

DEEPENING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST

BRIAN JOHNSTON

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CHAPTER ONE: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST AS BEING IN UNION WITH HIM

Some phrases are catchy, others are really important. They can, of course, be both. Reading through the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament, we're soon alerted to that fact that 'In Christ' (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 1:3) is a characteristic phrase. It rolls off the tongue easily enough, but every Christian should register how important it is. It may be expanded slightly by way of explanation: this 'in Christ' status applies to all those 'in union with Christ' – which, of course, is true of every believer. This union with Christ is a salvation matter; whereas being united with other faithful disciples of Christ is a matter of our service. Both are important, and we'll come to the second of these later, but we begin by exploring what it means to be in Christ.

To be in union with Christ in some ways is like being in a marriage union. In a marriage union, two persons become one. Any debt of one is the debt of both (at least morally, if not always legally). For all those in union with him, Jesus paid our debt. We became indebted to God through our sinning, of course. But Jesus' death was also our death, because of our identification with him. Let's read a key Bible section that explains more about our identification with Christ in his death ...

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin”.

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed” (Romans 6:1-17).

How would you define being a Christian? From what we’ve read, one biblical way would be to say, ‘A Christian is someone who’s died with Christ!’ The Apostle Paul says, ‘We died to sin’ (v.2). We’re going to see that our being ‘in (union with) Christ’ explains how Christ could take our blame and satisfy God fairly that our debt was fully paid. We’ll also see how it confirms the eternal security of the gift of our salvation. And even how it also clarifies the significance behind our water baptism. More than that, how it gives us a real motivating basis for living in a new kind of way as a Christian believer - not living as we once did simply because we are no longer the person we once were. We’ve a new identity due to our being in Christ. A Christian is a new person. When Paul talks here about ‘the old man’ he’s referring to us when we bore the name of Adam - when our union or identification was previously with him – that was when sin and death reigned over us (5:12-21).

But at our conversion, we died – simply because Christ, with whom we’re in union, has died. Sin’s death penalty which we truly deserved, as our due legal sentence, was not suspended, but it was in fact served when Christ died on the cross. This means

we've a secure salvation. This is because no released prisoner fears being returned to prison for the same crime. The error of thinking we can lose our salvation flows from a shallow appreciation of our union with Christ, and how his death was our death.

Old Scots law from the days of the death penalty used to declare: "at 8 AM this morning Angus Macdonald was 'justified'" - meaning he'd been executed at 8 AM for his crime. He was now free of the penalty of the law (through his death). In a way much like that in Romans chapter 6, the Apostle's language of justification blends into the language of liberation - we've been freed from sin (v.7). Sin is like a drug, although the effects of the 'drug' remains in our system, our addiction is broken. Knowing this should motivate us to lead transformed lives.

Throughout Romans chapter 6, sin is personified:

- as a king - who reigns or has dominion
- as a master or owner - who pays wages, and
- as a general - to whom one presents instruments.

Someone has said that the preacher has two problems: convincing sinners that they are under the dominion of sin; and, secondly, convincing believers that they're not under the dominion of sin. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he issues two commands, two imperatives: "Let not sin have dominion ..." (chapter 6) and then in chapter 12 where he says "present your bodies".

Our identification with Christ, our being in union with him, is also the explanation for the symbol of baptism which, for a follower of Christ, is commanded to take place after he or she is sure

of their salvation. But let's pause to go over these two foundational points that arise from the biblical teaching of our union with Christ – and what are they, again? They are a secure salvation that cannot be lost, and a proper understanding of baptism as a sign of our salvation, but not a contributing part of it. Starting with our eternal security in Christ ...

It's not a new thing to assert falsely that a backslider may lose his or her salvation, for the Apostle Paul evidently debated with those who claimed just that. They raised the objection to Paul's preaching with which Romans chapter 6 opens. Remember, that's where Paul says in Romans 6:1: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" In other words, Paul must have been preaching 'once saved, always saved,' because of the fact that some were clearly reacting against it back then, saying: 'Come on, Paul, do you really mean to say that a person who's known salvation by placing personal faith in Christ can then go on to live carelessly and multiply many sins without any fear of losing his or her salvation?' 'If that's the case,' they argued, 'we might as well all sin at every opportunity if that means it gives God more opportunities to be gracious in forgiving our many sins!'

In chapter six of Romans, Paul shows how wrong-headed this point of view is. He begins his reply by saying in Romans 6:2, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" This is the basis of Paul's rejection of their 'we may as well live as we please' philosophy. He tells them that the reality is that the believer on the Lord Jesus Christ has in fact 'died to sin.' But what does this mean? Well, in Romans 6, Paul also tells us that 'Christ died to sin.' There has to be a consistency between what it means

for Christ to die to sin, and what it means for the believer to die to sin - since both these expressions are used in the same place in our Bible.

Paul reasons that, if Christ died to sin, and we're identified with Christ, then it follows that we, too, died to sin. As a practical consequence of that, it'd be out of place for us to go on to lead a life dominated by sinful practices. That's the sense of this paragraph in our Bibles. And to prove that we've been identified with Christ, Paul shares two things: a revelation of what happened at our conversion, and an explanation of the meaning of our water baptism. These two things are linked by this idea of our being identified with Christ. It's at salvation, when by God's grace we are saved through faith, that we're identified with the Christ of the cross in his death and resurrection. We're taken out of Adam (see Romans 5:12 ff) and placed 'in Christ.'

When we believe, it's as if Christ's death becomes our death and it's then that we receive new life in Christ. Later, in water baptism we demonstrate that fact by 'acting it out' - i.e., being buried in water and rising again. Water baptism is only a symbolic witness to all who watch it taking place that we're testifying to the faith which has already saved us - so our water baptism is in effect a drama about our previous identification with a crucified and resurrected saviour. But after talking about (i) salvation by grace, and it being (ii) symbolised in water baptism, so that we (iii) lead a sanctified life, Paul concludes our section by saying God intends that we (iv) serve according to a pattern.

He uses the word for a mould for molten metal or liquid jelly. Christian disciples are to be like the metal or jelly being delivered

to the mould. The teaching of Christ and his Apostles is meant to shape our lives of service as we own our Lord's sovereignty. He's Lord, and this is part of what it means to do what's right (see from v.12), and it's the true, full response to God's grace (see from v.1) – that we should serve by following the complete pattern of his commandments, even as we follow him.

CHAPTER ONE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What would be your definition of a Christian based on what we learn in Romans chapter 6?
2. Why is it important to understand the significance of our union with Christ?
3. Long ago clothes were dyed by being ‘baptized’ in dye (yes, they did use that word!). The dyed clothes had become identified with the pool of dye. Can you transfer the sense of this use of the word to clarify the meaning of believers’ baptism?
4. Have a go at capturing the practical thrust of this whole chapter in a single sentence.
5. Looking at the New Testament overall, what features ‘shaped’ the lives of the earliest Christians as they served the Lord?

CHAPTER TWO: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AS BUILT ON HIM

It would surely tell us a lot about a person if we knew what their hopes were; where they'd invested their wealth; and into which projects they were channelling their energies and power. Well, we don't need to wonder about God. In the letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, he shares these things with us. Paul writes to those who've known conversion ...

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world ... But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. Therefore remember

that formerly you, the Gentiles ... remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole [or every] building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:1-13, 19-22).

Paul had prayed in the first chapter that the believers in the Church of God at Ephesus would know about God's hope, his treasured possession and power. It's like the opening prayer of a preacher, before delivering his message, in which he aims to explain what these things are. Paul does this in chapter two, explaining exactly what's meant by the things mentioned first in chapter 1.

