical bit comes at the end. It happens that stories about Bibles seem to represent chapters in my life.

At seven in an Anglican mission Sunday school I handled my first Bible, glossy backs and red edges. Religion and the Bible were then to me alien and incomprehensible, my family being sceptical of religion. The Bible's peculiar book titles, Ecclesiastes, Chronicles etc were a giggle. We breathed on the glossy backs of the Bibles and drew silly faces in the condensation.

Years passed. A large volume had been deposited in our attic as part payment of a debt by a crazy old man. He used to read it to his wife while swearing at her and forcing her to eat out of a pig trough. He died, once he was buried she died of joy. The whole street talked of his secret hoard of money. My widowed mother with six of us at school, one day thought of that Bible and suggested it hid his wealth. I was allowed to explore. Enthusiastically I brought it down and laid it on the table.. The covers were wrapped in heavy brown paper, layer after layer, and sewn tightly with black linen. It looked hopeful

as a place where he could have concealed high value banknotes. Each wrapper removed increased our expectation and excitement. Then the last thick wrapper. There nestling next to the original hard back was - nothing, absolutely nothing!

That Bible was a financial let down. Soon after, however, mother and I were converted and learned that Bible did contain inestimable treasures.

My next chapter began with a parallel AV/RV New Testament which I proudly gained as a prize for a long essay on prophecy. Encouraged, I invested sixpence a week for a large Schofield reference Bible. Then using Anstey's "*How to Study the Bible*", I did a six months study stint, two hours before work each day. It gave me my first grasp of the Word. But Schofield, and I a Pentecostal, did not agree.

My next new Bible found me a Bible college student. Came my first proud preaching appointment. Dressed like Principal George Jeffreys, I emerged on the world with my new Bible. It was loose leaf, bound like a ledger with sermon notepaper exactly the same as the pages interleaved and along with them. The mighty thoughts with which I hoped to astonish my congregation were written on that fixed-in sermon notepaper. The hour came, but, horrors, that kind of Bible never lays flat. On the reading desk it immediately closed and would not stay open. My notes were lost, hid somewhere among the thousand pages, beyond discovery. Desperately I thumbed to find them but in vain. The next day, abjectly embarrassed by my (first) pulpit disaster, I found them.

My greatest Bible chapter began 14 years later. Influenced by a visiting preacher, I began to read the Word, not a chapter, but the whole volume, over and over and over again. I still do. It changed everything for me. Psalm 119:50 said His Word quickens us. I threw off years, found new energy, drive, fitness, my mind surged with new ideas, and my preaching became so faith filled that it filled also my church - revival took place. Life began for me when I took the Bible for myself.

Living by the Word is what Jesus meant saying "*Give us this day our daily bread*" - the Word of God. We read the Word and it becomes our daily bread by His Spirit.

Now – the technical bit I promised. Going back to 17, I had become fascinated with Textual Criticism and learned how our English Bible rested on ancient manuscripts mainly from either eastern or western churches, that is Antioch or Alexandrian. Some regard Alexandrian manuscripts as suspect, possibly tainted with Gnosticism. They omit the last eight (Pentecostal) verses of Mark found in the eastern orthodox documents.

Correspondents have written me denouncing modern versions as Alexandrian, and advocating the AV alone. What is the truth? Scholars have continued sincerely to do honest work on the vast mass of Biblical manuscript material now available. I would say that today there is not a ha'porth of difference in the Greek text worry about. I am confident His Word comes through whatever text is used.

Except, except! We have an academic epidemic of new translations. They need caution. One method of translation renders the *meanings* of the Greek as translators believe they understand it. This is "dynamic equivalence", giving us an equivalent of the Word. The Greek words are followed perhaps to a large extent but the general aim is not the actual Word, but the equivalent, in effect paraphrases. It doesn't make them invalid. They do carry enormous research and meaning and I use of them myself especially the NIV.

The alternative method keeps close to the Greek words to respect verbal inspiration. The peculiarities, ambiguities and cultural colour of the original Bible writers, their personal character and idiom are retained, not changed to explained them,

The NIV, probably the most popular Bible at present, is helpful, excellent and readable. It is a "dynamic equivalent" Bible, reading very similar to the AV but much of it is translated by paraphrase. For reading it is good, but not for teaching. It tells us what the translators think God meant, rather than what He actually said. Words are introduced not found in any Bible manuscript. The first of our English Bibles, the Authorised or King James Version rests on only a few ancient manuscripts, but the translators believed it was from God, and they worked to preserve in English the original words and spirit. However some new versions anger me. They support private viewpoints, such as the liberal outlook, or the feminist, or the politically correct. I bought four copies of the much advertised New Revised Standard Version and discarded them for their politically correct alterations of God's Word. Some are worse and have been banned by evangelical churches in America. The liberal attitude making the Bible a vehicle for their own modern fashions, current thought and to suit pressure groups is an abomination. The great purpose of Gods' Word is to confront and challenge the fashions, unbelief and predilections of the world. Making the Bible to conform to the mish-mash of present ideas is betrayal. The world needs a rock, the true word of the Lord. My own work is to explore Bible truth. I need experience and every tool possible. I search for the insights of scholars and others. I pray daily for the Holy Spirit to guide me into all truth and I can honestly say that His word is greatest joy in life.

Thou has made me to laugh

A BBC radio discussion has remained in my mind. A member remarked how serious and humourless Jesus was. Lord Hailsham demolished him, quoting instance after instance of Christ's wit. It reminded me of a lecture I heard by the late Dr. Norwood of the Methodist Women's College, similarly showing how humorous Jesus could be. .

If brevity is the soul of wit then Christ's words are like the Bible says apples of gold in caskets of silver. He would not always answer questions because it was a waste of words. Take the Sermon on the Mount and one of His pithy remark "*Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted*". To listeners then, it put things in a nutshell so neatly it would make them smile. Certainly it didn't bore them. "*They heard Him gladly*." Much in those three chapters is so out of the normal. "*If your eye offends you pluck it out*". Spoken with His graciousness and that voice, the greatest sound ever heard on earthy, they would see His smiling eyes and realise it was truth expressed with the brevity of in humour. Jesus startled hearers with laughable absurdities conveying truth unforgettably People loved to hear Him because His speech was seasoned with the salt of brevity, wit and charm.

Dr. Norwood told us about the proverbial camel going through the eye of a needle. He amused us with explanations he had heard. The camel being camelhair rope, for example. He was especially entertaining about the camel passing through a narrow gate at the side of the main city gate. In fact, there never was such a gate at all. By such absurdities Jesus heightened people's understanding. He talked about a man with a bit of dust in his eye being treated by a man with a 'beam' in his eye – a whole plank. If we don't laugh at a man walking around unconscious of a plank in his eye, we don't know how to read Christ's words.

There is the idea that laughter is not for serious believers and God isn't funny. Well, I have prayed for many sick people, and I do a lot of smiling because of His wonderful and often hilarious blessing. God made this world, and the fun, laughter, merriment

didn't generate themselves. God put it all there, the play into young creatures, like the mother and two fox cubs rollicking on my lawn, and those squirrels such a nuisance but such comedians in their antics. A duck and drake began visiting my garden this year, my first close encounter with ducks and I laughed and laughed over them. Even the goldfish flashing in my garden pool don't make us miserable but always put a smile on everybody's face.

I find the world is intensely interesting. God gave us risible faculties and fills the world with situations to match, My work is with theological issues and again and again the humorous strikes me. Christmas is the time to be glad. It was God's humour to let Roman emperors kid themselves while a babe in a crib fresh born in a minor part of their empire had a destiny the Caesars and Augustus's could never imagine. The Emperor Nero's name is now used for dogs.

God is a fountain of joy. We have everything to laugh about, Perhaps it should become more obvious?

I Was Just Thinking 9

Fire faith

The other day a phrase set my mind and heart stirring. "An offering made by fire unto the Lord" (Leviticus 2:16 and many other places). What offering? Well, there's me, if I am fulfilling Romans 12, "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto the Lord".

In John 21, Christ told the disciples to bring to Him some of the fish they had caught. These were a cold offering. But He had a beach fire! He cooked the fish for breakfast.

Bible religion is a fire faith. What is our religion? Cool, correct, precise, unemotional, unexciting? A church member who had just found true joy in salvation, told me her vicar complained that she put him off preaching because she was smiling so brightly in the congregation and therefore couldn't be listening!

Somebody asked whether we should tithe before income tax or after? So canny – is that a fire offering? Fire translates into exuberant generosity, joy, praise and worship, an "I've got to, I want to, I must, I will" attitude. Not an occasional bit of service attitude, but one ablaze for God, in giving, praying, working and loving.

The disciples saw Jesus in furious action and remembered the Scripture "The zeal of your house has consumed me". Eaten up! What consumes many is ambition, money, lust - enthusiasm for what they can get. Psalm 58:3 (French version) says "consumed by iniquities". But a fire offering is always something being given, on the altar, aflame.

People sing 'send the fire'. They mean on the unconverted world, on God's work, on their church. But why not on themselves? A cold offering is better than no offering at all, I suppose; just doing what we should, attending worship, helping a bit here and there, doing things at and for the church. But when the God of the burning bush, the God of Pentecostal tongues of fire comes, offerings become fire offerings.

BUT .. there's no fire without an offering. An empty altar does not attract the fire of God. Do you see what I mean?

The most frightening and the most joyous Bible insight I ever had.

Paul was dragged out of Lystra presumed to be dead. Some think that this was the time described in 2Corinthians 12. He said he was caught up to the third heaven, and heard

inexpressible things he was not permitted to tell. How did he hear them? With his mortal ears or by some immortal means? What kind of consciousness was he in? The death state or near-death state possibly mentioned in Acts 14:19?

Consciousness is perhaps the greatest scientific mystery, but it is God's greatest natural gift to us, so we can say "I am me" and "I know you".

Normally we only know what our five senses tell us; what we see, hear, feel, smell and taste. We believe our faculties are reasonably reliable, conveying to us valid impressions of our earthly surroundings.

But knowledge can come to us without our five senses. We Pentecostals believe that God reveals to us what eye has not seen nor ear heard. Then also by the gifts of the Holy Spirit supernatural insights are experienced that normal human faculties could never convey to us.

But apart from the Holy Spirit, everyone may sense things that they can't explain. The 'sixth sense', presentiment, is common, when our alter ego seems to be somewhere else. Adam and Eve came into existence as adults in a new world, to dress and keep it. How? Without any knowledge at all? God instructed them and they were immediately competent and knowledgeable, nature being within their capacity and responsibility. Their consciousness reached out to God, the fount of knowledge, who brought them swift understanding.

Now this consciousness is capable of expansion. The Readers Digest recently published an article on expanded consciousness. It quoted proven instances of people knowing what they could never know by normal human means. A woman undergoing special surgery had to be rendered brain-dead. During that brain-dead time she watched the surgeons at work on her own inert body with not one of her faculties operating. Her consciousness was alert when her brain was not.

This is not a one-off incident. Thousands of people simply know they have seen something, somewhere, during extreme illness. A convincing instance came to me when I was ten. Mother brought me to see my dying father, a decent but not religious man. He told my mother he had been "to the gates," but had to return in seven days. He died a week later. More than that He spoke of "the greater love" he had encountered during his deep coma.

God is omniscient, He knows everything. His consciousness is all-embracing. Psalm 139 declares that God not only know what happens, but knows everything about us, our personal feelings and thoughts, even what we shall say.

This was seen in Christ. "He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in man". He told Nathanael he seen him under a fig tree when Philip called inviting him to meet Jesus and knew his character as an Israelite without guile. Overwhelmed, Nathanael cried out "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel". Jesus startled the Samaritan woman by telling her all she ever did. 'Doubting' Thomas fell in worship and called Christ his Lord and God, realising Christ knew about him.

But apply this to Calvary and tremendous implications arise. His super-consciousness brought him identity of experience with sinners, knowing what it felt like to be guilty before God. "He was made sin for us". He experienced sinnership which is the essence of the work of Christ in His death. He entered into total oneness with us all, experiencing our experience, as one with sinners under the wrath of God. He suffered

for us as we would in the judgment, and thus saved us, aware of God's awful antipathy for sin, our judgment falling on Him.

Now our own personality, with the power of consciousness, if released from confined physical limitations, will also expand quite comprehensively. What happens then depends on whether we left this life 'in Christ' or out of Christ.

Either saved or lost, our consciousness will penetrate other people's consciousness. I shall know what I really did to people, good or bad, and will enter into their reactions, feeling as they felt, how they were happy or how they were hurt. The horror of murder is that the murderer will suffer his victim's suffering, knowing how his victim felt. His sin will return to face him in stark and vivid form. Our sin will find us out and so will our acts of love.

This fact horrifies me when I think of Hitler. His fate at this moment is to be flooded with the terror and emotions experienced by the millions he murdered. It is a picture of hell too harrowing to contemplate.

However the wonder of redemption has to be and is the wiping out of all haunting recollections as God said "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more". What God chooses not to remember, we cannot. Our hostile attitudes, betrayals, careless indifference, selfishness and failures in love which brought such heart-grief to other people, God remembers no more.

The creative act of Christ's finished work, will remove the pain from the fact of our sin. Our consciousness passes through Christ's precious blood and is filtered of awareness of sin. Forgiveness is nothing less than that. God, for Christ's sake, will not allow us to be haunted and blackmailed in heaven by self-recrimination and guilt. Processes are in motion that whatever we have done, our consciousness of other people's consciousness will be barred by the barrier of the blood of Christ. He absorbed it all and we are 'justified', treated as if we had not sinned, as just and righteous.

We used to sing a most un-theological hymn "I'm only a sinner, saved by grace". This is not really the case. We are not just saved sinners, but far, far more in Christ. The angels won't look at us and say "That man was a murderer but he is permitted to brush shoulders with us by the goodness of God". Our reputation won't be as sinners, but as the favoured of God. He Himself remembers our past no more, and neither will anybody else.

We shall have the immense joy of all knowing one another in glory. We shall know as we are known. Peter knew Elisha and Moses, and so shall we. More than that, every lovely quality we ever had, the fruits of the Spirit, will be highlighted by the pleasure of God. The ugly and evil will have been filtered out of our personalities by the power of the Cross. Everybody will be a joy to know. Heaven will be full of glorious children of God, each a shining prince in glittering splendour.

God is handling our wrongs, ills and evils, but at what cost He has never said. We saw the spectacle of Calvary but our eyes penetrated no more than to a scene of inhuman wickedness and frightful suffering. If we knew what Christ actually endured, it would paralyse us. Even to dwell on what we do know can appal us, but already our consciousness expands to know Him and His incredible love and to come to a realisation of His assuring embrace.

These thoughts make me want to save others. His name is Jesus "for He shall save His people from their sins". It is our own taunting and tormenting sins that will make hell.

We need no devils with goads. But God is saving souls from their sins. That is what we are to do, save, before the floodtide of sin catches up with our friends, families and neighbours. We can't judge anyone in our present earthly stage. Some I am sure are far less wicked than we suppose. There is decency and self-sacrifice all around us, but from deep within us all, self-condemnation arises like a poisonous vapour. But, "O the deep, deep love of Jesus!" We have the hope of a heaven of unalloyed, un-abating relief in the sunshine of God's love. Thank you Jesus!

Homosexuals and 'any questions?'

The BBC plonked their 'Any Questions?' team down into territory unfamiliar to them – that of church affairs, asking, "Should homosexuals hold church office?" What on earth would they (secularists, perhaps humanists, agnostics and non-religious types) know about it? I can't imagine them reading their Bibles every morning and speaking with tongues. One panellist was anxious to tell the nation he was an atheist, as if that was such a brilliant intellectual achievement it qualified him to be an authority on church appointments. Then one member of the audience said he was born a homosexual. How did he know what he was when he was born?

Political cross talk won't do for spiritual matters. They are not talk stuff. Actually, one panellist said he had been reading the Bible (sensation!) but only the bits about homosexuals. Insight into the other 750,000 Bible words might have led him to see that God has an extreme distaste for human perversity.

However, they had to answer the question given to them and they did their best, despite being handicapped by what appeared to be little understanding of the culture and language of the Christian world. It is fundamentally different. The church is not governed by opinion but by the Word of God. Spiritual truth is not decided by democratic vote.

Well, those who see no wrong in homosexuality can certainly claim overwhelming support. For thousands of years the whole world saw no wrong in it. That was the pre-Christian, pre-scientific age of almost total ignorance. Only one nation on earth knew better and treated same sex intercourse as a wicked, namely Israel. That light came direct from God when He spoke to Moses.

Homosexual practice has always, everywhere, been one of various sexual aberrations. Slaves were sex objects, as were young boys. 'Worshippers' visited temple prostitutes, with social customs of sex orgies and gang rape. Even wealthy Roman 'matrons' acted and dressed as prostitutes for the thrill of it. Paul's references to women wearing a head covering is a direct allusion to this in the Roman city of Corinth. Plato has some shocking social views. This sexual 'freedom' went hand in hand with slaughter as sport, unwanted babies thrown out to die, human sacrifice and other wickedness, in which they saw no wrong. The world scene is described in Scripture "There is none that does good, no not one". Israel regarded all nations as like a sea throwing up evil.

This 'culture' persisted into the Greek and Rome civilisations, until the world victory of Christianity. I assumed such history would be known yet a BBC lady panellist declared that people [of pro-homosexual opinion] had 'progressed farther than the Church' in homosexual matters. Progressed? How could going back to a pre-Christian age be progress? If decency exists, It came via Christianity and from when God told Moses "Be ye holy for I am holy". How holy are homosexuals?

For all that, we would all be as corrupt and hedonistic as the ancient heathen, if we, like them, lacked any guiding light or moral reference point. The true light now shines, but it is being deliberately smothered and is evident in many TV programmes which channel ancient and gross lewdness to us. Turn from God and you find the devil. Know God and in the light of His glory, everything messy, sordid and shameful is impossible, "hating even the garment spotted by the flesh".

The Bible laws stress that God hates confusion. Garments of cotton and wool were forbidden, yoking together animals of different species, and wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. The colour 'pink' is not mentioned in the Bible, being a dilution of red with white. We are responsible to a holy God whose righteous will is mandatory and absolute.

God wants men to be men and women to be women, neither feminised nor masculinised. God formed men physically for women and women for men. Anything different is an offence against nature. The results show on medical records. God destroyed Sodom at the beginning of history as His warning that this sin would find us out. When Christianity was originally proclaimed it was a message of moral change and included condemnation of sexual aberrations. The so-called homosexual 'life style' is clearly taught in the New Testament as a death style.

Christians and the Bible are not in the defendant's dock. They are God's earthly attorneys at God's judgment bar. Preach the Gospel and the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. It can't do that if we are compromising. Without Divine standards, there exists no authentic moral guide whatsoever. We are thrown back on Government legislation, which itself has no moral foundation. Until World War II, all the Ten Commandments were deeply embedded as part of the British life-basis, and were an effective brake. Today, in 2004, Parliament's 100,000 commandments can't stop runaway evil.

