

ORTHOS

The Revd Dr James Packer is professor of systematic theology at Regent College, Vancouver. These three papers were presented at the Evangelical Ministry Assembly at St Helen's Bishopsgate, London in 1986.

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ASPECTS OF AUTHORITY

1. Authority in Our Message

Concern for authority

I begin by posing this question: 'Why should we be concerned about authority at the present time?' If I were a minister or lay worker in a church of any denomination I think I would be concerned. In fact, there are several reasons why we should be especially concerned.

1) *Real freedom* -- which means fulfilment, contentment and satisfaction -- is *only found under authority*. This is something which Christians alone have truly known. We were made to live under the authority of our Maker and that has always been the path of freedom and fulfilment for us human beings. It is a creation-fact, yet how few people today understand it. Therefore we need to be concerned about authority and its significance for fulfilling human life.

2) *We understand the claim of our Lord Jesus Christ*. We evangelicals should be very clear about it. Jesus is Lord: he is risen from the dead and he reigns. Our Christ is not a potent historical memory like the liberal Christ: rather is he a living Lord. He reigns, and he must rule over human lives. That is his claim, and it is a redemption-fact. He rose that he might be Lord of the dead and the living, as Paul says in Romans 14. But in the church this is not well understood, and in the world it is not understood at all. It is, however, central to what we ought to shout from the housetops about authority. Bow to the authority of Jesus Christ; understand what it means to do that! This is part of our message to the world and must remain so.

3) *Pastoral leadership requires authority*, although we have to be careful how we expound the concept. I am not putting forward the idea of the autocrat who insists that when he speaks, as pastor and leader of the church, no dog should bark and no one should query what he says, but that the authority of his office should be deemed to justify everything that he lays down. That is not the idea of pastoral authority which any of us should entertain. Nonetheless, there is authority attaching to the office of the pastor, and to the informal role of the lay Christian leader. It is the authority which belongs to God and to his Word, which is to come through the officer or lay leader and which is to be received as from God when it comes in that way.

If we are seeking to pastor God's people, we know that again and again crisis comes at this point. With the Bible in our hands, in the Lord's name, we affirm something -- and it is challenged. This can lead to quite agonizing tensions, but in those circumstances it is no answer for us to back down and say, in effect, 'Well, if you don't like what I say, forget it'. We would not be saying it at all if we did not believe that the Lord was saying it first. So we have to press the issue, and sometimes there are quite acute disruptions because of the problem of maintaining the authority of the pastoral leader. I dare say that many of us have

been in a situation where we have had to fight that fight and we wish that the situation had never arisen. Nevertheless, for the honour of our Master, in whose name we speak, we do not feel able to let the issue drop. Certainly, pastoral leadership involves authority -- the authoritative application of the word of the Lord -- and if we are going to be adequate pastoral leaders we must come to terms with that fact.

Is the authority of the pastoral leader challenged widely in churches these days? We know very well that it is, and this causes the special concern about authority as it relates to pastoral leadership.

4) *The modern world rejects authority.* In a general way, the world has always rejected divine authority, but now we are in a situation where all forms of authority are defied. It is part of the temper of our society, and to make any form of authority convincing, demands hard labour, thought, skill and, for the Christian minister, much prayer and humility. Yet compassion for those around us should make us feel, and surely does, that we must convince them of the reality of authority and the vital necessity of observing it. Otherwise society goes to pieces.

One of the things which, as Christian leaders, we are called to do is to function -- and to help others to function -- as the light of the world and the salt of society, preserving it from corruption and holding it together. In a situation, therefore, where all around us seem to be thumbing their noses at authority in all shapes and forms, we do well to think about the subject afresh. It is a matter which we need to consider deeply and it is worth spending time trying to work out what, in this area, it is best for us to do.

5) *The modern church lacks authority.* It lacks authority because (and this applies to all denominations, even the Roman Catholic) there is real uncertainty amongst the members and the leaders as to what ought to be said. The trumpet gives an uncertain sound and, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14, that is a very unhappy state of affairs. Who will prepare for battle? Who will prepare for any serious enterprise at all? We shall simply laugh at the leader who has the trumpet to his lips and cannot get a clear sound out of it. That is frequently the story. Layfolk within our churches, and people outside who are watching the churches, laugh, because of the uncertainty of the sound which the leadership produces when it tries to speak on some matter of moment and of practice.

For us pastors, leaders at our own level, this is terribly depressing, terribly frustrating. We do not want things to remain as they are. We want the church to regain authority, and that means regaining certainty, and consensus, and a common mind based on the Scriptures. There is no need for me to prove that there will never be any authority in the church's pronouncements until that happens. I write as an Anglican who knows approximately what is going on in the Church of England. I know all too painfully what is going on in the Anglican Church in Canada, and I observe that the same sort of thing is happening in other churches too. The church lacks authority in the modern world.

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Can authority be recovered? Can authority be restored for the church at large, for that section of the church of which I am a part, for my own congregation, for my own personal ministry? Like so many other matters, authority begins at home. Authority begins with us and with the people to whom we seek to minister. This is the real existential pressure-point to which all those wider cultural effects contribute, and it is at this pressure-point that each of us needs help. The word 'certainty' will cover what we are seeking, but the word 'authority' expresses it better: the authority of certainty about the mind and will of God; the authority which springs from certainty as to what the Bible, under which we stand, is saying to us all.

It is my hope that this short paper will make some small contribution towards buttressing our grasp of, and our experience of being grasped by, God's authoritative word for today.

Authority defined

Let us be quite clear what we are talking about when we speak of 'authority'. What elements are there in 'authority' as a practical relationship within the church? (By 'practical relationship', I mean that 'authority' is something under which we stand.) We want to see people functioning under the authority of God's Word, and we want always to be under it ourselves with a clear head and a good conscience. What elements are there in 'authority' viewed as a functioning relationship in the church? What are the factors in a situation in which God's authority is truly recognized and operates effectively?

1) *There is the divine authority of Scripture understood.* To speak of the authority of Scripture, and not immediately to add to this notion the thought of Scripture rightly and clearly understood is, in fact, to tell only half of the story. The phrase 'authority of Scripture' becomes a mere shibboleth, an empty phrase that does not get us anywhere unless we can interpret and understand Scripture with confidence and certainty about what it has to say on specifics. The general idea of biblical authority can be stated like this. It is the authority of the Creator, who is the source of all that the Bible tells us. It is the authority of Jesus Christ, the reigning Lord, who uses the Bible as the instrument of his government over his people. It is the authority of the Holy Spirit who, as the agent of the Father and the Son, both inspired and now authenticates, interprets and applies what is written so that the people of God know God's truth, know God's mind, and know what they ought to do. Therefore the authority of Scripture is the authority of truth. Truth unchanged and unchanging because it is the truth of God, it is the truth of things as God knows it. Because he does not change, so that truth of his knowledge of things does not change. It is the truth which he shares with us, and which abides for ever as a foundation for our knowledge of him and our service for him.

This is not the place in which to launch into a disquisition concerning the interpreting of Scripture. The point to be made is that the force of Scripture as the medium of the authoritative truth of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is an incomplete idea unless we know what to do in this matter of interpretation. Later we shall return to some of the specific problems of interpretation and

hermeneutics with which the modern church is concerned, but here let me simply note that if we talk about the authority of Scripture we need to remember that those questions of interpretation cannot be evaded. Otherwise, the notion of the authority of Scripture will be emptied by the end of the day, and we shall have got nowhere simply by saying that we seek to live, to believe and to obey, according to the Word of God. In the modern church everybody says that, but the difference between various people's notions of what Scripture is, and their different ideas concerning how it should be interpreted and applied, empties the thought of the authority of Scripture of all of its fixed meaning. It just becomes a nose of wax -- that is the story on the ecumenical scene. Nonetheless, the thought of the divine authority of Scripture, God's Word written, is the fundamental element in the concept of divine authority functioning in a pastoral and church situation.

2) *There is the authority of the church.* As evangelicals, we would be very foolish if we tried to discount the thought of the moral authority, even if not the definitive authority, of the Christian consensus down the centuries. There is authority in the heritage of teaching and expression which we receive from the Christian past. If all those Christians, spread over so many centuries, have found in their own Bible study that a particular line of teaching seems to be scriptural and good, then probably it is. If they have found that particular ways of singing God's praises -- perhaps through the singing of psalms and eighteenth-century hymns -- are edifying, then they may well be so today. Karl Barth speaks extremely well about this: 'Receive the tradition, or the heritage of the church's teaching, as a first exposition of Holy Scripture'. Do not receive it as the final exposition: it needs to be tested, however venerable it is, and however broad the consensus on which it rests. It could be wrong, incomplete, lopsided, or insufficient for our time. Nonetheless, value it, for those who produced it worked with the same Bible as we do, and they had the help of the same Holy Spirit on whom we depend in our Bible study. It would be strange if what they offer us as a first exposition of Holy Scripture was completely misguided and misled. It seems to me that that is wisdom.

We do well to remember, of course, that one truth can be verbalized and expressed in liturgical response in more than one way. We should be sensitive to the differences between the secular culture of our own time, and that of earlier eras. We need to be flexible in finding our own contemporary way of expressing some things which, though identical in substance with what we are concerned to say, cannot be expressed nowadays (in a way that communicates) in quite the form that was given to them before. Such flexibility is essential, but nonetheless we should be ready to find that the substance of what we want to express corresponds pretty closely with the substance of the understanding of Bible truth that goes back many, many centuries.

That is what I mean by the authority of the church. The authority of ecclesiastical legislation is not my primary thought here, although if we identify with a particular branch of the Christian church which has a synodical form, and therefore legislates at the centre for those on the circumference whom the legislative body represents, we ought to recognize our duty to observe what has

been legislated as long as we stay with that body. Yet the real issue here is about the consensus of faith which is our heritage from the past. Respect it, honour it, check it, but do not disregard it. I, for one, am profoundly thankful for all that I have learnt from the nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth and sixteenth centuries -- and from the fifth, fourth, third and second centuries as well. There was wisdom, and I am enriched by some of the things which I have gleaned from the work I have done in historical theology. We cannot all specialize in historical theology, but we should all be friendly, rather than unfriendly, to the Christian past. In our pastoral ministry, it is a great strength if we can quote wise men and live sections of the church of yesterday in support of the things which we try to enforce today.

3) *There is the authority of wisdom.* By this I mean the authority of demonstrations that the things which we are saying are rational, wise and fruitful for human life; that there is good sense behind them; that they do make sense as prescriptions for living. This is something quite different from the thought of the authority of reason. That thought was at the root of the 'Enlightenment' approach to Christianity; it has been the root of liberal theology, and it still is. While people trust the authority of reason to modify biblical Christianity, there is no hope either of fruitful consensus or of the power of the Holy Spirit in the church. What we are considering may be called apologetic argument for what, first and foremost we recognize as biblical wisdom.

We are talking about the kind of arguments which show, for instance, that observance of the principles of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount makes for human happiness. I have been amazed at the frequency with which, over these last twenty years, it has been necessary to quash the idea that biblical law is only for believers, and not for human beings as a whole. The response to this fallacy is to say, over and over again if necessary, that biblical law for living, as indeed the whole of Scripture, is the Maker's handbook. God who created us has given us this book; it gives us the wisdom that we need in order to live aright. That is a creation-fact, a fact of our human nature, before it becomes a fact for the children of God as they seek to honour, glorify and please their heavenly Father. So, argument that demonstrates this seems to me to be wise and necessary and to add a sense of cogency and strength to what we say from Scripture about the mind and will of God for our faith and for our life.