But first, he begins by reminding them of their conversion. Spiritually, they'd been dead in sins, as we all are until we receive Christ as personal Saviour. That act of faith had brought them life, and, as joined with their Saviour by faith, they'd been raised and seated with Christ above. This is a spiritual reality we do well to stop and absorb. At least, for one practical reason. By stating this, God is affirming that the job is done. The believer on Christ

cannot fail to gain heaven: not if he or she is already raised and seated there. I'm reminded, by way of illustration, of the time in sport when the referee cancelled the goal scored by Zico, the Brazilian, because it came a split-second after the final whistle of the soccer game against Sweden in the 1978 World Cup. Like the goal the Brazilians scored, the sins we commit daily now, cannot change the result because when we believed on the Lord Jesus, it was as if the whistle blew and our salvation was forever finalized.

It's right to emphasize that it's faith alone that saves us – and Paul in his letter does that here, very plainly. But faith must be real rather than simply professed. We may learn about flying in terms of the laws of science; we may see a demonstration of it and accept it works; but it's another thing to step onboard a plane, absolutely trusting it's going to get us off the ground. But we might add that real saving faith is never alone, even if it's faith alone that saves us from God's eternal wrath and judgement in the lake of fire. We often like to complain about things not being fair. But what's fair is we ALL deserve the lake of fire – which means we can only be saved by God's undeserved favour. That's what's meant here by being saved by God's grace. This same passage of God's Word goes on to show there are things that should attend a faith that's real – there are specific works God has prepared for each of us to engage in (v.10).

Good works are important, but let's not put the plough before the ox: salvation must come first. We'll talk about some accompanying good works in a moment. But notice this section is addressed to all, to those both far and near, that is to Gentile as well as Jew. There's no second class. God's ultimate purpose is

not our salvation, but rather that we should be something for him, for the praise of the glory of his grace. Jews and Gentiles – together – can now be something for God even while here on earth. They're fellow-members of the Church which is Christ's Body, which when viewed in eternal perspective, or in the heavenly realm, is complete and perfect.

But we're focusing in Ephesians chapter 2 on its members who are on earth – specifically those to whom Paul writes in the Church of God at Ephesus – members on earth who are struggling to grasp what God intends them to become for him now. And Paul prays they'll grasp it. Paul tells them they're no longer separate from Christ, nor excluded from the promises, nor strangers to either hope or God. Far from it, they've actually been brought, he says, into 'the household of God'. That word can mean either family or house. We must in every case seek out the correct meaning from the immediate context. Here, since there's talk about building, and about a foundation and cornerstone, Paul has to be referring to 'the house' rather than 'the family' of God in this instance. This is a topic of Bible-wide significance, and perfectly fits the flow of thought here as Paul thinks about saved men and women being built up in the Apostles' teaching to be something for God by offering service to God in an organized and structured way – being a development upon the exclusively Jewish arrangements of the Old Testament.

In other words, Paul, at the end of chapter 2, begins to elaborate on what God has in mind as the present goal of our conversion experience – which is that we should become a house or temple for God on the earth. Paul's no longer describing the (universal) Church in ultimate terms, but he's now taking a temporal view

of its representation as a spiritual structure on earth which believers like those in the Church of God in Ephesus were part of. Nowhere, in fact, does Paul ever describe the entire Church the Body as a temple. Quite the opposite, he says in 1 Corinthians 3:16,17 that God's temple is capable of being destroyed – a fate which can never befall the Body of Christ.

Having said that, it's curious how so many commentators simply assume Paul has nothing other than the ultimate view of the Church the Body in his sights here – even to the point that it impacts on the actual translation of verse 21 – should it read 'all the building' or should it say 'every building' - in relation to whatever is growing into a holy temple in the Lord? The point at dispute is the word 'the' – was it properly there or not originally? More than half of the ancient manuscripts witness to its absence – and that being the case, respected Greek language authorities say the most accurate meaning here is 'every building.' In turn, this means we're talking about a built-up structure on earth which is spoken about as having a foundation and a cornerstone and is overall comprised of individual buildings, but altogether forming a single temple (compare in Matthew 24:1 ... 'the buildings of the temple') – something like how a campus university today might overall consist of different faculty buildings in the one overall complex.

As I was writing this I was passing through Dubai airport, a huge sprawling complex. Here the terminals are some distance from each other, such that it can be a 30-minute slow bus ride between them – sufficient to cause you to miss your connecting flight. But let's return to the point: many buildings making up one airport complex. That can only be a helpful analogy, of course,

for within Christianity we know physical structures have no importance. They've been replaced, and let's remind ourselves with what. The local Church of God at Corinth was in every way exactly like the local Church of God at Ephesus to which Paul was currently writing (it was based on the same teaching plan, 1 Cor.4:17; 7:17). How did Paul describe that local church? He described those who formed it by saying "you are God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9), and then says to them in 1 Corinthians 9:27: "you are [in character] Body of Christ."

In other words, each local fellowship of faithful disciples, carefully following the Apostles' teaching, took its character from the Church the Body. Together with all the other local fellowships, they were an overall spiritual temple or house on earth for God (see 1 Peter 2:5) – and that was the New Testament answer to the Jerusalem Temple after the cross. The Temple of God and the Body of Christ have been shown to be different, but there's a clear connection between them, because the Temple on earth, as we've seen, derives its character from the Body. Obedient believers like those to whom Paul was writing, visibly express on earth the wonderful reality of Christ's Church. The complete Body isn't on earth, but only something that can represent it. The unified community of New Testament churches of God was the earthly expression of the essential Body unity.

Sadly, this is not expressed when Christendom is divided by differences. So, to all believers today, as those enlightened at the time of their salvation, Paul's prayer here applies. Remember, he's praying that we come to experience more of God personally – and he specifies how that can happen. It's when we travel to the end of this chapter with Paul and see how we, too, are invited

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to be included in belonging to this temple made up of people – people whom God's delighted to view today as his inheritance – in the same way as he once regarded Israel as being that. This is the hope God wants to realize now by calling us through the Gospel, and it's surely a major part of the good works he's prepared for us to do before the world began to exist!

CHAPTER TWO: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the many ways of confirming our secure position in Christ has most impact for you?
2. What are some examples of how people put 'the plough before the ox' in terms of envisioning a salvation that results from good works (as opposed to good works resulting from salvation)?
3. How does the argument of this chapter move on from viewing Christ's (Body) Church in ultimate terms to considering its contemporary expression on earth?
4. Paul said in advance of this chapter (in 1:18) that his prayerful intention was to explain where God's hope and interests are currently invested in this Church Age. How does the ending of this (second) chapter of Ephesians relate to that objective?

CHAPTER THREE: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AS THE ONE WHO UNITES US

We hear a lot about ecumenical moves nowadays. The starting premise - one which cannot be denied - is that we're all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28) – all one in the perfect mystical unity of the Church the Body. This truly is the case – and praise God for it! But, at street-level, the universal Church – or that part of it which is expressed in members alive on earth at this time – appears very different. There are presently so many different denominational emphases. Only the gradual development of a corporate maturity can help to overcome this (Ephesians 4 explains how).

This was what the Lord Jesus himself prayed for before he left earth to return to heaven (John 17). The New Testament history book of The Acts of the Apostles gives us an inspired record of how earliest Christianity spread in a unified way outward around the eastern Mediterranean and into its hinterlands, before crossing into Europe. Very largely, those in the New Testament community of local Churches of God were all on the same page ('epi to auto' as they called it back then; see 1 Corinthians 4:17;7:17; Ephesians 4:4-6). This was in keeping with the use of the same template of teaching in every place – a specified teaching and practice which the Lord had prescribed for his Apostles to use.