One thing more. The BBC panellists seemed unable to grasp that the Christian church's standards are not open to discussion. They are absolute. The Church is the pillar and ground of the truth standing to confront the world with the mind of God. The Bible is not a book of club rules for those joining the church. It is God's law and standard for all mankind, all races, in the church or out. "Here we stand, and can do no other". Unbelief gives no immunity to God's requirements. Defy His will and we are like a fly up against a 70 mph car!

Incidentally this 'Any Questions' broadcast did include an evangelical voice, but it seemed so friendly. Paul the Apostle pioneered purity and holiness against ancient evils without compromise or apology. To the 'Any Questions' heathen of sophisticated Athens he declared, "God has set a day when he will judge the world by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Today the devil has plenty of agents. The world needs to see the flashing two edged sword of the Word of God, the Gospel, wielded with a strong and courageous arm.

"Does prayer work?"

"Does Prayer Work?" the Daily Mail asked. But whose prayer? The newspaper and television people seem to think that prayer generates some kind of power that might cure the sick, a measurable but mystical energy. The more the prayer the higher the

calibration? The only way prayer works is if God answers it, but He doesn't care for newspaper people testing Him to see if He does.

Last year they tried prayer as an experiment. The hyped television and press experiment produced exactly the same as if nothing had been done. Did they really think God would cooperate (that is if it entered their minds that God had anything to do with it). Actually some healings were recorded, but they appear to have been when believers laid hands on the sick. Otherwise, nothing, but then would God show what He could really do just to conveniently fill newspaper space?

It prompts me to remark that newspaper and television people are not notably pious. At least, TV programmes give me that impression and newspaper editors (the Mail or Telegraph anyway) appear never to have heard of God. Considering their poor acquaintance with the Almighty, were they not a trifle too sanguine that he might go along with their scheme to provide data? I didn't think the Creator of infinity would be all that enthusiastic about a journalistic stunt.

Whoever had the idea, didn't know the Bible. The infamous King Herod tried something similar. He had always had a fancy to see a miracle, like going to the circus. He had heard wonders were taking place and superstitiously feared the prophet Elijah had come back from heaven. Then he learned that Jesus was performing the healing miracles and he believed Jesus did perform wonders, which is more than some liberals and Bible critics do now. When Jesus was arrested they sent Him to Herod and the King was delighted, hoping to see a miracle as a royal command performance? Jesus ignored this pompous royal nobody.

God isn't waiting to find out if He exists till somebody proves it. His reputation has not been handed to the BBC and ITV. He is not seeking their attention. I think perhaps THEY might seek His attention and find out what God thinks of them and their programmes. A vast quantity of modern stories, thrillers and dramas are empty of any moral point, and of all godliness. The formula used is one of violence, revenge, unforgiveness, worship of money, hatred and greed.

It is with a shock that one realises the devil tried it out even on Christ to tempt God. "The devil took him (Jesus) to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the son of God' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' " Christ answered "It is also written: 'Do not put your God to the test'".

God never tries to prove to us He is God. Does He need to? In Canada I was astonished that I had to have I.D. when I wanted to put my money into my bank account! But God is independent. It doesn't matter to Him what we think about Him. You either believe or you don't. One time when God is put to the test is in healing meetings and in prayer. When people lose faith because God didn't do for them what seemed reasonable, they were testing God.

In healing meetings, many come to try it out. If it doesn't happen, they either profess disappointment or are happy to 'prove' it doesn't work. The allegation is that the evangelist built up their hopes and then failed them. I don't believe this ever really happens. They had been testing God and God had not obliged. True faith is never disappointed, healing or no healing.

I recall a very correct church member trying to force God into a corner and do what was demanded of Him. This man was always super-correct. He sat in my congregation with an almost visible aura of critical rightness around him. After a while he no longer appeared. I hunted him down. He explained he had prayed for God to do a particular thing which God could do and God didn't do it. He decided there was therefore no God!

Testing God is a subtle sin. Students of church history will find the word 'simony' occurring too often. Churchmen sought to acquire church office by money, like Simon Magus who sought to buy the power of the Holy Spirit. The essence of simony is the same as putting God to the test, that is to try dealing with God in a materialistic frame. The doubters, demanding hard evidence and scientific proof. But God is love, and nothing in the world is so hard to pin down in concrete form. You can only trust.

God never will oblige. He is known only by faith. He performs miracles but never to convince critics. You can't push God. If anyone wants to be an unbeliever He will let them be. He is just not a suitable subject for the analytical processes of the scientific age. Miracles are for believers. By the way, they do happen.

I Was Just Thinking 10

Well done? Good? Faithful?

"The last shall be first," Jesus said. A liberal once remarked, "I'm inclined to agree with Jesus". Well, he had better! But I'm sure that some of the people Jesus marked for promotion from last to first, would be quite humble, in ordinary jobs, looking after home and family and filling whatever role in the church they could, but perhaps never in the front row. The architecture of the temple of God has very many small saints' niches to fill. We can't judge, but I expect endless lines of such 'last' people to be presented with the Lord's own BAFTAs and Oscars for their unrealised great performances as extras with mere walk-on parts. No church, like no drama, could exist without them.

Of course, Jesus never meant that front line battle heroes would be last. Apostles, martyrs, and countless other giant spiritual characters are needed to lead Christian ranks forward. "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness", Paul anticipated.

He also said, "I judge myself". I am glad he could, but personally I find it a contortion. Naturally we are each our own favourite person and to examine ourselves we need to be like a mongoose that can touch any part of itself with any other part of itself.

Somehow some of us do land in the front line. From my teens I was roped in for just about everything. I can't remember now how I reacted. My ego fizzing perhaps, inflated with self-admiration? Jesus stayed out of the limelight for his first 30 years. It is tough to let other people upstage you, jump on your shoulders and steal your show, as I very well know, but it is good discipline in the art of preferring others above one's self, as Scripture exhorts.

Having ventured thus far about myself, perhaps I'll risk a bit more, or about my wife anyway. I expected her to be always by my side through my travels and decades as pastor-evangelist. She fought shy of any limelight and never grumbled when my job for God pushed her into the obscure second place. Throughout our years of pioneering we had to count the pennies, but she never complained. It was all sacrifice for her and little recognition; I the first and she the last. But she is in glory now where the roles are

different. Her quiet loyalty to me and to the Lord, like that of myriads of other pastor's wives, I know will have brought her God's "Well done, good and faithful servant".

Thinking along these lines, I've been asking honest friends if they think that God will turn around and tell me that I had taken her too much for granted, taking her away so often from a woman's natural habitat of home? I had been accused in the past of "dragging" my wife around the globe. Will she get all the reward, not me?

I must 'wait and see', as Asquith said. But I know this, that priority for God should not leave a wife and family wondering if we even love them. Jesus never meant it to be like that. Christians are supposed to LIVE as well as die for God's work, not to burn out but to burn ON. We can put God first too much, like a pastor giving just a squeezed-in spot for his family after visiting church members all day, then spending hours behind a shut study door, with church meetings every night. Is that what God demands?

Well, I was just thinking. God will judge, and we can't re-live life. Meanwhile, zeal can outrun natural obligations. Christ's passion for God was consuming, but He still gave 30 of His 33 years to home, work and siblings. Even during His ministry He was so relaxed, never rushing to grab every opportunity to heal and save. Even in His last moments, He told John to take care of Mary, his mother.

Studying the Gospels, Jesus spoke of forsaking one's family for His sake, and loving Him more than everything else. Peter claimed he had had forsaken all, but had he? It looks as if it was not all the time. He did not neglect his wife and also went to see his mother in law. We should read one Scripture with another, for we are commanded to love our wives. That isn't just spiritually either, but is in terms of house and home. Deacons, elders and bishops were qualified by caring for their wives and families. Looking after them WAS God's service.

The Bible talks about wives and mothers over 750 times. The Scripture life-style is set in the framework of family religion. We love and serve God by loving and serving one another, particularly those in our care. If we fail in responsibilities to close relations how can we have close relations with God?

Accord in marriage is the litmus test of accord with God. It is a common field where Christian reality is tested. A difficult partner can be our opportunity for longsuffering, forbearance, patience and the love that 'endures all things'. It is hardly consistent to sing in church "I will give my life for you", then shout and bawl at home when things don't go right.

Marriage is tricky. It may hold together, but how? Affection? Or some less creditable bond? Keeping up appearances? Dread and fear of displeasing a partner? Is that Christian union? I've seen managing director marriages, with one partner running the show and the other in the outer office; boa-constrictors, swallowing a partner who ceases to be of any account; spare wheel wives with no life or will of their own, accessories who must stay close in case their owner needs them; and master and servant marriages, with he (or even she) never lifting a finger in the home.

None of this is the marriage unity of Scripture. Agape is never presuming, exploitive, demanding, selfish, one-sided or overbearing. Marriage should be freedom, not serfdom, wedded not welded, wedlock not padlock. The idea is to practice understanding and service, to provoke love and seek the happiness of the other before self, and practice makes perfect.

I think how God treats us. He told Israel, "I, your Maker, am your husband". Jesus called Himself the bridegroom, and the way He is with His bride is the wonder of angels. He is our model, isn't He?

Seeing the Kingdom come in power

Jesus promised that some listening to Him "would not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1). They would see the Kingdom in power in their lifetime. Normally we think of the coming of the Kingdom as bringing immortality to all believers, not that they would die when it came. So, did they see it come? When?

Critical scholars say Jesus expected His kingdom to be set up very soon, in the lifetime of people present, and that He was therefore mistaken. But that is the difference between scholars concerned only about who wrote what - whether Luke copied Mark, or if Mark had another source, and so on - and those who use of the Word as God intended to instruct us all in Divine matters.

In that connection I remember that Jesus told the Scribes they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God, yet the Scriptures were their daily employment. It can be like that today. For example, I looked up many learned authorities on this particular passage but they showed no insight whatever, only critical concerns about the passage. But I take it that Jesus meant us to understand Him. So, I can ask - did some of Christ's audience ever see the Kingdom come with power while they were still alive? If so, when? Jesus had preached that the Kingdom had come, and that it was proven by the fact he was casting out demons (Matthew 12:28). But there would be something more, a further advance of the Kingdom into the world, and 'in power'. That was His emphasis.

Jesus had cast out demons and He said His followers would also do so. They did and came back and reported it to Him (Luke 10:20), but Jesus predicted greater Kingdom power. Now - did they see it, something more than had then been seen in Christ's own ministry? Was that even possible?

This was not the only reference Jesus made to greater things. For example, John 14:12-14, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father and He will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever". Again in Acts 1:8, "You shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and you shall be witnesses unto me". This was not healing power, which they had previously operated, but a greater form, witnessing-power, to draw people to God.

The Kingdom of God was manifested in new power when Peter used the keys of the Kingdom by preaching the first Gospel message. That day the first Christian converts streamed into the Kingdom - the Kingdom had come with power. Salvation power had come, the greatest power of all, the Holy Spirit convincing and converting. That same Kingdom is with us today in power. If it were not, then soul-saving would be impossible. However, this promise was followed in v.2 as follows: "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up into a high mountain, where they were alone. There he was transfigured before them."

Now, why after six days? Six days since when? Six days before, Jesus had raised the question of His own identity. He asked who people said He was (Mark 8:27). Then Peter declared, "You are the Christ", which Jesus said was a revelation from God. But then

came a dramatic confirmation. There on the mountain, Peter, James and John saw His glory, the exposition of who Jesus really was. It was so great that the disciples were warned not to talk about it at that time.

The Christ, radiant as the sun, now in blinding splendour spoke with Moses and Elijah and the disciples heard them talk about "His exodus which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." After the glory on that mountain there would be the glory on another mountain, at Calvary. Jesus always talked about 'His hour' when He would glorify the Father and Himself.

That is the amazing situation. The Christ of transformation majesty and glorious Deity, seen in the splendour of His power, was soon to be a battered corpse gibbeted on a crude cross. Incredible! But what we have to note is this; that the Kingdom did come with power, but only AFTER that terrible Friday when God in the flesh submitted to the assault of evil men. There was no Pentecost until after Calvary. There never is any Kingdom power without the Cross.

The Gospel message of Christ crucified releases the work of the Holy Spirit. The word of the Cross is the key word to power. There's no healing except from His pierced hands, and no power to save except at His wounded feet.

While we bring the same apostolic message of the crucified Lord, we live in the same age of power. There is no other 'Kingdom power' greater than the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was the performer in all we know of God at work. His is the supreme power of the universe let loose. He takes of the finished work of Christ and translates it into our experience of salvation. Christ triumphed at Calvary, the Spirit has come and we preach Jesus. The sources of salvation are open. Today is the day of salvation.

Tithing?

Tithing has always been important for me and is a worthy practice for millions. I don't know any reason why we should not tithe. However I disagree strongly with many of the reasons often given for tithing.

We hear about 'the law of tithing'. Law! It seems believers are free from all the obligations of the law except tithing. This is often the teaching of organisations wanting money, which makes it a suspiciously convenient interpretation of Scripture. Similarly, Malachi 3:10 says 'bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse' and somehow the 'storehouse' becomes the modern church treasury. Quaint Bible exposition but shrewd finance.

Tithing went on long before the Levitical or Mosaic law, being practiced by other nations. Abraham gave tithes to Melchi-Zedek, King of Salem hundreds of years before Moses was born. We don't know why he did, except that tithing was not uncommon. He probably felt it was the thing to do after his successful skirmish with Amraphel. Abraham had not met the king before, and had no special reason to give him tithes or anything at all. But it is always better to give something to anybody rather than nobody. Giving nobody nothing is about as miserable a way of life as anybody can make for themselves.

Bible tithing arrangements were not that simple. Coinage was introduced about the time of Nebuchadnezzar, 600 BC. Business was by barter, goods for goods. In Israel, tithing literally meant counting cattle and sheep and the fruit of trees (Leviticus 27:30-32). Givers of tithes were to eat part of the offering when they came to the priest, who would

eat with them (Deuteronomy 12:7 and 12:12). Tithing in kind continued at least up to 450 years before Christ, during the period of Malachi and the second temple. If anyone brought silver weighed to the value of the tithed produce, they had to add a fifth of the amount of the tithe (Leviticus 27:31). This could be when people lived too far away to transport animals and crops (Deuteronomy 14:24-25). The main purpose was the upkeep of the priests who served full time and could not grow their own food or earn a living (Deuteronomy 14:27). But once in every third year the tithe could be applied where the donor lived (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

But giving locally was not religiously valid unless followed by worship in Jerusalem. That seems to be a critically important principle. Some make gifts to the church but never attend worship. Worship is an absolute necessity for any relationship with God. Worship matters to God, not just cash.

There are only two references to anyone in New Testament times tithing: One is to a self-satisfied worshipper in Luke 18:12 whom Jesus contrasted with a truly repentant sinner, and the other is to the practice of Pharisees tithing table condiments, mint, dill and cumin - tiny tithes (Matthew 23:23). Jesus quotes this extreme practice as a contrast to what they should do: "These (justice, mercy, and faith) you ought to have done and not leave the other undone." They tithed only under a rule of their extreme religious sect.

Teachers on tithing have built much on this verse, treating it as Christ's dominical command for all believers! It is a peculiar way to handle Scripture. What Jesus said was not to disciples but to Pharisees committed to tithing by their own legalist rules. Jesus was not imposing the Pharisees' religious practices upon us, nor making Pharisees our role models. If He was, it is conspicuously not mentioned again throughout the rest of Scripture.

Nevertheless, though the New Testament says nothing about tithing, it does not excuse us from giving. Instead it elevates the whole subject beyond legalistic observations into a spiritual dimension. The emphasis of Jesus created a perspective on money and possessions totally outside the thinking of Israel. He advocates a kind of profligate, uncalculating generosity.

Tithing is hallowed by 4000 years of known practice and represents a kind of reasonable guide. But Jesus initiated a new tradition, certainly nothing to do with arithmetic tenths. For Jesus to speak about specific offerings and amounts would be totally out of character. He poured Himself out and gave His all, even His blood. We cannot imagine Him putting a figure on generosity and talking of percentages. His own example was without limit

"Give to him that asketh thee and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matthew 5:42). His followers were not to adopt a penny-pinched, exact and grudging carefulness. Giving had to be prompted by an excessive style of love: "Ye have heard that it has been said, 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy', but I say love your enemy." Christian character is not to be guarded, nervous, or economical, but unstudied big-heartedness and open-handedness, trusting in God. Only Christians sing while they take up a collection. "The liberal soul shall be made fat" (Proverbs 11:25). It is common that the over-careful live out their lives in threadbare style. The explanation is that God is a great giver, and blesses those like Himself. A mean church will shrink, not

grow. God doesn't like meanness. Church treasurers handling Gods' money should handle it like God - bountifully.

Preach tithing and you will get money. Preach Jesus and you will get the Holy Spirit busy. He can unzip purses much quicker, but He does far, far more than that. Just try Him!

Death? What's that?

I dedicate this short piece to the thirty or more colleagues and friends recently bereaved of wife or husband whom I name one by one before the Lord every morning.

A friend told me yesterday that a child he knew had a brain cancer. Lying ill, he had suddenly said "Mummy, look there are two angels". Then a door had opened and he had gone, slipped away, with a royal escort.

Having ventured on the territory of wife, marriage and personal issues, I will follow with what happened next. My precious lady went through that door. Then I saw them slip under the ground her beloved form forever. I visited that spot, and each time I had experienced shock effects, not only emotional but also claustrophobic and panic attacks. A doctor said that physical effects can occur years after losing one really loved. For over a year it was too harrowing for me to go near that cemetery. Then, on the second anniversary, I felt it was only the decent thing. I went, anticipating an ordeal.

I stood there. The soil had sunk a couple of inches. Grass has covered it, unkempt, drab, ordinary, as if it didn't matter. First, rage burned in me that the earth had her in its grip. Then, a marvellous thing happened. Suddenly, not thinking or expecting it, I was struck by a brilliant shaft of warm sunshine that broke through the black clouds of my life. Instantly I KNEW, as if God had spoken, and I don't mean believed, I KNEW there was nothing under that inconsequential bit of mud that had anything to do with me. She had never been interred there, nor could she have been buried anywhere, not even in a monumental marble shrine in a cathedral.

Her worn out physical appurtenances, yes, had been laid there, but that personality who had filled my life and home, that lady of purpose, of faith, of love, who had borne the burden of life over eighty years with such victory and determination, SHE, she could never be buried, she was too vital, too SAVED, too trusting in Jesus every minute, in all she did and sang as we went into hundreds of churches, cold clods could never cover her, no never. She was obviously somewhere else, and I knew where. The first song I ever heard her sing was "'Good morning to heaven', some morning I'll say." Dead earth could not have anything to do with that living personality.

That beautiful head stone, engraved with flowers I had painted, I saw was forsaken, presiding uselessly over nothing. SHE wasn't even there, never was there, any more than I was there with that bit of my own hair I had put in that cold hand in the coffin. I had gone to that cemetery fearing grief, but came away with happiness in my very soul. I don't live without her for I can't but I live knowing that we still belong to one another and she is fine. She is not just visiting in America or her sister in Australia, but completely settled with everyone she ever loved and with Jesus. The headstone reads, "Lived for Jesus, now living with Jesus".

