

Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1552



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A Glorious Birthday – page 5

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OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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Glad Tidings Distributors

for orders and payments

United Kingdom – Cilla Palmer, “Highlands”,
78 Mildenhall Road, Fordham, Ely, Cambs,
England CB7 5NR
Tel: (01638)723959 (24 hrs & Fax)
cilla@gladtidings.fsnet.co.uk

Australia – Jon Fry, 19 Macey Street, Croydon South,
Victoria, Australia, 3136
gladtidingsaustralia@gmail.com

Canada – Vivian Thorp, 5377 Birdcage Walk,
Burlington, Ontario, Canada, L7L 3K5
vivianthorp@bell.net

New Zealand – Neil Todd, 14 Morpeth Place, Blockhouse
Bay, Auckland 7, New Zealand *thetodds@xtra.co.nz*

South Africa – A. J. Oosthuizen, P.O.Box 50357,
Musgrave Road, Durban 4062, South Africa
antoost@mweb.co.za

U.S.A. – Pat Hemingray, 3079 Kilburn West,
Rochester Hills, USA, MI 48306

Other Countries – Andrew Johnson, 22 Hazel Drive,
Hollywood, Birmingham, England, B47 5RJ
andrew@gladtidings.me.uk

Editor: Owen Tecwyn Morgan, 26 The Crescent,
Hampton-in-Arden, Solihull, England, B92 0BP
glad.tidings@virgin.net

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Learning from the Master

Art students are sometimes required to copy great works of art so they can study at first hand the artistic accomplishments and creative genius of their predecessors. In doing so they seek to master the skill and techniques of the artist and work out for themselves just how the original was constructed and painted.

The artist featured on this month's front cover is making a good attempt at copying Auguste Renoir's depiction of Pont-Neuf in Paris, a painting first done by Renoir in 1872. He was better known for his figure paintings, but this landscape depicts the development of impressionism, especially in the way the effects of sunlight are shown. It requires a lot of skill to capture the same effect on canvas and that is what the artist is learning while making the copy.

"Imitate Me"

Someone once said that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery". Trying to be like somebody else by copying their behaviour and their character, is the greatest compliment possible, because you are taking that person as your role model. That often happens when a celebrity wears something and people rush out to buy the same clothes, or at least try to achieve the same look. It can happen too when people set a bad example – perhaps by their aggressive or violent behaviour – and others seek to copy. That's why we hear about "copy-cat violence", "copy-cat crimes" and even "copy-cat suicides".

Role models are very important for young people, who are easily influenced by people in the public eye, but it is equally important that we set good examples to one another by the choices we make and the things we say and do. But you would have to be fairly certain that your way of doing things is right before you would say to someone "imitate me". Yet that is what one Bible character said on two separate occasions when writing to his fellow Christians. The man was the apostle Paul and this is what he wrote:

*For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, **imitate me** (1 Corinthians 4:15–16).*

*Brethren, **join in following my example**, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern (Philippians 3:17).*

Life in Christ

The apostle was someone who had actually had "a Damascus Road experience". Nowadays we use that expression about someone whose life has been turned around by something dramatic that happened to them, but the expression comes from Paul's encounter with the risen Christ as he was nearing Damascus. He had left Jerusalem as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth; he entered the city of Damascus, bewildered and blind, about to become a baptized follower of that very Jesus.

Thereafter, Paul lived a totally different life from what he had been expecting, becoming an ardent follower of Jesus and an extraordinary preacher of the gospel of salvation, centred in what he now understood to be the saving work of Jesus.

In the Philippian letter, from which the second quotation comes, he compares and contrasts his life as an ardent Jew with the new life that he now has in Christ, stating one of his new aspirations in these words:

I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death... (Philippians 3:8–10).

Christ his Role Model

In an earlier letter, Paul had explained to believers in Galatia – a province of Asia Minor – that he had modelled his life upon that of Jesus Christ, his Lord. Summing up his aim in life, he said this:

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

That is why Paul could ask the church members to whom he wrote, both in Corinth and Philippi, to imitate him, because he was himself living in a way that sought to imitate Christ.