We've referred to the prayer which the Lord Jesus prayed in John's Gospel, chapter 17. It divides into 3 sections that could be labelled as glorification, sanctification and unification. The glorification referred to the Lord himself; the sanctification applied to his Apostles; and the unification relates to us – to believers of the Church Age. It's mainly relevant for us here if we confine ourselves to dealing with the third section of that prayer in John 17. This is the part that deals with the unification of believers in this present Church Age, that began at the Pentecost recorded in Acts chapter 2. This section of the prayer that the Lord prayed so soon before he was to go to the cross begins at verse 20.

“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; and I have made Your name known to them, and will

make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:20-26).

Let’s remind ourselves again. For whom is the Lord praying? He tells us: for himself (vv.1-5); for his apostles (vv.6-19); for the elect of the Church Age (v.20 ff.). In terms of contemporary application then, we’re looking at the third category. The scope of the prayer is self-evidently the whole Body of Christ. The objective of the prayer, however, narrows down upon those who are to become so visibly unified they’ll be an effective testimony to the unbelieving world. And the very next book of the New Testament unfolds the sequel to this prayer. Notice how the Lord prays in John 17:18: “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” We can compare verse 18 of the Lord’s prayer in John 17 with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20:

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

As a result of this, based on what we find in Acts chapter 1, and the rest of that book, we find the answer to the Lord’s John 17 prayer in the community of local churches described in that first Christian history book of the Acts of the Apostles. Throughout the book of Acts, we have documented how over time with the spread of the Good News, individual churches known as

Churches of God came into existence at various locations around the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean. Notice, I said ‘individual,’ but not ‘independent.’ For indeed, they weren’t independent. They each bore testimony to the essential character of the Body (of all believers). And, what’s more, they were interdependent on each other in the overall early Christian community. That’s why the various collective nouns of the New Testament were so fitting – they were a nation, a kingdom, a priesthood, and of the household of God.

The universal Church, known biblically as the Body, is a mystical unity and so invisible. In answer to Christ’s prayer of John 17, the emerging nation, kingdom, priesthood to which the disciples of Christ then belonged, gave visible expression to it. What we’re saying is that Christ’s prayer was then answered – and will always be answered - when the essential unity of the Body results in the expressed unity of the community of local churches: still on earth, but arranged according to the biblical pattern.

Those who belong to Christ are seen as a completed number of persons in this chapter, not overlapping with the world of unbelievers (John 17:9,14,21,25). All members of Christ’s Church have been “chosen ... to obey” (1 Peter 1:1,2). However, that obedience is not automatic, so the Lord prayed in advance for it to happen. In other words, he was praying that the maturing process outlined in Ephesians chapter 4 (vv.11-13) would materialize as believers co-operated with the Holy Spirit’s promptings in their lives. As Body members spoke the truth, even doctrinal truth, lovingly with each other, Christian unity on earth was to be reached through each submitting in obedience to the Lord’s teaching as found today preserved in the New Testament

Scriptures, but as first taught orally by his Apostles two thousand years ago.

The early answer to the Lord's prayer is found in the progress of 1st century New Testament churches of God in 'The Acts of the Apostles,' and it's again being answered in churches that operate as a community today in the same way as they did in the 1st century.

We live in days of so-called 'consumer Christianity.' That's where believers interested in teaching go to one place; and believers interested in lively forms of worship go somewhere different; and those who are passionately missions-minded may go somewhere different again. For any one of us, there may come a time when we're tempted to think it would be easier to be in a bigger church group or a livelier company of Christians or one with many more young people. Why not, if it seems to meet our needs? Why stay where we are? Does it not help to remember this prayer prayed by our Lord Jesus on the evening before he went out to die? It sums up the full vision he had for coming to this earth to die.

It was about so much more than rescuing repentant sinners from the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. It was also about making possible that his Father in heaven would have the kind of worshipping people right now that he'd always longed for. Not only chosen for salvation, but chosen to serve by obeying the Lord's commands that provided for a gathering of Christian believers to worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23,24). This is not focused on pleasing myself and meeting my needs; but is focused on pleasing God and fulfilling his glorious purpose.

But how could the Lord pray for such unity? God is a God of means, is he not? And before he went back to heaven, the Lord provided his leading disciples, principally the Apostles, with the blueprint for unity. It's like the flatpack furniture manufacturer really wants you to successfully build his furniture and so he goes to great lengths to leave you with detailed instructions. The Lord longed for unity, prayed for it, so is it conceivable that he didn't prescribe a unique set of instructions which if repeatedly followed in every place in every era would lead to it becoming the answer to his prayer? And that prayer, as we've seen was that the essential character of the Body be expressed in a visible unity. Independent designer churches of man-made ideas can never hope to do justice to representing the mystical unity of the universal Church.

There's one plan for one visible community on earth and it's never changed since the Lord prayed this prayer and passed the plan on to his Apostles. The Lord's prayer here reverberates still – it is, in effect, that we will follow his original plan. We were chosen to obey, remember? Will we allow ourselves to become part of the answer to the Lord's great prayer? Which is that we still should serve by the same deliberate plan for local churches (Acts 2:41,42). And what was God's original plan? In summary, they received his word; were baptized (in water) & added (to the local church). And they continued in the Apostles' teaching; the Fellowship; the Breaking of the Bread; and (the local church) Prayers.

CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you describe the churches described in the pages of the New Testament as ecumenical? Why or why not?
2. How would you summarize the content of Jesus' prayer in John 17?
3. Does the history of early Christianity reveal whether or not this prayer was answered?
4. In what sense does any contemporary answer to this prayer involve our obedience to Scripture?
5. Is it correct to say that this shows a divine ambition stretching beyond the salvation of human souls?

CHAPTER FOUR: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AS THOSE FOLLOWING HIM

Some people learn the simple ABC approach to following our Lord. First, they **A**cept Christ in their heart by faith as their personal saviour; then it's about being **B**aptized where the symbolism is a sign (as a wedding ring is for a married couple) of the fact they're following Christ. Finally, they commit to local biblical **C**hurch fellowship as the first Christians did in Acts 2:42. Soon they learn that the local church is not the physical building it meets in, but the people who gather there. And they gather under the guidance of not just one leader but under multiple lay elders (Acts 14:23). These elders are co-ordinated across an entire community made up from the pooling of the local church fellowships (1 Pet.5:1). What this gives is an integrated approach in true worship that's spiritual in character (1 Peter 2:5). But more on that later ...

For all we've said by way of introduction, Acts 2:41,42 is a useful summary: "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." But we need to be sure that we view this in the context of the entire book of Acts, and indeed in the light of the whole New Testament – in which we find a widespread community of Christ-followers who were known corporately as 'The Way' (Acts 9:2;

19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22). The origins of this movement can indeed be traced back to Acts chapter 2 (vv.44-47), and it was a well-defined movement. They 'were together' (v.44) or as we might say 'on the same (page)'. They were following the one who'd famously described himself as 'The Way' (John 14:6) - and they were increasing in number for we read that 'the Lord added to them' (v.47).

The word 'added' shouldn't be overlooked here. In literature of the time, the word was used to describe a change of political government whether of cities or provinces. With that helpful understanding of how the word was otherwise used, we see it signifies that with these followers of the Way there had been a distinct change away from being governed by the teachings of the party of scribes; now they were adhering to the rule of Christ's teaching given through his Apostles. And this was how the Way expanded. It was by divine initiative, as the Lord himself added others to them. Others didn't just take it upon themselves to join (Acts 5:13,14) - the emerging movement was marked out by God as to its boundary, and he moved individuals across that border to come inside. In summary, while salvation and baptism must be undertaken as individuals, that's not the full picture. And even once an individual was added, there were four keys for spiritual health and growth. These were, as we read, devotion to the Apostles' Teaching, the fellowship, the Breaking of the Bread, and the church prayers - all of which we find set in the original corporate context of these verses in Acts chapter 2.