One day while working at my desk, I suddenly dropped into a deep sleep and had a vision of her, always lovely, but now the essence of beauty, full of such charm, dressed in a coat of brilliant blue. She turned to me smiling, put her arm through mine and said

"Come with me, let us take a walk". We did. When I woke suddenly, it was if she had just gone out through my study door.

Hundreds have prayed for me. I want them to know God has answered in amazing ways, and in this way - I KNOW "He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day."

I Was Thinking 11

What? The Devil?

Lately, I keep hearing about Job, mostly because Job puzzles readers. Well, like people climb mountains because "they are there" I used to preach on Job as it was there, in the Bible, a challenge intellectually and philosophically, but an excuse to wrangle on about suffering. My congregation suffered more from my problem of suffering than from their all ailments. We talk of the patience of Job, but what about my congregation's patience? The Job drama starts with the devil. There'd be no story plots at all if he retired, like the newspapers keep in business by people breaking the Ten Commandments. A lady complained about the expression "What the devil!" saying the devil is mentioned in Scripture so is a sacred personage. I fancy however, that Job would have been less squeamish about taking Satan's name "in vain" if he had known what Satan had to do with his misery, but Job didn't know.

His Infernal Majesty Satan appears 14 times in the first two chapters of Job engineering all the calamities, but doesn't have even a walk-on part in the rest of the drama. In 38 chapters Job's friends discuss his troubles but never once suggest Satan had anything to do with it. In fact 42:11 speaks of "all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him." This is a contrast to naïve Christian ideas today that even if a fuse blows it is the devil.

So though the five characters in Job never once mentioned Satan, the drama names him in the prologue, which was quite novel. In the Old Testament despite his activity from the Garden of Eden forwards, trouble is rarely attributed to Satan. In people's minds then God was behind everything, good and bad. God sends sickness and God heals, sends plagues and droughts and then forgives and brings better times, takes away a man's breath and restores it, sends armies against Israel and defends Israel. "I bring prosperity and create disaster" Isaiah 45:7. "Is there evil in the city and the Lord has not done it?"

The speeches of the three 'comforters' make up most of the drama. It is the Old Testament theological book. Oddly it never quotes other Scriptures, perhaps being written before the Bible. At the end, the Lord tells the three 'comforters' that they had not spoken that which was right, but that Job had. (42:8). Quite. They had no Bible then. The author put into the mouth of his characters a theme with variations, namely that sin brings retribution. They wanted to 'comfort' Job by fathoming his afflictions. Seeking an explanation for suffering is cold comfort, especially as these comforters concluded it was all his own fault, he must have sinned. Why knowing 'why' should be thought a comfort, I do not understand. Is it ever? We all ask why, and it is ridiculous really. A philosopher with the toothache wants a dentist, not an explanation. If God told us why, little good would it do us. The explanation would be infinitely complex and leave us with a headache. God is running eternity, not a pie shop. His thoughts are not our thoughts.

One thing Job does get right, that he needs to know God properly. "Oh that I knew where I might find him". Knowing God is always the answer. Job could and could not answer God 'one time out of a thousand', but He was sure of God "He knows the way that I take. Though he slay me yet will I trust him". 23:3,10. 13:15. 9:3. In that long-ago world of impenetrable spiritual darkness, before the Greek wise men were born, Job already had penetrated the deeps of true knowledge. The fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom. We play around with useless intellectual conundrums, trying to fathom God's reasons, but all we need is to know Him. Then we can heave a sigh of relief and find rest.

In all my hours of flying, I've never questioned a pilot about his control of the plane. Pilots are well qualified and I confidently suppose they can manage without my advice, and get me where I want. The Lord God is surely well qualified to do the same! Every aeroplane pilot comes on the intercom with the same strong, assuring, educated English voice. Seat belts fastened, we settle back and leave it all to him. No back-seat drivers at 35000 feet. Those who know God, and hear His voice, do the same, leave it all to Him. He can run my life better than I can.

Israel believed God ran all creation and was responsible for afflictions, even sending enemies into their country. Yet it was Israel, the most troubled nation on earth, that exhorted us to have faith in God. That was not Israeli' religious genius, but God's revelation gift, long before the age of great thinkers who never found God. We read them, say Aristotle's 'Ethics' but find no sign of feeling or comfort,

The message of Job is the message of Israel. If it is God who is behind events, then it is all right, like children with parents. Fear God and no fear is fearful. I recall mother pushing me out on the doorstep, when I was four, and shutting the door exasperated. I stood there, commiserated by my playmates who agreed she surpassed all cruelty. But it was mother, not some villainous stranger, so I knew the door would open again. If our Father lets a lion loose in our garden, then as Psalm 4 says "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety". When it comes to understanding everything, it is honest, not humble to admit we don't, and it is not pride to declare we know God. That is everything.

Now Job's comforters argued he must be guilty seeing he suffered so much. That was the current outlook. Sin and suffering stood as cause and effect. Job protested he was innocent, but they concluded he must be a secret sinner. How comforting for Job! That was their one-track thinking, and largely what the book is about, The author, putting words into the mouth of his characters, was daring to challenge popular ideas. He was brilliant, and described the three friends as toning down their accusations to make their theory fit that sin brings retribution. Job was innocent and it upset their theology. It never was satisfactory that God sends pain on sinners, but Christ bore it for our sins.

We hear of today's 'thinking man'. They think they think, but it is one-track, limited within the frame of the present world-view. People really astonish me. They criticise God, why doesn't He do this or the other? God! They really kid themselves they know better. When 'thinkers' boast they don't believe in God it doesn't prove they think at all. Any moron can be an atheist. Nobody knows enough to be sure God doesn't exist, but even a child can know He does.

In the end of the drama, God comes into the scene. He simply challenged these too cocksure comforters with a score of zoological questions. If they didn't understand a

crocodile, how could they understand God? Job said "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?". (40;2) I still remember one remark of the college Principal to us as students which surprised me. "When man fell, he fell on his head and has been cracked ever since". The world's wisest man might argue that elephants are impossible, but a schoolboy could contradict him if he has seen one.

Christians 'see!' Jesus liberates thought. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Believers can think straight. "We have the mind of Christ". The common philosophy has always been that suffering and wrong are complementary. "What have I done to deserve this?" The answer is that our deserts have nothing to do with it. We happen to live in a fallen world. " He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities, For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love..." Psalm 103:10. His love explains everything.

The disciples saw Jesus looking at a born-blind man. They could not resist saying something and asked whether the blind man had sinned or his parents. How could he sin before he was born anyway? Jesus changed thousands of years of thinking, and answered the riddle of the book of Job, replying "Neither has this man sinned nor his parents". John 9:3.

Now the book of Job portrays five characters trying to solve the riddle of Job's sufferings. They failed. There are no answers in Job, only questions. However they do ask some right questions, the real questions of life, and these are answered in Christ in the New Testament. The drama of Job brings Satan on stage challenging God to test Job. It was a new insight then, but it seems it still would be new now in the world. People ask why God allows this or that. Have they never heard of the devil? "Jesus Christ was manifested to destroy the works of the devil"

Job said something very right. "When he has tested me I shall come forth as gold". This is much misunderstood. Trials will not give you a golden character, only show it. Job's testing did not make him gold. He was gold in the first place and trial simply brought it out. Putting lead into a crucible will not transmute it into gold as the old alchemists hoped. Lead comes out as lead, and gold as gold. It does not evaporate. At the start of my ministry my church was invaded by malcontents thrown out of other churches. They brought me close to a breakdown. Then an old Anglican friend said "Well, I know you are a bigger man than to let them upset you". Was I? It challenged me as wise comfort.

That is why we read about the patience of Job. Chapter three doesn't sound as if Job was patient at all. He cursed the day he was born with eloquently lurid protest. Job was positively very furious over what had happened. Why not? Sickness is no blessing. Ministering to the sick as God called me, I rage within me and often scream rebukes against physical torments. I'm sick of sicknesses, I attack them in Christ's holy name as the unholy work of the devil like Jesus did (Acts 10:38), an offence and insult in God's creation. So, the patience of Job? What? Well, yes, but not patient with his calamities. He was patient with God. Job uttered no word against the Almighty, nor shook a fist at heaven.

Job's wife said "Curse God and die" but Job refused such suicidal unbelief. He didn't want to die and so didn't curse God. He could have done and died, but He knew God.. I remember a woman saying to me "God has not answered my prayer so I'm not going to church any more. I'll show Him!" I never heard that God sat down worried about it, but the Lord did remember Job's trusting patience.

In one speech Job asked how God could possibly be affected by an earthling, 'a maggot' as Bildad said. (25:6) But God is affected and chose to bless us 'maggots' and take upon Himself to care, passionately.

Calvary shows that. Fathom that deed if you can, but I can't. Preaching, aged 23, I could explain everything. Today I'm sure I never will. God is too big for our small minds, but I know Him, and that is everything.

Reading just a chapter

The first name on the Magna Charta was Cardinal Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton, English theologian. Some 800 years ago he divided the Bible into chapters, which was useful but difficult. People often read just a chapter, but it contains only half the story. It is like answering the phone when you're enjoying dinner.

John 8 and 9 is the break I have in mind. The thought is broken off at the end of chapter 8, and continues in chapter 9. Take closer look. In chapter 8 Jesus deals with critics in the Jerusalem Temple. They were infuriated contending with Him in words. So, they turned to violence. "They picked up stones to stone him". Jesus wasn't ready to die then and as on other occasions eluded his enemies. "Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds ... " John 8:58. Then what? Chapter 9:1 continues the story, "as he went along he saw a man blind from birth". Hurrying from murderous enemies Jesus stopped for a nameless blind beggar. There were plenty more around Jerusalem, but He could not pass this one, despite the danger.

What a revealing episode! It speaks volumes about Jesus and His healing ministry. It shows how He felt, that He healed as He felt. That was Him, wanting to heal, whatever the risk. It is still Him if there is any meaning in Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and for ever." If He didn't still heal, like He did, how could that verse be true?

The Gospels are full of healings to reveal what God was like, and what God was like, He IS, for ever. Interpretations of Scripture that make God one thing today and something different tomorrow, break down on the rock of God's faithful character and changelessness disposition. He would never let himself down. The French version of Psalm 111:3 says "He is for ever faithful to himself ". Nowhere in Scripture is there a single hint that the time would come when God would alter His attitude and stop healing. Theories are being imported into the Word of God that it never was meant to accommodate. The test is, do they match God, what He is? He is changeless, faithful to Himself, never failing. His works spring from His spontaneous, compassionate nature.

Some teach that Jesus worked miracles but only while here, as if He was merely carrying out a set programme limited to His earthly ministry. This is dangerous theology. Was Jesus like He was only for a specific purpose and time but now is a different Jesus? Are we believing in the wrong Jesus? And isn't God now like Jesus' miracles once revealed Him? God save us!

It is being taught that His miracle ministry was only to prove His identity as the Son of God or as the Messiah, or to confirm His teaching, or to establish the church, or to introduce a new era. Then He withdrew and no more miracles were needed to confirm the faith. So? Have we misunderstood? We naturally call Him the Great Physician and believe He still is. But are the scholars right that it only temporary, and the Gospels build up false hopes of His mercy?

Well, have I been ministering under an illusion? I think not. I read about Jesus as the great Healer, believed it, prayed and saw the sick healed. It was not because I had seen it first, for I had not, nor that I wanted to do it, for I feared failure, but the Word compelled me. I believed before anything happened, and the first miracle was in my own church after I had dared to proclaimed Jesus as the Healer. Some declare they preach Christ but they strip Him of His compassion for the sick. Which Christ do they preach? The Gospel Jesus, or non-miraculous Jesus, distorting His Bible portrait as millions see it?

Jesus did create an impression of His profound concern for the afflicted. But teachers have suggested that His true aims were theological, and relief of sufferers only a means to that end, secondary to proving something or other. To think of Jesus making sick people well but with some other primary interest, that horrifies me.

Jesus always acted out what He was. He healed because He pitied the weak and sickly. That is how I think of Him. Is there a Bible text to say I should not? Where are we told He would change? He loved them, then. Why not us, now? He loved people, always did. He always will.

The fifth sparrow

First, I've looked again at the story of the born-blind man. Why really was he blind? It is important to ask as several Bible versions indicate the man was born blind to be healed. The disciples asked if the man had been born blind because of sin. Jesus said not and the NIV reads but "SO that the work of God might be displayed", and the AV reads "that the works of God should be made manifest in him". Translated like that it means God made him blind to heal him, setting up a staged demonstration of His power to bring Him glory.

Somehow this doesn't sound a bit like God to deprive a man of sight for 40 years just to give him eyes later? The plan would not capture my admiration. There were plenty of sightless folk without making another man blind for forty years just as a convenient example.

Now the test of all theology is whether it reflect what God really is. Scripture itself has its own integral control of interpretation, namely its revealed character of God, what God says about Himself. So, would the Bible God blind somebody just to show He could heal them? Well, not the God whose face I see in the Word, and certainly not the Jesus of the Gospels. .

So, what does John 9 really say? The operative word in many translations is 'so that' - the man was born blind "so that the works of God could be manifest". The original Bible word for 'so that', or 'in order that' is the Greek 'hina'. It usually does mean 'so that' and translators have more or less used it in this fixed form. However, in fact 'hina' also carries a different sense and has been used in another way even in Scriptures. It can be translated as an imperative, 'let it be'. The word 'hina' is used in John several times and can be written as 'let it be' in some places..

So now, how does the verse sound with the meaning 'Let it be'? Here's the translation of what Jesus really said "Neither has this man sinned nor his parents but let the works of God be manifested in him. I must works the works of him that sent me, while it is day." Then Jesus healed him. He was blind, had a human right to see and God restored his sight.

The disciples had asked Jesus why the man was born blind, but He did not say why. The disciples saw Jesus notice this blind man, and they just have to say something, if only to ask a silly question whether the man sinned before he was born. Jesus gave no explanation. The Lord did not come to discuss suffering and solve philosophical conundrums. He came to suffer for us, redemptively.

I once prayed for a group of six sick Sikhs. Well, let's be honest about why the sick are sick? Most reasons are too obvious. Often sickness is self-inflicted. The Government at present is warning people that they are eating themselves into an early death, obese, meaning too fat. Lack of hygiene, drugs, alcohol, nicotine, overeating, idleness, poisoning the system with bitterness and hatred are all killers as well as injuries, circumstances or assaults. Why does God allow sickness? Why do WE? Not everyone wants to get better, It doesn't suit their circumstances. One woman healed of osteoarthritis told me she wished she had never met me, it so unsettled her settled future programme.

Sickness was all once a mystery credited to the will of God. Science has shown it never was. God doesn't make people ill. If He did, nobody could cure them, but they are now being cured. Eventually most physical disorders will be treatable. I pray God much to show medical science the cure for cancers.

Suffering is never God's designed will, though He may give us grace and not healing sometimes as with Paul's thorn in the flesh, an affliction that did not come from God but was "a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him" – perhaps recurrent malaria. The Lord often wraps evils, anything the devil himself can do, and hides it in the bosom of His purposes. He makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and "ALL THINGS work together for good to them who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose."

At present there is a hard core of suffering that I can't explain and only God understands, despite our pleadings in prayer. What then? The works of God still remain what Jesus showed them to be. The Father has everything in hand.

Jesus in Matthew 10:29 said two sparrows are sold for one penny, then in Luke 12:6, five sparrows for two pennies, an extra one thrown in, the poorest and most worthless little bird. But that poor one is the very one Jesus spoke about falling from the housetop (Matthew 10:29) saying our Father is 'in it', and that we are worth more than many sparrows.

I've seen a woman nurse such a tiny bird scrap that had fallen prematurely from the nest and shed a tear when it died. From where does such an instinct of gentleness come, if not from the God who created women, and birds? Well, if He sets a woman caring for a tiny fledging, how does He feel about us?

I Was Thinking 12

"The Passion"

My 'Passion' experience was partially eclipsed by the novelty of it being my first cinema experience since I was 11 - except for one in the West End where after ten minutes I stormed out protesting the mockery of Christ.

The Passion film left a mass of viewers shocked and speechless. These scenes were the sword that went through the soul of Mary, Christ's mother, too searing to contemplate. But I own that the screen portrayal did not affect me too greatly. I suppose I knew the

actuality so well from the Gospels. Also, as a newcomer to cinema, like a dinosaur (a very small one!) coming alive from the past of extreme holiness separation-ism, my focus was on Biblical accuracy and the techniques of acting, so the force of the presentation struck me more obliquely at the time.

But Mel Gibson did what the Bible does not, that is describe or dramatise the suffering. Scripture uses few descriptive adjectives, depending on facts without embroidery, like the French writer Gide. But the film, especially the fiendish scourging, was adjectival throughout. God left it to us, our imagination and the skill of Mel Gibson and others to bring home to us the convulsing realities. Being critical for a moment I wished I had been consultant for those scourging takes. As I watched I felt it was too overdone. Jesus, or any other man, would have died half way through such extreme violence. Similarly, 'Jesus' was unrealistically shown as never losing consciousness even struggling uphill on the Via Dolorosa with a very weighty cross - which would only have been the crosspiece - and collapsing at the Stations of the Cross. I observed too that that precious blood of His, which would have been a crimson pool on the ground, appeared only as a lace of lacerations.

Brutal scenes are a feature of Mel Gibson films, I am told. He is Catholic and the Catholic view of the Cross is pity and empathy, gazing at length on crucifixion pictures to identify with His sufferings as a road of salvation. The message of the film is similar but it quotes Isaiah texts during the introduction, making it clear that Christ bore our sins and by His stripes we were healed.

For all my years submerged in theology (the Cross being my life long focus) this visual display remains for me weeks later as the reminder of what our iniquity has really done, and done to God. Its vile hand dragged that Holy One from His sublime throne down to that sordid and hellish Roman cockpit.

I can't get over the fact that He was my victim, impeached for my sins. The screen presented me with a new realisation of wickedness. My sin scalds others, sometimes even terribly, yet what did it do to Him, His suffering, photographed on a 30 foot screen! There are no words - tears are superficial. What a price tag for our illegitimate pleasures! Hollywood gloss and all, but to see Romans trying to cut my Lord in pieces with their lashes was unbearable. He, Christ - and me! My sin associated Him with me! My sin offering, my redeemer.

Now, the viciousness of Roman whips was sickening enough and I know that 'by his stripes we were healed', but it was on the Cross that my hell-fires scorched His soul. The scourging was so grotesquely cruel, so what actually went on in the infinite consciousness of our Saviour during those 6 hours gibbeted on a tree? That is the mystery of God and of eternity. No film, no portrayal could convey that. "None of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed, how dark was the night that the Lord passed through e'er he found the sheep that was lost".

Jewish critics bitterly claimed the film was anti-Jewish propaganda. To me, the allegation sounded prejudiced and untrue. The story Mel Gibson gave us was, as the Pope said, ".. as it was". Jealous Israel leaders did hand Christ over but the brutality was not shown as Jewish, but Roman. To eliminate Jewish involvement from the Passion story would have been false and blind. Does political correctness want us to re-write history? (Like the American film showing USA forces, not the British, capturing the Enigma machine.) In the Passion film Jewish women were paid tributes.