Just as we should try to show that what we are pleading for has been acknowledged by general consensus in the church, or great sections of the church, as wisdom from God down the centuries, so we must demonstrate that it is wisdom for life in this or any other age. We weaken our position if we allow ourselves to appear to be lapsing into what has been called 'biblical positivism', the attitude which says: 'Well, I'll take what's in the Bible, however ridiculous it might appear.' I do not think that the man who said, 'If the Bible told me that Jonah swallowed the whale, I'd believe it', was really saying anything particularly wise or particularly honouring to God, any more than I think that Tertullian was saying anything particularly wise or honouring to God when, at a high point of rhetoric in one of his apologetic writings, he said, 'I believe because it is absurd.' God did not make us to live by absurdities. If we allow people to suspect that

there is something absurd about the biblical pattern of faith and life that we seek to teach, we are dishonouring him as well as weakening the pastoral authority of the things we say. So, in exercising authority in the Christian church, I maintain that the authority of Scripture as such should be backed up by the authority of wisdom and the authority of Christian consensus.

4) *There is the authority of unction.* Only when I have said all that, do I allow myself to add something which has become familiar to evangelicals ever since the great days of the late Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who used to say it so often: 'There must be the authority finally of unction, unction from the Holy Spirit, upon the preacher and teacher, in the fellowship of the Lord's people.' Certainly, there is need to seek God's anointing, so that when we speak the Word of the Lord, as from the Lord, we shall be heard with convincing effect. But we ought only to allow ourselves to think in terms of seeking the anointing of God, the power of God, on our speaking for the Lord, when we have come to terms with the authority of the church and the authority of wisdom as backing up and supporting that which we seek to say and establish directly from Scripture. I want there to be power in my own ministry, and I know that you want there to be power in yours, but let us not separate that desire from the thought of the Christian consensus and the demonstrable wisdom of the Word of the Lord. Lloyd-Jones did not do so. He appealed over and over again to the great days of vitality in the church in order to confirm things that he was saying from Scripture. He used common-sense argument to hammer home the foolishness of the follies that Scripture detects, and the wisdom of the wise words that God teaches us in the pages of Holy Writ. *

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When these four elements are all present, there will be maximum authority in our ministry. If any of them is missing, there will be less authority in our ministry than there should be and that will be a grievous loss to everybody. So we need to ask ourselves whether we are presenting an authoritative word with all these dimensions of authority included? This is no small task, for what we are talking about when we speak of the authority of the Word is not just our presentation of the gospel ABC in an evangelistic context. What is at issue is our presentation of the whole counsel of God: all that Scripture tells us about the will, the works and the ways of our Creator; all that Scripture tells us about the content of his law and his promises; all that Scripture tells us about godliness for the individual, righteousness for society, and the church alive and pleasing its Lord. All that we are told about spiritual life and wisdom in its beginning and its growth, has to be presented with authority.

Spirituality

We come now to an area where I believe that we often fail to speak with appropriate authority, fundamentally because we do not understand sufficiently what the Bible teaches about it.

We must take seriously the study of spirituality, as it is now called: the study of spiritual theology, as the Eastern Orthodox Church calls it; the study of what

the old Puritans used to call practical or casuistic divinity. It is of major ecumenical interest at this present time. In go-ahead seminaries there are lecturers and professors of spiritual theology; I am glad to say that we have one at Regent College, Vancouver. It has come to be generally recognized that spiritual life, from start to finish, is a matter for serious biblical, theological study and reflection. It is an area in which critical thinking is in order; in which options need to be set alongside each other and sober theological judgments reached as to which of these options is wiser, better, truer, sounder, profounder and, in all those ways, more scriptural.

We evangelicals have traditionally adopted a 'know-all' attitude. We know about conversion, we know about spiritual life, we know about fellowship with God; no one can teach us anything in these fields -- neither the Anglo-Catholics, Roman Catholics, liberals, nor anyone else. When it has been suggested, perhaps, that our competence is not so great as we thought, we have bridled and become defensive, stopped our ears, and refused to take seriously the possibility that it might be so. I think we all need to work harder in this area than before.

There is a character in a play by Molière who, at a certain point in the story, is acquainted with the fact that all his life he has been talking prose, though he never knew it, and he is just tickled pink by the discovery. Two or three years ago, somebody put it to me that all my writing is really 'spirituality'. That had never occurred to me. When I reflected on what was being said I felt free, similarly to be delighted and to take this as a good discovery. I think it is true, because it is just a way of saying that in all the things that I have put on paper, I have as a matter of fact been concerned about the application of the truth in life. I have tried to remember that truth is 'truth for people'; to focus on the question, 'What effect is this truth meant to produce through the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who take it into their systems?'; and to shape the things which I write so that they were not just teaching on paper, but *preaching* on paper. Preaching on paper is 'teaching plus'. It is not, of course, something different from teaching; it is something added to teaching. However, it had never occurred to me that I was writing 'spirituality' by tackling all truths in this way. Nonetheless, I now acknowledge the justice of the accusation -- yes, I was, and by the grace of God I will continue to do so for the rest of my writing ministry. This, I believe, is how it should be.

None of us ought to settle for teaching which does not become applied instruction on the Christian life. I think we need to become aware that, at this time, when so little solid Bible teaching is given, we evangelicals are in danger of reacting so much that we never do anything but give solid Bible teaching. We never think out, nor share with others, the systematic, practical application of these truths for the shaping of our lives. So this is the point at which I would summon all of us to more serious study of the spiritual life. Evangelicals of my generation have, I think, woken up to the fact that we really do need systematic theology. Forty years ago, when spiritually I started looking around me, there was very little awareness that we needed it. I think that things have changed for the better in that respect, but I believe that we stand now in equally urgent need of systematic spirituality: a systematic study, a systematic acquaintance with the

spiritual life, in its essence, its basic form, and its basic principles. I do not think that we are yet anywhere near to having this. We need to do more work on it. There will be more authority in our ministry if we can become stronger here.

What would a systematic spirituality look like if it were put down on paper? Let me just make a double-barrelled suggestion. Barrel number one has to do with three theological perspectives that would be basic, and barrel number two concerns three theological themes that would be fundamental and would give the architectural shape to the whole exposition.

The theological perspectives

1) *It must be thoroughgoing in its theocentricity.* Augustine is still way out in front of us all in the profundity of his understanding and exposition of the nature of sin. No one ever went deeper than Augustine in insisting that the heart of sin is pride, that the heart of pride is egocentricity, and that the way to picture fallen human nature, therefore, is as the Latin phrase has it: *homo incurvatus in se* -- the human individual (*homo*) bent back on himself. It is a vivid picture. We were made, as it were, to grow straight up Godward: to have our eyes to God, our hearts going up to God, our worship directed to God, all through our lives. This was what human life was meant to be. When man is bent back on himself, what he does is direct to himself all that adoration, valuation, worship and honour which is due to his Creator. That is where sin has left us. We worship the great god self. Now, the Gospel summons us to repent of that, not only morally by taking God's revealed will as our rule, but also intellectually by consenting again to do what Adam and Eve declined to do in the Garden of Eden: that is, to take things from God in a way that a child takes things from his parent; to take God's Word about the way things are, and to believe it because he has said it.

Evangelicals, to be sure, understand this pretty well at the level of principle. Many of us have discovered what a radical, Copernican revolution is really involved in ceasing to lean on our own understanding and starting to take God's Word about everything on which he has been pleased to speak. This is an aspect of 'repenting into theocentricity' which, on the moral level also, is very much a Copernican revolution. Well, it has to be so if the rule, 'Glory to God alone, and hallowed be thy Name', is going to become operative in our lives.

I am focusing on intellectual repentance, because it is just here that I think we are weaker than we are on the moral level. All around us are half-way houses. There is the half-way house of liberal theology, which just declines to take God's Word as being final on a whole series of things, both doctrinal and ethical. But in evangelical pietism, particularly in its charismatic form, you often find a very great neglect of the sort of Bible study which is motivated by the desire to know what God says about everything, so that we may take his Word on it and live by it. Instead, there is far too great a readiness to settle for the knowledge of one or two simple biblical truths and leave the rest.

This means that intellectual repentance has not yet been completed and that a certain amount of egocentricity at the intellectual level -- egocentricity that expresses itself in declining to be interested in some of the things God tells us -- is still operative and controlling. Yet there will be no profundity in our understanding of the Christian life, any more than there will be any real, strong Christlike maturity -- in both our lives and those whom we seek to nurture -- unless intellectual repentance as a summons from God is accepted as an issue and a challenge. Then we begin to learn, with a seriousness that will perhaps be new to some of us, to love the Lord our God with all our mind.

2) *We must be thoroughgoing in our Trinitarianism.* Do we banish the truth of the Trinity to the lumber room of the mind as so much useless baggage, as not practical, as not having anything significant to say about the way we live? The truth is that the doctrine of the Trinity is the structural frame of the Gospel and of the life of godliness. Whenever I have to preach on Trinity Sunday, whether in Anglican or other contexts, I always take one of the Prayer Book's brilliances, the gospel for Trinity Sunday, according to Cranmer's selection: Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in the first half of John 3. There we are told that the Christian message is an invitation into knowledge of the Father, through the saving death of the Son, via new birth from the Spirit. If we master the content of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, then we are like people who have climbed to the summit of a hill and are now able to recognize that the Trinity is its name. It is the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for our salvation with which this gospel deals.

We understand, as evangelicals, that if the work of the Son is neglected, we lose atonement and the knowledge of Christ's sin-bearing. We lose mediation and the knowledge of the Saviour as the risen one and intercessor who brings us to God. Christianity is reduced to some sort of 'natural' religion, and we know all too well how common a product this is in the Church of England, not to speak of other churches. We understand that the answer to it is to restore the knowledge of Jesus Christ the Son, our Saviour and our Lord.

But let us ask another question: What happens if we neglect the knowledge of the Holy Spirit? Again, our evangelical heritage gives us some idea of the consequences. We lose the reality of personal fellowship with Christ, of assurance and joy in the Lord, of experiential or experimental (I do not mind which of those two words is used; both have a point) godliness. We lapse into some kind of orthodoxy -- our doctrine of redemption is correct (which is good), but our Christian experience is minimal (and that is not good enough). Evangelical formalism is not what we want to encourage. We should ask ourselves whether we are making enough of the work of the Holy Spirit, so that we have a deep experience of fellowship with the Father through the Son, and fellowship with the Son as a day-to-day experience.

Then there is a further question: What happens if we neglect the doctrine of God the Father? In his book, *The Forgotten Father*, Tom Smail directs our attention to this question and says some very uncomfortable things, not only to the charismatic constituency but to all of us evangelicals. Forget the Father, and

the likelihood is that we shall lose our concern for the glory of the Father in creation. We shall forget to take seriously the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:26), the summons to work in the building of Christian culture and the managing of the world for God. We are very likely to remain egocentric in our spirituality because we shall never really grasp that we exist for God, that he does not exist for us, and that it is our business as his children to advance his honour and glory rather than look to him to advance ours. It is likely that we shall end up unstable and self-indulgent, immature in our spiritual lives, the spiritual equivalent of spoiled children -- spoiled because we have never acknowledged a strong Father and never accepted his discipline. In human families, of course, when father allows that to happen, the children begin to be spoiled. So we can see why it is important to be thoroughgoing in our Trinitarianism. As we think through the realities of Christian life, if we are not working within the Trinitarian frame, there is going to be lopsidedness and distortion and, at the end of the day, lack of maturity in Christ.