Indeed, he was trying to live the life of Christ day by day. That was the very point he made earlier in the Corinthian letter:

Do all to the glory of God. Give no offence, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1).

Learning from Jesus

Anyone who wants to become a Christian must try to follow Jesus, for that is what he has commanded us to do. We are to “follow his steps” (see Matthew 10:38; 16:24; 19:21) and take him as our example for life. Make no mistake; that is a major challenge! For Jesus lived a perfect life. He always did what God wanted; always thought more of others than of himself; always had a kindly word for those in need; always went about doing good; always controlled his thoughts and his words. Or, to put it another way:

Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow his steps: “Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:21–22, and the citation is from Isaiah 53:9).

By trying to copy Jesus, as well as we can, we will learn how the Master lived, come to marvel at his selfless life and learn to love him more each day. He is coming back from heaven before long and will be gathering to himself all those men and women from all ages who have made him their first and foremost choice in life. Make him your Master now!

Editor

A Glorious Birthday

The birth of Prince George Alexander Louis of Cambridge, the newly born son of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, has brought much interest and excitement all over the world, but especially here in Britain.

For Prince George is the third in line to the throne and his birth in the 61st year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II has added a sense of continuity to the celebrations that have continued throughout this year. Millions of people like me saw the proud parents displaying their baby to the watching world.

Another birth

Later I began to think of an even greater birthday. It happened over 2000 years ago. An angel appeared to a woman named Mary and gave her the astonishing news that, despite being a virgin, she was to bear a child. This would happen by God's power – the Holy Spirit, as the angel explained:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

Her Son – like the young Prince George of Cambridge – would also be heir to the throne, but his kingdom would be far greater:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32–33).

The child to be born was to be the Saviour of mankind (Matthew 1:21) who would eventually rule over all



nations as King of kings, and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16).

Media Coverage?

As it turned out, this “king of kings” was born in lowly and difficult circumstances. Mary was not comfortably settled in an excellent hospital with every facility on hand. Quite the opposite: Jesus was born in humble surroundings and was laid in a stable manger for safe-keeping (Luke 2:7).

Nor was there even local press coverage for Mary was in Bethlehem, far from her Nazareth home. And there was no announcement made at the palace, for King Herod was extremely jealous and suspicious of any rival, as later events would demonstrate. But an announcement was made, even so.

Humble shepherds were the first to hear when angels appeared to make this dramatic declaration:

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men! (Luke 2:11–14).

So it was shepherds who first visited the newborn child – not the proud grandparents – and they went away thrilled at what they had seen, “*glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen*” (Luke 2:20).

Turning Point

From that moment the Roman Empire would never be the same, as the glorious news of the Saviour captured the hearts of men and women. All across the then known world people appreciated the great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, saw how it had opened for them a way of life that could eventually give them eternal life. The Believers were persecuted in horrible ways, but hundreds went to their death knowing that the love of heaven had touched their hearts, and that at an appointed time they would be raised from the dead to reign with their Lord.

What sort of life will they then enjoy? How can one describe immortality in the company of angels? For the mortal population who survive will see a transformed earth. Isaiah tells us that the desert will blossom as the rose. It will be a time of singing for very joy of heart as the wars, famines, distresses of the past will have gone forever. In fact, to



drive home the lesson the Psalmist described the tremendous time to come when corn will grow on top of the mountains. There will be no more hospitals, for the power of God will be there to cure all ills. No one on earth can do that. The prophet puts it perfectly:

The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isaiah 35:10).

How can my words describe the wonder of that future age? It will be an age of sheer happiness. Do think about it, and respond to the Saviour’s command, detailed in Mark 16, verse 16. You will never regret it. In the meantime we wish all blessings for baby George and for the Duke and Duchess and pray that together we all may glorify God.