The film's scenes are numbing. Like the Cross itself, it highlights what sin does, not only to God but also to ourselves, twisting our thinking, corrupting our conscience, distorting our understanding of truth, and finally crucifying God and putting the devil on the throne. It puts into pictorial form the most devastating statement ever made about mankind: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, and who can know it?" Who can know it? We reply 'nobody', and TV news confirms it, daily.

Can the devil tell the truth?

A demon-hunter demanded "Lying spirit of the devil, what is your name?" I imagined that spirit creasing his brow in a dilemma. Tell the truth?

IWT 11 pointed out that Job's friends never attributed his troubles to Satan, though he appears 14 times in chapters 1 and 2. In the rest of the OT he is on stage only 5 times, and in the New Testament 34 times. Otherwise his gang of fallen spirits are called 'the devil', operating at the Satanic will.

Satan himself personally troubled Jesus and others, buffeting Paul, for example, with a thorn in the flesh. He is capable of inciting endless mayhem, including murder (John 8:44).

Some teach that Satan wished to displace God. He had no such insane idea, knowing himself to be a limited creature and that God filled heaven and earth. His ambition was no more than lord of the Earth, this planet being the vital battle ground between good and evil. He installed himself as 'the god of this world'. Human beings are capable of resisting or of falling in with Satanic scheming. We were created vulnerable, precisely so that the victory of God will be evident through our weakness as agents of God's strategy. He will rid creation of all evil through us. Angels and heavenly intelligences serve us as we battle here against entrenched evil.

From the Garden of Eden, Satan had the world pretty much to himself. The invasion of his territory by God the Son was a shattering blow to the kingdom of hell. The devil could not anticipate that the Son of God would take flesh and suffer death and go to such extreme lengths to overcome evil. Love, such love especially, is a mystery to Satan. The devil knows he can't win, so why carry on? Quite simply, he can't help himself. The embodiment and personification of evil can't stop being what he is, evil. Knowing he has but a short time, the devil is filled with greater fury (Revelation 12:12).

I am amazed by, but do not admire, the faith many have in the devil. Half the Christian world believes the devil is active in their everyday life, yet have difficulty accepting that God is equally active. They believe the devil makes them sick but not that God can cure them. The devil appears to be at ease creating trouble, but people clatter on God's door for a week to get His help. Need they? Prayer is often an expression of unbelief. Why ask God to do what He said He would do? Is He such a reluctant character? They take the devil for granted as up and doing, reliably being a bad devil, but believe that God must be persuaded and blandished with fasting to be a good God. Yes?

Most troubles and evils, including temptations, come from ourselves (James 1:14) and from the imperfect world which environs us. Satan is not another God. He has no Divine attributes, no omnipresence, omniscience or omnipotence. He is the anti-God. God is good, full of iridescent light and joy. Satan is the negative, limited, evil, full of darkness.

Few have dealings with Satan himself, but we all have indirectly through the medium of demon spirits. Once in my life, God let me see Satan as a warning of the impossible situation he would engineer around me. Normally he does not stay with us but does what he can and leaves us. His targets are people dangerous to him in the war. "Mighty men around us falling" sang the hymn writer - of course! Satan creates pressures on leaders that others know little about. They may go down in the battle and we should pick them up not kick them down.

Christ emptied Satan of his power. Heb. 2:14 "That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death". The word "katargeo", used 27 times in the NT, means of 'none effect'. Satan seeks whom he may destroy, to bring about their death or their ruin. How, if he is evacuated of power? Satan has only the power we concede when we give way to him. We can resist him, for in Christ we have the upper hand. Jesus told the disciples "I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy". The 'enemy' had power, but not after the victory on Calvary.

Some teach that demonic forces can control us. They ascribe erratic or wrong behaviour to controlling demons. But surely anyone not responsible for what they do should be sectioned under British law? Believers should never lay their sins at the devil's door. God has given us "the power of a sound mind", 2 Timothy 1:7, and power over the evil one. That is what salvation is (Acts 26:18).

Telling believers they have a demon is dreadfully wrong. To rid them of the idea is something I have found well nigh impossible. Exorcism again and again achieves nothing simply because there is no demon to expel, but each time it drives the idea deeper into their consciousness. Eventually they 'learn to live with it', like a bent nose, which is hardly the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The ABC of the Gospel is being set free from the devil. Otherwise the mighty work of Christ has failed. We shall be troubled by Satanic attention, but in Christ we are stronger than he is. It is time to live that way and not give way.

To think he is all powerful is the deceit of the devil. We are the masters, not he.

What is 'True Revival'?

"I have been young and now am old but I have not seen the masses repenting nor their seed coming to church." If prayer could do it, the whole world by now would be in religious ferment.

'Revival', is a matter of definition. There's the kind associated with the question "Why does revival tarry?" It seems a perpetual subject for preachers as a chance to have a go at church shortcomings. Some want God to step in, do everything and make work easier for Christians. 'Prayer brings revival?' So does work! Without it, revival never did happen. The Bible talks about evangelism, never 'revival'.

Periodically we hear of 'signs' of revival, as when Billy Graham was in Haringey 50 years ago and constantly in the fads and fashions of worship and Bible 'discoveries'. The cry "Do it again Lord!" is for a repeat of old church excitements. Realities should be our concern, the paralysing and disgusting national ignorance of the Bible and Christianity, spiritual collapse and public moral bankruptcy even led by a blind Parliament.

Now, when Wesley died in 1791, Britain was still only half civilised, cruel, debauched. Churches were struggling, or empty, and it was feared that Christianity would not survive the century. Wesley's followers were mostly poor un-influential country folk.

Fifty years of revivalism left only 50,000 Methodists (accounts vary). Of the 10 million UK, 9,950,000 were not Methodists. The Industrial Revolution created slums for the masses of country folk recruited for the mills, the new 'working classes'. Little was done for their spiritual welfare, shunned as the 'great unwashed' by the churches and lost to them until now.

Then, from about 1830 or 1840, almost imperceptibly, spiritual waters crept in with the greatest revival I know of, though little mentioned in the books about revival. The main Wesleyan increase did not come from 'revivals' at all, but from church expansion continuing up to the Great War of 1914. What the Victorians did for us was to lay new Christian foundations. God does things His own way, not according to a preset revival formula. He changed Britain then, His way. I pray for 'revival', but for God to do it His way - again. The need is not a week or two of excitement, but a nation-wide swing back to Christian principles and a change in social conscience and God-consciousness.

Revivalist type meetings thrived in the 19th century because religion itself was thriving. "Revivals", especially in country places, regularly took place where people in noisy convulsions called on God. One Yorkshire worthy boasted he had been converted like that every year! It contributed to the Christian England the Victorians gave us. A main cause of Victorian godliness was the leadership of great evangelicals, as in the Clapham Sect. William Wilberforce championed not only the Empire slaves, but another ninety moral causes. Evangelicals fought for the deprived and critical social issues. Anthony Ashley Cooper, later the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, piloted a succession of measures for the depressed classes through Parliament, as in the Factory Acts. When he died, 100,000 working people lined the streets, weeping. We need a broader vision. God made the world, not just churches.

I was brought up by Victorians and I could never convey the ambience, the atmosphere, unimaginable by the present generation with Christianity as the common currency and God a universal sanction curbing crime. Everybody knew right from wrong – then. Britain was the world leader and the greatest missionary country. Possibly the French Revolution failed to cross the white cliffs of Dover partly because Wesley and his preaching of the Gospel were a spiritual barricade. Jesus said "Ye are the salt of the earth". Where the Gospel is preached, godly and preservative social effects follow, quite beyond any actual evangelistic results.

In books, revivals sound as if they happened in a vacuum, related to nothing but prayer and authenticated by special phenomena. The D.L. Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham campaigns are not counted as 'revival'. Reinhard Bonnke seeing a million converts in a week is also not 'revival.' The revivalism USA paper 'The Herald of His coming' has never mentioned that in about three decades, CfaN has received 34 million decisions cards and brought unprecedented public and even national changes with multitudes healed and the dead raised to life. Should we wait for something we've never seen or move with God in what He is doing?

'Revival' with classical phenomena invariably follows religious pre-conditioning. Duncan Campbell told me that in the Isle of Lewis, where he led the 1949 classic 'revival', even drunken fathers had read the Bible at breakfast each morning. The Welsh revival winged along on the nostalgia of chapel culture. When the Salvation Army first took to London streets a crowd would listen to them at any time of day or night. The "Awakening" in the American colonies was among people already very religion-conscious. Toronto

phenomena, mainly among believers was hailed as signs of 'revival', but no sweeping soul-winning followed.

Christian expansion today, however, is amazing, but only on other continents. Bogotá (Colombia) may explain. There, as in the Philippines, to talk to someone on the street about God attracts a crowd. Why? Because Catholicism is inbred, everyone is religiously aware and interested and there is spiritual unrest. Catholic theologians tried to meet it with their leftist Theology of Deliverance, but people want God, not just politics. Similar pre-conditioning accounts for Christian expansion in Africa, China, Korea, and other global areas.

Why no revival in Britain? First, there is no inbred religious consciousness here. Second, 300 years of rationalist thinking from European and British philosophers like Descartes, Hume, Locke, Kant, plus Biblical critics and liberals, has washed religion out of the public mind. These secularist teachings, however, have not penetrated everywhere and on other continents multitudes turn to Christ while Europe stagnates in spiritual uncertainty, like another Nazareth rejecting Christ.

Folk of the 19th century, less well educated and sophisticated had not absorbed the Enlightenment rationalism and turned to God not in the classical revival sense but like a quiet tide. Remembering Wesley many say "Lord do it again". Has God only one bolt to shoot? In my grandparents' times God proved He had bigger ideas and soon Christian standards permeated society generally.

I was born into a Christian land. No locked doors, no burglars, no muggings, but Sunday schools and church-going were becoming unfashionable. That is why I suffered 11 burglaries, road rage assault, and my wife being attacked near our home. In her final illness a plausible rogue offered me a gadget for £946 to relieve her pain. I saw it in a Curries catalogue for £46. Builders told me my house needed new gutters. They had installed new ones themselves 6 weeks before. England today!

When Princess Diana died, grief changed Britain overnight. That's human nature. The 19th century surge back to faith can easily happen again. British people will surely awake to the void of life without a spiritual dimension. The British and European scene is a spiritual vacuum, and nature abhors a vacuum! It can be a precursor for a general swing towards God. I could now be writing of something imminent, contemporary, true revival, prayed for over a century, the kind that made us Christian a century or so ago. Where there are channels and little creeks, God's ocean will steal in, and overflow. Let us make them!

Pebble in a cave

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd, Muhammad edh-Dhib looking for a straying goat threw a stone into an opening in the sun-lashed hills near the Dead Sea and heard a tingle of broken pottery. Venturing in, he found several large jars containing seven ancient scrolls, and hundreds of leather scraps.

Bedouins realised such documents meant money. They found more and so did certain scholars. By 1956 another ten caves had yielded some 800 scrolls and thousands of fragments, written mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic (the language of Jesus), pre-dating the Christian era. Qumran, a site near the caves thought to have been a fort, was explored and proved to be where a community lived which had owned the scrolls. I have visited Qumran.

We waited for years for translation and publishing and the completion was so delayed it was a scholastic scandal. Today our curiosity is gratified. I have the English translation. Most of the finds were non-Biblical, being rules and practices of the Qumran community, but all the Old Testament books were represented except Esther, usually in several copies, such as 30 of the Psalms.

The scrolls contain little history but show the style of writing and language of 2000 years ago. They included Old Testament versions in use before and at the time of Jesus. We now have the complete book of Isaiah 1000 years older than what we had before - the Cairo codex Ben Scrolls. Much debate continues, such as where the scrolls were written. But it is too technical for my short article.

Copying Scripture was obviously not too precise. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jewish experts, the Masorites, worked carefully to tidy up the diverse publications and produce an authentic version. It can now be checked against copies 6 or 7 centuries older.

This lost community was (we think) the Essenes, a rigid fundamentalist back-to-the-Bible movement, known to us from the historian Josephus. Qumran lasted over 200 years with an average group of about 200 men. They were rigid fundamentalists attempting perfect obedience to the law far more than the Pharisees. They, like all Israel at that time, (vide Simeon and Nicodemus) believed the Kingdom of God was imminent. They were right, and wrong. The Kingdom came but not as they expected. It broke into the world in the person of our Lord Jesus.

Qumran men called themselves the 'Sons of Light' and their founder, or some individual, the 'Teacher of Righteousness', being at war with the 'Sons of Darkness'. Their strictness is incredible. Anyone speaking the name of God would be expelled. On the Sabbath it was an offence to carry even dust on their clothes. The community possibly fled during the Jews uprising against Rome and deposited their precious MSS in the caves for safety. Nobody came back.

When the scrolls were known, various scholars made gratuitous and authoritative comments but which proved to be fatuous nonsense. Now, they said, we would know the truth of Christianity's origins, and that perhaps Jesus belonged to the cult. One 'authority', Dr. Allegro, suggested the disciples were inspired by intoxicant mushroom juice. His department head said to him "Allegro. Retardo! Retardo!" Any such outrageous sensation was greeted with approving enthusiasm by the press.

Personally I find nothing in the scrolls that could effect the New Testament and Christian teaching, but they are immensely useful. To possess the very Scriptures used over 2000 years ago is exciting, but they also give us examples of the ideas, beliefs, attitudes and languages current up to the time of Jesus. The scrolls are important to Textual Criticism upon which we depend for our Bibles.

Qumran was not remotely a source of New Testament teaching, but provides a backdrop to the glittering jewels of Christ's teaching and His unfolding of truth and Scripture. Qumran made it very hard labour to come to God and believed nobody else could unless they joined their commune. Their rules carried the death sentence though they could not carry it out.

Right through history there have been purists, kathari, extreme fundamentalists. In my lifetime I've seen an endless procession flaunting their special revelations like banners, claiming secret knowledge, special keys to power, blessing, holiness, and 'structures' for the church, with all ordinary folk, like me, lost!

But I'm not lost. Jesus found me. Qumran was ultra-selective and elitist, Jesus embraced all. Qumran laboured to impress God, but Jesus said "Come to me all you that labour". Qumran spoke of strife and war, but Jesus of reconciliation and peace. Qumran lingered on the theme of judgment, but Jesus taught forgiveness.

Well, I congratulate myself and thank God daily for my incredible good fortune getting to know Jesus. Extremists today, like the Qumran Essenes, conceive their own ideas and cherish them like brain children. Full of their own pet religious theories and assumptions they make life so difficult, even impossible for themselves. God never meant it. He made us for His fellowship so ordinary folk could enjoy it. Jesus stands always offering us life. To not know Jesus, when you can, is proof of the perversity of human nature.

I Was Thinking 13

I wish you a happy Christmas!

Christmas suggests two great questions: What is heaven and what is it really like? And What is God's purpose in saving us?

What is heaven really like?

People ask, "*Do you like Christmas?*" Like it? God planned the world for it! The peak day, the key locking together of all days in Divine order. Without Christmas the world would be meaningless. The Incarnation and Christ's work are God's greatest achievement. The Father was at Bethlehem and at Calvary. That is high theology.

Those who quibble about the 25th of December being once a pagan mid-winter feast have no perspective whatever. They may as well say we can't grow wheat in a field because a dandelion once grew there.

Last Christmas, IWT asked what it was like for God to become Man. C. S. Lewis said that it was like a man becoming a beetle, a metamorphosis from the invisible and immortal to the visible and mortal. "*Beyond all question the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body!*" 1 Tim. 3:16.

This Christmas, I am thinking about Christ's other experience - His change of location. He descended from the world of love down to breathe our fetid atmosphere and sit in our grotty parlours. So, I wanted to glimpse where He came from and what He gave up. It has helped me appreciate better His passionate imperative to make such a journey. He came to take us where He came from. Moving house, folk want to know about the neighbours and the place where they will live. I, we, shall be going to glory presently, so I am anticipating what that Home will be.

The apostle John in Revelation says he saw a door opened in heaven and tells us what he saw through that open portal. Was it the door from which Jesus exited to Bethlehem? He left the door of heaven open, one day to come and bring us and welcome us home through that door.

Many mansions?

The book of Revelation, uses strange figures of speech, such as a sea of glass mingled with fire, We will look at that presently, but first at what Jesus said about the future life. "*In my Father's house are many mansions.*" The word 'mansions' is from the Latin Vulgate. It has inspired hymns and popular thought, but it is only imaginative poetry. Obviously in the resurrection state we will neither sleep, cook food, or have weather, so mansions

with bedrooms, kitchens and shelter will not be needed and can hardly be the dwelling places Jesus mentioned.

The original word in Greek is '*monai*', as in verse 23, "*we will make our abode ('monai') with him.*" It isn't anywhere else in the New Testament but its cognate is '*meno*', to abide, tarry, remain, used 129 times in the New Testament. So the *monai* dwelling places are where we will 'remain' permanently. Earth is not our eternal resting place. Other Divine and gloriously different worlds are ready to welcome us.

Jesus went on to say "*I go to prepare a place for you.*" (Greek '*topon*'). Everyone including scholars speculate as if the 'place' was a location. Obviously it can't be. Christ is not an architect superintending the construction of a palatial residence! It would be a million miles wide city by now. After all, He made the heavens and the earth in six days, so He would hardly need 2000 years to make a mansion.

Our destiny is to be ever with the Lord, at His side, as His bride, as He said. "*Where I am there you may be also*". When I first went to the USA I did not take my wife but I 'made a place' for her, talking about her so she would have an American welcome when she went with me, happy with my friends in different cities and comfortable with the USA environment and culture.

I'm much confined to my own house so I trust not to be domiciled at some limited address hereafter, just pruning heavenly roses on a lordly heavenly estate somewhere. Human hankering for wider fields. Trips into space can now be commercially booked and it is planned for men to land on Mars within ten years. The believer's glorious expectation is that we shall leave the limitations of earth and go OUT, not IN, to explore the Father's house and its countless dwelling places for ever. This present world enthralms me though I live in an inner city zone, yet earth is only one of God's 'abiding places', so what beauties await us in other '*monai*' places?

We shall move in a new dimension, everything new, new songs, music with a 1000 tone scale, new colours we have no power now to see, new delights, new pleasures. God is our true home and we shall swim in life, light and love.

Shall we know one another in heaven? Will my wife be no more than everybody else is to me? No, death is conquered and will not part us for ever. In fact we shall know one another far better. Our bodies will be like the resurrection body of Jesus, our apprehension will no longer depend on fleshly eyes, ears and nervous systems. As purified and unveiled personalities, our recognition of one another will be as direct as God now knows us. Those we loved here we shall love with a joyous intensity never yet experienced. "*Now we see through a glass, darkly*".

Now Jesus gave up that heavenly state for Bethlehem's squalid estate to lie in His first bed of straw in a cattle trough and grew up in a primitive, unhygienic and smelly house shared with livestock.

He came here to take us there, shedding our fleshly imperfections to reflect the glory of His face, stars studding eternal skies, splendid above the bright-winged angels, in shoreless infinity. The whole Gospel of John opens this great hope to us.

