

## **The Way**

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# CHAPTER 1: ONE WAY AND ONLY ONE

Some time ago, when Thomas Edison was working on a seemingly crazy contraption called a "light bulb", it took a team of men twenty-four hours to put just one together. The story goes that when Edison was finished with that one light bulb, he gave it to a young helper, who nervously carried it up the stairs. Step by step, the boy cautiously watched his hands, obviously frightened of dropping such a priceless piece of work.

You've probably guessed what happened next; the boy dropped the bulb at the top of the stairs. It took the entire team of men twenty-four more hours to make another bulb. Finally, tired and needing a break, Edison was ready to have his bulb carried up the stairs. It was then that he gave it to the same young boy who dropped the first one. That was kind, but Edison was someone who also showed great patience in other ways too. He's reported to have performed 1,100 failed experiments before he invented that first successful light bulb. When it was put to him what a waste of time that must've been, he denied it, simply saying he'd discovered 1,100 ways how not to do it. Then finally, he'd discovered the way to do it.

Many ways *not* to do it; one way to do it. That reminds me of how in the first century, many aspiring Messiah figures claimed a following, making themselves out to be somebody, promising to deliver the Jews from Roman rule and free their land from its occupying power. We get a sense of this from the advice the rabbi Gamaliel gave to the Jewish hierarchy when they were consider-

ing what they should do with Peter and the apostles in order to squash the new upstart religion of Christianity. We read in Acts chapter 5:34-39:

“... a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away *some* people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.”

So people like Theudas and Judas of Galilee had claimed to be God’s way of delivering the Jewish people from the situation they found themselves in. But as Gamaliel pointed out, they were found in time not to be God’s intended way of helping the Jewish people at all. Many were found not to be the way, before the apostles broadcast the unique truth of Jesus’ claim when he said: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me”.

Those words are still challenging because society today has a dislike of anything that's 'exclusive'. Uncomfortable as it may seem however, truth *is* exclusive: for something cannot be both true and false at the same time. When Jesus said 'I am the Way,' make no mistake about it, he was making an exclusive claim. By saying he was the way, he was equally saying everything else and everyone else was not the way. Quite clearly, if truth is not exclusive of error then it ceases to be truth.

Jesus Christ claimed to be the Way, the Way to the Father. That's well enough known. What's less well known is that those who followed him, soon came to be described as 'followers of the Way'. You can trace this expression in the historical Bible book of Acts, and in this book we're going to see how the description is applied to more than what we might be inclined to consider as just the way of salvation – for it applies just as much to the way of Christian service and worship. It's a way that reflects the Lordship of Christ, for the apostles preached Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Corinthians 4:5). The option of receiving Jesus as Saviour, but refusing to acknowledge him as Lord, was never on offer. That's why the hugely impressive thing in the early New Testament history of Churches of God is their unity: 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Ephesians 4:5).

Of course, when the apostles were still around, and speaking with one voice, it makes sense to think of how those in this movement, which was known as the Way, kept in step with each other. For the Way was just that, the way, not many different ways. On the other hand, why should it, in principle, be any different today, when the New Testament has preserved for us the written form of the actual teaching of the apostles? Ah, you say,

but that depends on how you interpret what the New Testament is saying! Well, of course it does, but do you seriously mean to imply there are many correct ways to interpret the New Testament's teaching? Is there not one correct interpretation of each Bible verse? Is God's Word to us both yes and no (see 2 Corinthians 1:17-20)?

If you've followed me through this far, would you not agree that it's worth taking a fresh look at how closely the Bible supports your own practice of Christianity. Now, I know, some will say that the Bible book of Acts truly describes what the first Christians did, but will question if we're all duty-bound to do the very same as they did. I'd have to say in bringing you the material found in these chapters, that I'm representing the point of view that takes the description of Christianity found in the New Testament as being also a *prescription* of how God intends we're to practice Christianity until the Lord Jesus returns. I'm convinced of that personally because of how the New Testament often quotes the language of the Old Testament service of God's people or else refers to its principles. God is an un-changing God (Malachi 3:16).