Ken Clark

The Blessings of God's Kingdom

What a blessing the establishment of the Kingdom of God will be for those who survive the events surrounding the return of the Lord, provided they acknowledge the King and seek to serve him. For in that day the benefits in serving God will be obvious, as the prophet Zechariah explains:

It shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, on them there will be no rain. If the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the Lord strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14:16–18).

Jerusalem Exalted

The prophets Micah and Isaiah both say this of Jerusalem when the Kingdom of God is established:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths."

For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken (Micah 4:1–4).

God's Righteous Law

At that time people all over the world will be instructed in righteousness and they will be eager to learn the benevolent ways of God. God's law will be the only law. The rule of man will be gone forever. Any disputes will be settled by the King who judges in righteousness. No longer will there be the power struggles within nations, where everyone is only basically concerned with remaining in power, and not necessarily with what is best for the people in general.

No longer will there be the political intrigues between nations, where every nation is really only concerned with its own interests, and in many cases seeks to impose its will on others. It will be a time of peace such as the world has never known. People will feel safe with no one to make them afraid.

It will also be a time of great plenty and of great satisfaction for the peoples of the world who serve the

King, with life expectancy being extended for people to enjoy for longer the blessings which will flow. The following words are spoken specifically about Israel but no doubt similar scenes will be witnessed worldwide.

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “When the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

There will be an abundance of grain in the earth, on the top of the mountains; its fruit shall wave like Lebanon; and those of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth (Psalm 72:16).

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying. No more shall an infant from there live but a few days, nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; for the child shall die one hundred years old, but the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for as the days of a tree, so shall be the days of My people, and My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands (Isaiah 65:17–22).

Eden Restored

When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God told him that the ground

was to be cursed for his sake and that in sorrow he would eat of it all the days of his life. Thorns and thistles were to spring forth and in the sweat of his face he would eat bread, until he returned to the ground from which he was taken. This is still the case, and it will remain so until the Kingdom of God is established. This is what the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 8:

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now (Romans 8:19–22).

The blessings of the Kingdom will reverse this unhappy situation, for the fruitfulness of Eden will be restored. We see a symbolic picture of this time in the final chapter of Revelation.

He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him (Revelation 22:1–3).

What a time of great blessings this will be.

John Shepley

The Garden of Eden

In the beginning, so we're told, God planted a garden 'eastward in Eden'. Where it was East of, we can't be sure.

Scholars have traditionally located the Garden in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), based on the flimsy evidence of the present day location of the ancient rivers, Tigris (Hiddekel) and Euphrates, which give some credence to the likelihood that Eden may have been in Babylonia, near the mouth of the Euphrates (see Genesis 2:14).

The Cradle of Civilisation

From time immemorial school children have been told that the site of the Garden of Eden, the cradle of civilization, was somewhere in Iraq. It would be wise to take another look. Let's consider the possibility: that the Garden was planted to the east of the Mediterranean coast – the Great Sea that lies in close proximity to Jerusalem, a distance of a mere 37 miles.

When you reflect that Eden is the place where God initiates His conversation with His creation doesn't Jerusalem seem a more likely venue than Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and the site of Babylon, a notorious symbol of apostasy in the Bible?

If scholars are mistaken, and the Garden was not located in the cradle of civilization at all, but in Jerusalem, we may well re-evaluate our conceptions of this and other traditional presumptions, such as the nature of man and his destiny.

Set forth in the Garden of Eden are two theological building blocks of

God's Word which are not open to challenge:

- 1 the mortality of man, and
- 2 the Kingdom of God on earth as man's eventual destiny.

Eden Principles

God commanded Adam and Eve that they were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, warning Adam that in the day he ate of it he would surely die (Genesis 2:17). Sadly, the pair fell from grace by disobeying God and were banished from the garden lest they ate of the tree of life. God said:

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19).



Does it seem logical to you that God would meet and confront man in this specially created Garden in the middle of a desert, somewhere in the Middle East? Or does it make more sense that this unique spot should be where God has chosen to establish His kingdom on earth?