"I saw a throne"

Paul in a Paradise experience saw "unspeakable things" he said. Language failed him. Hebrew writers use imagery that to us seems a misalliance of expressions. The Song of Solomon, chapter 7, for example. The lover says his beloved's nose is like the tower of

Lebanon and she says his cheeks are like beds of spices. Some nose, some cheeks! Revelation uses the same style.

My thoughts have been hovering around Revelation 4 on the worship of the Creator and Revelation 5 on the worship of the Lamb, the blaze of eternal realities blotting out mundane matters - the screen of my mind.

What John saw was a throne, THE Throne. Isaiah, 800 years before, saw a throne at his prophetic 'call', but, like other writers, told us little of the scene. John places six Revelation scenes around thrones. He refers to dire happenings on earth but the high Throne is unshaken. The Lamb reigns, always, everywhere.

The Throne is the power centre to which Christ ascended.

John saw a rainbow of brilliant emerald light encircling the Throne. A rainbow is caused by sunlight passing through rain throwing prismatic colours on the screen of a dark sky. The first picture of heaven for us earthlings is that rainbow, God's own banner of promise flung high across the dark clouds of our earthly experience.

But this rainbow was green, the symbol of life. Nothing John saw was mere pageantry - just a passing display for John's benefit. This emerald blaze was the awesome Shekinah that the High Priest only saw through a haze of incense smoke, like a force-field of unfading glory and life. At Niagara falls I've seen the rainbow when sunlight shines through the rising spray. The emerald light of the great Throne is the constant glory of God's presence, like the radiation of the sun ever shining night and day whether we see it or not. He is the '*Father of lights*'.

I noticed a subtlety in the Greek of Mark 5. A woman was healed when she touched Jesus' clothes as power emanated from Him. But she did not trigger that power by her touch. It is always there, flowing from His presence, so that not only her but, "*as many as touched Him were made whole*."

That life is the life of God, to John an emerald emanation from the Throne, but it fills heaven, so that there is no death, simply His presence with neither beginning nor ending, everything permeated by His life. We cannot die because He lives and we are in Him, the place of ever-newness of life. John had written his Gospel with three main themes, light, life and love, and now He saw them made visible at their source. "*The lamb is all the light*."

"Unspeakable things"

John saw a figure on the Throne, but John could not explain to us what He was like, because He was like nothing else in the world and imagination had nothing to hold on to. John fell back on eastern depiction, saying that Figure was 'like' jewels, just exquisite beauty, "*He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone*", that is diamond and carnelian. Hebrew writing describes the beauty of one thing in terms of the beauty of a quite different thing. The Song of Songs (2:3) says the man beloved was like an apple tree. The glory of God Himself is beyond words, and John could only think of the scintillating loveliness of a flawless diamond and the rich deep red-brown of carnelian. Sardius suggests man, '*Adam*', to be red and Christ was the second Adam.

The 'fair woman' of the Song of Solomon (chapter 5) is asked to describe her beloved. For six verses she tried different figures of speech, but in the end gave up and said "*he is altogether lovely*". That is our experience of Jesus. He excels our best songs. John had known Jesus but, seeing Him in His heavenly identity occupying His throne, He was lost for words. He had looked on the fountain of life. We shall see Him ourselves in His

splendour, the source of all loveliness, music, poetry, colour, and joy. We shall stand for a thousand years 'lost in wonder love and praise.'

Other 'dwellings' – for whom?

Around the Throne John saw twenty-four other thrones occupied by twenty-four 'elders' who prostrated themselves before the One on the great Throne. John heard the noise of heaven, no graveyard stillness there, but crashing thunderings and dazzling lightnings flashing across the immense scene. These elders were (Greek) '*presbyters*', as appointed in churches but in the eternal dimension and enthroned. They were overseers of orders beyond earthly limits, with authority over domains and subjects deep in God's dominions, One day the redeemed and blood-washed children of God, Princes and Kings will visit these unknown territories. "*Do you not know that we shall judge angels?*" 1 Cor. 6:3.

John saw also four 'living creatures'. The original name is 'the Zoa,' (from Greek 'zoe', life.) He had described God as jewels and now needed words for these other awesome beings, full of eyes. Eastern style, he could only compare their faces to animals for their grace, strength, majesty and beauty. Such greatness was the boast of earthling. No human had the physical beauty of lions, oxen and eagles like these new Zoa life forms. But from where had they travelled to worship at the Throne. Are they the normal inhabitants of heaven that we meet when we go there? Or are there remote domains beyond all physical worlds, peopled by super-human beings? How far had they travelled to come to worship at the Throne? Further for sure than we travel to church.

These many and different creatures are hints of the spaciousness of the Father's house. Jesus said in it were many dwelling places, and if earth is the dwelling for people, then in what kind dwellings do such wonderful angelic beings dwell? We know of angels, cherubim, majestic and ancient spirits called the sons of God, mighty princes, vast intelligences. Heaven is so great it provides these lords their endless and lustrous kingdoms.

"The heaven of heavens"

The dwelling places Jesus mentioned are in the Father's house. Solomon said that the heavens, and the heaven of the heavens, cannot contain God. His house is not a closed space heaven with smaller departments or areas. The apostle Paul spoke of being caught up into the third heaven which he called Paradise – the garden outside the house. Heaven, where we are destined to abide stretches as far as Gods' presence, His entire order and series of infinite orders, spiritual, material and physical. We have seen the almost frightening photographs of stellar space taken by modern telescopic technology, but in the words of Job awed by what he could see by only his natural eye, "*these are but the skirts of his ways*". I have always thought he meant the mark on the dewy grass left by His Divine robes as He passed.

That is the dimension of Heaven, endless spheres, endless heavens, endless joy, endless life. It is not a shut-in estate behind gates, like an everlasting church meeting. Hell is small, a mere pit, with gates and bars to keep in its victims. Heaven is greater than all the cosmos.

Where is God going?

"*God came from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran*". That's history, Bible history.

Sir Walter Raleigh warned writers that if they come too near the heel of truth it will kick their teeth. History is only a view point. Writers select, interpret and edit events to their liking. Somebody said "History is fiction with the truth left out". I taught students Church History for 20 years and felt the same about accounts of the past, – and incidentally about garbled Press accounts of my own evangelistic campaigns. Henry Ford said "history is more or less bunk".

However, in the Word, God is the editor of events. We have His judgment not only on the past but on the future also.

Here is an outline of Scripture history. After Creation came God's extraordinary concern with just one family, Israel, for 2000 years. Then a new global scene followed with the impact of Christ. It still progresses world-wide, sweeping across nations. All Christians on earth in the year 1900 numbered 500 million, but Pentecostal-Charismatics alone number 620 million today. The ferocity of some Islam extremists comes from their anger over Christian expansion. But Bible history overleaps the present, pre-writes the future and announces the Second Advent of Christ.

However, after Jesus returns and reigns what then?

Turning back to the sacred pages of the Book we find them bloodstained. It is the blood-price of human redemption paid by our Lord. Born from His supreme battle and victory is that wonderful new creation, the Church of the redeemed. This body is the most remarkable entity on earth, created by God, totally different from all organisations and religions ever known. The future lies with the Church, with what God is doing and anything God will do will be with the Church. What does not relate to the Church is irrelevant.

The hope of mankind is there, what will happen on earth. The global effects of Christ's first coming are evident, but His second coming will have far greater effects across the nations. That is our secret. In Bible terms we say that as God brought Eve from the side of Adam to be his wife, He has brought the Church from the wounded side of Christ to be His Bride. Soon He will come to claim His Bride.

The Second Coming is the consummation of history but not its end. The Bible does not end with 'Finis', but with Christ saying "*I am the beginning and the end.*" The Bible begins with an end and ends with a beginning. From the Second Advent of Christ a new chapter starts, as Scripture shows us.

A student pastor asked me an interesting question. If we have free will in heaven, couldn't we still sin, even there? Of course some teach that those in heaven are predestined to be there by God's sovereign will, not by their own will. Having no will, they cannot sin. Well, for myself, I would not be happy in the company of such robotic creatures, nor can I see how God could have any satisfaction in them either. He wants people in His own image, with their own sovereign will and power of volition, freely loving and worshiping, not dolls, auto-response mechanisms, creatures with conditioned reflexes like Professor Ivan Pavlov's dogs.

In Revelation 21:5 God says "*Behold I make everything new*" and in 21:1 "*I saw a new heaven and a new earth*". The apostle Peter also says "*We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness*" 2 Peter 3:13. A new universe having neither physical nor moral evil, no tears, no death, no sorrow, no crying, no pain, with fear banished and unbelief, abominations, murder, witchcraft, immorality and deceit forever eliminated.

This ultimate state cannot be achieved by God saying 'Let it be!' like He made the first order, creation. Omnipotent power is right for material effects, but to create a sinless universe of people, angels, or any other creature, force is useless. Not even God can make people good by compulsion. His way has to be love – and sacrifice. That is what is happening now, preparing the foundations of a righteous heaven and earth.

This process, breaking the power of evil was especially the work of Christ. Matthew 4:1 says "*Jesus was led by the Spirit TO BE tempted by the devil*". Mark's Gospel says the same thing. Luke says "*Jesus being full of the Holy Spirit was led by the Spirit into the wilderness being forty days tempted of the devil*". He had come to overcome the devil, the world and the flesh. "*For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.*" 1 John 3:8.

We are told of His wilderness temptations. They were not the only tests He had faced, for obviously His 30 years life in Nazareth presented every kind of temptation. But with His wilderness trials He had gone public for all to be aware of His purpose and holiness. Christ resisted the devil. His rejection of all worldly ways brought Him to Calvary, and though His flesh flinched from the horrors of death He strode to Calvary to do His Father's will. For the first time a Man had overcome the world, the devil and the weaknesses and fears of human existence. The future was assured.

Christ did the groundwork for us to build upon. We are all here on earth for the same purpose. In this world we are exposed to maximum temptations, to prove that in Christ's love we can face the world, the flesh and the devil and by faith we can overcome and live victorious lives, like God boasted of Job. Here is the wisdom of God in one of the most remarkable Scriptures: "*Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*"

God's purpose is moving on. He has made us finite mortals capable of sin, to prove that under the greatest pressures love conquers and that we have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the destiny of the redeemed – they overcome, and become Christ's spotless Bride "*Christ loved the Church to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any such blemish, but holy and blameless.*" When He comes, and our days of temptation and testing are over, there will be no more pressures of the world, flesh or devil, but the power of His love will purify the Church utterly. Having conquered on earth, no temptation can ever reach them.

When the new heaven and earth appear, the Church will be a glorious sight, like a bride adorned for her husband and like a glittering city with its gates open to mankind. In the midst of it is the Lamb of God bearing the marks of having been slain. His presence and the brilliant display of millions upon millions who have followed Him and been more than conquerors under terrible trials, even to death, this will be the barrier in the wisdom of God against all such repetition as the desperate history of earth.

This planet was made and we were placed here for this long war to end all wars, to end the reign of Satan, and empty fleshly and worldly temptations of all power. God has bigger plans than our comfort. He has allowed the present stresses to establish the reign of love, for ever, in all future worlds. With evil finally ended, the purposes of God can move forward into endless eternities. What those purposes are we do not know, but we

are the most privileged of all His creatures to be His agents, means and conquerors to ensure a sinless eternity, *'to the praise and glory of God, world without end'*.

Are we liars?

Visiting a friend I noticed a fine looking book, 600 pages, published in 1996 which she had picked up cheap from a stall. Obviously it had never been read. With many graphs, arguments, calculations and legendry history it proved where the body of Jesus was hidden in Europe eight centuries ago. This 'solved the mystery' of what happened to Him.

So the testimony of Christians for 2000 years meant nothing at all? Millions must have been pretending, even lying, saying they had experienced His presence risen from the dead? Such books suggest the witness of the Church is of no account. Well, on any grounds it seems to me outrageous, even insulting. At least we are honest.

I Was Thinking 14

Not the God of the Philosophers

Empty souls philosophise. The French mathematician Blaise Pascal had an extraordinary experience of the fire of God and recorded it, saying it was "not the God of the philosophers". The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, a crazy atheist, hated Pascal. He suggested God has swallowed him. Well – why not? A lunatic asylum 'swallowed' Nietzsche for the last 11 years of his life. He died in 1900.

Samuel Butler said "all philosophies are nonsense". That is true, particularly when they deal with God. I am writing this because the great thinkers' ideas of God have confused believers down to this day, without clarity from the Word. Generally, people have their own ideas of what the Almighty should be like. When things don't happen as hoped they are quite offended with him.

There are interpretations of God's changelessness that get in the way of faith. If His will is perfect, rigid and all-wise, can prayer change anything at all? Knowing the end from the beginning, the future is fixed. What value then are our petitions? We can only pray to bend our will to the inevitable.

God's changelessness should be understood in Bible terms, not by human conclusions. God is seen as a mountain and prayers mean less than snowflakes. It is a fudged picture. I want to clear the mists from the mountain. My God is the Bible God and the God of millions. He responds to our call and does move. We ask, He acts. He comes to our aid. Prayer impacts Him. He changes things. He works when we pray and does not work when we don't pray. *"You have not because you ask not."* We trust Him and He guides and cares. If God's will is inflexible, why did Jesus say *"Whatsoever things YE ask in my name we will do"*. In graciousness to us He wills what we will. He bends to our estate.

My testimony is that my faith rests in the God of the Bible, no longer the God of reason. In my early ministry I aimed to prove faith and the Bible by reason, I defended the ways of God to men, like a lawyer in court – as if He was on trial. God is the judge and the world is on trial. After some years, a powerful spiritual experience turned my life around to the way of faith. The jigsaw of questions came together in a single instant. I abandoned futile - I was going to say 'infantile'- attempts to think out the Divine mysteries. My eyes opened to God by faith. It seemed at that moment that Jesus stepped out of the Bible as from the tomb and met me like He met the doubting disciples.

I took college lectures to show that independent thought without the Word and the Spirit, produced only modernist stairs of sand. To work out what God was like was ridiculous. Irenaeus the early church father said "How can we know about Him unless He tells us?" *"He shall lead you into all truth"*. The Gospel is knowing, not talking; finding, not seeking; arriving, not travelling. Paul said that God was never found by reason. We read the same thinkers' works that Paul read, and can see how right he was.

People in Scripture built everything on belief in a living God. He walked with them. Those who take Him at His word rank with Abraham, Elijah and David, the mother Mary and Mary Magdalene and add their names to Hebrews chapter eleven. The Bible God answers by fire, the Pentecostal God, and by His wonderful grace my God. In countless healing services I have dared to declare the Word of God that the Lord heals, throwing myself in trust upon God. I believe that if I do what He said, He will do what He said. What joy it has brought!

The Bible God is touched by the feelings of our infirmities. He doesn't just sit being sorry for us. He walks in the fire with us and we are not burned and through the valley with us and we are not harmed.

The Bible tells us the Lord reversed His intentions, 'repented', changed His mind and changed his action when prayer was made. He said He is not a man to repent but that means He has no fault, no sin of which to repent. But when men of God stretched out pleading hands, again and again He swerved from His expressed purposes. God hears all prayer, diverges and does what He would not have done. Seek His blessing and He lifts the curse.

Prayers touch God. They are not reflexive, affecting only our own selves. Praying is not a subjective exercise to do good to ourselves, to calm and focus our spirit, like eastern meditation. Hundreds of millions today testify that prayer reaches God and it is His peace and His love that comes back to us.

The Old Testament has been neglected. It is there that we have the ABC of God's essential being, His nature, disposition and character. The New Testament imposes the picture of Christ on the picture of the God of Israel. It fits perfectly. It is the same Person, in living colour, not just black and white. The Old Testament speaks of God and Jesus said it speaks of Him. They are one and the same. Christ Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." Heb. 1:3. He always did God's will, and when circumstances changed His direction, it showed the Father varying His ways also.

Genesis 6:6 give us an early lesson. *"It repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart"*. The LORD God not only 'repented' or 'regretted' making man, but it *'grieved him in his heart'*. The word in Hebrew could not be stronger, *'bitter indignation'*. It is used several times for very disturbed people, such as David when Absalom was killed. He wept brokenly *"Oh Absalom my son, Absalom my son! Would God I had died for thee."* God used the same word about His own feelings over us, David did not die for Absalom but Christ did die for us. It was no mere way of talking, God WAS grieved, *'in his heart'*.

The same word is used in Psalm 78:40 *"Often they rebelled against him and grieved him."* The Psalm speaks of God's patience and how Israel pushes the Lord too far. *"When God heard them he was very angry; he rejected Israel completely"*. God had angry regrets, changed His mind

and demonstrated it. Isaiah 63:10 "*They rebelled and grieved (made bitterly indignant) his Holy Spirit so he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them*".

This IWT could be filled with such Bible teaching. God does respond and is affected by what we say and do, His action is in chain to our action. Prayer is not just piety, soaking in a cosy religious meeting, like a gently simmering Welsh stew. It is a power link.

If God knew everything beforehand, the future would be fixed, but He chooses not to. Our Lord told us to pray "*Thy will be done*", because it isn't done and what happens is not fixed by His will. Job asked what God had to do with him or his sin. This is one question in Job that was answered. Job learned sin does affect God. That is the crucial centre of Christianity. Christ bore our sins on the Cross. It contains all the theology we ever need to know. It is frightening that my wickedness impacts God. David realised it and shuddered: "*Against thee, and thee only have I sinned*". His murder against Uriah was even more against the Lord.

My aim is to encourage faith in a God who is sensitive to each one of us. He is not oblivious of anybody on earth. It is not hard to contact Him. We make it difficult for Him to contact us, but we are important to Him, not nameless things. He is as aware of us as a mother is aware of the babe in her womb.

God showed His intense sensitivity in His cry through Hosea, "*My heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together*". He used that sort of language because He meant what He said. It is not talk reduced to human categories. It was the same Voice heard in Galilee, weeping over shepherd-less people or rejoicing in spirit over His disciples. If God has a disposition then by definition He can weep with those that weep and rejoice with those that rejoice. We saw that supremely in the fields of Galilee and on the hill of Calvary.

The idea of a Gospel and a God of reason originated with great historical minds. Two names are specially notable. Augustine of Hippo, born 354 AD, and Thomas Aquinas, born 1225 AD. They wanted to show to pagans that Christianity was reasonable and so they shaped it to pagan thinkers. Augustine read Plato in the works of Plotinus and Porphyry (who wrote against Christianity!) and Aquinas resorted to Aristotle. He could not read Greek but used translations and interpreted the Bible by what Aristotle thought. To my mind it was a staggering betrayal, however well intended.

Jesus is not related to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke or Hume. He is the God that loves me and sacrificed everything for me. Love is beyond all philosophy. We can't love and not feel it. Neither can God. Loving is dangerous. It risks heartbreak. God risked it and His heart broke. His compassions are real. The changeless God changed, the greatest change ever known. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

God is love. He never changes in Himself. His name stands for His essential Being and is eternal. I like the modern French of Psalm 111:3: '*Il est pour toujours fidele a lui-meme*'. '*He is always faithful to Himself*.' His heart beats for us. Our Jesus today remains the Jesus of the Gospels, the same yesterday, today and forever. His ear is ever open to our cry. Prayer moves the Hand that moves the world - no matter what anybody 'thinks'.