It's when we see an underlying pattern in the service of God – one that's Bible-wide – it's then we can have confirmation that our interpretation is the correct one because it fits all the pieces together. Visualize a jigsaw where each piece is a perfect square. That means there are many ways of fitting them all together. But only one way will allow the overall picture to emerge. When one interpretation allows all the biblical data to fit together such that we see a consistent pattern emerging for serving God in the Old and New Testaments, then we can be sure we're in the will

of God. That would be my background reason for showing you ‘The Way’ prescribed in the New Testament for followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s the conviction that early Christian history, as given in the book of Acts, is more than purely descriptive – it’s the understanding that the New Testament’s body of teaching (‘the Faith,’ e.g. Jude v.3) defines and specifies the Way of Christian service until Christ’s return. After all, the ‘Apostles’ Teaching’ (Acts 2:42) was, of course, originally given to them by the One who could say ‘I am the Way’ (John 14:6).

And the first Christians were those identified in the New Testament history book of Acts as ‘belonging to the Way’. Check out Acts 9 verse 2 where we read exactly those words: ‘belonging to the Way’. Then chapter 22, verse 4, tells us that Saul of Tarsus persecuted some who were of ‘this Way’ to the death. In other words, he was attempting to kill committed Christians, followers of the Christian Way. And these are only two of some seven such references in the book of Acts.

Priscilla and Aquila were a wife and husband team who got involved in sharing a clearer explanation of Christianity to a Bible teacher called Apollos – someone who’d recently arrived at Ephesus. Acts 18 verse 26 says they showed him ‘the way of God more accurately’. In the next couple of chapters we’ll try to work out what that involved. But the great thing about Apollos was his humility. He knew a lot, for sure, but he was still prepared to accept there was more to learn, new things for him to discover that were soundly based upon the Word of God. He’s a worthy example in that for all of us. Unlike Apollos, however, not everyone then accepted help aimed at pointing them in the direction of the Way. Twice we read in Acts chapter 19 of some who be-

came hardened, ‘speaking evil of the Way’ (v.9), which led in turn to a disturbance ‘concerning the Way’ (v.23). It’s a sad testimony upon our fallen human nature that we can react in such a way to the plans God has for us – plans which are to prosper us.

When Paul said in Acts 24:14, “according to the Way which they call a sect, I do serve ... God”, he was obviously talking about the way of Christian service and worship beyond salvation itself. We’re saved to serve, and our chief end is to glorify God. It’s our hope and prayer that this book may cause us to have “a more exact knowledge about the Way” (Acts 24:22) – once again these are words Paul used, this time a few verses later in Acts 24, where once again they express the fact that, originally, Christianity was referred to as ‘the Way’, not many optional ways.

## CHAPTER 2: THE WAY OF SALVATION

When Jesus Christ said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6) he was claiming uniqueness as the only way to God. During his life on earth, he claimed to be equal with God – a claim the Jews were all too aware of as they went scratching for stones with which to stone him for blasphemy, as they saw it, in John chapter 5.

What's more, the Bible also advances the claim that Jesus' death was a sacrifice for our sins, with forgiveness freely available to everyone who believes in him. These claims are testable based on whether Jesus actually did rise from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Sceptics, historians and lawyers have long been convinced of the fact of the resurrection of Christ by the real evidence for it – evidence which is both factual and circumstantial, and both positive and negative – to quote the words of one legal expert who sifted the evidence.

Jesus was born and named as the one who would save his people from their sins. That salvation, as explained in the Bible, is a salvation from sin's penalty, then from sin's power, and finally from sin's presence. Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8 talks about how we can be saved by God's grace through our personal faith in Christ; and that salvation is a gift from God, not being the result of our own works - but only as a result of God's work, once for all through Christ at the cross. It's speaking there about salvation from the judgement our sins deserve, which is the second death

of the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8) – the essence of which is eternal separation from the God who loves us.

But in Philippians chapter 2 verse 12, Paul writes about our need to work out our own salvation day by day. This clearly refers to something that requires our action in co-operating with the work of the Holy Spirit within us. So this is not speaking about the same thing as we've just described previously, since that would make for a contradiction in the Bible. No, it's talking about a different aspect of our salvation: about being saved from the power of sin in our daily life as Christians. Our old self remains and we do still sin (see 1 John 1:8). Sinless perfection here as Christians isn't possible. Sin's power is greater than us, but we do have Jesus as an advocate who pleads for us in God's presence (1 John 2:1). That's why the Bible (1 Corinthians 10:12,13) tells us that we don't need to fail, but if we do, we can know salvation from the power of sin by confessing our known sins to God (1 John 1:7-9).