Land of Promise

In truth, God's plans for Jerusalem go way back. God called Abram to this land. Why did God select this tiny country, with Jerusalem at its centre, and call it the land of promise? If we accept that Jerusalem in Israel is the Garden of Eden, we can see by inductive reasoning that Israel has been in the mind of God since the creation of the world. For the grand theme of the Bible is a progression from Eden to a new Eden (portrayed in the Book of Revelation).

Whence this overweening love of God towards Israel and Jerusalem? It is central to the plan and purpose of God in the earth. *"For, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). God did not create this planet in vain, but He created it to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18).

Thanks to Christ's sacrifice, first hinted at in Genesis (3:15), we learn that not only Israel, but all nations will be blessed when the law goes out from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. In short, there is only one place for Eden to be – in the land God cares for, where His purpose finally will be accomplished:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from



the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).

Jerusalem or Zion

Try to suspend old concepts and view the ancient city of Jerusalem as the place where God once established His Garden. This is the place about which He said:

For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a lamp that burns (Isaiah 62:1).

In the face of this scripture certain truths challenge errors that have beset the church for ages. Extra biblical ideas evolved in the church due in great part to the Hellenistic idea of the dual nature of man – the body and an immortal soul. Faced with the problem of disposing of this non-existent soul at death, the suggestion emerged that it be sent to heaven. Add in the fact that Matthew, who was writing to a Jewish audience (for whom the word 'God' was too sacred to utter), substituted the word "heaven" for "God", and his reference to "the Kingdom of heaven" in place of Kingdom of God, compounded the error.

Paradise Restored

In the Beatitudes, the Lord Jesus promised that the meek shall inherit the earth. So it's altogether reasonable to believe that Jerusalem, the Garden of Eden restored, will become that Kingdom, the paradise of which Jesus spoke on the cross.

Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Does the use of the word 'Paradise' spoken by Jesus to the thief on the cross, seem strange and out of sync? Today we associate the word Paradise with Islam and those who blow themselves to smithereens in a glorification of Allah. Why did Christ use the word?

Interested Bible students will find that Greek language scholars support the rule that Semeron, the Greek word for 'today', may follow or precede the verb it qualifies. So in Luke 23:43 Jesus did not necessarily say "*today you will be with me in Paradise*" but could just as well have said, "*I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise*".

The simple re-arrangement of the sentence conveys a meaning of far-reaching significance. The facts



concerning his words to the thief are that Jesus was not in paradise that day at all; he died and was buried in the grave and it was a further 40 days before he ascended into heaven. The word 'paradise' has a very special meaning for Christ.

He will return to the earth, to Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives, to claim his throne when the Kingdom of God is established, centred in Jerusalem – in Eden, his paradise.

What of Us?

What meaning does this interpretation of Bible history have for us? It is crucial if you want to obey God, and if you love life and want to live forever. From the beginning of creation, God's plan centred on the Holy Land and the promised Kingdom on earth.

- ❖ First, God called Abram from Ur to go to a land He would show him, promising to make him the father of many nations (Gen 17:4).
- ❖ Second, the Jews were called out of slavery in Egypt to this same place. Moses speaks to the Israelites about the land they'll soon enter, the land of promise: "*...a land for which the Lord your God cares; the eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year*" (Deuteronomy 11:12).
- ❖ A third miracle has taken place before our eyes, as we have witnessed the long prophesied re-gathering of the Jews to Israel, beginning with the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

These three happenings reinforce the fact that the final outcome of God's plan will be earth-centred. When

Christ walked the earth, he preached the gospel or good news of the Kingdom of God, promising that those who believe in him will be granted a place in the everlasting kingdom to come, a kingdom centred in the land of Israel.

Kingdom Promises

Eden will be restored, not in Babylon, but in Jerusalem. In the wilderness of Zion, God will command the blessing of life everlasting:

For the Lord will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody (Isaiah 51:3).