3) *We must be thoroughgoing in our otherworldliness.* The New Testament is robustly otherworldly: not in the sense of treating this world as unimportant, but rather the reverse. This is God's world, and it is the place where eternal destiny is decided. If that does not make it important, we may wonder what could! The New Testament certainly has no doubt about its importance, and does not encourage us to have a negative attitude to it. Nevertheless, the New Testament never allows us forget that the world to come is even more important. It insists, in a dozen different ways, that we are to have our hearts in heaven, our treasure in heaven, as we live here on earth; that we shall only, in fact, be free to give ourselves selflessly in the service of God and the love of our neighbour if we know that we have treasure in heaven. Therefore we do not need to be looking for rewards, appreciation and wealth down here: we have got wealth up there.

Yet this is something which has very largely gone from our evangelical ethos. When death comes, we say to each other, 'Yes of course, it is better to depart to be with Christ', but we do not live as if that were true. We do not teach others to live in that light. What has happened, I believe, is that we have become the victims of Marxism on the one hand, and materialism on the other. Both Marxism and materialism combine to say to us, 'Look, this is the only life there is. Anything good that you are ever going to have, you must get and enjoy down here. So get things done. Change the world, so that you may have a better life down here.'

While I am all for Samaritanship, and I think that Samaritanship has a social dimension for Christians as well as a personal one, the implication is that in this world you have to have everything; and the Christian way is that you seek it all and give it all to others, as if this was the only life there is. That implication can often lead us into getting our spiritual priorities wrong, and not focusing, as sometimes we need to do, on the renunciations and the forms of poverty and the willingness to be rejected, to which loyal discipleship to Jesus again and again will call us. So we become soft and worldly. What we really need to do is to recapture biblical otherworldliness for, until we do, we shall never get our thinking straight -- nor will our congregations. We have got to give teaching

like this, otherwise our people will always be in the grip of the world's value system, and deep down in their hearts will never cease to think, 'Well, of course, the church is important, and Christianity is important and we are all for it, but you've got to go along with the world, haven't you? You have to live.' C.T. Studd, once goaded with that sort of talk, simply flashed back, 'I don't recognise that necessity.' It was tough talk, but he was catching the New Testament mood, and we have all got to catch it if we are to live lives of biblical godliness and to teach others to live similarly.

The theological themes

In brief, I suggest that the architectural themes within which the realities of spiritual life are to be expounded are these.

1) *God's covenant* The new relationship with the Creator, through Christ, brings with it a new relationship to everything around us and everything that happens to us. The doctrine of God's covenant, which runs all the way through Scripture, covers all of that, and under this heading there are any number of new dimensions to be explored.

2) *New creation* This is the doctrine of regeneration, the doctrine of God changing human nature out of its Adamic image into Christ's image, by renewing grace. There is a sense, certainly, in which the doctrine of justification by faith is fundamental, but it is important for us to see that the doctrine of new creation is no less basic. From one standpoint, the New Testament Gospel summons us to be justified by faith in order that, within the new relationship (which is a covenant built on justifying grace with Christ as its mediator), new creation in Christ's image should now take place. It is a point which can be made from Romans, Ephesians, Colossians and Galatians, in each of which justification has a fair degree of prominence in one form or another. The study of what is involved in God's work of remaking us in Christ's image is the second great theme of any right-minded evangelical spirituality for our time although, of course, that theme has more than one form in Scripture itself. It is also the theme of co-resurrection with Jesus in Paul's teaching. Regeneration and co-resurrection with Jesus are the same, and we need to be clear about that.

3) *New community* Like the new creation, this theme is to be set within the covenant frame, which is fundamental for everything. We have been made and redeemed for togetherness, for mutual ministry, mutual support, interdependence. None of us is made or redeemed to be a 'lone ranger'; all of us are made and redeemed to live as members of a community in which, if one suffers, all suffer. Sympathy is the rule of association; mutual help is the form in which the God-given life is expressed.

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If we take these three themes as essential for our evangelical spirituality, it means, among other things, that under the covenant theme we shall be expounding the marvellous thought that God makes friends. Under the new creation theme we shall be expounding the thought of the baptismal pattern of

life in Christ -- resurrection out of death -- every step of the way. Under the theme of new community we shall be expounding mutual sympathy and dependence. I believe that these are the real key thoughts which we need for the demonstration of what godly life, according to the New Testament, really means in depth.

Some themes function and give their message only at surface level. Here are three which, it seems to me, go as deep as our theology and our understanding can ever take us, and which never lose their direct practical bearing.

Conclusion

This is a specimen of a study which needs to be done, in order that in this area we may speak the word of Scripture with authority, linking up with the profundities of spiritual teaching which have emerged in generation after generation in the church of yesterday, and then demonstrating that this indeed is wisdom for man, because of what it does in the way of ripening human nature. It is the kind of teaching on which one can ask God to pour out his Spirit, both on those who give it and on those who hear it. But is it not the case that some of us lack a solid theological basis -- a basis rooted in systematic study -- for the exposition of such matters, and so we touch on them only in snatches and sidelong references? This means that our congregations are rarely able to see where it is that we are leading them as we talk to them about life with Christ in God. Consequently we do not find the maturing of Christians which surely the Lord wants to see.

I know from my studies of the Christian past that there have been spiritual giants, but I believe that, today, most of us are pygmies, and I would like to see that situation change. I believe there would be authority in our message, which is often not present at the moment, if we knew how to tell people, with a sure touch and with a deep spiritual understanding, how full stature in Christ can be achieved. So this is one sample of the kind of thing which I feel needs to happen if there is to be full authority from God in our message. Unless we can strengthen our ministry in this area, it is not very likely that it will become authoritative in any other field.

2. Authority in Our Preaching and Counselling

The focus is not now directly on being master of what we have to say, so much as on our approaching the task of communicating it in a way which maximizes the sense and the reality of God's authority. In other words, we are considering our activity as communicators, and thinking explicitly of preaching and counselling.

Preaching and counselling defined

I define preaching, not institutionally but functionally. In any situation where it is possible to explain the Word of God and apply it, there is preaching. It may be formal preaching in a church service, or informal preaching as we gossip the Gospel in a casual conversation. 'Counselling', as I use the word here, means precisely that. The word 'counselling' is so often applied these days to taking the world's wisdom -- in the form of commonsense and psychological knowledge -- and passing that off as Christian wisdom, offering it in the name of Christian counselling. So it must be understood that I am using the word 'counselling' in a much narrower sense. We could substitute the phrase 'pastoral direction' -- the kind of thing that, as ministers and spokesmen for the Lord, we seek to do in the study as we sit down with someone who has a problem and begin to explain to them the Word of God, the message of Scripture as it bears on their situation. That is what I mean by 'counselling'.

Although we cannot all be great preachers or great counsellors in the sense of headline-hitters who are admired by others, we must be good communicators of the Gospel, good preachers, good counsellors -- and that means being people through whose spoken ministry of the Word, God's truth will come with appropriate authority to those whom we address. That is the mark of a good preacher and a good pastoral director -- the Word comes with authority and is felt to come with authority, whether in the formal situation or in the one-on-one conversation. Surely we are making it a lifelong quest to speak the Word of God so that it comes across with maximum authority. I want to suggest to you, and this is the main thrust of my argument, that much of our success at this point, much of our realization of what we seek to achieve, depends on our mental approach -- the way that in our thinking we square up to what we are doing. The way in which we think is going to determine the way in which we act, and the way in which we act is going to do a great deal to determine how much or how little of God's authority is felt in our delivery of his authoritative Word. So, this is not so much about the technique of preaching as about its *thrust*; not so much about the discipline of exposition as its *direction*; not so much about the style of sermons and pastoral communications as their *strategy*.

If we aim at nothing, we are sure to hit it. This, I believe, is the malaise of a great deal of public and private exposition of the Word of God in these days. The truth is there, but if we do not handle it rightly, we do not communicate it in the best way. Any number of books are written, and any number of talks are given, to tackle the issues of expounding Scripture -- at the level of *how* to do it. But

that is not the primary question: the basic question is, 'What are we trying to do?'. Once we are clear about our aim, then a great number of the residual problems about how to achieve it will readily resolve themselves. We are talking about aim, direction, goal, and the mental approach that makes for the achievement of that goal. So I start with three basic, enormous theological assumptions, which I cannot take for granted, because this is where the thinking starts. It is the departure point for the proper mental approach.

Basic assumptions

1) *Christianity is essentially knowing God*: it is a relationship with God. It is more than knowing about God: it is entering into, and maintaining, a personal love-relationship with the Creator and Redeemer; it is a matter of beginning a fellowship which will go on to eternity.

I find it useful to distinguish between the outward and inward journeys of life. The outward journey is our journey on the horizontal plane, through this world with all our relationships, our involvements, our life activities from the cradle to the grave. The inward journey, by contrast, the journey that some never even begin to take, is the journey into the knowledge of the Lord, the journey into that fellowship which deepens and develops through life into glory. And it is the inward journey with which we are concerned now. It is a matter of knowing the first person of the Trinity as my heavenly Father, and myself as his child. It is knowing and depending upon the second person of the Trinity as a wife knows and depends on her husband. It is knowing and relating to the third person of the Trinity as my enabler -- I live in the power of the Holy Spirit. And in each of those three aspects it is a love affair. I do not think we ought to hesitate to say that Christianity is a love affair; in Scripture, knowing means loving.

Or, putting it the other way round, Christianity is friendship with God. He has loved us; he has redeemed us; the Father and the Son draw near to make friends with us. It is the privilege of every believer, like Abraham, to be called the friend of God. Jesus said to his twelve disciples, 'I have called you friends', and he says that to all those who become his disciples. Our calling is to respond, in friendship, to the God who comes to make friends with us. That is how we should think of prevenient grace; that is how we should think of the work of grace, renewing us and sending us off in a fresh direction to make friends with the God who has come to us to be our Saviour and to fashion us in Jesus' image.

This is familiar ground, of course, but it needs to be said. In all the preaching, in all the pastoral counselling that we do, the focal purpose, the controlling direction, must be to lead others into more of faith and love towards the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit -- to see this relationship deepened in their lives. We must not stop short of that, and we must not set ourselves any goal less than that.

2) *Scripture is essentially God preaching*. This is the phrase which I always use when I am trying to define or describe Holy Scripture. I like it because it holds together two thoughts: 'This is what God said when he gave it', and 'This is what

God says right now to those whom Scripture confronts'. We say that the Bible is the Word of God. In our day we need to be very careful how we expound that. There are many, besides evangelicals, who will say, 'Of course, we believe that the Bible is the Word of God; we are right with you in acknowledging the reality of revelation in Scripture'. But how should we understand that phrase?

It will help if we think of the meaning in terms of the 'dialogue' model rather than the 'insight' model. The dialogue model takes the insight model into itself, but the insight model is a half-truth without the dialogue model. When we say that the Bible is the Word of God, we should mean this explicitly. What the Bible says (present tense), God says (present tense) in application to everyone to whom the Bible comes right now. The dialogue is precisely a matter of God addressing us, and requiring of us that we talk back to him in response. In other words, one of the things which we should mean whenever we say that the Bible is the Word of God, is that Holy Scripture in God's name addresses each of us right now, and we must respond to it right now.