And then there's a third aspect of salvation which the Bible mentions, for example, in Romans 13:11 – and it's a future aspect of our salvation – I say this because it's described as being nearer to us now than when we first believed. This is talking about salvation from the very presence of sin, a salvation which will take place at Christ's return to take all Christian believers away from this sinful world. Then our bodies will be made new and sinless (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), and we'll never be able to sin again. Praise God for that!

By not taking care to distinguish between these 3 aspects of salvation, some have wrongly taught that the believer's salvation

from the penalty of his or her sins isn't secure or is a mixture of faith and works. Not so. God's promise to whoever believes in Jesus is eternal life (John 3:16; Romans 6:23). It's God's free gift to the believer, and in Romans 11:29 Paul teaches that God never asks for his gifts back (since he never makes mistakes in the first place). In John chapter 10 (verses 27-29), Jesus himself emphasizes that the believer (one of his sheep) will never perish. That security depends on the strength of his love, not ours. The matter of our eternal security is in his hands (and the Father's hands), and not in our hands. Nothing can slip between his 'fingers'. He simply cannot lose his grip on us.

And 1 Corinthians 3:15 is also helpful in this connection because it tells us about the judgement-seat of Christ where all believers in Christ will appear after we go to meet the Lord in the air at his return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). The purpose will be so that our service down here can be assessed (1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10). We may fail to gain reward, and as much praise as we should, but we'll still be saved 'though so as through fire'. In other words, the fire can burn up our works and we lose our potential reward, but not our gift of salvation itself. We really do need to distinguish between gift and reward.

There are many biblical ways of viewing the eternal security of our salvation from sin's penalty - and they're all consistent. Our new birth is an irreversible process as the imagery itself would indicate. And, what's more, think of when a baby is born naturally. Who does the work? It's the mother, isn't it? The baby doesn't have to work to bring about its own birth. And neither do we in order to be born again (John 3:3). When we're born as children

of God, God himself does the work to bring us into his spiritual family.

At salvation, when we repent of our sins and put our trust in Jesus Christ as our own personal Saviour, the Bible tells us we become members of Christ's Church, which is called his Body. The power of Hades cannot prevail against it, the Lord himself declared in the Gospels (Matthew 16:18): meaning it's powerless to dismember anyone. So, we're entirely safe. We could go on ... for the Bible has a lot more to say, for example about God's sovereignty, which really is the final guarantee that our salvation can never be lost. But some are confused when they read in the Bible about 'falling away'. To understand this properly in its context, we need to distinguish between our salvation and our service. It's possible to fall away from a position of responsibility in service for God. That's what's being referred to, for example, in Hebrews 6:6. In its first century Jewish (Hebrew) setting, it referred to those who were being drawn back into keeping the Law of Moses. In that first century setting at least, there could be no recovery into church of God fellowship for such high-profile defectors.

As far as the New Testament teaching is concerned, our service is to do with being in a local church of God; and our salvation is all to do with being in the Church which is Christ's Body. From the last-mentioned Church we can never fall away, but – we say again - we can fall away from local church of God fellowship – something that's quite different (see 1 Corinthians 5:13, and so, overall, fall away from the kingdom of God which is on earth – see 1 Corinthians 6:9).

Finally, Matthew 12:31 with its mention of the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, has been a difficulty to some. This, too, must be kept carefully in its special historical context. These Jewish religious leaders were standing face to face with Christ. They'd witnessed his mighty miracles and good deeds, and yet very deliberately they attributed the power of the Holy Spirit, by which Christ performed his cures, to the power of Satan himself. That was the defiant sin of the Christ-rejecter. There's no comparable situation today which a believer could face.

So there we have it: we're left with the certainty that the believer truly has eternal life which cannot be lost. In the first Bible letter written by the Apostle John, we find three assurances of how we may know that salvation is ours. For John's repeated emphasis is that those who 'believe' may 'know'. He gives, as we've said, three ways by which believers can be sure that they're saved: and these are by believing; by obeying; and by loving.