In life mankind has always had to contend between truth and error. If we choose error, we can't blame God – it's not His fault, because nowhere in the Bible does He say that we'll go to heaven when we die. This is a man-made idea, to complement the erroneous belief that we are immortal. From start to finish the Bible promises the establishment of a literal, earthly kingdom to come. God's words are plain, and best not tampered with.

Going to Jerusalem

Years ago there was a children's game, played at birthday parties, called "Going to Jerusalem". Children would circle round two lines of straight chairs placed back to back, always one less chair than children. At the end, the one left standing was the loser, and there was no prize. The game conveyed the idea that Jerusalem was a special place, a place we would all want to go to, because in the Garden in Jerusalem we can take hold of the tree of life.

As Isaiah promised:

The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose ... Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert (Isaiah 35:1,5-6).

Jerusalem is the place that God has chosen to centre His kingdom on earth. This will be Eden restored, and then there will be access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).

Marian Canoles



Paul at Miletus

One speech in the book of Acts stands out from all the rest. It is not because of its content but because of its audience. All of the others are directed at those who had not yet become disciples of the Lord Jesus and members of the early church, but the talk which the Apostle Paul gave to the elders of the church in Ephesus at Miletus is different.

Paul and the rest of the group with him were hurrying back from his visits to Macedonia and Greece on his third major journey in an attempt to be at Jerusalem, if at all possible, in time for the day of Pentecost. They did not have the time to travel to Ephesus; instead they arranged for the elders of the church there to meet them at Miletus, thirty miles south of Ephesus, and there he told them of his fears and concerns.

Paul's Appeal

The apostle began by reminding them of the way he had worked and preached not only in Ephesus but wherever he had made visits.

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20–21).

He had always, he said, forthrightly and robustly taught the message of salvation, as we have seen in some of the talks we have looked at in previous articles in this series. Paul had never sought an easy life; in fact he had

been promised that his work would be beset with difficulties. Ananias who went to baptize Paul had been told:

Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake (Acts 9:15–16).

So what Paul has to say now must be noted carefully. He told the elders of his plans to visit Jerusalem, and clearly suspected that he would not be popular when he reached that city. It seems that he had been warned in some way that he was likely to suffer some form of imprisonment because of all the preaching he had done.

Unpopular

Paul was not popular with the Jews. They saw one who had once persecuted the early Christians become a turncoat of the worst sort. Paul was unconcerned about this; all that mattered to him was that the gospel of the grace of God should be spread as far and wide as possible. He told them that this was his last visit to them; they would not see his face again. But he had discharged his responsibility towards them:

I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27).

It was important to Paul that what he preached should at all times be “the whole counsel of God”; he hid nothing

of the message because it might be unpopular. Had he done so, he might have made more converts, or been more popular, but this would not have been honest for those to whom he preached.

Trouble Ahead

Paul now warned the men from Ephesus of the dangers facing them. He talked about the young church as the flock, continuing an idiom which comes from earlier in scripture. The Lord Jesus once gave the apostle Peter a commission to ‘feed his lambs’ (see John 21:15). Now the apostle Paul used the same figure of speech, warning of imminent spiritual danger:

For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29–30).



Paul recognized that there are always people who want to pervert the teaching of the gospel for their own ends. Some were outside the church, but sought to infiltrate it. Others were already members! Perhaps they had come with honest and pure motives, but now were beginning to manipulate things for their own ends. Paul cautions the elders that they must be alert

to this. For three years he had warned them constantly of the dangers. Night and day he had worked with them so that they would be ready for such problems.

The Antidote

There was however a solution and Paul made a recommendation that is still valid today, for all who might be concerned about the influence of wrong teaching:

Now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

The answer to all our problems is to turn to God’s Word, to read it constantly, and to read all of it, if we are to find the “whole counsel of God”. Paul’s warning to the elders also shows us one of the reasons why there are different factions amongst so called followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is because there are some believers whose message is not the whole counsel of God.