The Word of the Lord is a present event of God saying to us what Scripture says as we read it. That was Luther's view; it was Calvin's view; it was the view of the Puritans; it was the view of that great, though odd, theologian, Karl Barth. But it has not been the view of most Anglicans, who have said in our time that the Bible is the Word of God and there is revelation within it. It has not been, and is not, the view of those in the Church of Rome, who would nevertheless say the same thing. What they mean when they say that the Bible is the Word of God, and that there is such a thing as scriptural revelation, is just this: If we allow the Bible to lodge in our minds, if we allow ourselves to meditate on the things that the Bible says, and if we do that in the fellowship of God's people, out of our reflections will come convictions as to what the Word of the Lord is. Yet that process will not involve any direct address, with application from the Word; rather it will be a distillation of insight triggered off by the Word. We shall then celebrate what has happened by saying, 'Yes, this is the Word of God which came to us from the Bible; this is the Word of God which the Bible contains; this is scriptural revelation.' But what we are really doing is celebrating insight without direct address from the Lord.

It is rather important that we should realize that there is such a thing as direct address from the Lord in his Word, and it is not sufficient to talk about the Bible as the Word of God unless the reality of divine address is acknowledged -- unless we recognize that God is speaking every time we are confronted by Scripture, every time we read a passage, every time we face a text. I am convinced of this because I am convinced that Jesus Christ was the Son of God incarnate and, when he spoke, God spoke. People were confronted directly by him, and by the divine word which was spoken to them and asked for immediate response from them. Then I take the incarnation as the paradigm of God's encountering us through Holy Scripture. He speaks his Word in what is written; what Scripture says, God says in application to us right now. It is for us to listen and respond, and to teach those to whom we minister that they too must listen and respond. When we preach or give pastoral counsel, it is for us to become the mouthpieces for Holy Scripture so that it may deliver its direct word

to those at the receiving-end, in order that they may recognize God speaking. The minister is saying nothing on his own authority; he is simply becoming the sounding-board for the Word of God -- God's present address in Scripture. This is the way in which we should think of Scripture, and how we should think of preaching.

It is also very important to think clearly and in a disciplined way about the application of what is written. Again, the incarnation is the model. In the specific reality of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the second person of the Godhead, incarnate and living on earth for thirty-three years in a little out-of-the-way province of the Roman Empire nearly two thousand years ago -- in him we have God's Word for the world. The universal is in the particular, as philosophers might express it. And the particular reality of Jesus Christ -- his person, his work, his ministry, his mediation -- has got to be applied and made relevant by Christ's messengers to the whole life of all men, everywhere, in every age. The application universalizes the particular, so that the particular reality is in truth a reality for everybody.

What is true of the incarnate Word, is equally true of the biblical Word. It is correct to say that the sixty-six books of Scripture are ancient near-eastern literature, coming from a culture very different from ours, from a pastoral civilization which contrasts sharply with our urban, industrialized world. That does not alter the fact that there are universal applications to be drawn out. We do not understand the Bible, or hear the Word of God, in the sense of God's message in the text, until we have seen how it all applies to us where we are. We know this, of course, and in our own personal Bible study and meditation we seek to make the application to ourselves. In our ministry, private and public, we must aim to do the same for those at the receiving-end, and this is often where the difficulty comes. We are often unable to make the application in a convincing way, so that people do realize that this Word of God speaks directly to their condition. We say our piece, and they are left unconvinced that this is the Word of God for them.

I picture the interpretative process as comparable to being a fly on the wall as God the Creator, the God of Holy Scripture, addresses and deals with people in the biblical stories -- Abraham, David, Moses, Israel in Jeremiah's day, the Thessalonian church, the Jews in Jerusalem, Peter, John, and so on. We see what he said to them, and what he did in his treatment of them. From that we learn what he has to say to us, and how he would deal with us. So we universalize and learn the application.

It is more than exegesis. I distinguish exposition from exegesis by saying that exegesis is a matter of determining what the Scriptures meant as a word to those to whom the books were first addressed. Exposition adds in the application, and thus shows what it means for us today. Interpretation has to be done in a disciplined manner. It must be the biblical truth that is being applied, and the application must be done correctly, in terms of bringing the Word to bear on the real lives of real people with problems as they really are in God's sight. We have got to learn to make the diagnosis properly, to speak the Word to people where

they are. But if Scripture is essentially God preaching, and we as preachers and teachers are called to be his mouthpieces in this, what else can we do? I stress this in order to highlight the enormous responsibility, and at the same time the enormous importance, of exposition understood in the way which I have put it.

The Bible is God preaching, and we have to communicate what is in the Bible in such a way that folk will hear it so. We know, of course, that this depends also on the Holy Spirit unstopping their ears. However, the confidence that we have in the Holy Spirit, the sense of impotence that we have without the Holy Spirit, will not excuse us for incompetence when it comes to making the application of Scripture. We must do the work of the Lord competently in our preaching, if we are to expect God to honour it in the hearts and lives of those to whom we speak.

Nowadays questions which come under the rubric of what is known as hermeneutics loom very large in the thinking of the church in general and in a lot of us evangelicals. We ask what is going on; we are interested in the subject. I would only say this: there are just two insights that have come out of the modern hermeneutical discussion which I would commend to you. We need them for self-criticism in this matter of biblical exposition.

Insight number one is that we can only understand any statement properly when we have set it in the context of which it is part. This is a corrective to the idea that the way to understand biblical statements is by lexical study of the words and their background. We should not allow ourselves to think we have understood any text of Scripture until we are sure that we have understood the flow of thought of which it is part, and can see how it fits in. Modern hermeneutics is very strong on this point.

The second insight is that the cultural differences between the world of the Bible and our world must be taken into account by asking two questions. a) Is there something in the background of the text which is not part of my world, which I might have missed and which would keep me from understanding the text fully? So we read what we call the critical commentaries to make sure on that point. b) Is there something in my mind which operates as blinkers, preventing me from seeing what the text is saying, because I am taking for granted something which comes out of the modern world and which cuts across what the text is saying? In other words, are we being limited in our own understanding of Scripture by what I have to call intellectual worldliness, taking for granted things that our culture takes for granted, so that our ears are stopped from hearing some of the things that the Bible says? For example, if it has never occurred to us that intellectual worldliness might lead us to strain out of our theology any thought of the holiness and awesomeness of God, so that we think of God as a kind of celestial Santa Claus, then we shall have fallen victim to intellectual worldliness. We shall need this particular piece of hermeneutical self-criticism, and we shall need it rather badly.

3) *Our preaching is essentially prophecy*, in at least one of the biblical senses of that phrase. To become a mouthpiece for God is to be a prophet. I do not want to go into all the complexities of the discussion as to whether prophecy in the New

Testament is always this, or sometimes more than this. I simply want to say that the basic idea of the prophet (*prophêtês* in Greek, *nâbi'* in Hebrew) is of someone who acts as spokesman and mouthpiece for someone else. If we are seeking to be God's spokesmen and mouthpieces, letting his Word address itself in and through us, then, *de facto*, our preaching is prophecy. So we should see it, and so we should quite consciously try to practice it. Similarly, our pastoral counselling is prophecy in the sense that our business is to bring the Word of God to bear and let the Bible do the talking. So the authority of our preaching and pastoral counselling will be the authority of God speaking. The sense of its authority will be the fruit of the Holy Spirit attesting to those to whom we speak that this really is the Word of God, coming from Scripture through God's messenger and addressing the hearers directly. Let us think of our preaching in these terms, and never as anything less. When we allow Scripture to speak its message through us, we are prophets of God.

I have already referred to an imbalance in Protestant preaching, which I have detected on both sides of the Atlantic over the years: an imbalance which reflects not only an overdone reaction to the weakness of the modern church, but also a real inconsiderateness, a real lack of thought about what constitutes spiritual nurture and spiritual health. The imbalance is a matter of trying to make up for the fact that great sections of the church do not teach the Bible, by overloading our own preaching and counselling ministry with orthodoxy, with doctrinal content drawn from Scripture, as if the most important thing in the world is to learn as much truth as possible. Of course it is important to learn as much truth as possible, to learn as much from the Bible as possible, to know God's mind just as fully as we can. But if we allow ourselves a preaching and teaching ministry in which there is an overload of orthodox doctrine but which is insufficient in the way of application, then what we are going to do is to nurture Christians, who, to use picture language, have enormous heads stuffed with knowledge, but tiny little bodies with no muscular strength. Imagine it as a cartoon: enormous heads and matchstick bodies.

Of course, there is an evangelical pietism which produces the opposite effect. It emphasizes application, but there is virtually no attention to learning truth. In this case the picture is one of Christians who are produced with pin-heads and enormous abdomens! This, too, is distorted development. What we have got to do as Christian teachers, communicators and counsellors, is to minister God's truth in such a way that exegesis and application -- declaring the principles and applying the principles -- are properly balanced, so that there is genuine growth among those at the receiving end.

Let me offer two grids for this, grids which I have found very useful since I started to work with them.

a) Years ago I was given three code letters to provide a balance for my preaching, and I think it is only in the last decade or so that I have seen how wise it was. Preaching, I was told, is like a three-legged stool which cannot stand correctly unless all three legs are in their proper places. Here are the three initials, one for each leg: D, E and P -- doctrine, experience and practice. Let us see

to it that in applying the Word of God we strike a proper balance of doctrine (instruction in truth), experience (leading people into living communion with God on the basis of truth) and practice (living it out in ethics and obedience).

b) The second grid comes from the world of Catholic spirituality theory. I have amended it a little, as some Catholics today are doing. Traditional Catholic teaching, ever since Origen in the third century AD, has said that God leads those whom he is training up in the knowledge of himself -- those, that is, who are growing in grace and advancing in their love-relationship with their Lord -- in sequence along three paths. First, the purgative way, where the focal centre of spiritual concern is in practising repentance, getting rid of sinful habits and replacing them by godly habits; getting the sin (the gross sin, at any rate) out of the system. This, so the theory runs, occupies the attention of folk while they are on the purgative way. Then they graduate to travel the illuminative way, in which what is happening centrally -- the focus, the great source of joy and interest of their spiritual life -- is that God is constantly enlarging their understanding and showing them spiritual realities that they never saw before. Finally, there is graduation from the illuminative way to the unitive way, where the central concern in our consciousness, and the focal point of our prayer and praise, our joy and our pilgrimage, is that we are in communion with Jesus our Lord. We are conscious of it; our hearts are one with him; our gaze is steadfastly fixed upon him. So we walk in fellowship with Jesus, and that is the top of the tree, so to speak.

The comment we need to make is that the three concerns certainly must have their place in every Christian's life, but that in fact they are going on in parallel, all three together, from the beginning of the Christian life to the end of it in this world. When we put the matter in that way, we can see immediately that, in a balanced Christian life, every day will see a fresh practice of repentance and turning from sin to Christ. Every day will be a day for fresh searching of the Word for light, and for renewed and enlarged spiritual understanding. Every day will be a day for walking in fellowship with the Lord. If these three concerns are being prosecuted together, under God, we shall have balanced and mature growth. I offer these grids for what they are worth. They have certainly helped me, as I have tried to plan my teaching and counselling ministry.

Directional principles

Let me now pull together some threads and offer a series of directional principles for a teaching and preaching ministry: directional principles which, if observed, should mean that the Word comes from us with maximum authority, and that it reaches our hearers with maximum benefit.