The first way then is about maintaining our deep conviction in the truth about Jesus, the Son of God. Again and again in chapter five alone, he stresses that it's those who 'believe in the Son of God' (vv.5,10,13) who know they have eternal life. Sadly some believers, by losing faith, lose the assurance of their salvation - even though they can't lose salvation itself. Then at the end of chapter two, we come across an example of the second way of convincing ourselves that we're saved - it's when John says in 1 John 2:29: "... everyone ... who practices righteousness is born of Him." So we can live without doubts when we do right by keeping the Lord's commands.

Finally, in First John chapter 4, we discover how strongly the matter of loving one another comes over as a third assurance of our new birth. John 7 says that “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” So, the certainty that the believer has eternal life is a certainty that’s assured three times over when we retain our convictions about the person of the Lord Jesus, when we do the right things by keeping his commandments, and also when we love each other.

Just so there's no misunderstanding, John's theme is not salvation itself – for remember: salvation from sin's penalty is not by works - but John's theme is rather the assurance of salvation. Continuing to believe, keeping the Lord's commandments and loving each other are not things we do so as to be saved, or even remain saved, from the judgement of our sins; but if we are saved by faith, and we do these things, then we'll know without doubt that we're saved, just as the Bible plainly teaches – and saved forever at that!

## CHAPTER 3: THE WAY OF THE LORD – IN BAPTISM

There's a man in the Bible, mentioned in the Book of Acts, who's described as having 'a more exact knowledge about the Way' (Acts 24:22). Throughout this book, we're reminding ourselves that, originally, this was how Christianity was referred to. It was simply known as 'the Way'. The first Christians were said to belong to 'the Way' – or were followers of 'the Way', hardly surprising as the one they followed had proclaimed himself to be 'the Way, the truth and the life'. A similar expression is found in this story narrated in chapter 18 of the book of Acts:

“Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:24-26).

One of the first things Priscilla and Aquila would have given Apollos further help on would have been the topic of Christian baptism, for Apollos only knew about the baptism of John at this stage – that's John the Baptist, of course. In the very next chapter of the book of Acts when the Apostle Paul came across disciples who'd only been baptized with John's baptism, he baptized

them in the name of the Lord Jesus – or as we have it in Matthew 28:19: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. It’s one and the same name. This is what we call ‘believers’ baptism’. A clear example of this is found in Acts chapter 8:35-39:

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. As they went along the road they came to some water; and the [Ethiopian] eunuch \*said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [And Philip said], "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the [Ethiopian] eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the [Ethiopian] eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.”

This is helpful confirmation that baptism is for those who can clearly testify that Jesus Christ is their personal saviour. Baptism is not necessary for salvation itself. Baptism is something we do, it’s a work, and so it cannot save us, as the Bible plainly teaches we are not saved by works. And that story in Acts 8 is also revealing as to how the baptism was conducted, since we read they went down into the water, and afterwards came up out of the water. This description is consistent with the meaning of the biblical word for baptism being ‘to dip’ – as well as being consistent with the explanation of the significance of baptism in Romans

chapter 6 which talks in terms of being ‘buried’ with Christ in water, as a symbol of death, burial and resurrection.

Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose on the third day, and for the believer on the Lord Jesus Christ, his death is our death in that it’s paid sin’s penalty for us. So, when we take a public stand in believer’s baptism, we’re identifying with the risen Jesus as Lord of our life (our new life in him) – and in effect we’re saying that we’re dying to the old way of living and rising to a new way of living – no longer living for ourselves but to do our Lord’s will and to please him, not ourselves.

In believers’ baptism we make a visible, public statement of the unseen faith that’s in our heart, and which has already saved us. It’s as if we’re telling all those who’re there to witness the event that we’re under new management. We’re displaying our new Christian identity as being no longer ‘in Adam’, but now ‘in Christ’. Our old or former self has gone, and the new has come: baptism shows our intention to live – or walk, in the old Bible language – to walk in that newness of life – the new life we received when we first believed in Christ.

At salvation, we understand that our former self died with Christ, and we became a new person, effective from the time of our conversion. So then, if we live true to our baptism, day by day, we’ll want to be conscious of putting away from us old behaviours and vices, and living a new quality of life for the Lord. So in our water baptism, we have a reminder about our need to display our new Christian identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ even as we grow and mature spiritually. We also declare our commitment to live for the saviour who died for us.