Many Christians are drawn to the idea of getting back to doing the same today as the primitive Christians did - but the problem is they all seem to end up doing different things from each other!

It's the result of ripping out selectively chosen parts of the story and creatively re-combining them. A more responsible approach is to recognize the limitations of a narrative text like the book of Acts. First, search for the author's original intention - which on the largest scale isn't difficult to find. The historian Luke is narrating how a small Jerusalem-based group, emerging from Judaism, grew into a worldwide phenomenon that became mainly Gentile. To do this, he traces the way from Jerusalem to Rome. And he paints the story in 6 panels, each ending with a summary statement of the ongoing progress of God's Word (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:4; 19:20).

The main message is about the progress of the Gospel in the power of the Spirit - in which all manner of internal and external obstacles are overcome - and the last word of the entire book is literally: 'unhindered,' which brings us to a very inspiring crescendo indeed! Luke's literary technique is to tell the overall story as the story of two missions: Peter's to the Jewish world; and Paul's to the Gentile world. Each of these are sequels to Christ's mission to announce the good news of God's kingdom - a term we find at the beginning, middle and end of Acts, inviting us to conclude that throughout the content of this volume we're seeing the shape God's kingdom took during the first century. The citizens or subjects of that kingdom were precisely those whose response to the teaching of Apostles like Peter and Paul brought them into the 1st century churches of God.

But, this is not so much anyone's biography - neither Peter's nor Paul's - as it is in some sense an autobiography of the Holy Spirit. Although it has to be said that there's a very even-handed treatment of the two principal human characters: both ministries are

sketched out with recorded sermons, signs, visions and periods in prison. In fact, it's as if - certainly as this played out to a Jewish readership - Paul's credentials are being matched like-with-like with those of Peter.

Of course, there's also a light dusting of supernatural signs (e.g. only 3 occasions where tongues feature) which mark the transitions from Jews only - to Hellenistic Jews - to Samaritan half-Jews - to God-fearing 'wannabe' Jews - till we finally get to full-blooded Gentiles. The notable signs which attended these various transitions were to show how all these people groups were included on equal terms in the one body of all true believers.

So, there's the overall intended picture, but *en route* from Jerusalem to Rome, we read of many happenings.

The vital question for us today is this: are these happenings just to be treated purely as things that did happen then or are they also things that must happen now? That's the most important question we can ask relevant to deciding how we should do church today (e.g. baptism by immersion and keeping the Lord's Supper every first day of the week). Did it only happen that way then or must it also happen that way now? How people answer that leads to many differences between Christians. So, how do we decide what must happen?

Well, when things are commanded of people the same as us the intention is clear - the same must happen today, but what about when things are only, shall we say, incidentally recorded? In those cases, are we duty-bound to repeat history (by repeating these historical precedents) - or not? Some cultural things - dat-

ing from the first century - are not for repetition in every modern culture (e.g. Christian men greeting one another with a holy kiss); whereas we'd be justified in repeating other things – but, even so, are they mandatory?

The case for any given first-century recorded practice being mandatory today is strongest when:

1. it forms part of a consistent, non-ambiguous pattern;
2. it was repeatedly followed back then giving uniformity of practice across the primitive churches (1 Corinthians 11:16);
3. and where its meaning is explained later in the Bible letters that follow (e.g. Romans 6:4);
4. and when it was also anticipated by Old Testament types (e.g. 1 Corinthians 10).

On that careful basis, the modern churches of God, are a restorative movement:

- one which does not continue with the once strategic sign gifts (like tongues);
- but does include the same role for women and biblical church discipline that Paul later defended at Corinth based on Old Testament principles (as old as creation itself) and were practised by ALL the first century churches (1 Corinthians 14:34; 5:1-13; 11:16).

The churches of God do:

- de-emphasize the role of musical instruments since they (in a way that can be judged significant) receive no explicit endorsement (see Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; John 4:23,24);

- and above all, they serve the pattern of those primitive times in terms of the following 5 particulars:

- 1. that there was only one church per city (church here being a local church as distinct from the Church the Body);
- 2. that for a baptized believer to be added to one meant s/he was added to all;
- 3. that in each church there were elders appointed;
- 4. that since the churches were connectional (i.e. not independent) these elders were co-ordinated;
- 5. so making it possible for the overall community to claim to be God's house on earth.

[Examples of supporting verses can be found in: 1 Cor.1:1,2; Rom.16:1; Acts 14:23; Acts 15; Heb.3:6].

This is what is understood to be 'the Faith' (Jude 3), or body of doctrine - the same as Paul calls 'the standard /pattern of teaching' which was to be guarded (2 Timothy 1:13) - and 'the mould /pattern of teaching' that Paul wrote to the Romans about (Romans 6:17).

In summary, what we're saying is this approach to 'doing church' is the result of applying:

- One distinctive (hermeneutic) key to interpretation: and that is to take Acts to be prescriptive as well as descriptive (based on Bible-wide conditioning to expect such a pattern). And what's more, there's ...

- One distinctive (exegetical) differentiation in word meaning: and it's between the biblical word for 'church' being carefully distinguished as to when it relates to the (universal) Church the Body on the one hand; and, on the other hand, to individual, local churches of God. (That this word relates to a gathering of disciples is based more on its New Testament use than on its etymology).

When our method of Bible study is carefully performed on this consistent basis, it can be claimed that the original apostolic pattern of teaching once again becomes clear. The confirmation has to be that what results makes best sense of the Bible's bigger picture of how God has always wanted a people, house, kingdom and nation that would serve him *his way*.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think primitive Christianity was labelled as 'The Way'?
2. How did this movement expand and develop in the time covered by the book of Acts?
3. What do you think was the purpose behind the writing of The Acts?
4. The basis of the case for a recorded early practice being considered mandatory even today is set out in a 4-part way. Does this seem to be exhaustive – or what would you add?
5. If you were to apply this can you affirm what has been outlined? What variations, if any, would you list?

CHAPTER FIVE: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST AS OWNING HIM AS HEAD OF THE BODY

We're returning to take a further look at Paul's biblical letter to the Ephesians. In earlier chapters, we've already seen that he's introduced the Church, the one known as the Body of Christ at the very end of the first chapter (Ephesians 1:22,23). This is the universal church comprised of all true believers on Christ since the Holy Spirit was given. That's made clear in 1 Corinthians 12:13 where we read that all believers are baptized by the Lord in the Spirit into the Church which is the Body of Christ.

This is, of course, the Church of which the Lord famously said he'd build it (in Matthew 16:16). Now, in this letter to the local Church of God at Ephesus, we actually have two views of the Church. One sees it in its ultimate (heavenly) presentation as flawless (Ephesians 5:27); the other is a partial view of how its represented temporally on earth, as it was back then in the first century churches of God. It's in this view that it's meaningful to long for its corporate maturity. This comes about by means of gifted believers speaking doctrinal truth to each other member in a loving way - until the full measure of the unity of the Apostolic Christian Faith is arrived at. But that's getting ahead of ourselves ... first, let's read Ephesians 4:11-16:

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Paul shares a little more detail here about the glorious fact that all Christian believers, both Jew and Gentile, are now all one in the Body of Christ – the Church which is the embodiment of the divine Son who is its Head. In effect, the Church is the display unit for God to showcase his kindness (2:7) and wisdom (3:10) to the angels. Consistent with this, the Apostle Peter tells us that from the prophesying of the Old Testament prophets right through to the preaching of the New Testament evangelists, the angels in heaven have been most interested in the content of all those Spirit-given messages about the sufferings and the glories of the Christ (1 Peter 1:10-12). The angels, Peter says, earnestly desire to look into the sufferings of Christ which he

suffered for his Church, in order to bring it to share eternal glory with himself.