1) *Focus on people's lives.* Let us never forget that truth is for people, and let us never focus so exclusively on the question, 'What shall I teach them now?', that we forget the question, 'What good will it do them for me to teach them this, that or the other, at this point in their pilgrimage?'. I think that too many of us stop short at the question, 'What shall I teach them now?' -- twenty sermons on Galatians, twenty on Nehemiah, two on Philemon. It is all thought out in terms of content, rather than of desired effect. It is not thought out in terms of the good

that this particular area of study and instruction might do. In his most intense moments of contending for truth, the apostle Paul never forgot that truth is for people, for people's growth, for people's transformation. Even in Galatians, where he is perhaps fiercer than in any other letter, we can see that this is so. He is thinking of truth as truth for people, for their freedom in Christ, for their maturity in Christ, for their Christlikeness. He never forgets that this is what the truth is for. It is just because he wants the truth to have its proper fruit in the lives of the Galatians that he is so fierce against the Galatian heretics. It is not only the honour of the God of truth, but also the edifying of the Lord's people, that drives him into saying those extremely tough things.

And so it ought to be with our ministry all the time. It is not only that it is our privilege to take people into the Bible because the world of the Bible is so wonderful. Rather, we have got to bring Bible truth to bear on their lives at all times. We must focus on people's lives, and plan all preaching, all instruction, all specific ministry of the Word, in terms of the good that this or that truth will do for them -- how it will help them to know God and grow in grace.

2) *Focus on the unchanging things.* We have referred to cultural differences between the Bible world and ours. Now is the time for saying that this is only a superficial matter. The deep things of Scripture do not change, and we can draw a direct line of connection between them and our lives today once we see what those deep things really are. The truth about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit does not change. The truth about human nature -- its fallenness, its twistedness, its glory, its ruin, its need and what is involved in meeting that need -- does not change. The truth about the life of grace does not change. God's unceasing demand for holiness among those who name his name does not change. These are the things that abide, and in all our instruction it is for us to take the things that do not change and make them real and vital and relevant by shrewd application to the lives of those to whom we speak. Always labour (this is a Francis Schaeffer point) to pinpoint the antithesis between the Bible's way of looking at life -- knowledge of God, to the glory of God -- and the world's viewpoint. Worldliness at the intellectual level, worldliness as a point of view, is always in antithesis to Scripture. Bring out that antithesis, and show how God's way challenges the world's way. Exhibit God's way and God's truth set forth in Scripture that we might know him, as wisdom -- supreme wisdom -- for us, the human beings whom he made.

Let me put it pictorially. The result of sin is that everyone is born, and lives, in a moral and spiritual sense upside-down. We have never known what it is to live any other way. We see everything upside-down, and everybody around us is seeing everything upside-down. So we, in our character as the fallen world, jump to the conclusion that this is the natural, normal way of looking at everything. Then comes the Gospel of Jesus Christ or, if you like, then comes the Lord Jesus in the Gospel, and inverts our lives in relation to what they were before. It is a scriptural image, of course. The first preachers of the Gospel were spoken of as those who turned the world upside-down. But what happens when you turn upside-down people who were upside-down already? The answer is that they end up the right way and at last can begin to see human life as God

meant it to be -- this world as a theatre of God's glory. At last they are restored to sanity. This is the G. K. Chesterton vision. We find it in his essays, in his books of apologetics, and in his Father Brown detective stories. This fallen world is upside-down. We have to invert everything that the world takes for granted in order to see it as God sees it and thus to see it straight. That is the meaning of the Chestertonian paradox. All the Chesterton stories are stories about upside-downness in some shape or form and how it was corrected. C.S. Lewis thought that Chesterton was the wisest man he had ever read, and that is a pretty good testimonial. Let us allow the Chesterton vision to get into our imaginations. Then let us learn in our ministry of the Word to nail that upside-downness of the world's way of thinking and of the natural man's life. Let us follow through the picture and explain how Christ, by turning our present lives upside-down, sets us the right way up again. I have found it a very fruitful way of explaining the Gospel.

3) *Focus on the person and power of Jesus Christ.* I think that I need to say this because there are many areas of biblical teaching in which we allow ourselves to say what we believe the Bible to be saying about the particular matter in hand, without relating what we are teaching to the cross of Christ and to the risen life of Christ -- and that is really to deal with passages of Scripture out of their full biblical context. I am not going to justify the canon: I am going to assume the canon. And assuming it, I have to say that the context of any particular passage of Scripture is ultimately the whole of Scripture. I put it to you that we miss the proper biblical perspective in our exposition of this or that biblical truth, if ever we allow ourselves to get out of sight of the hill called Calvary and the empty tomb. In other words, all truth that we want to teach should be exhibited in relation to our Lord Jesus Christ, and we should always preach and teach in a way which makes it impossible for our hearers to forget that for this preacher, this teacher, this pastoral counsellor, this minister, Jesus Christ is central in every way. If you read the printed sermons of a man like Spurgeon, Whitefield, or Martyn Lloyd-Jones, you will see exactly what I mean. The sermons always end in sight of Calvary and the empty tomb. And that is right -- the truth has not been put in its biblical context until it is presented within that frame of reference.

4) *Focus on the consciences of the listeners.* In our application, we must do a thorough job of searching consciences and bringing home the truth. Here I am going to suggest two more grids which I have found helpful, but there is a warning in advance. If we take this seriously, we shall probably have to change the proportions of our sermon. We shall spend far more time making the application than we do now. We shall find ourselves again and again having to preach more than one sermon on the same text, so that we can make the application properly -- a number of applications in fact.

a) As we preach, we must think of the people to whom we are speaking. We must make what the Puritans and their successors used to call the discriminating application, whereby we bring the Word to bear on different types of persons. In just about every congregation we can expect to find at least six types of people. First, unawakened folk, who need 'strong stuff' to make them realize that they must seek the Lord. Then there are awakened folk, who know that Christianity

is the answer to their need. They want instruction; they want the Christian angle on life; they are looking around, trying to learn what Christianity is all about. Thirdly, there are people who have come to the point of conviction; they know they are sinners who need new life in Christ. They have to be guided and pointed to the Cross. Fourthly, there are young Christians who need building up. Then there are mature Christians, many of them middle-aged. They need encouragement, because when we reach middle age we are tempted to slacken off. Our physical system is beginning to slow down and the temptation is that we shall begin to slow down spiritually as well. Middle-aged Christians need constant encouragement. And then, sixthly, there will always be Christians in trouble. You can guarantee at least one broken heart in every congregation: somebody who is tempted and has perhaps fallen badly; somebody who has been hit by this or that trauma which has bewildered them, knocked them flat, taken the wind out of their sails. They are discouraged; they do not know which way to turn; they need something to stabilize them -- something which, in their trouble, will act like a lifebelt from the Lord on to which they can hold.

In our preaching we need regularly to make applications of the truth to all those six sorts of person. That is a grid for the mind. As I prepare my sermons, as I plan my preaching, let me ask myself, 'Am I making constant application of these truths to all those different sorts of people?'. Because they are all there, they all need that application in a quite specific way. It takes some skill, and we cannot, of course, address all these different sorts of person in every sermon. Yet we can plan a preaching ministry which will ensure that every one is addressed regularly.

b) There are three types of application. i) Application to the mind, whereby we say, 'If this is true, then we can see what follows. This, this and this we should believe, even though the world disbelieves it. And this, this and this we must deny, even though the world affirms it.' We clear people's minds by making the application, and that is a big job in these days when the world is pouring in so much nonsense, distorting Christians' value systems, telling so many lies and pumping them out day by day through the media and by other means. There is a lot of work to be done constantly in disinfecting people's minds.

ii) There is application to the will. Application which takes the form: 'Look, friends, if this is true, then we can see what we ought to be doing and what we ought not to be doing.' We can develop that and press the point: 'Are you doing it? Are you avoiding the things that you ought not to be doing? And if you have been doing those things up to this very minute, will you stop doing them now? And if you have not been doing these things that you ought to have been doing, which this truth we are studying requires us to do, will you start now?' We must come right down to brass tacks. To take a simple example: 'You ought to be praying every day of your life; that means setting aside some time to do it.' These things have to be said, or people will not do them. The Puritans, who were very good at the whole art of application, used to say that people's hearts are very hard and much needs to be said to get through to them. I think that is right.

iii) There is application taking the form of self-assessment. The Puritans used to call it the use of trial -- a rather quaint phrase, but it is vivid. The preacher requires the hearers to examine themselves. If this is the truth of God, where do we stand in relation to it? Do we believe it? Are we obeying it? What does it say to us? 'Well done, faithful servant', or 'You have been negligent; you must change'? The Puritans believed that it was very healthy to make this kind of application regularly to congregations. Again, I believe they were right.

Now, I have referred to six different sorts of person, and I have suggested three different kinds of application. That gives us a grid of eighteen items. It is for each of us, of course, in terms of our knowledge of our own people, to plan how we are going to carry this through in our own preaching ministry. I am only saying that I believe that the Word of God will have less than maximum authority as a word from God to our hearers, unless we are spelling out these applications systematically in a thorough way.

5) *Focus on the Holy Spirit to evidence God's truth as God's truth*, and our application as part of God's message to the minds and hearts of those to whom we speak. Only the Holy Spirit can do it. We must be aware that without the Lord and his anointing on our ministry, nothing can be achieved. That does not excuse us from failing to preach as wisely and as authoritatively as we possibly can. We must not allow ourselves to be less than fully competent in the way that we preach, just because we are trusting the Holy Spirit to give results, although we know that apart from the Holy Spirit there never can be results. 'He who wins souls is wise', says the book of Proverbs. He who edifies God's people by his preaching ministry is wise. We have been thinking about the wisdom which is needed to give maximum authority to the authoritative message. May God give us that wisdom. May God bless us in our own preaching and teaching ministry, and give us the joy of seeing much fruit from it.

3. Authority in Our Decision-Making

My desire is that we should all become more competent in declaring the Word of the Lord. Competence is a matter of understanding; competence is a matter of clarity. Competence is a matter of knowing what the Word of the Lord is, and then being able to state and apply it in such a way that others can understand. Without in any way diminishing the spiritual dimensions of Christian communication -- the fact that there is no understanding, either in the communicator or in those at the receiving end, except as the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds -- I still want to press for competence.

We are now thinking of ourselves as Christians who, in our leadership role, indeed in our lives as disciples, are constantly faced with the need to make decisions. Again and again we are asked to help others -- individuals and groups -- to make their decisions. And we need to be good at it. So we are moving into an area which is sometimes labelled with the Word 'guidance', since the essence of living under God's guidance is that we make wise and right decisions.

Very often we do not relate our discussions and thoughts about guidance to the practicalities of decision-making in what we used to call 'moral cases'. We tend to deal with ethical thinking of the casuistical sort on the one hand, and seeking God's guidance for our obedience on the other, as if they were two distinct matters. They are not: they are two aspects of the same matter, and decision-making is common to both.

God's guidance

1) *God's guidance is a matter of promise.* One of the things which I regret about modern evangelicalism is that the theme of living by the promises of God enters into it so little. We lay stress on believing the Scriptures. We do not lay stress, as our evangelical forebears did, on making the promises of God the basis of our life and our hope. Yet by neglecting that theme, we diminish the vividness with which we grasp the meaning of our own confession that there is such a thing as a word from God on which to base our lives. What makes it so thrilling to know that such a confession is true is the further knowledge that the Word of God is not only law, but also Gospel; not only command, but also promise. Our God is a promise-keeping God, and the promises of God should be the basis of all Christian living. It would not be at all hard to demonstrate this from Scripture.