Sadly, it appears that the forebodings of the apostle were fully justified, for the true church in Ephesus did not survive long after the end of the first century, in spite of a further letter, this time directly from the Lord Jesus, in the Book of Revelation (see Revelation 2:1-7). Perhaps the Ephesian elders were more concerned about not seeing Paul again, instead of paying full attention to his warnings about the future. They prayed together before they parted, but sadly they do not seem to have taken sufficient heed of Paul’s warnings. Will we?

Mark Sheppard

The Four Gospels: Mark

Who was he?

Mark, like Matthew, had another name. He was also called John. John Mark grew up in Jerusalem, but set off with the Apostle Paul for Antioch, and then with Paul and his relative Barnabas for the first preaching mission to the Gentiles.

He was their assistant, so he was probably young at the time. Indeed, he may even be the ‘young man’ whom he describes in his own gospel, without naming him, as having observed the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Now a certain young man followed (Jesus), having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young man laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked (Mark 14:51–52).

We do not know exactly when Mark wrote his gospel, but he was certainly living in Jerusalem in the early years. He is probably the ‘Mark’ included in the Apostle Peter’s greetings:

She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son (1 Peter 5:13).

If it is the same Mark, he may have spent time travelling with Peter and recording his stories of Jesus. And he seems to have been in Rome when the apostle Paul was imprisoned there (see Colossians 4:10).

Mark’s Account

Mark’s approach is to summarise in powerful, dynamic phrases the thrilling events of Jesus’ ministry. His record is

called ‘synoptic’, that is, it gives a broad overview of the subject without getting lost in the details, and it can be easily compared with the accounts of Matthew and Luke which cover much the same period of the Lord’s life. Frequently Mark uses the words “*immediately*”, “*at once*” or “*forthwith*” to describe the effervescent energy with which Jesus strode across the landscape of Galilee, healing, teaching, and calling men and women to follow him.

Many years ago, an English actor ran a one-man show in London and elsewhere during which he recited off by heart the whole of Mark’s gospel every night. Nowadays you can view that show online free: it takes about an hour and a half. Or try reading Mark aloud to yourself, as if it was a play and you are acting the parts of the characters. Or just read Mark chapters four and five together, and see how he describes a typical day in the life of Jesus.

- ❖ He spends the first period teaching in parables from a fishing boat.
- ❖ At nightfall, exhausted, he commands the fishermen to take him across the sea.
- ❖ Afterwards he is so tired he sleeps through a storm.
- ❖ He has to be woken up to deal with the crisis on the boat.
- ❖ He heals the madman on the opposite shore – somehow, he knew Legion was waiting for him over there.

- ❖ His task complete, he returns to the west side of the lake.
- ❖ He is at once swamped by the huge crowd that is waiting for him to appear.
- ❖ He plunges into his work, healing a woman with a haemorrhage.
- ❖ He walks to Jairus' house and heals the sick daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, a man he could well have counted his enemy. He instructs the parents to make sure she had something to eat, and yet he himself has had no time to eat himself.
- ❖ Another day is already well under way, and his only rest has been a few hours snatched on the boat.

That, Mark is saying to us, is the selfless, loving Lord we have been called to follow.

Trouble Ahead!

Note how Mark records many times how Jesus explained to his disciples that he was going to be killed in Jerusalem, but that he would rise on the third day. He describes perfectly their surprise and bafflement at this idea.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned around and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:31–33).

Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and he did not want anyone to know it. For he taught his disciples and said to them, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And after he is killed, he will rise the third day." But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask him (Mark 9:30–32).

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and scourge him, and spit on him, and kill him. And the third day he will rise again (Mark 10:33–34).

Last Week

Six of Mark's sixteen chapters are spent looking at the last week of Jesus' ministry and at his death and resurrection. His last chapter has a break part way through, and the original ending may have been lost, but it conveys perfectly the shock and despair that hit the disciples when Jesus died, and how difficult it was to convince them their master was risen from the dead. Like Matthew, Mark ends with Jesus' commission of the Apostles to go out into the world, preaching the good news to all nations:

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15–16).