Doubtless, they're still learning from the persecution Christ still suffers whenever members of the Body are persecuted on earth (Acts 9:4). So that Paul's own sufferings which he mentioned earlier in the chapter are included among those sufferings which are of intense viewing interest to angels (Colossians 1:24). In fact, in 1 Corinthians 4:9, Paul thinks that God has exhibited apostles like himself as a 'spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.' And it was while Paul was at Ephesus that an evil spirit declared that he knew about Paul (Acts 19:15)! All this information builds up an intriguing picture of celestial classrooms of angelic beings learning to appreciate more of God's manifold wisdom through the Church – meaning through us!

So, that's one practical way in which we can participate in this purpose of the ages which surrounds the mystery of Christ's Church, his Body. But how else can we be involved? We've glimpsed the Church in glory, with its members raised and seated with Christ in heavenly places, and how it's seen without defect (5:27) in the eternal dimension. But how are we managing to represent all this in the here and now? Our earthly quarrels and divisions are totally out of character as we seek to visibly express the Body of Christ on earth – just as the first Christians did 2,000 years ago in New Testament Churches of God in different localities. Individually, we're holy, but day by day we're to live holy lives – that's another matter. Equally, we're all one in the Body of Christ, but while we remain on earth God desires that we should be visibly united. Not easy to achieve, is it? Some estimates put it as high as 40,000 different Christian denominations

in the world today. This is not a great advert for the oneness of the universal Church. In other words, it's not an accurate representation of the mystical union of the Body of Christ.

How can things improve? Paul prescribes a large dose of humility, gentleness, patience and loving tolerance in verse 2 so that we might preserve what he calls here 'the unity of the Spirit' - which he'll later describe as being 'the unity of the faith' and also as the unity 'of the knowledge of the Son of God.' Obviously, we need help in this matter, which is why the chapter talks about Christ ascending on high, leading captivity captive and giving gifts - included among which are evangelists and teachers. It's very interesting to see that this is a quotation taken from the 68th psalm. Psalm 68 - if I may remind you - traces the sweep of Old Testament history as God brought his people out from Egypt and all through the desert; and, finally, the ark of the covenant was brought up to Jerusalem and into the temple Solomon had built.

Now Jerusalem is on Mount Zion, and so it's as if God was then, at last, ascending to his rightful place among his people. To assist their service of God back then, God had taken 'captive' for himself the Levites and had 'given' them back to the priests to assist with the people's worship (Numbers 18). This is what Paul takes up as an analogy for the Lord as he now gives - not Levites - but evangelists and teachers to equip the individual believers; to promote Christian maturity in them; and overall with the end result that Christian unity on this earth should be reached.

When we see the Church described here in Ephesians 4:13, it's in the context of it becoming mature or attaining to a full-grown stature. And when we compare this with verse 16, which is clear-

ly talking about the growth of the entire Body, we realize that corporate maturity of the Body must be intended even in verse 13. But how can the Body mature as a whole - other than through its individual parts? And that's certainly what's happening here: with gifted evangelists and teachers equipping individual believers so that they're no longer all at sea doctrinally. Instead, they speak the truth to one another in love - please don't think this means they're just learning to be honest or to speak home truths in a kindly way - no, the context shows that they're lovingly speaking doctrinal truth to other Body members - that's how they're all, mutually, becoming more stable. And the end result is measured by the Body members together on earth attaining to genuine Christian unity by reaching up to the standard of 'the unity of the Faith'.

In summary then, here's God's prescription for Christian unity while we wait for the Lord's return. We're emphasizing three things: the means (and that's the evangelists and teaching pastors); the method (which is Body members speaking the truth to one another in a loving way); and finally the measure (and the goal of maturity is to arrive at the unity of the Faith).

Nearly two thousand years ago, Christ's Body on earth was seen in character back there, in the New Testament churches of God - in other words in local churches just like the one at Ephesus. They were charged with becoming physically what the Body already is in spiritual reality. Like them, we do this by becoming visibly more united as a duty and function of our connectedness with other Body members. But the recipe is not compromise, but rather consecration (to the word of our Lord, John 17). I wonder how serious are we to help each other to mature as the Body of

Christ by sharing Bible truth with one another in a loving way, as we're urged to do here? Our quarrels and divisions and the drawing up of our own man-made constitutions are out of character.

We seem to like to have it where we – as groups – express our own individuality in creative ways. We admire the differences, exalting what may be seen as the Christian virtue of tolerance. But is this accurately reflecting the unity of the mystical Body-Church in holiness and truth? The Body, as it's represented on earth, needs all its parts to work together if it's to mature as a whole. Would we be prepared to set aside traditions and prejudices and sit down and explore the Scriptures afresh for the sake of a greater visibly expressed Christian unity? That would surely give the angels something to talk about!

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A fair bit of New Testament teaching urges us to 'become what we are.' Often this is targeted at individuals (e.g. you're holy in Christ, now live a holy life day by day), but how does this chapter show it as applicable to corporate testimony on earth?
2. What group of beings, and which great truth, are Christians intended to witness to while on earth?
3. How can Body members, wherever they're found on earth, contribute to the maturing of the Body in terms of its earthly representation?
4. What are the means, method and measure of Body members on earth becoming physically - and as a whole - more reflective of what they are spiritually?
5. How was this achieved, in large measure at least, in the New Testament record?

CHAPTER SIX: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AS THOSE ADDED ALONGSIDE HIM

What guidance can we find to help us have confidence that our interpretation of a particular Bible text is the correct one (for there can only be one, despite the post-modern contrary opinion)? One guide that has helped generations of Bible students is to compare scripture with scripture. Peter refers his readers to the writings of Paul. The Lord asked: ‘what does the law say?’ before illuminating his teaching from it. Overall, it’s a recognized safeguard against isolating a text and engaging in so-called proof-texting (i.e. making a text appear to ‘prove’ whatever we want). This ensures that we develop main lines of Bible truth with wide-ranging support from many texts, and in that way, we establish a reassuring consistent bigger picture, one that serves as a sort of road-map to guide us.

There are many differences between the service of God’s people in Old and New Testaments. But there’s a basic consistency we can readily discern in terms of underlying principles which apply to God taking a people for himself in any age. We find three conditions that stand the test of time. Three necessary features of a people aspiring to be God’s people:

- First, Israel had first to be redeemed out of Egypt's slavery by the blood of the Passover lamb (Exodus 12; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19).
- Secondly, they went through the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) in what 1 Corinthians 10:1,2 retrospectively describes as their baptism. And with specific mention of the covering cloud as well as the walls of water on either side, we have a realistic portrayal of baptism by immersion (see 1 Peter 3:19-21).
- Thirdly, God led them by the hand of Moses to Mount Sinai where they received the two tables of stone summarizing the Law of Moses which was, of course, God-given. God's redeemed, baptized people must commit to obeying the teaching of his Word relative to their time. For Israel, it was Moses' Law; for New Testament disciples, it's the Apostles' Teaching.

Summarizing then, we expect, when we turn to the New Testament, that we should find the key steps of sinners being saved or redeemed by the blood of God's Lamb who is Jesus Christ; then submission to believers' baptism by immersion in water as an identifying rite; before living in faithful obedience to the Lord's teaching through his Apostles as detailed in the New Testament.