God's guidance, quite particularly, is promised; and God is faithful. What he has promised, he will also perform. For our own encouragement, and in order to enable us to encourage others, let us remind ourselves of some of the explicit promises of divine guidance that Scripture contains. For instance, in Psalm 25:8 and 9, the psalmist declares: 'Good and upright is the LORD, therefore he instructs sinners in the way; he leads the humble in what is right; he teaches the humble his way.' This is a declaration of what the Lord does, and is an assurance that it is something which the Lord always will do. In Psalm 32:8, the Lord is introduced in his own person, promising to do just that. Often in the psalms the speaker ceases to be the psalmist and for the moment becomes the prophet. He declares

the word of the Lord, and the 'I' of the psalm is the Lord himself. That is what we have here. The psalmist said in verse 7, 'Thou art a hiding place for me; thou preservest me from trouble; thou dost encompass me with deliverance.' Now the Lord himself speaks: 'I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you. So do not be like a horse or a mule without understanding', and so on.

Or take that famous promise in Isaiah 30:21. Though often, as I believe, misunderstood, it is a precious promise of guidance to God's own people. God promises that his people will see a teacher: 'Your eyes shall see your teacher' (v. 20); 'and your ears' (v. 21) 'shall hear the word behind you saying, "This is the way. Walk in it when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left."' As a matter of strict exegesis, it seems clear that this statement is to be linked with the previous statement at the end of verse 20: 'Your eyes shall see your teacher.' What the Lord is promising is that his people will always have faithful teachers who will rebuke and correct and redirect them, if, in fact, they are straying off the path. But the point which I want to make is that here again you have God promising that direction from himself will be given.

When we reach the New Testament, we hear about people being 'led by the Spirit'. That phrase is used in Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18. The Greek verb is *agô*. The thought of being led by the Spirit is thus a very general one: *agô* can mean moving something in a whole series of different contexts. Led by the Spirit, moved along by the Spirit -- the idea is not specified in any detailed and sharply focused way, but the general thought means what it appears to mean. Life will be directed in some real sense by the Holy Spirit in such a way that the course that Christians are following will be a course programmed for them by God, in which they are responding to divine initiative and are following a path that God is unfolding before them.

The classic passage on guidance in Scripture is no less than the famous Shepherd Song, Psalm 23. 'The Lord is my shepherd,' writes David, 'I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. *He leads me* beside still waters; he restores my soul. *He leads me* in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.' Then the following verses indicate the blessedness of the sheep led by the heavenly Shepherd: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' It is a wonderful and lovely psalm; we know that; we use it; we find people blessed by it; and who can wonder? First, the promise is of the Shepherd's care, right across the board. Next the promise is one of being led by the Shepherd in paths that are fruitful, refreshing and restoring. Then the promise is of protection, enrichment and security, as we are thus led.

For exposition of this psalm it seems to me that it must surely help to know something about shepherding and the care of sheep. I have a friend in North Wales who is a sheep farmer, and so I am privileged to have a little of this

knowledge. Of all the livestock that folk have ever herded and tended, sheep demand more care than any. They really are silly, just as popular lore assures us they are, and they need, more than any other class of livestock, endless attention and meticulous care. They are always getting into trouble; they need constant service from the shepherd in getting them out of trouble. The shepherd's responsibility is to give them constant care and to bring them home in good shape. The point about verse 2, the green pastures, is that sheep will only lie down if they are free from fear, hunger and pests. That is as true of sheep today as it was in David's time. So already the thought of protection is there in verse 2. The reference to the still waters is fairly obvious. These waters are waters at which the sheep may fill up. Sheep are a little like camels: they have long drinks and can then go for long periods without any water. The shepherd's business is to see that they are able to take in as much water as they need. So, says David, the shepherd restores my soul and leads me in paths of righteousness. The shepherd goes before, the sheep follow after. Now, there are variations of technique: sometimes the shepherd comes behind and whistles to his sheepdog, but the effect is the same -- the shepherd keeps the sheep on course, either in person or using the sheepdogs to do it. He leads, and the sheep travel along the paths which he sets. In Psalm 23, protection is promised (v. 4), provision is promised (v. 5), and eternal security is promised (v. 6). Constant care, constant concern, constant attention: the Lord, our Shepherd, gives them to us. This is really a psalm about God's covenant care for each of his subjects, pictured in the terms that the psalmist knew best: the shepherd and his sheep.

2) *God's guidance is a covenant mercy.* I want to underline the thought that any exploration we make of the theme of divine guidance and help in decision-making must be set within a covenant frame. The giving of guidance, the provision of help in decision-making, are part of God's promised covenant mercy to us, his sheep, whom he has undertaken to lead home, watch over, care for, and keep on track, as long as earthly life and pilgrimage lasts.

This is important because God's guidance is an area of perplexity in which Christians are constantly uncertain of themselves, and very uptight. And the basic reason for the uncertainty seems to be that all too rarely do they remember that guidance and help in decision-making *are* a covenant mercy, covered by God's covenant promise and thus guaranteed.

We all know something of the history of discussion about guidance among evangelicals during this last hundred years. From the latter half of the last century the kinds of thing which Frank Buchman said to those who followed him into the Oxford group in the 1920s and 1930s have constantly been repeated: namely, that the essence of God's guidance is that, in the recesses of one's own mind and heart, one can expect to hear a voice, or get an impression, or in some other way receive a strong awareness that what one ought to do is this rather than that. It is a 'hot-line to God' concept. Yet people who have tried to live in terms of that notion of divine guidance as their standard, which they expect to be instantiated again and again on a day-to-day basis, have got into all sorts of trouble because it has not worked out that way. They have listened for guidance and nothing has come.

I am not going to say that there was no wisdom at all in Buchman's exposition of this particular line. Probably it is always the case that those who deliberately quieten their minds before God for the first time will discover issues of obedience, righteousness and integrity which they have been suppressing. Now that their minds are quiet, these issues are able to rise to the surface and demand attention. And it is very good for us that when matters of this sort arise to conscious level we should give them present attention. Indeed, that is certainly the next thing that God wants us to do. However, if we go beyond that point and suppose that all the guidance which God wants to give will rise into consciousness in the same way (if only we wait before God with our minds blank, to see what the Lord wants to say to us), then we are going to get into trouble. This has happened, as we all know, and it has done much to discredit that image of guidance.

Nonetheless, lots of evangelical minds are haunted by the thought that real divine guidance surely will be like this. The problem here is that a better notion of divine guidance has never been fed into their minds to displace this one, so that the discredited notion still holds sway -- just as, in Pentateuchal criticism, the discredited documentary hypothesis still holds sway because no one can think of a better and tidier hypothesis to replace it. Nature abhors a vacuum, and mistaken notions, even those which are demonstrably mistaken, can only be driven out by bringing in better ones. I hope to establish a better notion of guidance, both for ourselves and for those whom we instruct. I want us to be competent in understanding this matter of decision-making before the Lord.

When the Lord's people think about God's guidance outside of the covenant frame of reference in which it is promised, then they are thinking about it in a way which theologians could only describe as Arminian. When I use that dreadful word, it is intended to be a term of discredit. I believe that Arminianism is bad theology and I make no apology for saying so. I believe that the Arminian way of thinking about guidance really is spiritually disastrous. It works like this: I think of God's plan for my life as being like the itinerary which a travel agent prepares for a long and complex journey. It is very important, when I have an itinerary like that, to turn up at the right place and at the right time to get aboard the plane or the ship, the coach or the train. It is my responsibility to do so, and if at any stage in my journey I fail to turn up at the right time in the right place, then the itinerary is ruined. Maybe a substitute itinerary, a sort of second-best, can be drawn up which will make it possible for me to go on travelling, but that original ideal itinerary is hopelessly lost. So, the best I can hope for, if I realize that I have 'blown it' on a matter of guidance, is to limp along for the rest of my days as a second-class Christian. 'I made a bad decision; the Lord has not finally abandoned me, but I am going lame now, and I shall be lame all my days. I am out of the perfect plan of God for my life, and I can never get back into it.'

This is a caricature, but only a slight one. I think it is true in this country, as I know it is true in the United States and Canada, that people break their hearts quietly over this. There are people who believe that, way back in the past, they

were called to some form of service and said 'No'. There are those who believe that, back in the past, they made a decision, maybe concerning their marriage or their profession, or in some other major area, and they got it wrong. Now they think they are ruined and that they are 'going lame'. They do not always say this, but it is there, like a running sore in the heart. They are hurting people, and they are quite sure that they are second-rate, second-class, substandard believers. We can see the Arminianism, of course, in the cartoon of the situation which I have described. Now let us replace it by some good, biblical, theocentric, Reformed thinking.

God has promised to lead and guide his sheep. He has not promised that we shall always be saved from making bad decisions, but he has promised that he will restore the years that the locust eats. He has promised that if a seed falls, that seed will arise. Those promises are in Scripture. The shepherd does not let his sheep go. It is really a disgraceful negation of the resourcefulness of the God of all grace, to suppose that he is not capable of restoring a life into which a bad decision has entered since one became a Christian. If I believe that after any number of bad decisions in my unregenerate days, God was able to renew me, to make me a new creation in Christ and to start working out the glory of my transformation into the image of Jesus, how absurd it is to suppose that because I make one more bad decision as a Christian, my life, and the work of sanctification in me, are spoiled for good. It is nonsense. It really is an insult to the graciousness of God, and it indicates no belief in these covenant promises. So we have no need to be uptight about missed or mistaken guidance. When people think that the 'hot-line' concept of guidance is the norm and the standard, and then link that with the idea that getting God's guidance wrong, even once, could ruin their lives, we cannot be surprised that they become uptight. We cannot wonder that they are 'running scared', because it is very bad, very uncomfortable, and very untrue theology.

Let us return to the question of how God makes his will known for our decision-making. We have looked at the 'hot-line' concept, and can bracket with it the supplementary measures which people who committed themselves originally to the 'hot-line' idea are often found to be taking. In desperation, they create situations which they call 'putting out a fleece'. 'Lord, I set up this situation. If you want me to do this, then let the situation develop one way; if you want me to do that, let the situation develop another way.' God *did* bless Gideon when Gideon put out his fleece. But Gideon was a very young and immature believer at the time, and I believe it is right to understand the incident as God's indulgence of the young believer, rather than as a model of God's standard way of guidance for all his people. For there is only the one story in Scripture of this kind of behaviour, and that in itself surely says something. It is true also that the disciples before Pentecost set up just such a situation: they selected two men, either of whom they thought might well act as a replacement for Judas, and they cast lots. They said, 'Lord, by the fall of the lots let us know which one you would like us to choose.' Again, it seems to be significant that this happened before Pentecost, rather than after; I am not sure that it is set before us as a model to follow. I do not hear of anything like that happening after the Holy Spirit has come and the Christian mission has begun in earnest. I

know that there was a casting of sacred lots in the Old Testament also, but it seems more natural to suppose that these were, in a real sense, sub-Christian ways of trying to find the will of God rather than standard ways of doing it for the Lord's people to follow now.

I know, too, that there are recorded in Scripture just one or two instances of what you might call 'hot-line' guidance. For instance, in Acts 8, the Spirit says to Philip, 'Go down on the Gaza road ... Join yourself to this chariot'. Well, it is recorded because it happened. God will from time to time do things which we should not necessarily expect or come to regard as standard in any way, and we must not get into the habit of making rules for him. We do need to learn to distinguish between the ordinary and the exceptional, and I am noting these exceptional things in order that I may invite you to agree with me that they are exceptional. They are rarities in the Bible story.