David M Pearce

Why be a Christian?

Sixty or more years ago, the day at school in the United Kingdom began with a religious assembly. It was always based on a Christian theme with a hymn, prayers and a reading from the Bible. Very often the first lesson of the day would be 'Scripture' as it was called. Most children therefore grew up knowing something of the Christian ethic. People in this country could then be described as being, in the conventional sense of the word, 'Christian'.

Comparative Religion

The situation has changed markedly. Now quite young children are taught about other religions of the world. So in this country a ten year old could tell you something about Buddha or Krishna or Moses or Christ. He could also tell you about the more important festivals of other religions such as Divali for the Hindus.

Now there is much to be said for this new state of affairs in our so-called multicultural society. The idea behind such teaching is that children as they grow up can, at an appropriate age, make an informed choice as to which religion to adopt for their own lives or indeed to choose to have nothing more to do with religion! Thereby they can take part in that very popular activity – making a choice! There is however one issue of supreme importance which is rarely addressed today.

What is Truth?

Although some religions of the world provide a moral basis for everyday living, very few people ever address the issue of Truth. Is it a matter of choosing the religion which suits you best?

Do any of these religions make claims about the truth of their teachings? Is the nature of their teaching such that it will ultimately not be possible for these very different religions to exist side-by-side?

History bears eloquent testimony to religious conflicts and wars in all ages including the present! The purpose of this article is to ask if it really matters which religion one chooses. These are hard questions and they cannot easily be answered.

A man's faith is very much the man himself and it is well nigh impossible for anyone to put himself into the shoes of a person who lives by another faith. When I was an undergraduate over sixty years ago, I had the privilege of listening to an inaugural lecture given by Professor R.C.Zaehner, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford. He took as his title "*Foolishness to the Greeks*". He was the new occupant of the Chair of Comparative Religion. I found his remarks very helpful:

"It is then only too true that the basic principles of Eastern and Western thought, which in practice means Indian and Semitic, are, I will not say irreconcilably opposed; they are simply not starting from the same premises. The only common ground is that the function of religion is to provide release: there is no agreement at all as to what it is that man must be released from. The great religions are talking at cross purposes".

So here is one academic facing up to the impossibility of arriving at a satisfactory answer to these hard questions.

Christ Alone

The fundamental of apostolic Christian teaching is expressed in the New Testament by the apostle Paul in this verse: “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*” (2 Corinthians 5:19). This brief yet immensely pithy sentence presents to the reader a whole range of apostolic Christian teaching. It tells of the claim that man can only be released from his thralldom to sin and death through Christ and thereby be reconciled to God. As the apostle Peter said when he was charged with false teaching by the Jewish leaders of his day: “*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). It is at this teaching and these claims which we shall now look.

Some might wonder why I have used the phrase “apostolic Christian teaching”. The reason is quite simple but also fundamental. If we are to understand the Christian religion aright we need to go back to its earliest sources, simply because “things” are very different now. I quote again from Professor Zaehner:

“Because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, therefore will I spue thee out of my mouth.” Such was Christ’s verdict on the Church of Laodicea in the first century, and such is the verdict on the churches in England to-day”.

Some church leaders involve themselves in political issues and forget about the Biblical moral principles, such as marriage and family life. So many communities of Christians have allowed themselves to be led astray by teachings derived from other religions and philosophies. This was done under

the mistaken idea that different people with different cultures could find the truth about God through their own seeking after Him. So there is this continual effort to bring together religious teachings and philosophical ideas. Sadly, these ideas gradually corrupt the original gospel message.

Familiar examples of such syncretism can be seen in the false teaching about heaven going at death; the immortality of the human soul, not its mortality; the conflicts about the nature of God and of His Son bound up in the false doctrine of the Trinity and the apparent necessity for priests and a clergy with hierarchical orders, whereas the Bible speaks eloquently of church elders.