More about the mysterious Zoa

We can judge what a place is like by those who live there. A man with a skewer through his nose belongs to the rain forest. The occupant of a Rolls with a liveried driver suggests city opulence. The glory of the angels reflects the glories of heaven.

In IWT13 I wrote about heaven. I shall take up residence there and am naturally curious about it and about its permanent habitants. Are the natives friendly? John in Revelation mentions some of them. Since God's dominion is vaster than all stellar space, those we find there are likely to be different from me. Well I hope so – for their sakes.

Several million different life-forms exist on the earth and in the sea; some are beyond verbal description - animals such as jellyfish, coral and amoebas. But this planet is tiny compared with the vastness of God's domain and it must contain endless spirit forms. John gives us glimpses, but obviously God's creative hand must spill out endless varieties.

Ezekiel saw the Zoa, what our English Bibles call 'living creatures', Ezek.1:5. Some six centuries later the apostle John also saw the Zoa, Rev. 4:6. Often they are regarded as visionary dreams or apocalyptic symbols. There are such visualisations in John and Daniel, the famous prophetic 'beasts,' like cartoons of the world empires. But prophets and others have met living presences, beings of overpowering majesty. Daniel fainted when he saw one, and John wanted to worship another similar awesome Personality. They are 'living creatures'.

To describe new orders of existence, especially spirit beings would be hard. John and Ezekiel could only compare them with what people knew. They described three sets of wings, a man's hand under the wings, four faces reminding him of noble animals, powerful legs gleaming like bronze, and a general appearance fire streaming light as they moved. They went from place to place with instant rapidity. On the ground he saw them like a wonderful complexity, wheels within wheels.

It is curious but nobody can imagine space aliens more attractive than ourselves. Star Wars and TV space fiction invent creatures that look as like freaks, born with genetic malformations needing plastic surgery. Other beings are not like men but worse. God doesn't make horrors. He made the Zoa, who are very different and He delights in new species as evidence of His glory and beauty. On earth His creatures are marvellous, with many species so different from one another, skylarks and whales, tadpoles and giraffes. He made them of dust, but He formed the celestial Zoa from light as centres of burning energy, flowing with beauty. He also made other celestial beings. The nearest creatures to ourselves are the angels, invested with visible splendour outside our experience, and yet they are sent to minister to us, the heirs of salvation.

What glories await us! What endless fascination! John says the Zoa were full of eyes round about, seeing in every direction. Snakes have powers to 'see' in all directions not by eyes but by sensing the electrical stimuli of hidden prey. We do not possess extended awareness yet, but we shall at the resurrection. John tells us about Zoa's many 'eyes', but it is difficult to imagine. But he is certainly talking to a kind of multi-consciousness, awareness in every direction. They are godlike with sight not needing our fleshly senses of eyes, ears and tactility. God of course is infinitely perceiving, direct, Spirit to spirit.

Modern technology 'sees' contours of the sea bed miles below the surface, never seen by mortal eye. God has not less power than science. He knows the shape of our soul, and the contours of our character. We ourselves have some experience of seeing the invisible. "*What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived God has revealed it to us by His Spirit*". By the Holy Spirit we see God, and by the gifts of the Spirit we know what is beyond our immediate vision and natural faculties. We already have a higher consciousness. "*The Spirit answers to the blood and tells me I am born of God*".

These Zoa with many eyes 'see', or know, beyond all normal sight. In Scripture Paul says "*We see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully*". The mirror he knew was only polished copper or bronze, a shadowy image, not like our silvered glass. That is how we see one another now, knowing one another only 'partly'. But when resurrected with a body like Christ we shall have instant powers of recognition, when all things will be transparent to us as to the Zoa and other species of spiritual existence. Such things tell us of the promises of God, glimpses of conditions that will be ours as our life here ends.

Jerusalem the golden! "*I know not, I know not what glories wait us there, what joys beyond compare*".

Why?

As a lad I never knew why the pastor was always preaching about trials and troubles. I didn't seem to need ointments and plasters for wounds. Desperately poor as we were, and always hungry, I accepted it as normal in this world.

Eventually came the responsibility of a congregation. Trouble still did not trouble me. Life's stress and discomfort seemed normal to me. I had learned the right words to say to my congregation, mostly much older than myself, that God was testing us. He stood heavily on our foot and told us to praise Him.

Then, one wintry morning a woman asked me to go with her. We went into the hills which were pockmarked with inky black pools polluted by industrial effluent. By the edge of one such foul place she told me of her desperation and declared her wish to end her life in it.

At that moment my blithe spirit faded like a switched off TV screen. The problem of suffering danced constantly in my brain, taunting and haunting. It became the main subject of my ministry and drove me to seek the answer. First I pored over the sermons of great preachers, culling for words, for balm. I found C. S. Lewis who called suffering 'God's intolerable compliment'. That seemed wise and I could not un-think it. But it brought no cheer to church members in hospital.

It was not only the sickness and tragedy puzzled me, but what Scripture said about it, particularly statements in the New Testament. What I read there was unparalleled anywhere else. But they were hard sayings. I believed them, preached them, but couldn't see them. Jesus Himself said "*Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted*". But why I wondered should it be like that? Why did God make a world in which comfort was needed? I remember being alone in my single lodgings with raging toothache for a week. I found true what Shakespeare said. "*There was never yet a philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently*". It needs a cure not a caress. I couldn't forget that desolate soul by the ugly marl hole. She needed a stronger arm than mine round her shoulders. No words, no amount of money, no music could do anything for her, and she represented the whole inconsolable world.

For me then came the joy of marriage to a wonderful girl, and no better way to start a family! But her family tree included Bishop Hooper. Queen Mary had him burned alive for his faith. He died in unspeakable agony. Dead - how could he be comforted?

I puzzled over 2 Corinthians 4:17: "*Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.*" If there as an answer it had to be there, in the hereafter.

It was clear enough from the Word that this was no world of bliss. Eliphaz tried to comfort Job saying *"Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards."* Jesus also said *"In the world you will have tribulation"* and after a good few decades on earth I've proved how right He was. Nothing different seemed ever to be intended. God does not send affliction but leaves us here exposed to it. Our lot is not to be snatched away to be like the angels.

The mists began to clear and I saw that the Word of God said nothing about a world without trouble being better. We must pass through this 'vale of tears' to get and be where and what God wanted us to be. He knew what it would be when He permitted our birth. Jesus pushed His disciples off in a boat knowing full well that Galilee would soon be a boiling cauldron, but He always did what He saw the Father do. He could have stilled that storm, but instead He saw them through it. Paul went to three cities *"confirming the souls of the disciples exhorting them that we MUST through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God."* This Greek indicative is 'dei', it is right and proper, it behoves us, it is the thing to do. It is the word of Jesus saying He MUST do His Father's will.

I began to see it as if from a lookout across an eternal landscape. I am still scanning it. I observe that the road is left rough with full justification, not mere compensation. It had to stay that way underfoot because something great was afoot. Jesus said *"O slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken, ought not Christ to have suffered these things?"* Christ OUGHT to have suffered! Peter says the same thing about us. *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."*

If we would read the facts we might understand better. God has revealed to us nothing merely to gratify our own curiosity. He gives us secrets only for the fulfilment of His purposes. Jesus told His disciples *"All things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you ... that you should go and bring forth fruit."* So putting together what we know we shall learn more. Begin with the angels, so important in the Divine economy. Some angels sinned and were reduced to planetary level. It was a minor rebellion leaving the masses of heaven unaffected, they could be foolish for *"God charges his angels with folly"* but they are innocent like children, with no experience of temptation or trial.

Outside the human race nobody knows suffering or stress – except God. Angels and cherubim don't have worries or nights when the darkness seems endless, the future peopled with stalking evils. No devil is there to push the Zoa or angels to the brink. The Divine glories they enjoy beyond our thought leaves them without allure for the tawdry tinsel of our material world.

So why aren't we favoured like angels? What is God up to, pushing us off to struggle across life's raging seas? We are like mariners the Psalm talks about going down into the depths and then tossed high on hills of heaving water, like a mouse in the paws of a cat.

God has plans and purposes that angels cannot fulfil. They require humans, a special species, that God put here to be shaped by the wild weather, and be identified by a patina of triumph over adversity. He wanted people who had proved His grace and had overcome, victorious people, feeble flesh but more than conquerors over the greatest evil forces and triumphant in stressful conditions. Nobody is exempt from such moulding and making. Elijah wanted to die, John the Baptist was jailed, apostles were hunted like vermin and *"it was fitting for him, for whom all things exist, to make the author of our salvation himself perfect through sufferings"*, Heb.2:10. It needs us, people who have gone to

hell and back, to be God's vanguard marching into the eternal future, pillars of the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells. Chiselled and battered into shape, the only creatures overcoming the world, the flesh and the devil, and now to the praise of God and His great salvation becoming the foundation stones of the eternal city.

When Christ shall gather us in the fair land where God is, nobody there will be like us. Only one order will have come through great tribulation redeemed and washed in Christ's blood. No angel, no Zoa, can glorify God like those once dead in iniquity but who overcame the world, the flesh and the devil. The matchless redeemed will take over heaven. Angels will abandon the streets of the city of God to give place to the pilgrims of the night, their new song of the Lamb vibrating against the crystal walls. There will be praise and glory to God in the Church for ever.

I Was Thinking 15

Did God allow the tsunami – and etc?

"Is God in control?" I believe He is, but eight scholars ask the question in a new book. Another recent publication by a leading world religious philosopher deals with 'the problem of evil and the problem of God'. Is God a problem then? The book's problem is the various misconceptions of Him (a gripping subject which I have mentioned before and will again).

One prominent Muslim cleric said that Allah had actually sent the tsunami as a punishment against Muslims who did not apply the Shariah law. I hope his explanation cheers everybody up! It is a vivid example of the difference between Allah and the Lord; Allah the God of vengeance and the Lord the God of love.

Evolutionist Professor Dawkins declared that the tsunami challenged the Christian teaching of a God of love. If the press reported it correctly, this was a vacuous remark useless to everybody and on the level of comments typically made in pubs 'when men have well drunk' rather than that of a professor! The newspapers gave him a platform and loud hailer but switched off all Christian response. They left the public with a counsel of despair.

With this awful loss of life, the thought that anyone with an ounce of sensitivity could presume to mock Christians about the God of love is appalling. While people are mourning the loss of Christian family members, to attack Christian hope at such a time merely to score a point is despicable. **Far from the disaster being a challenge to Christian faith, it reveals it as the only faith that gives courage and comfort.** Dawkins' and Darwin's evolutionary theory is pitiless, throwing no arm around anybody's shoulder.

I suppose thousands, perhaps millions have asked why God 'allowed' the tsunami disaster. But is that the question? Did He 'allow' it? I wrote once on "Why does God allow sickness?" and answered that we may as well ask why the Minister for Transport allows road crashes. Perhaps we should just keep his rules. *Touché!* Obviously none of us 'allowed' the disaster, as we could not prevent it – perhaps. But popularly God is supposed to be able to do anything and 'Almighty' is what the word 'God' means.

It is certainly not safe to assume God did nothing about it. Only God knows what He did. He does not text our mobiles about what He does. The issue is complicated. We are

hearing accounts of providential and even angelic deliverances, alongside news of many Christians dying in the tsunami.

My first comment concerns what I would do if I knew for sure that God had allowed this disaster. What could I do? Take the Omnipotence to task? If God is God I can do only one thing – trust Him. I had better! Any other option would be extremely odd, like falling out with the universe. He alone knows the business of being God. We would have to be God to understand His business.

The world was enormously strange, frightening and threatening to people in the days of the Psalmists. One wrote Psalm 46 which fits the tsunami occasion. "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof*". It sounds like an anticipation of the tsunami disaster.

On the other hand if this calamity happened outside His control, it did not leave God helpless. His purposes will absorb it. He collects every circumstance as the material for His eternal purposes, working all things according to the good counsel of His will.

My business being Bible exposition, I am asked what I myself think about this gigantic convulsion of the Indian Ocean. Firstly, the Bible is not a compendium of explanations. Nobody really knows enough to elucidate God's role in everything that goes on, which is obviously complicated. Our confidence is in Him - and all things, evil and good, are in His hands.

Before we even ask the question, our knowledge of nature and the planet is inadequate. Did human activity help create the tsunami? Environmental factors and human meddling cannot be dismissed. That fatal wave resulted from an enormous underwater landslide and the subterranean movement of the tectonic plates on which the continents rest. These plates move constantly as part of the structure of the planet. Could human agencies have triggered off the convulsion? We can't say they did not. But in any case, what should God do anyway? Re-create the world?

Then I cannot ignore the fact that great as the tsunami horror was, it is still only part of the troubles that afflict mankind, and death comes to all sooner or later. On average 1676 individuals died every day in the UK in 2003, about 7 times the number of Britons swept away by the tsunami. Death and bereavement are our human lot. Death is the mist hanging over every dawn. We are "*subject to death all our lives*" scripture says.

As for God, He gives our lives and has the right to take them away, but multitudes are killed by human action. Even then God is not baffled. Scripture says: "*He makes the wrath of man to praise Him*". Even the crucifixion of His own beloved Son - the most appalling wickedness perpetrated on earth and an apparent supreme triumph of evil - God foresaw and wove into the glory of His will. In the words of the Messianic Psalm 22, Christ called to His Father: "*Why are you so far from my roaring?*" But from that tree planted on the hill of Calvary, the whole world has received fruit, a new spirit of sacrifice, love and hope, not to mention its God-ward objectivity of reconciliation and redemption.

Scripture shows God working within limits. Like Christ said of Jerusalem "I would, you would not". If we stray from under His wings how can He guarantee our safety? Jesus heard of a wall falling and killing some men. He had no philosophic comfort, but said "*Except you repent you will all likewise perish*". At the beginning as a young pastor I was told I

must 'defend the ways of God to man'. I tried, but God does not need me to defend Him.

Far from understanding God we don't understand one another. I knew my wife pretty well, but she had an instant and acute shrewdness beyond my plodding reason. What man ever had perfect penetration of a wife's esoteric thought processes? That's just a woman, never mind God! But my obtuse male inability to follow my wife's logic never caused my faith in her to falter or in her judgment, nor in God's.

The Bible shows God all the way through exercising limitless power but within limits imposed upon Himself by His love and mercy. "*He delivered his strength into captivity*". He is the only God I acknowledge, though often quiet when men clamoured for His action. "*Awake O Lord!*" the Palmist cried.

God asked "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" The answer is, read His Word and learn His ways. That is what the Bible is for. It is not a code book of secret passwords to acquire money or success. "*Follow on to know the Lord*" and then we can anticipate His action. Having power does not oblige God to use it. We all have things that we can do but choose not to. His wisdom governs His exercise of power. To know God is to trust Him. "*Though he slay me, yet will I trust him!*" said Job.

We do wrong, but God cannot deny us our right to be human beings by stepping in every time we chose to do wrong. We would cease to be what we are. The Scripture principle is: "*The wrath of men shall praise Him*". He does not stop wickedness, but it never baffles His purposes. The world is what it must be to function as a living world, and we must accept the world as it is. To demand a different, accident-free world is ridiculous arrogance. It is up to us to keep ourselves safe.

Prayer releases God's help in this world. He gives us dominion and authority to inhabit this world and He can intervene in it. He is on-call for when we need Him. We are here for Him and He is here for us.

Dei Gratia!

This is my very personal account about which I hesitated to write.

I sought advice and in fact received everyone's encouragement.

This story is wonderful but not surprising knowing it is typical of God and His ways.

Police banged on my locked doors in the early hours, three years ago, to break the news to me that my wife in hospital had slipped away. Instantly I became a pauper. She had been my wealth, and now life was evacuated of all significance and pleasure, despite, or even because I had had to care for her night and day. For 14 years of her declining health, symptoms multiplying, I ached to get close to share her feelings. It left me stressed, often physically sick and had even fainted off with anxiety about her.

Then within that annus horribilis four other Canty members died, including a brother and a gifted special sister. Then illness struck. Gruelling hospital checks revealed quite advanced prostate cancer. Later other symptoms appeared with more hospital checks, internal examinations and X-ray scanned for possible intestinal cancer. X-rays also showed extensive arthritis on my left side, and blood tests revealed anaemia. For several years the stabbing pains of chronic neuralgia had also assaulted me.

On top of these diseases, physical reactions to bereavement pounced like waiting predators: claustrophobia, panic, feelings of intense sickness, lassitude and inertia. I

forced myself to work to keep the lurking hounds of depression at bay. Then other ailments became allies in their onslaught; gout, swollen legs and water retention.

Illness was an embarrassment to me. For decades I had re-pioneered Divine healing in the churches and was eminent in that field. Then there was my previous testimony; from the age of three, hammering headaches and indescribable nausea regularly persecuted me, but I had finally proved God was my healer with never even another headache. For 50 years of preaching, evangelising and travelling the earth, I never missed a scheduled service through ill health. This record rendered the development of multiplied illnesses a trial of faith and a double distress. I began to suspect age decline and break-up.

Physical problems were one thing, but worse, circumstances colluded against me. I was outside any church after a lifetime and after planting two dozen churches. I had no place, no role and no activity within the denomination I had helped to father through its most difficult days. I felt crushed, surplus to requirements. Nothing to do, I just sat at home, seeing almost nobody day after day, I told God I may as well join my wife.

Then, at my lowest ebb, a Baptist minister phoned with a word he insisted positively was of God. I was not interested. After delay I decided I may as well do what he said. It proved to be of the Lord, the dawn of a new day and a wide open door, as I will explain.

One morning driving home from the doctor's surgery, thanking the Lord aloud for the doctor's help, suddenly, quicker than I could think, God spoke to me in exact words: "Well, I told you I would look after you didn't I?" Until then the house had been unfriendly and desolate, no wife to open the door, but that morning as I went in I became conscious of God's presence. An inescapable realisation gripped me. God was favouring me, taking up my cause, re-shaping and re-ordering life for me.

First, intestinal cancer. All tests proved negative. Then four months ago a letter in personal terms from the consultant surgeon of the cancer department expressed his pleasure that prostate cancer with a PSA of 48 had reduced to a normal 1.08, with liver and kidney function perfect, further hospital visits unnecessary. Then followed a second letter. The local clinic of doctors wrote saying that their tests now showed everything fine - anaemia, blood pressure, cholesterol and sugar. Wonderfully at the same time all neuralgic pains ceased, no more leg swellings, water retention or gout, nor to this moment, and not a single twinge of any rheumatism.

The sum total is robust health, better than I have had for years, with vigour and eagerness for work. Life has opened up a further phase ahead. I have awaked in the morning literally euphoric with the joy of the Lord. The lost desire for life, music, art and poetry has returned and I am rehearsing the violin and piano and wanting to sing. I was told that singing God's praise keeps the devil away. I believe that. Mine would keep anybody away. Exciting thoughts, ideas for paintings and writing flow again like streams in springtime after winter.