3) *God's guidance is linked to pastoral common sense.* I am now going to suggest that the right concept about God's guidance in decision-making for the Christian is rather different from anything we have looked at so far, but is something which is already indicated by what we are told at the end of Acts 15: 36-41. Paul says to Barnabas: 'Let us go and visit those churches which came into being under our ministry on our first missionary journey. Let us see how they are getting on. Let us go and encourage them and minister to them.' On what basis did Paul make the suggestion? Surely the answer is on the basis of pastoral wisdom. In the eighteenth century, the great evangelist George Whitefield ministered on exactly the same basis: preach and return. Never go to preach at a place unless you can see your way to going back; teaching there a second time, so that you can care for those who have been awakened under your ministry on the first visit. That was Whitefield's strategy, and I submit that, in his case, just as in the case of Paul with Barnabas, what was operating was pastoral common sense -- and it was in terms of pastoral common sense that the decision was to be judged. For Paul and Barnabas, surely, there could be no doubt that this was a good decision. We know that God blessed them on their second missionary journey, and that in fact they took the Gospel to Europe before they got back to home-base.

However, if we read on, we find Paul and Barnabas arguing about whether or not it was an appropriate action to take young John Mark with them as their factotum and general assistant. Paul thought it was not, because Mark had withdrawn from the company on the first missionary journey. Barnabas was Mark's uncle, and he believed that it was entirely right to give Mark a second chance. They disagreed: each was backing his own judgment. So where does guidance come in? It comes in the fact that each of them was seeking to make the wisest possible decision about a reliable helper. Since they could not agree, they parted company. God overruled that to the furtherance of the Gospel: Paul went one way, Barnabas another. We know how Paul was blessed with Silas as his assistant, and no doubt Barnabas was blessed also in his journey with Mark.

So we are out of the world of 'hot-lines' to God. We are in the world where, as part of our responsible service to God, we are to think, to calculate, to make wise plans, to exercise wise initiatives, and to make wise decisions about

colleagues and helpers. This, I believe, is the world in which the Bible wishes to anchor us Christians in the matter of decision-making. Other things, however real from time to time, are exceptional: this is standard. Let me pursue the thought in the following form. The right concept is of divine guidance being like marriage guidance, child guidance, career guidance, as we know them in ordinary life today. Of what does such guidance consist? Surely, of help to the mind to set goals, to gather resources for the achieving of those goals, and to solve problems that arise as we consider how to reach them. The counsellor in the world of marriage guidance, child guidance and career guidance seeks to help us to work out these things, to think straight, and to execute the best decisions that the situation permits. This, I suggest again, is the basic form of divine guidance.

* * *

If we ask about the means of divine guidance, the regular external means are biblical instruction, wise advice and the limits set by circumstances. That is the providence of God shaping up our lives from outside. The internal means of guidance, I suggest, are desire for God's glory and for the things that will honour him most and advance his cause most effectively; wisdom as we seek to see how the desire for the best can be fulfilled; wisdom to make the best of any situation and never to settle for less than the very best objective that the situation permits, together with the best means of achieving that objective.

God blesses all the exercises of heart and mind that are involved in heeding Scripture, taking advice, following the lines of God-given desire, thinking out the way to make the best of the situation. Some of us who have been through Anglican theological colleges will remember that we were taught to work out what were called 'moral cases': deciding what is permissible in particular problem situations; which of the various permissible options is the best; what is the best goal at which to aim; and what are the best means with which to meet that goal. In other words, how can we make the best of a given situation? This is how we should find ourselves thinking through the decisions which we have to make; how we should be teaching our people to think out their decisions. In fact, a great deal of our Christian maturity consists in our ability to make wise decisions along these lines.

Biblical principles of decision-making

So now let me propose, in the form of yet another grid, seven biblical principles of decision-making: biblical principles which together constitute the way of wisdom for the Lord's sheep, as we seek -- in the confidence that God leads, guides and supports -- to make the wisest and best decisions, which we shall see him blessing as we proceed along the path we choose.

1) *There are instructions to heed.* These are the instructions of Holy Scripture, viewed as Torah, God's law -- law in the sense of fatherly instruction, which is what Torah basically means before ever it gathers political associations and comes to mean the law of the land. Scripture has the character of Torah. Scripture tells us what kinds of action our heavenly Father loves to see in the

lives of men, and therefore of us his children, and equally what kinds of action he hates. We are all familiar with the situationist mistake at this point. The situationist sees all the commandments reduced to loving motivation: if love is your motive, then anything can be right. Biblically that is not so: there are certain types of action that can never be right, and they are specified in principle in the Decalogue. We are to do what God commands and avoid what he hates. Reading Scripture for ethical guidance of this kind, we realise very soon that what God's Torah is doing is setting fences to the right-hand and to the left, but leaving us with a broad path between the fences along which we may go. It is broad because whatever we do when we are on this path we shall not, in fact, be transgressing the limits.

What we have to do, once we have seen the limits, is to decide which of the various options open to us is the best and then to follow it. We must always aim at the best -- this is our Christian liberty. As the Reformers expressed it, as indeed the New Testament expresses it, we are free to make choices within these limits, provided we do not transgress the limits and start doing the things which God hates. But within these limits it is our freedom and our responsibility to choose what is best.

This applies in the matter of whether or not we get married and, if so, to whom; it applies to the career we follow, the vocational choices we make. We must seek to make the best decision out of all the decisions that are open to us. Were the Reformers right? I believe they were. Certainly, when we have sought before the Lord to see what is best, we may very well find -- for God is gracious in this -- that there is an inner peace and sense of rightness which confirms the decision; but the original decision was something that we worked out by saying, 'Lord, in this situation help me to think through and see what is best.' This is Christian liberty being used responsibly.

Christian liberty is also to be used energetically. The model New Testament Christian is an enterprising, not a passive person, always asking, 'What is the most I can make of every situation for the glory of my Lord?'. Paul is sometimes laughed at for being an opportunist, as the book of Acts shows that he could be. But that sort of opportunism is a proper, Christian state of mind. It is what rises to the surface if we cultivate the attitude, 'Lord, in this situation, and in every situation, help me to see what is the most I can make of it, and what is the best I can do.' This kind of instruction is already being given, it seems to me, in Ecclesiastes 11: 'Cast your bread upon the waters and you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven or even to eight, for you do not know what evil may happen on earth.' We can see how the thinking goes. Anything may go wrong. What is the inference -- that it would be wiser to do nothing? No, the inference is that it would be wise to commit yourself to a whole lot of things, a whole range of different options, any of which, so far as you can calculate, might prove fruitful. Have a number of irons in the fire at the same time. If one goes wrong, another will prosper.

It is a summons to the same spirit which was shown by the people in Jesus' parable who, having been given money, traded with it and took certain risks, but

they profited and the master said, 'Well done'. Yet he had nothing but blame for the man who, through fear of trouble, doing nothing with his talent but burying it in the earth, was passive and inactive. He is spoken of as a 'rotten servant'; he is rebuked by his master, rather than being commended. That is not the spirit for disciples of Jesus. Christian liberty is to be used, not only responsibly in making the best choices we can, but also with energy and with enterprise. Passive Christians are, to that extent, subchristian Christians.

2) *There are limits to observe.* As I have said, we should never allow ourselves to transgress the limits and start doing the things which God has said that he hates to see in his human image-bearers. We should never allow ourselves, in other words, to do evil in order that good may come. Paul says, in Romans 3:5, that the people who say that are justly condemned. He regarded it as a scandalous and shocking thing to say, and I hope we find it easy to agree with him. The end does not justify the means. The means, the action that we take with a view to achieving a goal, has its own independent moral quality, good or evil, and we may not do things which have a negative moral quality -- things which are evil, however much we think that they may lead to a good end. You cannot glorify God by sinning.

Professional Christian moralists speak about the law of double effect. They recognize that when we are doing something which, viewed as a means to a good, right and proper end is an appropriate thing to do, may also have unhappy negative effects -- effects which, ideally, we would not have wished to produce. An illustration of this comes from Nicholas Monserrat's book, *The Cruel Sea*. The warship commander knows that there is a German submarine around, letting off torpedoes. He believes that he knows where it is, and so he sets out to go as rapidly as possible to the area, in order to drop depth-charges and blow it up if he can. To do so, however, he has to drive at full speed through a lot of sailors who are struggling in the water, their ship having been sunk by this same submarine. Now, these men are hoping to be picked up, but the effect of the commander's action is that some of them die and all of them are enormously discouraged. They shake their fists at him out of their lifebelts as the destroyer steams past. The commander is the man who has to do it. He says that there are times when all you can do is to make what you judge to be the best decision, and pray.

That is true. It is the way in which, from time to time, Christian believers have to take action. In a situation where doing nothing would be the worst option of all, we have the responsibility of deciding which is the best of the possible options, and which are the best steps to take in order to achieve that goal, even if it would mean neglect of claims which other people felt they had on us. It may involve hurting and offending people. It may involve leaving trouble behind us which we would rather not have caused. Ideally we would not be in a situation like that; we do not enjoy it. It is the second of two effects to which the law of double effect refers. We can now understand what the word 'law' means in that context. It is not an encouragement to us to seek double-effect situations and welcome them when they come. It is simply a recognition of the fact that sometimes, as we aim at the best goal in the best way, incidental

trouble results which we would have wished not to have caused, and which, had we caused it deliberately, would have been actual sin on our part. There are situations in life where the second of the two effects, the unhappy effect, is inescapable. We must recognise that and accept it.

There is a classic situation -- very rare nowadays, but there have been cases in the past and they may well arise again -- in which we cannot save the life of both a mother and a foetus at the same time. A decision has to be made as to which life we are going to save, and the loss of the other life has to be accepted as the second, the unhappy, effect. In that situation also, to do nothing, and so invite the death of both parties, would have been a worse option than doing what we finally decide to do in order to save one or the other. I am putting it in this formal way because Protestants confronted with this would normally say that we should save the mother, whereas classical Roman Catholic teaching has always said that the first obligation must be to save the baby. Well, I am not taking it any further than to note that here is another instance of what we mean by the law of double effect. If we are going to be realists in seeking to do the will of God in this world, we have to recognise that occasionally it is impossible to avoid a double-effect situation where unhappy side-effects result from doing the right thing.

There are some people who are so frightened at the prospect of unhappy side-effects that they conclude that what they were going to do cannot be right. I am suggesting that, sometimes, it is right. When God, in his mysterious overruling providence, has shaped the situation in such a way that the second effect, the unhappy one, is unavoidable, we must trust that aspect of the matter to him and go on doing what we have to do -- aiming at the best goal in the best way.

3) *There are examples to follow.* The spirit of our Lord Jesus and the apostles must be caught. The spirit of love and humility which we see in them must be reproduced. Love and humility are of the essence. Remember the first eleven verses of Philippians 2 where, incidentally, surely the RSV is right to introduce the hymn (if hymn it is) by the translation, 'Have this mind [think these thoughts] in yourselves which you do have': the mind you *do* have, the thoughts you *do* think in Christ Jesus. You have to supply a verb and, according to the rules of Greek grammar, the only appropriate verb is a form of the last verb that appeared: think the thoughts which you do think (it is *phroneō* in the Greek) in Christ Jesus. The King James, I believe, and all those who followed the King James in rendering 'Have this mind in you which *was* in Christ Jesus', are under-translating. The thought, of course, is not false, but Paul is saying more than that. He is reminding us that, as new creatures in Christ, it is already our regenerate nature to think and behave in the spirit of Jesus' thinking and Jesus' behaviour. We live, that is, in love and humility as he did, the one who came down from heaven and was obedient to the death on a cross, in order to redeem us.