These three steps were understood among Peter's readership, for he was writing to God's New Testament people spread over five Roman provinces which he names at the start of his letter. Later, he makes it clear that the various local church fellowships involved were connected by the fact that each of them had elders

who were in fellowship with each other (1 Pet.5:1). A fairly substantial part of the first century Christian community is being addressed and shows what was typical of the whole community, soon stretching into Europe, some twenty years after the cross.

But I want to come to a delightful appeal given by the Apostle Peter in his second chapter:

“Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED” (1 Peter 2:1-6).

It's been well said that 'Either the Book will keep us from sin or sin will keep us from the Book' (John Bunyan). The Apostle Peter removes the choice here. He definitely urges us not to let sin keep us from the Bible, by telling us to put away all malice and all deceit etc. When we do that, we'll find a rekindled desire within us for God and specifically for his Word. We'll be like a newly born baby longing for milk. A healthy baby will be a hungry ba-

by. And a healthy child of God will also be one who hungers and thirsts for the word of righteousness (Hebrews 5:13).

If that sounds ‘logical,’ it’s because it is. The corresponding Greek word is found here in 1 Peter 2:2 (as well as in Romans 12:1). It seems we’re talking here about what nourishes our rational mind – and that’s the Word of God. As Christians, we need to have our minds nourished and renewed by the Word, for only this can adjust our perceptions, and it leads to us living transformed lives to God’s glory (Romans 12:2).

This brings us to personal growth in our Christian life. Notice that it’s described here as growing with respect to our (completed) salvation from sin’s penalty. It’s impossible to be any more saved than we already are by God’s grace, as received through faith. But there are things that ‘accompany salvation’ (Heb.6:9), things we arrive at by spiritual growth. What we’ve already experienced should leave us wanting more, and Peter was building confidently on the basis that those to whom he was writing had tasted the Lord’s graciousness.

It’s terrific to know that we serve a risen saviour who now lives above at God’s side. But observe carefully exactly how he’s described here. He is said to be the Living Stone. That’s a very thought-provoking metaphor, wouldn’t you say? We’re more used to imagery that sees the Lord God as a mighty rock. But here he’s said to be a stone, and what’s more it immediately becomes clear that this stone is within a structure, for other stones are mentioned. And this is where it all becomes so preciously relevant. I’ve used the word ‘precious’ because that how Peter sees it. And the reason why it’s relevant is because we are those living

stones. The metaphor is being extended at this point to apply to all who – like those first century believers - have new life in Jesus.

As I write this, I've just returned from driving through the suburbs of a major city in central eastern Africa. Alongside the road there appeared to be random piles of stones. I drew the attention of my companions to them, for I intended to use them to illustrate Peter's precise point here. The stones Peter talks about in chapter 2 verses 4 and 5 are not in a haphazard pile, but they've been added to the Living Stone who is the Lord. We all know that a random pile of stones don't make a house that someone can live in. At least, not until they're built together following an architect's building plan. The Living Stone is the Lord, remember, and because he's Lord, the plan is his, and he's communicated it through his Apostles, including Peter who's written this.

This fits with our opening comments. God calls us as individuals through the Gospel. As an individual, we place our faith in Jesus as saviour. As an individual, we submit to being baptized. And that brings us to the point of becoming associated with others in serving the Lord. God's purposes are ultimately collective. Always, in the Bible, he's been seeking for a people to be his worshipers. Peter talks about 'coming to' the Living Stone. This is consistently the language God uses of his people's approach to him in worship. He describes worship by his people as their coming to him or drawing near to him. This was easy to visualize when God's house in Old Testament times was a physical structure – a tent in the desert or a temple in Jerusalem. Israel encamped around and at set times approached God's house in worship. God's people and house were inseparable – or meant to be.

But it's an even closer relationship in the case of the New Testament people of God that Peter's writing about. The stones are living! The people are the house! No longer a material building, but a spiritual one. Living stones added together to him, forming a spiritual house for God. This comes with the integral condition (c.f. Hebrews 3:6) that we're to maintain the vision of approaching God in worship, even as we offer up spiritual sacrifices made acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus stands like Aaron of old, our great high priest, and what's more believers following the plan form the priesthood whom he brings in before his Father above.

Peter, in verse 6, goes on to quote Isaiah 28 about whoever believes in him not being disappointed. The same verse is applied twice in Romans chapters 9 and 10. There it's used to give assurance of salvation by faith, not works. Here it's applied once more, but beyond salvation this time, to the faith that sees us serving and worshipping in God's house, all the time looking to the exalted cornerstone of God's house as we draw near in worship. When we see Christ in this role as God sees him – as precious – and when we realize we're viewed by God as he views Christ – also as precious – how could we possibly be disappointed? This is saying we're as near and dear to God as he is! First, Christ is the precious cornerstone; and then to us who believe is the (same) precious value. Correctly, we speak of imputed righteousness since the guilt of our sin was imputed to Christ on the cross; but here, does it not seem indicated that we're taught to speak of imputed preciousness?

We may be believers, but there's something precious beyond salvation. How do we reach it? By putting away sin, by thirsting for

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the Word, by tasting the experience of the Lord's kindness, and by coming (drawing near) in worship – and that in God's way!

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Taking a Bible-wide perspective, how would you phrase the major preconditions facing men and women aspiring to the status of being 'God's people'?
2. What practical points does Peter offer for our spiritual health, growth and progress?
3. Which slightly more unusual metaphor does he use to describe the Lord?
4. How is this more focused on our relationship with him?
5. Worshipful drawing near of living stones is presented as a condition for being built up as God's house in v.5. Can you develop a parallel with the text of Heb.3:6?

CHAPTER SEVEN: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST SUBJECTING OURSELVES TO THE GOVERNING SON OVER GOD'S HOUSE

Almost 200 years ago, believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, first in Ireland and then throughout the United Kingdom, began to show revived interest in gathering to remember their Lord in a way they considered to be purely and simply biblical. They stripped away rites and ceremonies for which they could see no support in the New Testament Scriptures. Institutional and denominational emphases were set aside in favour of trying to establish church fellowship purely on the basis of common life in Christ. They understood they were meeting as brothers around the Lord's table for communion.

They had arrived at a clear idea of the universal Church, biblically described as 'the Church which is his, that is, Christ's Body' (Ephesians 1:22,23). But the fact that they were now meeting as local groupings of believers produced a dilemma. What if someone, another believer, casually requested occasional fellowship with them – suppose further that this was someone about whom there were concerns ... that his conduct was not particularly Christian? Should he or she be received to the communion table? One approach was to emphasize the unity of the Body and so accept all regardless; the other contrasting approach was to

stress local responsibility. In this case, respect for the Lord's Table demanded they refuse those with a disorderly (for example, immoral) lifestyle.

This generally divided state of affairs led to a search for a more biblical solution to this real, practical problem. The result was to find the biblical basis for local church of God fellowship as in Acts chapter 2. What's more, careful reading of the New Testament showed the original local churches had not been independent, but closely interlinked as belonging to the one overall community of churches (1 Peter 1:1). This was recognized as being the spiritual house of God on earth (1 Peter 2:5), although it was not the whole Body of Christ in its entirety, not the universal Church of all believers on Christ (for to that, dead and even disobedient believers would still belong).

The term 'house of God' which surfaced occurs in both Old and New Testaments, and a full trace of its character is required if we're to appreciate what those first so-called Brethren believers glimpsed more than 125 years ago. We don't have time for anything as extensive as that, but what we can do is pick up one New Testament section which draws heavily on the rich Old Testament background surrounding this topic of God's house on earth. We've in mind Hebrews 3:1-6 which refers us back to the house of God in the time of Moses, known as the Tabernacle (Tent), where the people worshipped God. Let's read it, and ask ourselves 'What matches that today?'