God has restored my zest as a full time writer and Bible explorer. My partnership with a well known international evangelist has seen our books, booklets and a mass of other material reaching tens of millions in over 130 languages, possibly equalling any Bible teaching on earth, and now other ventures are afoot.

God's goodness is all anybody ever says, His presence so real. His Word brings a joy that echoes even in the emptiness left by my wife's death. To God's glory I have to speak the truth.

I can now say that the Baptist pastor's word was from the Lord. It led me to a wide door where some 2000 people now look to me as a pastor and where my long experience, memories and knowledge have found a place of usefulness and benefit. God knew my greatest need and brought me many lovely friends, more than I ever had or knew.

These are the astounding reversals God has wrought. Those who know me personally have also expressed amazement. Everything I touch seems blessed. I live from hour to hour in praise of God's goodness, so deeply thankful for His gracious care.

What happens when we take bread and wine?

It shocks me when a pastor invites people to come and help themselves to bread and wine from the table, like a smorgasbord or cafeteria. Jesus in the Gospels and the apostle in Corinthians treated it as a special ordinance, a holy moment of tremendous significance. The emblems should be ministered. Servers take over the role of Jesus in the upper room saying "*Take this, eat, drink. It is me.*"

Never did any simple act provoke such controversy. Theology, metaphysics, even war have raged around the Lord's Table. Someone working towards a PhD asked me whether I followed the teaching of Luther, Calvin or Zwingli. For me, none. Whichever, it would amount to no more than a slight mental or imaginative difference, which is surely not the object.

From the time of Augustine (4th century) Christ was seen as present in the emblems spiritually. The ancient Catholic belief of transubstantiation was conceived 500 years later to match the age of superstition and the clamour for the mysterious and supernatural. After 1059 it became a dogma and priests claimed the power to transmute bread and wine into the real body and blood of Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass. Why they thought eating His actual flesh would benefit them I cannot imagine. Jesus said "*The flesh counts for nothing.*" John 6:63. Luther rejected the Catholic dogma as 'Aristotelian'. (Thomas Aquinas laid down the argument for transubstantiation from the teaching of Aristotle). Luther still believed Christ was physically present in the Eucharist. This is 'consubstantiation.' He argued that as Christ has a human body of flesh, it is in the flesh that He is present.

Calvin said also that Christ's body was present and received but spiritually, not actually. Then the Swiss reformer Zwingli denied any such metaphysical notions, saying Communion is only a symbolic act to remember Christ as absent.

What does happen is a matter of discussion and of differences in evangelical circles. The Pentecostals have no accepted definition and I am not the oracle to settle five centuries of debate.

Communion is accepted widely as a 'sacrament' and a 'means of grace', even in many evangelical churches but for me as a Pentecostal the whole subject takes on a deeper richness. The phrase 'a means of grace' is a common and easy phrase. But it is a weevil word corrupting beliefs. **Grace was the centre of theology until the Pentecostals showed the work of God was by the Holy Spirit**, not by any other emanation or force. The 'means of grace' meant ways to accumulated grace sufficient to give souls access to heaven, that is by religious acts, fasting, prayers and so on. Taking communion was particularly a good 'sacrament' a meritorious physical act conferring automatic effects.

Pentecostal thought, as I have known it for a lifetime, is that no physical act has any reward without the operation of faith. Salvation is by faith, not by any act, but faith must act to bring salvation. Bread and wine were important in Scripture from the day when Melchizedek the priest of Jerusalem brought bread and wine to Abraham, confirming God's promise of the land to Abraham. As a tent dweller he could farm neither bread nor wine.

However, so much for that. I would like to make bread and wine more meaningful. **Jesus is present, though not IN the emblems, but with us**, where two or three gather in His name. We partake physically with faith, and benefit physically and spiritually.

When Jesus instituted this ordinance He was alive, and the disciples could not 'eat' Him or drink His blood. But communion is far more than a remembrance of Christ as Zwingli said. We partake of physical elements by faith and receive the physical and spiritual realities of Christ. The act is important. It is as close as anything could come to signify the physical realities of the Gospel. It is a truly Pentecostal act, our bodies receiving as well as our spirit.

At the Lord's Table, I open myself completely in surrender to God. I don't just eat, thinking that in some way it will do me good, any more than just the act of listening to sermons has any sacramental and automatic effect. I admit that listening to some sermons has been a trial of spiritual character, but merely hearing adds nothing to my heavenly grace banking account. Any religious rite must be joined with a conscious faith act.

It is precisely to ensure that we do draw near for physical and spiritual blessings that Jesus told us to do this, partake of bread and wine. As I eat, my eating becomes an act of my spirit to reach out to Jesus. Eating bread is so natural and simple, a child can eat. That is what it means, come simply, naturally to God who feeds us on the bread of heaven as we open our mouths and open our souls consciously to Him. I don't come merely for a new cleansing. I am cleansed already or I dare not come at all.

Some eat thoughtlessly assuming that the bread is holy and in a mysterious way they imbibe God. One of my church members would not let the birds eat the remaining crumbs from the communion table, but always ate it herself – with milk. But God is not to be manipulated automatically and helplessly by a piece of bread, Paul says Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, not by ritual. I myself think of Him as coming and coming as the everlastingly coming One, flooding my soul in a never ending stream of life. "*Moment by moment I've life from above*", that wonderful hymn says.

Fads!

A book being hyped is against "Fads" - the disapproving name for charismatic innovations and fashions. Full page advertising encomiums, and my own feeling about 'fads' prompted me to buy a copy. I went through it, and as my deplorable habit is, I scribbled comments on the fair page and passed a few on to the author, Baptist pastor Ian Stackhouse of Guildford. The book carries high praise from ten eminent scholars – mostly Baptist, including David Pawson, Dr. Nigel Wright, (Spurgeon's College) Greg Haslam (Westminster Chapel) and Canon Tom Smail. This is not a review and any way my voice would hardly be noticed in such glamorous company.

The ground bass for his theme is that 'fads' are taking over the charismatic churches, pushing normal Christian concerns aside with the fond hope of swift growth and revival. He calls for a return to basic pastoral work, the 'means of grace', worship, and the 'sacraments'.

I've said myself that methods convert nobody and cannot bring a sales rush through church doors. Hopes of such easy church expansion are naïve. Ian Stackhouse says things like that in his 250 pages. Methods, church structures, schemes and new machinery produce no more than old-fashioned manpower Gospel witness. New births begin with the Word, according to 1 Peter 1:23.

I once listed quick-result schemes but new ones appear on the market with the latest book. Ian Stackhouse feels that 'fads' absorb effort that should be spent building the right sort of church which will then impact the outside world. Presumably he is in a position to judge charismatic motives but my own experience leaves me hesitant, and he does not produce any actual evidence to convince me of his judgment.

Having written several books on the call to preach the Gospel, one with a circulation of about four million, I looked for encouragement for evangelism in the Stackhouse book, but found little emphasis. He writes in scholastic style and with little Scriptural quotation.

It is incontestable that the Bible provokes us to reach out with the Gospel as our major activity. The Lord came from heaven to seek and save by the will of the Father. To be motivated by the same aim can hardly be incorrect. Listening to 'God Channel' television preachers, either my luck is out or invariably I find them saying less and less about the Gospel and ministering more and more along the lines Ian Stackhouse suggests. But surely - isn't that itself another 'fad'?

Arthur Wallace promoted the idea that revival only needed new church structures – 'new wine skins' as he misinterpreted Christ's words. That theory created church upheaval 20 years ago. The idea that new schemes will bring crowds en masse to church is utopian.

Nevertheless I insist that that is no reason to refuse new means. If churches adopt a 'fad' to win converts, successful or not, it is a healthy sign. Paul said "*that by all means I might save some*". 'Fads' for the supreme purpose of Gospel witness are justified. Always of course if the fad itself is not a distortion of Scripture teaching, for I have objected to some on those grounds, as for instance schemes with cult-like features.

How can we perfect a church if we neglect Christ's last great command to preach the Gospel to every creature?

I Was Thinking 16

'God so loved the world' John 3.16. 'Do not love the world' 1 John 2:15

John talks about the world more than anybody else in Scripture, and it is always the same word - '*kosmos*', the inhabited world, people, he does not talk about the physical earth. This is a rare subject in Scripture - just that God made heaven and earth. The biblical writers had no idea about the globe.

Love, even love for your enemies, is a great theme in Scripture. So if God loved people – the world, why should we not love the world? Obviously the nuances differ.

Psalm 7 says that God is angry with sinners every day (v.11). From that angle it is the rebel world that is the world not to love – the rebellious order.

I confess I DO love this world, the Earth. The longer I live the more I want to be alive in God's world, not half dead in it! "*Thou has made everything beautiful in its time*" (Ecc 3:11) – the earth is miraculously lovely. Poets fail to convey the music of our fascinated wonder. Even my humble garden borders are pageant streams of prismatic splendour. Every petal is a flake of sunshine. Abroad are tumbled rocks, stormy skies, rocking oceans and unsculpted mountains yet so awesome they catch our breath and moisten our eyes to shine with speechless pleasure. Words are too crude.

John said "love not the things of this world", and yet we read: "God saw all that he had made and behold it was very good." The Psalms also rejoice in God's good world. He waters the furrows and puts gold in the hills. Why should we not love what He has done? We must remember that John's writings contain many ambiguities and double meanings. By the love of the things of the world he means covetousness and falling in with godless aims. John writes "*the whole world is under the control of the evil one*" (1John 5:19). Paul also explains this to the Ephesians - "*You followed the way of the world, and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are children of disobedience... by nature the children of wrath dead in transgressions.*" (Eph 2:2-3)

I am baffled that apparently decent people are so prejudiced and uncomfortable with 'God talk'. While house calling for my church, I received bitter looks from householders who knew nothing of me or my church. It is startling that many who tolerate the most objectionable rubbish on television can't be quick enough to switch off anything Christian. It is as Paul says, 'the spirit of the devil'.

Our church talk is of separation from worldliness, usually referring to a church-made category of forbidden pleasures. I wrote in IWT 2 of my own early 'holiness' which hung like a chafing yoke around my neck. From this distance I can see now how hopeless were our outreach struggles when we were erecting walls of separation for converts to climb over into our religious ghetto. I was challenged but never found much justification for my self-denials and constricted lifestyle and church culture of taboos and scruples.

We can fit the 'un-worldliness' pattern of a church and yet be far from spiritual. A woman whose tongue did me enormous and lasting harm was very strict on 'worldliness'. One of the most 'worldly' items is money - we need it but to love it is rank with the world, like Lot living in Sodom. Jesus coined a word for money '*mammon*', the god of gold. It is the pivot on which the world's interest swings and we are not to join that merry-go-round. Jesus showed total indifference to wealth. He suggested that we should not hold on too tight fisted even to what we have. God gives for us to live and then to give. He does not give because we give, for He is a giver already and needs no prompting or motivating.

We must distinguish between culture and command. Cultural standards change. It had startled me recently when several excellent and sacrificing Pentecostal friends told me they go to the pictures and to pop concerts - but I concluded that I was too fossilised. The Beatles were different from Elim choruses in the 1960's!

Standards are written across the pages of Scripture, but not in express commands. Issues of music, dress, hair, jewellery, entertainment are peripheral matters decided by the major principles of wisdom and love. Our rule book is love. The New Testament is not a law book like the Koran, nor does it give us the right to legislate. Christianity is not routine religious performances but action and love to please God, that is the God who sets us free.

God planted a garden, and the devil led Adam out of it. A young Scottish minister one morning found the roads too frozen so he skated to church. Afterward, called by the kirk elders to give account of his Sabbath sin, they were in a dilemma. If he skated he broke the Sabbath and if he did not turn up at church it was worse. Then clarity inspired one leader. He demanded of the young man "*It amounts to this – did you enjoy it or not?*" Well, I've known people refuse ice-cream because they might 'enjoy it'. I have no such conscience. I hope there is ice-cream in heaven!

Are we under the law?

This question annoys me. Why ask it? If we are born-again and really Christian we wouldn't want to be lawless. If we don't want to be under the law, that is the Ten Commandments, then we are not Christian anyway. Also, if anyone thinks that keeping the Ten Commandments will qualify them for heaven, they have no idea what it means. For the rest of the legal code of Scripture, that is the Old Testament, much does not fit modern life. I can't build a parapet to my house, nor do I gather birds from their nests. I keep no slaves or cattle, nor can I offer burnt sacrifices. The Lord commanded all men to keep three of the Feasts, but it is not possible in the twenty-first century. We can't pitch temporary shelters of tree branches outside Jerusalem or plough with an ox and a horse and leprosy does not appear on our house walls for any priest to pronounce upon. God forbade garments of wool and cotton, but we dress with synthetic fibres. Such rules are not applicable today but were only for Israel's primitive circumstances. We are told that we must "*rightly divide the Word of God*", that is, divide between the absolutes and the local and temporary, but we must discern the underlying principles.

Jesus said that the principle laws were love. Rigid rules are not practical. Early attempts to bring great blessings and success by strict ideas of un-worldliness actually defeated the purpose and alienated the people we wanted to win. Do I discern a new approach in 2005?

Do you hear from the Lord?

Some do hear from the Lord, about ten times a day and vastly more often than Peter or Paul. Or so it seems. One hostess warned me I could have no pudding – the Lord had told her not to give me any. Lofty claims of elbow intimacy with the Almighty deter others who worry that God never speaks to them like that.

God does speak. God made us that way, in His own image, which means he talks. He made us for fellowship with Him and with one another. How can we have any relationship without speech, either with man or God? A neighbour told me that he and his wife had not spoken for months. The marriage is now at an end, of course.

The Bible begins with an emphasis on God speaking. In the first chapter half the verbs, 14, concern His utterances. Genesis seems to have been written as a polemic against the prevailing world-wide idolatry of gods that say nothing and do nothing. Right through the Pentateuch, Moses' five books, we have our most fundamental revelation of God and He is represented as communicating. Leviticus is a great display of God reaching out to us, not indirectly but in language. In Leviticus 1:1 where "*the Lord called to Moses*", the Hebrew suggests personal terms. By Genesis 12 we find God not only speaking but setting up a personal relationship and even becoming his friend. It is nothing less than that which Jesus had in mind when He called disciples His friends. He said "*Everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*" That is what friendship means.

John's Gospel uses '*Word*' for the Christ, which would be grossly inappropriate if He were silent. The whole Bible presents us with a God who has things to say, and the whole Bible IS God saying things. In Genesis 3:8 God is the Voice walking in the garden.

God is not dumb, and He is not deaf. The Psalmist expected to be spoken to when he spoke to God. "*To you I call, O LORD, my Rock. If you remain silent I will be like those who have gone down to the pit.*" It pictures for me the sea waves clawing stones and pebbles down the beach and into the depths. But I am not a pebble and God does hear me. Dr. R.T. Kendall once asked me across a meeting 'George Canty, does God hear all your prayers?' I replied that God did. How couldn't He? Psalm 139 says that He knows our thoughts before we even speak.

Hearing and speaking must proceed together. God commands us to hear Him. How can we do so unless He speaks? Like a herald commanding attention we read "*Hear the Word of the Lord!*" Jesus said He was the good shepherd and "*They [the sheep] hear my voice.*" (John 10:4,16).

God speaks to us in various ways, and usually by Scripture, If we want God to speak to us, it is obviously sensible to read His Word. We are told to let His word '*dwell in us richly*', and we should have the 'engrafted word'. It is in our word-consciousness that God can readily communicate with us.

God does not speak just to thrill us with a miracle. It is for fellowship. For myself, I certainly know when God says something specific, for guidance or special help. But it is unlikely that He has half a dozen instructions a day. He leaves me to exercise wisdom, but He still speaks. My daily experience is like the hymn says "*He walks with me and He talks with me*".

It is the moment by moment assurance that our company pleases Him, like the domestic relationship of a husband and wife. They speak to one another for the love of it, not just for him to give her instructions – which I hope he never does! I have two friends, one of whom I rarely see, who phone me two or three times a week, just for the sake of phoning. Why not? It is just the pleasure of life and of friendship. That is how I myself conduct my relationship with the Lord, to have His reassurance that He is there. Yes I have heard His audible voice, and felt His hand physically upon my shoulder, but more often it is His unmistakable inner voice.

When Paul was heading for one port, we read "*the Spirit forbade him.*" That was all. He waited a while before he felt God had given Him further guidance. One of my church folk told me that during pregnancy the doctor gave her tablets. God does not always explain why on such occasions, but somehow she felt she should not use them. Later she had a shock on discovering they were Thalidomide, the drug that caused children to be born limbless. Her child was perfect and is a friend of mine today. A lady wrote to me yesterday and said she had a Scripture for me. It was the same one that had been dancing in my mind for a day, one so good I hoped it wasn't just my wishful thinking, but her letter - the first like it she had ever written - confirmed it. It is so common – God does speak and does guide.

Now some believe in a '*rhema*' word from God. That may be, though something here needs explanation. In Scripture '*rhema*' and '*logos*' are synonymous, and appear in texts meaning exactly the same thing, 'the word of God'. But *rhema* is more often used for single statements or words. The Ten Commandments in the Greek LXX version are

rhema words, and the Bible as a whole is usually known as the Word, not the rhema. Jesus brought the 'words of God', '*rhemata*' in John 3:34, and in Luke 24:44 His words are '*logoi*'. But otherwise the different words mean the same thing exactly.

The Rhema Doctrine is that the Bible is the Logos but is not for us unless God gives us a 'rhema' word – and then we can claim it. That reduces the Word to only occasional value. But it is always the living word. I heard a preacher last Sunday say that once God speaks to us personally we can go ahead in absolute assurance. Well, yes, but only then? We can also go ahead when we have the open Bible. I would be MORE sure of the written Word than of any subjective prompting.

The greatest 20th century theologian, Karl Barth said something similarly faulty, that the Bible is not inspired but that God inspires the readers with words from it. The Bible does not say anything like that about itself: "*ALL Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*" (2Tim 3:16) and "*ALL the promises of God are 'yes' and 'amen' in Christ Jesus*" (2Cor 1:20), not just any that God graciously highlights for us in case we are a bit unsure.

Many say '*The Lord told me*'. No reason why not, except that usually He hasn't, and the Bible doesn't encourage such familiarity, as if only certain people stand in the special confidentiality or counsel of God. It might have been with the Hebrew prophets but in Christ we are all equally close to God.

Nobody in the New Testament talked like that. Even the apostle Paul did not. On only a few occasions did he have special directives from the Holy Spirit. Usually he went ahead, not even asking guidance, having the Word of Christ to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. If we belong to Christ we ARE led of the Spirit, led gently by His hand as we develop our steady relationship with Him. God is not our managing director, but a Friend. He said He would never leave us and never ignores us, but He goes along with us and brings us back when we stray. That is, if we want to be led. Often we don't. We adopt the Nelson touch, read the message through a blind eye. That may mean not reading the Word, or only turning over the leaves when we want Him to say what we want Him to say. Some seek the Lord to speak and give them a new direction. How do they know He has a new direction in mind for them?