Paul also writes a great deal about catching the spirit of thankfulness. Again and again he urges people to be thankful, and that, it seems to me, is very much part of the Christian temper. (Though old Carruthers over-argued in *Prison to*

Praise and those other books that he wrote, the point which he was making was a good one, a true one.) Praise in all circumstances is, and must be, part of the Christian temper. If we have praising, grateful hearts, we shall think much better when it comes to making decisions about what we are to do for the glory of the Lord who has so blessed us.

4) *There is a discernment to exercise.* It is the discernment that is referred to at the end of Romans 12:2. How often have we preached and heard others preach on the opening words of Paul's sentence, 'I beseech you brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [yourselves, of course, is what that means: not bodies as opposed to souls, but everything that you are; that is the biblical way of speaking. Just as people can be called 'souls' in Scripture, so they can be called 'bodies'] a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.' But Paul does not stop there; he goes on to explain the meaning of 'presenting yourselves to God as a living sacrifice'. 'I mean this', he says: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind [the ongoing process of sanctification at the level of your thoughts] that you may prove [the Greek means 'discern by examination, by inspecting and testing'] what is the will of God; what is good and acceptable and perfect' -- in other words, what it is that we should decide to do. It is those who are humble, loving and grateful who will be able to discern what is the will of God, what is the best they can make of each situation, what is the good, the acceptable and the perfect -- in the sense, I think, of mature and ethically adequate (it is *teleios* in the Greek, and the word has got many nuances) action.

Those whose spirit is not Christlike are very likely to make false decisions when it comes to discernment of the best of the options. They will fight for the truth in a way which leaves hold of love; they will become zealous in a carnal way; they will become firebrands disrupting the churches. It has happened over and over again. Where there is real zeal, there is always the danger of this happening. Yet if we are going to discern the will of God in the church (and in our own families, friendships, and ordinary relationships across the board) we need to take into all those situations the spirit of humility, love and gratitude to God -- the Christlike spirit. Then we shall discern what is the will of God. As we look at alternative courses of action, we shall find what is good and acceptable and perfect.

5) *There is wisdom to draw on.* This is so obvious that we would never expect any Christian to miss it, but experience shows that, in the majority of cases, Christians do just that. Why is it that we think that, in a situation where we need God's guidance, the best course of action is to go off into a corner, on our own, taking our Bible perhaps, and to resolve the matter directly with God, without anyone else entering into it at all? When we begin to reflect upon the fact that we were created for community, are redeemed for community, and are none of us self-sufficient but are all of us meant to help each other, then that course of action becomes perverse and ridiculous. Whenever there is an uncertainty about the best decision, we should draw on the wisdom of the fellowship. We should consult the wise believers who know and who are willing to give time and thought to helping. 'In a multitude of counsellors there

is safety', says the wise man in Proverbs 12:15, and for us to have the help of a multitude of counsellors in the making of our decisions is for us to live in the natural way for God's redeemed children. The Gospel individualizes, but it should not make us into individualists; it does not isolate, however much it individualizes. It should encourage us to make more of fellowship with others than we have made before. It should encourage us to depend more on the wisdom of others than ever we did before.

We can, of course go astray here. The Bible warns us about King Rehoboam: he followed the advice of the wrong people and got into awful trouble. The kingdom split under him. There was wise advice being tendered to him and he ignored it; there was foolish advice set before him and he took it. Mistakes can still be made, but if we do not take advice (not only in the big decisions, but in the small ones also), if we do not share the reality of our lives, the decisions we are making and the policies we are following, with other Christians, inviting them to say whether they can see any way of improving on what we are doing and whether they could help us to do things better, then we are neglecting a New Testament means of grace. We are failing to draw on the wisdom that is there for us. We are doing something less than the best that we might be doing.

It is no wonder, then, if many of our decisions are less than the best decisions that we might have made. I think we need to stress this point. Some of us who have not identified fully with the charismatic movement are frightened of this, because we think of it as a charismatic emphasis. I do not think we should: I think we should see it simply as a New Testament emphasis. Ultimately, of course, the responsibility for decision must be ours: we have to make our own decisions, and no one can make them for us. However, as in the world it is taken for granted that we shall seek advice in making a decision of any significance, so it ought to be in the church and in the Christian life where, just because the glory of God is bound up with what we are and what we do, every decision has real, major spiritual significance.

6) *There are 'nudges' from God to note.* This is something which Reformed people have tended to minimize, just because other people have made far too much of it and run away with it along the Buchman line.

They are evident in Scripture, and they are not always isolated. They are never regarded as part of the standard pattern of guidance, but every now and then they are there. For instance, Nehemiah speaks in 2:12 and 7:5 of what 'God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem'. What that means is clear enough from chapter 1. The bad news came from Jerusalem: the walls are broken down; everyone there is in trouble; they are running with their tails between their legs. Nehemiah feels it as a personal burden: he fasts; he prays before God; he gets others to pray with him. There is a reference to them at the end of the prayer in Nehemiah 1:10 -- 'Thy servants who delight to fear thy name', along with himself as God's servant who 'delights to fear thy name'. It is obviously a reference to a whole company of people who are praying about this, but it started with Nehemiah feeling that 'here is a personal burden for me; here is something which is particularly my concern, my responsibility to do something, if, in the

providence of God, a way can be opened.' He prays about it himself; he gets others to pray with him. Circumstances had to change before he would be free to go to Jerusalem to do anything about it and, as we know from the story, this happened in a very remarkable way. Circumstances confirmed what God had put in Nehemiah's heart to do for Jerusalem. He was free to go, and he went and he did it! He became the second Moses of Israel's history: the man who restored Jerusalem; the man who put godliness back on its feet in Jerusalem after the exile. The Lord put it into his heart to do those things. That is the sort of thing which I have in view when I think of 'nudges' from God.

Then there is the strange happening recorded in Acts 16. On the second missionary journey, Paul and Silas had made a plan about where they were going. They were expecting to tour round Asia Minor and then to come back to Antioch from which they started. They were on the main highway to the port of Troas, which leads approximately west-north-west. Twice they had planned to turn off that road. The second time it was 'Plan B' after 'Plan A' had failed. How did 'Plan A' fail? They were going to turn north into Asia, but the Spirit did not allow them to do so. They felt it was wrong. So they went straight on; what else could they do? Then they were going to turn left into Mysia, and again they did not feel free to do so. 'The Spirit of Jesus did not allow them', it says. So what did they do? They just carried on. There was nothing else for them to do, and I can imagine them on the beach at Troas, looking out to sea: that is where the road ends. They look at each other and say, 'I wonder why God has brought us here?' Of course, the answer became plain very shortly. One night Paul had the vision of the man of Macedonia saying, 'Come over and help us', and then they knew why God had brought them there. Troas was the port from which they took ship to Philippi -- and the Gospel came to Europe. They had observed the 'nudges' of God, and it was good that they did.

I suppose, though it is not actually stated, that a 'nudge' of God is also to be understood when Paul writes, in 2 Corinthians 2 that, having said that he was coming to Corinth, he had not in fact done so. He explains why in verses 12 and 13: 'When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord'. There was more evangelism to be done, and there was work morning, noon and night for him. 'But,' he says, 'my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there.' The implication is that 'I judged, I was convinced, I felt certain [and that surely means 'the Lord convinced me'] that the most important thing now was to link up with Titus and to find out how those churches in Greece were doing.' So he says, 'I took leave of them, and hunted for him in Macedonia, until I found him and got the news.' This was the wise judgment of a responsible pastor, with a responsible pastor's anxieties. Yet to leave a fruitful and demanding mission like that, surely there must have been a 'nudge' from God to make Paul sure that it was the right thing for him to do?

As we seek to make the wisest decision in each situation, concerning the best and most that we can get out of it or put into it for God, he will, from time to time, incline our hearts one way or the other. When it happens, let us be grateful; such an inclination will always be defensible in terms of wisdom. Without the inclination we may not have decided, may not have felt inclined to

do the thing which now we feel that God is nudging, urging, prompting us to do. I do not believe that God ever leads us to do crazy things, so I think that reasons can always be given for doing what our hearts incline us to do in cases like this. Yet 'nudges' from God are factors in these situations, and if we play down this point as of no account, we are really 'selling short' the Holy Spirit. We are not telling the whole story about divine guidance. In that event, others may well look down their noses at us and say that Reformed people are all head and all truth, with no heart and nothing of the Spirit. Let us see to it that we do not bear any such condemnation.

7) *There are circumstances to consider.* Psalm 23 already gives us the thought that the nature of guidance is that God makes known to us his will and the way of wisdom, within the frame of reference that he has established by his command of events: that is, by the way in which he has shaped our circumstances. Thus, the shepherd leads, and just as we are not to transgress the limits of God's Word, so we cannot transgress the limits set by his providence. If God had not, in that amazing way, prompted King Artaxerxes to give Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild it, then Nehemiah could not have done so, and he would have had to acknowledge that it was the providence of God. Nehemiah would have then been like David: 'It was well', says 2 Chronicles 6:8, 'that David had in his heart to build a temple for the Lord', but the Lord would not let him do it. It was well that Nehemiah had it in his heart to go and rebuild Jerusalem but, had circumstances not opened up, it would have been right for him to conclude that it was not the Lord's will that he should go and do it. He prayed, and circumstances did open up. At each stage, of course, in working out the will of God for our action, both as individuals and as ministers of the Word, we should be praying. We need to be reminded of this, however well we think we know it. We can never say too often that we must work things out in a spirit of prayer before God. Yet the working out, as we have seen, is first and foremost a matter of thought, of wisdom, of applying biblical principles, of rationally calculating the consequences of different courses of action. Any special 'nudges' from God, any special urgings of the Spirit, come within that frame of reference and can be justified within it. God does not lead us outside that frame of reference into the stupid and the absurd.

Conclusion

I have suggested this grid so that we can be competent decision-makers in our own lives and competent teachers in the path of Christian decision-making in the churches and communities which we serve. I have spoken of the charismatic movement, and I think we shall agree that the coming of that movement has given a tremendous fillip in certain circles to that way of approaching guidance which expects, by one means or another -- by inner inclination, by 'nudge' of the Spirit or by prophecy -- to get guidance whenever guidance is needed, without having to think, without having to work it out rationally in the way that I have been trying to delineate. In that pastoral situation, we need to recall people to the wise way of decision-making, which, as I have said, is a great part of Christian maturity.

So I hope that these thoughts will help us towards competence and guidance in this matter of decision-making, just as I hope that other things which I have said will enhance our competence as preachers of the Word and as communicators of God's truth concerning the Christian life. What it comes down to is this: if we know our stuff, people will be able to see that we know our stuff, and they will be more ready to have us guide them than if they suspect that, because of our own fumbblings and uncertainties, we do not know our stuff. It applies in all the professions. The man who does not seem to know his stuff is not usually accepted as much of an authority. Why should he be? I want competence to be one of the words which future historians will write over the evangelical ministry of the late twentieth century in England and elsewhere. May God give us competence. By this means, may God give us full authority of manner and style in presenting his authoritative Word. By this means, may the authority of his Word be acknowledged, may the authority of evangelical truth be recognized, and may Christians grow and churches prosper.

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