“I am the truth”

Just think about Jesus for a moment. Which other preacher has said of truth, not that he teaches it, but *that it is he himself* (John 14:6); of a vision of God, not that he has found it, but that it is *in the sight of himself* (John 14:9); of that which can supply man’s greatest needs, not that he can show it but that *it is in him* (John 6:35 & 37 and Matthew 11:28)? No one ever spoke as he did. Even the temple guards sent to take him prisoner would not lay a hand upon him (John 7:46).

There is something about Jesus which at one and the same time separates us from him and yet draws us towards him. Others are lost sheep; he is the Good Shepherd. Others are sick; he is the physician – both physically and spiritually. Others’ lives are forfeit; his is the ransom. Others – all others – are sinners; he is not a sinner but the Saviour. Yet he fully partook of our nature (Hebrews 2:14-15,17-18).

Each of us has to come to terms with the magnitude of these claims which

Jesus Christ made about himself. They are either true or Jesus can be relegated to the position held by so many other religious teachers the world over. Ponder for a moment the nature of some of these claims –

- ❖ *I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst (John 6:35).*
- ❖ *I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life (John 8:12).*
- ❖ *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep (John 10:11).*
- ❖ *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing (John 15:5).*
- ❖ *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live (John 11:25).*

Jesus claims to be the only means of bringing repentant men and women to his Father, thus providing release from the bondage to sin and death. Either he is the Truth and we must believe him, or he is a liar and we can forget him. The choice is frighteningly stark.

The reason why I am a Christian is quite simple. I have come to believe the claims that Jesus made as a result of facing the challenge that his claims made upon me. In common with many others, I have prayerfully read the Bible and concluded that it is God's precious Word to mankind. This conclusion was not reached in a hurry or with any rush of emotion.

Tatian, writing in the second century AD, put it this way: "*When I was giving*

my earnest attention to discover the truth, I happened to meet with certain barbaric writings, too old to be compared with the opinions of the Greeks, and too divine to be compared with their errors and I was led to put faith in them by:

- ❖ *The majesty of God as portrayed in Scripture.*
- ❖ *The honesty of Scripture - against its own custodians and its continual confirmation by history.*
- ❖ *The mysteries contained in Scripture are beyond the invention of human understanding.*
- ❖ *The perfection and balance of its teaching and precepts.*
- ❖ *The use of language in Scripture.*
- ❖ *Its power to move sinful men and women.*
- ❖ *Its capacity to maintain its truthfulness in the face of time and opposition.*
- ❖ *The remarkable harmony between OT and NT: 66 books - 1600 years - 40 writers.*

Trust in God

We Christadelphians have come to trust God's Word for these very same reasons. The Word of God clearly tells us that Jesus Christ is to return to this earth to re-establish a theocracy in Israel with Jerusalem as the capital of a worldwide kingdom. Either it is true or, I reluctantly repeat, Jesus is a liar. The time for the consideration of these matters is now: before the prophesied future overtakes the present. Each one must come face to face with the astonishing claims that Jesus makes about himself and their implication for each of us as individuals.

Trevor A. Pritchard

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MID 30912, Birmingham, B27 6BR
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Africa & Europe

Christadelphian Bible Mission,
404 Shaftmoor Lane, Birmingham,
B28 8SZ, UK *requests@cbm.org.uk*

The Americas

CBMA, 19111 Kinsie Street,
Northridge, California, USA, 91324
ksommerville@unitedagencies.com

Caribbean

CBMC, Box 55541, Unit 119, 15280,
101 Avenue, Surrey, BC, Canada,
V3R 0J7 *philsnobelen@shaw.ca*

India

T Galbraith, GPO Box 159,
Hyderabad, 5000001, India

South and East Asia

ACBM, PO Box 42, Wallacia, NSW
2745, Australia
coelmada@ozemail.com.au

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