I once heard my friend Ed tell a true story which I've always remembered as an illustration of commitment – the type of commitment involved in following Christ. In Israel one day, Ed was talking to an Israeli helicopter pilot. The pilot told him how he'd been involved in an accident. His helicopter had flown too near the side-wall of the valley or chasm, and the rotors had struck the rocks. It had come crashing out of the sky. The pilot, obviously, had survived, but one of the rotors had almost sliced his leg off. The surgeon wanted to amputate it, saying it was so badly damaged it would be useless. But the pilot had begged that he be allowed to keep his leg. As soon as he was able, he got a bicycle and strapped his dead leg to one pedal, and pedalled away with his good leg. He did this day after day for a long, long time. Slowly, his damaged leg began to gain power, and he was able to rejoin active service.

While he was standing talking to Ed, his alarm sounded. Duty was calling. At that very moment, his presence was required in the air due to some threat against Israel's borders. Ed says that man ran across the car park to his helicopter: and then he added 'now that's what I call commitment!' Jesus Christ says in Luke 9:23: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me." Baptism is the way to begin to show that same calibre of commitment to the cause of Christ. But as well as displaying our Christian identity; and as well as declaring our commitment to follow the Lord Jesus; believers' baptism also demonstrates our love for the Saviour who first loved us. Jesus said in John 14:15: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." And baptism is one of his commands to us, one we should obey as soon as we're sure our sins are all

forgiven through faith in Jesus' name. The Lord commanded his first disciples in Matthew 28:19-20:

"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 they did that, for as we've seen Paul commanded unbaptized believers to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, the single name of the triune God. When we keep this command, like any other, we show our love to the Lord. In that sense baptism becomes a test of our love for the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20). I remember hearing about an unusual test of love. A certain Lieutenant Blandford had taken a book from among the hundreds of Army library books at his Florida training camp. In it, he discovered handwritten notes in a woman's writing. He had always hated that habit of writing in books, but somehow these comments were different, full of insight. He'd never believed that a woman could see into a man's heart so tenderly, so understandingly. Her name was written at the front too: it was Hollis Meynell. So he'd got hold of a New York City telephone book and found her address. He'd written, and she'd answered. Next day he'd been shipped out, but they'd gone on writing.

For 13 months, she'd faithfully replied, and more than replied. When his letters did not arrive she wrote anyway, and now he believed he loved her, and she loved him. But she'd refused all his requests to send him her photograph. 'No, don't ask for my picture,' she'd said, 'When you come to New York, you'll see me and

then you'll make your decision. Now, at last, home from his tour of duty, the time had come. As arranged, he was standing under the clock at the Grand Central Station in New York, waiting for the appointed hour of six o'clock to arrive – and waiting for his first meeting with Hollis Meynell whom he was to recognize by the red rose she'd be wearing in her lapel.

At one minute to six, he noticed a young woman coming toward him. Her figure was long and slim; her blond hair lay back in curls, her eyes blue as flowers. Dressed in a pale green suit, she was like springtime come alive. He started toward her, entirely forgetting to notice that she wasn't wearing a rose, and as he moved, a small, provocative smile curved her lips. "Going my way, soldier?" she murmured. Uncontrollably, he made one step closer to her. Then he saw Hollis Meynell.

She was standing almost directly behind the girl, a woman well past 40, her graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump; her thick-ankled feet were thrust into low-heeled shoes. But she wore a red rose in the ruffled lapel of her brown coat. The girl in the green suit was walking quickly away. Blandford felt as though he were being split in two, so keen was his desire to follow the girl in green, yet so deep was his longing for the woman whose spirit had truly upheld his own. Her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible; he could see that now. Her gray eyes had a warm, kindly twinkle. This would not be love, but it would be something perhaps even rarer than love - a friendship for which he had been and must ever be grateful. He squared his broad shoulders, saluted and said: "I'm Lieutenant John Blandford, and you - you are Miss Meynell. I'm so glad you could meet me. May I take you to dinner?" The woman's face broadened in

a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is all about, son," she answered. "That young lady in the green suit - the one who just went by - begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you asked me to go out with you, I should tell you that she's waiting for you in that big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test."