God is great company. I am daily so delighted with His care, His organising and His favouritism to us all. I am a convert to what I say in this article. In the beginning of my career I thought God guided saints, men better than me, and that only as a rare thing. It changed everything when I saw God wanted to walk and talk with me. I believed that He did, does, and will speak to anyone who has the open ear of faith.

Thinking about 'I was Thinking'

Why do I write IWT? It has cost me £20,000 so far, less about £1000 spontaneously contributed by readers.

It is not, I hope, self-promotion. I say as little as possible about myself, and don't use a photo. I write ten times more than IWT without my name appearing at all. After a lifetime caring about souls, I can't get the pastor instinct out of my system, and to write is my main means of feeding the sheep and lambs. My thoughts appear in various magazines, books and sundry writings with readers girdling the globe, but I have a special concern for British Pentecostals and IWT is an outlet for the thoughts that stir in my mind.

After having written for Elim since I was 17, trends changed and an appropriate slot was not found in Direction for my personal 'I was Thinking' column. But the Holy Spirit continued to move me and the only answer was the independent publication of this IWT insertion.

My Pentecostal experience began when Elim had only three churches in Britain and I saw all the campaigns that opened churches including opening a score or so myself. Through travel both in this country and abroad for many years, I accumulated knowledge of the many changing forms of evangelism, organisation, 'fads' and means – some of them repeating over the years. My interest has always been that of a bookworm, curious about events and history, but I have participated in just about every form of church activity including the roles of administrator, President of Elim, children's evangelist and college lecturer. In 1988, evangelist Reinhard Bonnke gave me support to devote my full attention to Bible teaching and writing. I am also currently active as one of 6 pastors with 19 sub-pastors in a large and growing Pentecostal church.

In fact, it was certainly the pressure of the Holy Spirit that prompted IWT. The task as I saw it then was impossible. Then the Lord swept aside every impossibility in one week. Mainly the solution came from the Halesowen office volunteers of CfaN. The then manager Bernard Jones was 100 per cent helpful and so is his successor Mark Oates and also Nigel Marsh who looks after the mailing list and Lisa who prepare the printing format and designed my 'bubbles of thought' logo. Emma Carter, a university research engineer with her husband Jamys, an Elim pastor look after the website and editorship, both well qualified. I name them because I am so very grateful.

My conviction is that the Word and the Spirit are supremely important, but often only in theory, not in practice. I seek the anointing of God on every copy of IWT and on every reader, as much as when I preach. Un-anointed churches don't grow. They have everything neatly laid out, like Elijah's wood on the altar, but they have not believed and called down fire from heaven. People want God, not just sermons. They have all the regular meetings but no Holy Spirit meeting, and perhaps no Bible meeting either. The difference was shown to me by a shattering visitation of God when I was working in my church. I was in middle life, seeing nothing, but I began reading the Word twice or three times a year and God blessed me. He showed me Psalm 119, especially verse 50 "*Thou has quickened me by thy word*", which was precisely what happened with real and far reaching effect.

While I have, I hope, a few more years left I want to create through IWT a legacy of encouragement and faith to leave for the present and future generation.

Leadership Pastoring

Words about leading are normal in Scripture, but leadership is not a New Testament subject. It has, however, become a universal in all churches. That does not matter as we all use lots of ideas and terms that are not Biblical. However, leadership in Scripture is always in the context of shepherding – pastoral leadership.

Visiting by permission a church leaders meeting, the pastor said that some pastors are not leaders and some leaders are not pastors. Too true, but somebody in the church must pastor or lead if the pastor does not. Leadership and pastoral concern are vital.

The great vision of Scripture is the Shepherd-King. You find it nowhere else. It is the unique and Divine concept of handling people. Church Growth has stressed the

business principles of leadership but it needs the checks and balances of Scripture and its great theme of the Shepherd. The shepherd must lead, but leaders don't need to shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd, not my leader. We have not yet scrapped the honorary title 'pastor' and nobody yet has called me 'Dear Leader'.

It is impossible not to talk about leadership, for it is needed, but to bring it under the covering of the pastoral is to bring it into Scriptural focus.

I Was Thinking 17

Why Make Christianity So Hard?

Jesus did say "My yoke is easy" but when originally jammed on my neck I found it cumbersome and anything but velvet lined. True, that was a while ago, and I have lived long enough to learn, and enjoy, what Jesus meant. But my impression is that an awful lot of folk don't want it easy. Making it hard brings them credit. They remind me of Isaiah 46:1, '*Bel bows down, Nebo stoops!*'

New Testament people seemed such successful Christians, real five-minute-mile-marathon-super-athletes. I was a panting pedestrian compared to them. Their language, "*joy unspeakable and full of glory*", and "*God who gives us the victory*", contrasted with my apologies at the end of every day, pleading that God would overlook my shortcomings and help me to remember the rules better tomorrow. I made the rules myself, and wrote them kneeling in prayer.

The Anglican Prayer Book speaks of miserable sinners, but I was then more the miserable saint type with a pose of perpetual penitence. At least, I thought, I do confess my frailties, which is quite humble, quite a virtue! Of course I never doubted that God loved me, just as I never doubted at 7 years old that my Irish mother loved me, but she still chased me down the street with a stick.

Jesus said "*Come unto me and I will give you rest*". The word 'rest' filtered through my church experience as an achievement to be attained at some indefinite future. Rest would only follow labour, after I kept up with the religious programme dumped on me. Worse, I was never sure I had done all I should. Had I unknowingly slipped up somewhere? Actually more often than not I knew very well I had, and felt God could not count on me or make me one of His blue-eyed boys, as if He ever had one at all! Saved by believing, sanctified by straining.

I wished the Bible mentioned people struggling like me to keep on the right side of the Lord. It did not oblige me with such examples, but I had friends like that who believed God's smile was reserved for rare souls, people who had reached the higher Christian standards. I visualised the Christian life as mountaineering, always with one more peak up ahead.

There was the example of Paul the apostle. I sympathised with his heart-cry: "*What a wretched man I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?*" But he immediately swept his conscience clean: "*Thanks be to God- through Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Romans 7:24/25. He never expressed any depression over weaknesses, no bewailing his poor spirituality, no remorse, no mortification, no self-deprecation. He showed every sign of assurance that God really went along with him. How did he do that?

One Bible phrase did occur to me, '*afflict your souls*'. It justified me every night at prayer time. It is found in Scripture, but only in the AV of Leviticus. The NIV doesn't say "afflict" but '*deny yourselves*'. The actual Hebrew says '*humble yourselves, deny yourselves, fast*', and when we ask what we should fast from, the answer is – from work! "*You must not do any work ... it is a Sabbath of rest*'. No workaholics! The Old Testament 'types and shadows' carry the same message. Leviticus 16.25 lays it down that priests approaching God must wear linen, for coolness and bathe first. That is to avoid perspiration. Sweat is evidence of hard work and God doesn't want it to be hard work to come to Him. Strenuous effort and hard searching only give us something to boast about, and it doesn't look good about God as if He is sullen, indifferent, playing hide and seek with us as if He didn't want us to find Him. That is not the Bible God. It is the God only of mystics waiting and straining to hear Him. The Lord did not say "Labour pleases me" His favourites are not masochists wearing hair-shirts. The Word is "Call upon Him while He may be found". The Bible is the world's happiest book. It took me time to adjust my perspectives to take in the whole Bible landscape. Ultra-holiness culture clung. It would take a chapter to outline it. But I gradually wriggled out of my religious straight jacket. Did that jacket reflect a God of freedom and deliverance whose disposition is pure joy? I played in a classical music orchestra but resigned because I didn't believe God approved of my taking part in public concerts. I even stayed away from a Gospel service because the pastor wanted the orchestra I led to play a hymn tune on their own, no singing. Well, the Pharisees tithed table condiments. I have found that life holds more realistic challenges, pride, jealousy, envy, adultery, covetousness and also the call to greater virtues such as loving our neighbour which was not meant to be a performance too wearing. Old Testament religion had its observances but was quite leisurely, no churches, no services, no Bibles to read, worship only at the Temple, doing nothing in the Sabbath and only a '*Sabbath day's journey*' of about 1000 yards. They tithed and ate their tithe at the Temple two or three times a year! But all took the Sabbath, the day of rest, and turned it into an oppressive legal obligation. We still do that kind of thing. Christianity becomes something to carry instead of wings to carry us. Soar like the eagles?

A lady recently came to me distressed. She had witnessed to people but without success. Her pastor had said that bearing fruit meant soul winning, and without such 'fruit' they would appear empty handed and shamed before the Lord in heaven. It laid a heavy burden on this good soul. It was inventive theology.

Prayer is specially looked upon as a way to please God. Is that what it is? A labour? How do we know we have prayed enough to please God? The more the prayer the more we please Him? In the two hundred references to prayer in the New Testament not one suggests it. We are exhorted to pray, but God's attitude towards us is not set out as proportionate to the time we spend on our knees.

Expressions can mislead us. They say "prayer is power" meaning prayer *time* is power, the longer the prayer the more the power, two hours twice the power of one hour. Depending on praying enough to have power means we never know we have power. We need a sign. Only the Holy Spirit is power, and He gives a sign. We can't manipulate Him to double His presence by praying twice as long.

By waiting in prayer can we gain more of God? It is said so. But again when do we know we have we prayed enough? How long must we wait to get more? How much more of

God do we get? It makes it hard to be the sort of Christian we imagine we should be. My reading of Scripture shows we should grow in grace and in knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, but I don't find 'waiting in prayer' suggested as the Scriptural means.

What is God like? Does He need a clamour at His gate to notice us? Is Christianity that hard? Is the Lord too preoccupied with a heavenly agenda to attend to us?

I miss my wife because she was always there to turn to anytime. To speak to her I did not need to make a performance of it as if I was hailing a passing ship. God is just as present as any wife, our great ever-present Comforter. Prayer doesn't need to be prefaced by appeals to Him to come and hear us. Of course He hears us. He can't NOT hear us, for He is not deaf or occupied miles away. The pagan prophets of Baal had to cry out "Hear us, O Baal!" from morning to night. Elijah's prayer was totally different, brief, assured. He knew God was listening. The fire fell at once. We don't need to cry like the Psalmists, in the age before the Spirit was given, "Awake or Lord!"

We turn to God without any preamble, a very present help. He is the "There God," as Ezekiel said. Run to Him and He runs faster to us, like the father ran to the Prodigal. God came to Jacob, challenged and wrestled with him. Jacob did not go searching for God. The Bible God needs no finding, no chasing. He is the God who does the finding. "Adam, where are you?" We can't claim the credit when we know Him – He found us.

God doesn't arrange for the Christian life to be hard. It is not a system for gaining credits. Circumstances impose hardships upon us, not God. He is not an inflictor of trouble, but a deliverer. The devil slips the insinuation into Christian teaching that God sends trials. He certainly allows us to be tried, but God is not in the business of planning trouble. "*In the world you will have tribulation, but fear not for I have overcome the world.*"

God may ask us to take the Gospel and face danger, to accept a commission that necessarily involves hardship, because the circumstances are like that. Then let a man deny Himself and take up his cross. But to make difficulties or load ourselves to breaking point with endeavour and religious duties is gratuitous and lures nobody into the Kingdom. Some sing "Let me burn out for thee, dear Lord". Too many pastors are going down with burn outs. Reinhard Bonnke says "God does not want ash heaps". Reinhard also said that God doesn't want us to be horses, that includes pastors.

The Lord knows our frame, that we are dust. He filled the world and life with good things and '*no good thing will He withhold from them that love Him*'. Is God happy when we refuse His good things, and make righteousness so sorely unattractive? Eternal life means quality lifestyle, companionship with God, the source of all goodness.

It's Not Funny?

We know what Jesus said, but how did He say it? He predicted disaster for the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, "*Woe unto thee ...*". We read it in church as just print, tonelessly, though He could have been weeping, as He did over Jerusalem. His 'woes' have been represented as fierce, thundering, but that is not the Jesus I know.

In the same chapter, Matthew 11, is His great call "*Come unto me all you that are weary and burdened.*" His voice must have been appealing but mixed with defiance and anger for the religious leaders who He said laid burdens upon men's back they could not carry. When Jesus spoke in his home synagogue, Nazareth, they '*were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.*' He fulfilled the Scriptures, Psalm 45:2 "*You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace*".

During 1943 in Swansea I heard the matchless Dr. W.E. Sangster preach for the first time. I remember his sermon well mostly because of his strangely effective and inimitable way of speaking, and also his warm grace.

Shakespeare said *'Brevity is the soul of wit'*. Jesus talked like that. He did not bury his meanings in a heap of words. A psychologist said that the Sermon on the Mount compacted everything a dozen psychologists said in a lifetime. If some of Christ's remarks don't make us smile, it is because we read them so sanctimoniously. He told a story of a man who was forgiven a debt of 10,000 talents, a sum greater than anybody ever imagined, £ millions, impossible, and then the man threatened to strangle somebody who owed him only £1 or two. He meant the contrast to be ludicrous – laughable if you like. Did He really tell it with a solemn face?

Charles Spurgeon, the 'Prince of Preachers', in his *'Lectures to My Students'* reproduced a newspaper cartoon depicting him preaching with the caption "Brimstone!" and alongside a chinless clergyman as "Treachle!" Spurgeon, criticised for his humour, said he kept back most of it that went through his head when preaching. Humourless preaching – but not Jesus' preaching, is probably why a Victorian poet said "O Galilean, the world has grown grey with thy breath".

The greatest preacher of all was Jesus. His times were passionate. Religion was full of fury as in the east today. Jesus did not meet the age dispassionately. His words were warm arms embracing the multitudes. In contrast, the modern pulpit has adopted the manner of the doctor's bed-side manner. Faith is recommended today as casually as a prescription for aspirin. Could that be how Paul preached in Ephesus, English-style, cool, calm and collected? If so, how did it move anybody's heart? We read that on the great day of the feast (Tabernacles) *"Jesus stood and said in a loud voice 'If any man thirst let him come to me and drink!'"* He did not just mention it asking a friend to pass it on.

How we would treasure recordings of Christ! But we should know Him well enough for His words to throb in our ears. An actor took a West End theatre and recited the whole of Mark's Gospel every night for a month to capture an echo of Christ's wonderful voice. Every night every seat was booked. Peter calling for repentance on the day of Pentecost was not apologetic, and brought a 3000 response. George Whitfield crossing the Atlantic preached to five ships at once, but God's voice at Sinai shook the mountain. The Psalmist says the voice of the Lord *'breaks the cedars of Lebanon and makes the hinds to calve'*.

Jesus never bored anybody, never trotted out the same clichés Sunday by Sunday. Police sent to arrest Him could not, and came back explaining *"No man ever spoke like this man."* That's how to preach properly, if only we could! He was everybody's man, holding thousands spellbound. To a twelve year old He spoke so tenderly, 'Little girl, wake up!' and she returned to life. His vibrancy shook death and demons slunk away.

How come we have His words today? Because they were unforgettable. Bible critics believe a collection of His sayings they call "Q" was the source from which Matthew, Mark and Luke drew. Maybe, maybe, but I find it incredible. Is that all, 30 or 40 years later, one collection? Thousands heard Him. Some would make notes, but He was unforgettable. Jesus said *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples, Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"*. John 8:13. They had to continue in His words and so His words had to be remembered, as He uttered them, because it was His words that mattered. They would pass His words and their impressions on to their children,

cherished as words of life. Some would make notes. Jesus used memorable phrases and pithy expressions often linked with startling healings. He was such a confident and happy man. What He said could never be forgotten.

Did people laugh when He spoke? Today we are surfeited with television comics and their attempts to be funny, often just silly. Christ stripped His message of mere verbiage, and spoke in concentrated form, sentences as sharp as arrows, compounded of wisdom. *"The words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined, purified seven times."* Ps.12:6. Our own speech should be 'seasoned with salt'. Why is a sermon considered the most boring thing that you ever hear? You listen for an hour or two, look at your watch and find it was only 10 minutes. It wasn't like that with Jesus. He knew how to do hold attention. He was the world's greatest raconteur and knew how to be persuasive and compelling. As a story writer, Christ's story of the Prodigal son leaves me envious of such genius. In those days without printing or recordings, the story teller could get a crowd anywhere in the street like probably Homer in Greece. But Jesus' stories had eternity in view.

Some church homilies are so predictable and so arid in imagination they are a pain in the neck. Jesus didn't hesitate to use the ludicrous as humour. He spoke of cutting off your hand or plucking your eye out. As if anybody would take it literally! It was His shock device for commanding attention. We all use that kind of thing. *"I'll eat my hat ..."*, or *"It's raining cats and dogs"*, or *"I could have died laughing"*. Jesus described a man with a plank in his eye getting a speck out of another fellow's optic. A man with a plank in his eye! That is a verbal cartoon.

I heard a preacher rationalising Jesus' illustration that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. He told us there was a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem for nightfall, and a camel could be squeezed through there. Actually there never was such a gate! Then another sermon spoke of the camel as a camel-hair rope threaded through a steel needle! Any concoction rather than credit Jesus with obvious humour – 'hyperbole' as the educated say. People would remember that.

God made kittens, so how can anybody say He has no sense of humour? I was handed a Gospel tract and read "eternity is no laughing matter". True, for the Christless, but for those who cling to Him, eternity is joy that only laughter can express. I love my God as He loves me, merrily. I feel his kisses on the breeze, and so I carve his name on trees. Why not? Ten thousand years misunderstood, He needs my laughter in the wood, a lot! Laughter is always close to tears. Edith Wharton said: *"In any really good subject, one has only to dig deep enough to come to tears"*. How many dig deep enough in the Bible? Ring Lardner said *"How can you write if you can't cry?"* But how can we preach if we can't cry? Jesus did.

The will of God

It is commonly said that God has a plan for every life. Yes, in a way, but that is not quite what the Bible says. He guides but has not pre-planned exactly what we should do all the time. We are not draughts on a draughts board with no rights, no will, no self-determination. Nor is He a drill sergeant-major and we are not on God's parade ground. Some believe God has a detailed and daily course mapped out for them, but live in daily anxiety worrying whether their self-will has omitted some scruple. They spend much time in prayer and seeking God's will. Where is that commanded in Scripture and where are the Scripture role models? Assumptions are made that seem right, without checking

by the word. God does, and must reveal His will. If He wants us to know it He doesn't mutter or whisper. What He wants us to do will be perfectly clear, unless we muddle it with our own intentions.

Our daily prayer is that His will shall be done on earth as in heaven. How is it done there? Angels obey Him but still have lives of their own. God has left us here to become what He wants us to be. He uses circumstance as His tools, picking up everything as material grist for His mill.

God does not leave us to look after ourselves, though He gave us independence. '*It is not in man that walks to direct his own steps*'. We walk, we go and He makes sure we are not heading for disaster. He can't guide till we go. A ship cannot be steered until it is under weigh and it does not steer itself. God has given us intelligence, acumen, wisdom to apply to our lives and to His work. Do what lies before us and the guarantee is "whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." He blesses our plans. We go and God goes with us. People are praying endlessly "O Lord let us see you move, we pray." God is waiting for us to move. The call is His. The initiative is ours.