“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; He was faithful to Him who appoint-

ed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house - whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end" (Hebrews 3:1-6).

As we said, Hebrews 3:6 refers us back to the house of God during the time of Moses around 1400 BC, when it was known as the Tabernacle and was, in effect, the special tent where the people approached their God in national worship. We were asking what might correspond to that today? We earlier introduced the universal church called the body, which is every born-again believer as we all were baptized in the Spirit into it (1 Corinthians 12:13). We are 'in Christ' with eternal security (Ephesians 1:3). The famous eighth chapter of Romans says each believer on the Lord has been chosen, called, justified and glorified in a magnificent sweep from eternity to eternity (Romans 8:30). No one who has believed Christ and been sealed with the Holy Spirit can ever possibly drop out somewhere between predestination and glorification.

But while our salvation, our eternal destination with Christ, is totally secure, it's true that the Bible does mention the dread possibility of 'falling away.' In fact, this is discussed just three chapters later in Hebrews 6:6 - which begs the question: from what

can an eternally secure believer fall away, if it's not from salvation? The letter to the Hebrews supplies the answer. Not only does it raise the issue of falling away, but the context in which it does so, clearly defines what's meant. For it talks about falling away, not in the context of salvation and Body-membership of the universal Church, but in the context of service for God within God's house. That brings us right back to the last verse we read: Hebrews 3:6 - Christ *[is] faithful* as a Son over His house - whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence. If we give words their normal meaning, the house of God isn't guaranteed to include every believer - as can be seen from the rather exclusive 'if' condition found in that verse.

Allow me to recap where we've got to, for it's vital we distinguish things that the Bible itself makes distinct. The Bible teaches that all those who're saved are in the universal 'Body Church' (1 Corinthians 12:13), from which we cannot be removed since we cannot lose salvation (John 10:28). However, it's at the same time possible to fall away from something (Hebrews 6:6). And what looms large in context here in Hebrews is the faithful service of God's gathered people expressed throughout the New Testament community of local churches of God (Hebrews 3:6). They're described as being God's house on earth, comparable to the Tabernacle in the midst of God's people long ago - from which disobedient Israelites could be cut off.

In other words, being in the house (Hebrews 3:6) is about holding onto something which it's possible to lose. That which can be lost or fallen away from, is not salvation. Therefore, it must be something beyond salvation, beyond our membership of the Body. Taking our cue from the Hebrews' letter, we're caused to

remember the warning God gave to Moses immediately after the people's salvation from the land of Egypt. And it, too, was in relation to God's Tabernacle-house back then, when he told them to be sure to keep to 'the pattern' (Ex.25:9). God's plan or pattern then extended beyond the design of the house and its furnishing to include also how the priests were to operate in relation to these things. This is made dramatically clear in 1 Chron.15:13. So, there was a definite 'if' condition applied to all *their* service for God as it centred on his house back then. By this we mean that if they didn't do things in God's prescribed way, it was not acceptable to him. And in a way that answers to all this, what we find is that in 2 Timothy 1:13 Paul commands Timothy to hold onto 'the pattern' (or standard) of sound teaching from the Lord. This is the Apostles' Teaching (cp. Moses' Law) which acts as the building plan for God's New Testament spiritual house today.

In London's Westminster Cathedral, its architect Sir Christopher Wren lies buried. The inscription where he lies says: if you would see his monument look all around you! But that's as nothing compared to the achievement of Christ. Brothers and sisters in churches of God can look around on each other and see how from hell-deserving rubble, from stones rescued from the burning, our Lord has fashioned a habitation for God in the Spirit! Our Lord is counted worthy of a greater glory than Moses. For a builder has more glory than the house he builds; and the owner of the house has more honour than a servant within it.

But what exactly does this mean for our relationship with Christ? Ray Stedman once shared an analogy from his Montana ranching experience down by the Missouri river: once, as a friend of one of the ranch hands, he got to ride a couple of old scruffy

horses out the back; later as a friend of the owner's son, he enjoyed riding the best horses all over the ranch. What that demonstrated to him was the big difference between acquaintance with a ranch-hand and acquaintance with the owners' son. Our relationship is not with Moses the servant, but with Jesus, the Son of God who is over God's house – and so the greatest privileges (detailed in this letter), are for those who form God's house (1 Peter 2:5), accessed through relating to Jesus as the authoritative son over God's house.

The letter to the Hebrews describes those who are 'brothers' of Christ. It also describes those who are 'fellows' of Christ. Hebrews 2:11 says: "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren". All who relate to God as their heavenly Father, have the gracious privilege of being owned by Christ, their saviour, as being his brothers. This is true of all believers in the Body of Christ. But then again, God the Father when addressing his Son in Hebrews 1:9 says, "YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS." Now the question is 'who are those companions – or fellows – of Christ?' And what's the difference anyway between being called a brother of Christ and being called a fellow of Christ?

Vine, in his expository dictionary fame, says about this word - the word 'fellows' - that ... 'It marks an even closer relationship than brethren.' But just who are in that relationship with Christ? For the answer, we turn to Hebrews 3:14: 'For we have become partakers [or fellows] of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.' Obviously, it's the readers

themselves who are addressed in this way in parallel with what we found in 3:6 – *whose house we are*. Companions, partakers, fellows or sharers – it's the same original word found in the same context, which means we can assume they refer to the same (see also 3:1).

Some New Testament believers did fall away from being sharers in the community of local biblical churches at this time of writing nearly 2,000 years ago. As a result, they didn't hold fast to service in the house for God on earth, but did remain members of the Body of Christ, of course, since it cannot be dismembered as the Bible's equally clear teaching on eternal security demonstrates.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Defend the Bible's teaching of eternal security in relation to our status within the Church the Body of Christ.
2. To what must we attach the equally valid Bible teaching of 'falling away'?
3. Those addressed in the Hebrews letter are implied to be in a comparable situation with whom in the Old Testament?
4. In what specific ways is the Hebrews' relationship with Christ compared and contrasted with Old Testament Israel's relationship to Moses?
5. Are the stated conditions of verses 6 & 14 in Hebrews chapter 3 directly comparable?

CHAPTER EIGHT: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AS REMEMBERING HIM

When the Apostle Paul gets to the eleventh chapter of his first Bible letter to the Church of God at Corinth, he begins to deal with things that should lie at the very heart of every local, biblical, Christian testimony. In primary place among the recorded gatherings of the first Christians is their gathering to break bread so as to remember the Lord. After all, this was what he'd specifically asked them to do when he'd broken the bread and drunk the wine with them in the upper room (Matthew 26:26).

The Lord knew how distracted we can become, how prone we are for the main thing to cease being the main thing in our lives. And so he left us with the command that we should remember him in bread and wine each and every week (Acts 2:42; 20:6,7; 1 Cor. 16:2). The hymn-writer says; 'We never would forget His love, Who has redeemed us by His blood.' How poignant to think that as the Lord had the ordeal of Calvary stretching before him, he laid down this ordinance which so meaningfully brings to our attention his great sacrificial love for us while we are engaging in corporate worship. There could be no better way to begin each week other than by gathering around 'the Lord's table' (1 Cor.10:21) to eat 'the Lord's Supper' (1 Cor.11:20). There, we freshly pour out our heart's appreciation (1 Pet.2:5) for the one who loved us with such amazing love.

The Apostle Paul refers to this local church gathering for the ‘breaking of bread’ in verse 23:

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

This section is prefaced by a key phrase found in verse 18 and that is the wording ‘in the church’ or ‘in church’ or it may be translated as ‘when you come together as a church.’ It’s repeated three more times (14:19,28,35) before we get to the end of chapter fourteen. It seems, then, that chapters 11 through 14 form a unit that’s central to this letter. And it contains precious instruction on topics which the Lord clearly places central to our local church function – but none more central than the Breaking of the Bread.