Now I want you to think of baptism as a test. Since it's a command of the Lord Jesus, whether we submit to water baptism or not is really his test of the reality of our love for him. May I ask: 'Have you proved and demonstrated your love; have you declared your commitment; and have you displayed your Christian identity - all by going through the waters of baptism? No? Then what's hindering you?'

## CHAPTER 4: BELONGING TO THE WAY

Four ways to grow as a Christian believer are by reading the Bible; by actively sharing our faith; by meeting together with other Christians; and by praying regularly. They're all biblical. For the apostle Peter encouraged his readers to remember the words of the prophets and apostles (2 Peter 3:2,16).

He specifically mentioned the biblical writings of the apostle Paul. And throughout the Bible we've the examples of Timothy, Joshua and the kings of Israel who were directed to read God's Word publicly as well as personally. Then, we know the Lord Jesus himself called on his followers to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18-12) in sharing the Christian message with friends and acquaintances – again something they could do individually and as a church. So, we're to read the Bible and witness, but individual Christians are also told, in the Bible, 'not to forsake [not to abandon] the gathering of themselves together' in the New Testament churches of God (Hebrews 10:25). Among their gatherings were times when they came together to pray. 'Pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17), Paul says. Not non-stop prayer, of course, for that would be impossible!

The same word long ago was used to describe the hacking cough that someone had. They weren't coughing non-stop, but if ever you were in that person's company you'd be left in no doubt that they'd a cough that was persistent. So we, as Christian believers, are commanded to develop a regular habit of prayer – church prayer as well as a personal prayer life. Shortly, we'll see how all

these 4 practical points for Christian living – of reading, witnessing, meeting with other Christians and praying - were all in evidence in the first Christian community at Jerusalem, but first, let's remind ourselves of the well-known story of the dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus as he was travelling to Damascus. It begins with these words:

“Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2).

The people Saul was looking for were Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. What interests us in this book is that they are described as ‘belonging to the Way’. What was this sense of belonging? And how, in any case, did they come to belong to this well-defined movement, which in early New Testament times was a community simply referred to as ‘the Way’? Those are the questions we’ll be exploring in this chapter.

This first community of Christian believers, known then as ‘the Way’, lived out the things taught to them by the Lord. We’re first introduced to this community as a Bible studying, witnessing, worshipping and praying community in Acts chapter 2. And certainly, the impression we get is of a learning that lived, a fellowship that functioned, a worship that warmed and a praying that powered. It was a vibrant community! And out of love, they provided for each others’ practical needs. Listen to this extract from

Acts chapter 2 talking about their togetherness and real community spirit:

“All those who had believed were together and had all things in common ... sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind ... taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God ... And the Lord was adding to their number ...” (Acts 2:44-47; see also Acts 4:32-35).

That’s interesting, the Lord was adding to their number. That was how this movement called ‘the Way’ grew. Others didn’t just casually associate themselves with it. By the way, when it says that they ‘were together’ it literally means they were ‘on the same’ – I suppose we would say they were on the same page, and not expressed in diverse denominations. Their togetherness was definitely linked to their growth. And it was God who gave the increase. More details of this are found in Acts chapter 5:

“... they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*” (Acts 5:13-14).

Once again, we read of people being added to the local community of obedient believers. Greek writers outside of the Bible make use of this verb (to add) to signify that act by which cities, towns, or provinces changed their masters, and put themselves

under another government. So persons, like those being referred to here, left the scribes and Pharisees and mainstream Judaism, and put themselves under the teaching of the apostles.

The community of ‘the Way’ was a distinctive movement of God. We’ve just read of those who didn’t belong to ‘the Way’ – they were described as ‘the rest’ and ‘the people’. This comment comes immediately after the passage describing the death under God’s judgement of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They died for conspiring to deceive the leaders of this early Christian community. This had a very noticeable deterrent effect, it would seem – it served as a warning for those whose hearts were not right with God. Ananias had been a wealthy man, and perhaps it was the rest of the influential people – as yet unconverted – who recoiled from any casual association with this group; whereas the others mentioned could well refer to the common people, who, despite holding the community of Christian disciples in high esteem, were also on the outside looking in. God would set the boundary of his gathered together people. Any increase to their number would be on his initiative.