Now the Apostle Paul has already begun from the very top of this chapter by talking to us about an order which encompasses even the Trinity (of Father, Son and Spirit) itself, listen carefully to what he says: “Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the

head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:2-3).

Some have wondered if Paul’s use of the word ‘head’ here could mean ‘source’ - instead of meaning authority - but in no sense could God be described as the source of Christ. So, it’s important to understand the order given here is in terms of an authority structure – especially because it’s going to shape the argument which Paul now outlines:

“Every man who has *something* on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head” (1 Corinthians 11:4-6).

These two parallel statements require that a man uncovers his head while praying or prophesying; and conversely that a woman covers hers. So, having clarified the actual practice which Paul’s instruction was insisting upon, let’s again remind ourselves that what introduces this is the hierarchy of authority relationships given in the order: God, Christ, man and woman. From that explanation of an order extending into the triune God, Paul now turns to a second explanation for the practice of head coverings in church, and this time he picks up on God’s order in creation. This is what he says: “For a man ought not to have his head cov-

ered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man” (1 Corinthians 11:7).

In these verses we’ve just read, Paul shares a major key for interpreting this whole passage. Its significance is all too readily overlooked – but it’s this: if a man ought not to have his head covered because he’s the image and glory of God, then clearly these instructions go way beyond any local or cultural boundary, and must apply in all truly biblical churches of God (11:16) at any time and in any place where they exist. And we should observe that this fundamental point of man being the image and glory of God is used to support the actual practice of head coverings - not only the principle of male headship.

But what was it that we’re meant to conclude from all this? Was it not firstly, that a man wears no covering because he’s God’s glory: this means God’s glory is uncovered, even as God is subject to no-one. Secondly, that a woman wears a covering for she is man’s glory: this means man’s glory is covered, even as the man is subject to Christ - and so the glory again goes to God instead. And thirdly, that a woman wears a covering: which also means that her personal glory (her hair which is a separate covering denoted by a different original word) is covered. So, women in church cover their heads (and men uncover theirs) in order that God gets the glory in each case in accordance with the hierarchy of authority with which the section began in verse 3.

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 11:16, Paul now sweeps away any possible variations in practice. He says that the Church of God in Corinth must keep in step with the universal practice of men’s heads being uncovered and women’s heads being covered which

then applied throughout the Churches of God. Far from this being a local custom specific to Corinth, it was the single, consistent practice throughout the entire first century fellowship of churches all around the Mediterranean. And the actual practice of head coverings is corroborated by the archaeological record. Second and third century pictures from the catacombs show Christian women praying with a cloth veil on their heads.

The teaching of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 belongs to those occasions when the church comes together as a church (literally ‘in the church’ or ‘in church’ v.18). We can be sure of this because Paul speaks of prophesying primarily in the context of edifying the whole church (1 Corinthians 14:4). Head coverings are after all described (1 Corinthians 11:16) as being a church practice (and a ‘practice’ is only unmistakably a ‘church’ practice – as opposed to a personal habit – when it is viewed in the context of whole church gatherings). When, in v.17a, Paul refers to ‘this instruction,’ experts judge he’s ‘probably [referring to] the preceding one about the head-dress of women’ (Robertson) and the second half of the same verse ties it into times when the church comes together.

Finally, since the succeeding verses of chapter 11 (11:17-34) are devoted to the breaking of bread ordinance which is definitely designed for the whole church (v.22), it would naturally seem that this preceding section also applies to those times when the church comes together (v.17b) as a church (v.18). But let’s check out from verse 34 what else applies to these church gatherings, such as for the breaking of the bread ...

“The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God *first* went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize *this*, he is not recognized. Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Corinthians 14:34-40).

Again, opinions have differed on the intended meaning of this further section of 1 Corinthians 14. The Bible states (1 Corinthians 14:34) that women are *not permitted to speak* when the church gathers together as a church, plainly seeming to say that it's not given to women to take the lead in any church service in any audible, authoritative way. This agrees with what we find in 1 Timothy 2:11,12 – “a woman must quietly receive instruction ... I do not allow a woman to teach.”

Perhaps the first comment we should make is that this text appears in all known manuscripts, so it's hard to minimize the force of these verses. There again, it surely has to be accepted that the statement, *they are not allowed to speak* takes the form of an absolute rule. So, what about the application of this text? Is it limited to the evaluation of prophecies only – that is, is Paul saying that women may not participate in the oral weighing up of such prophecies as he's been dealing with in the immediate preceding

context. Paul is at pains to ensure that the restriction which he's making doesn't mean that the women cannot learn (v.35).

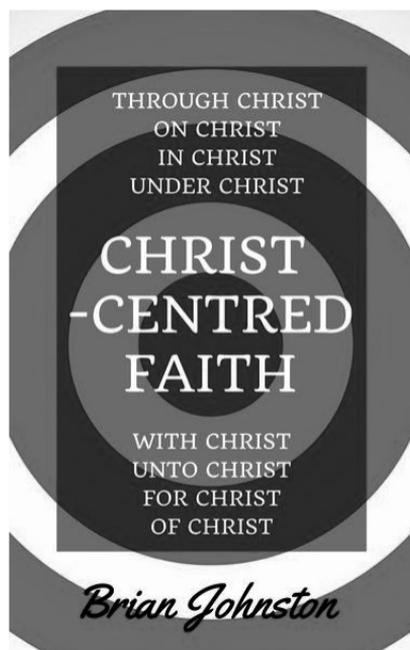
This implies that it was a learning activity in which they were engaged, not the activity of publicly critiquing or sitting in judgment over prophecies. Paul's summing up actually begins at verse 26 ('what is the outcome then') when he goes on to give practical guidelines for the ordering of both the gifts of tongues and prophesying when the early New Testament churches assembled together. Various in-church speaking roles are then listed in terms of exclusively masculine pronouns until Paul begins to address the womenfolk in verse 34, and then it's in order to explicitly confirm that they're not permitted to speak. (In re-stating what Scripture says here, we must be careful to also re-state what it clearly implies in another place, for example 1 Peter 2:5. And that is that women - every bit as much as men - are seen as together forming the priesthood which offers worship acceptably to God.)

Some think Paul was advocating a practice unique to Corinth, which means we can legitimately ignore it. Nothing could be further from the truth; Corinth was being asked to come into line with what all the other New Testament churches were already doing. He says: "Are you the only people the word of God has reached?" (v.36b). Paul asks if they're not troubled by the fact that all the other churches have put the same instruction into a different ecclesiastical practice. We could ask ourselves the same question today!

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What repeated act or ordinance is designed to keep our relationship with our Lord always before us? How often is this intended to happen (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2)?
2. How would you show that the women's hair, viewed as a covering itself in v.15, is not the same covering that's referred to in v.5 etc.?
3. Various 'orders' are cited in support of the head covering practice. Can you identify the use of authority order, creation order, angelic order & natural order?
4. The Bible describes women present at the Breaking of the Bread to be collectively worshipping as equally part of the holy priesthood. Are we to understand their 'praying and prophesying' (1 Corinthians 11:5) as being part of the overall church company engaged in praying and prophesying, but which they weren't permitted to lead audibly?
5. The suggestion that the command in 1 Corinthians 14:34 centred on Corinthian women who had a tendency to be noisy would render it necessary to assume that all first-century Christian women were noisy in a way which disturbed church services! Can you see why?

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About the Author

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God (www.churchesofgod.info). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit www.searchfortruth.podbean.com) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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