And so we see that to be a believer in the Lord was one thing. Wonderful as that was, since it brought with it the great blessing of salvation, it wasn’t the whole story. In the previous chapter, we saw that those who believed were baptized in water. Now what we’re seeing, is that the step after baptism is the step of addition to the fellowship of God’s people locally. Far from this being something we take upon ourselves, these Bible passages make it clear this is the Lord’s initiative in our hearts – one which we, at a human level, have a duty to respond to.

So back again to these early Christians who were belonging to 'the Way.' When persecution came, they supported each other in prayer (Acts 12:5). When problems came that threatened their treasured unity, they looked to one another for the answers (Acts 6:1-6; 15:1-31). They were clearly inter-dependent. They needed each other, just as we need each other. The story is told of the effect upon others of the absence of a believer from church gatherings. The man concerned had faithfully been in attendance every week for many years, but for the past couple of weeks had been absent. One of the other believers decided to pay the man a visit at his small cottage. Upon knocking, the door was opened almost immediately – as if the occupant had been expecting a visit.

After exchanging pleasantries they both sat down beside the open fire in the living room, which brought a welcome warmth to the situation. Nothing was said. They both just sat there, gazing into the vivid amber glow of the fire. This took away any awkwardness. After a few minutes, the visitor reached forward and with some tongs carefully removed a glowing, red hot ember and placed it on the hearth stone beside the fire. Both men fixed their gaze on it, watching as its glow faded so that all that was left was a charred, black coal. He then took the tongs again and placed the coal back into the fire, where it immediately began to glow again, until it again became red hot. Another minute or two passed, then the visiting brother got up and made his way to the door. The house-holder helped him on with his coat. Not a word had been said since they sat down in front of the fire but, with tears in his eyes, the man simply looked at him and said, "Thank you so much for visiting and thank you for your fiery sermon. I'll see you back at church again next Sunday."

You and I need each other. When we try to ‘go it alone’, or when we don’t give priority to being with fellow-believers, the glow of our love, enthusiasm and commitment to the Lord rapidly fades and grows cold. How often have you been encouraged by a fellow-disciple’s joy in the Lord? How often have you received the sound, wise advice of an older Christian? How many times have you been helped and comforted through some difficult situation by the shared experience of another Christian? It was surely like that in the first Christian community – among those who ‘belonged to the Way’.

We were created by God to be inter-dependent, not independent. All God’s revealed purposes in the past through Abraham to Moses and beyond were centred on the establishment of a community of believers who would come together in unity of heart and purpose - in close relationship not only with each other, but also with God – so close in fact that God repeatedly referred to them as “My people” in the Old Testament.

It’s not in the least bit surprising, then, to find that same value and importance given to the idea of ‘community’ in the New Testament, amongst those who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. We’re first introduced to it, as we say, in Acts chapter 2 where we also read:

“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 [the] fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to [the] prayer[s]” (vv.41,42).

This was the beginning of something that would develop right through the New Testament writings. Everywhere on the pages of the New Testament we meet those who belong to a well-defined community of born-again disciples, all baptized by immersion in water, all added locally to church of God fellowship, all serving according to one pattern of teaching in every place, all maintained under a fellowship of elders while being separated to God.

If we're to follow their example, there's no room for a 'lowest common denominator' approach today. Was it not our Lord's expressed desire for his followers "*that they may all be one*" (John 17:20-23)? Unity like this can only be reached through a sincere commitment on our part to carefully follow the pattern the Lord laid down in His Word (Romans 6:17; 2 Timothy 1:13). In the next chapter, we hope to have more of a look into what really is the Biblical teaching pattern for this authentic Christian community and its service.

God calls us as individuals, it's true, but then he shows us in the Bible how we should come together with other believers who have the same desire to follow the Lord obediently (Acts 2:41,42). The unity we've been emphasizing is really important to the Lord – so important, in fact, he even spoke about it as he was going out to die! Now, if that's the case, shouldn't we make sure we're in a community today that corresponds exactly with that first Christian community of those who 'belonged to the Way'?

## CHAPTER 5: THE WAY OF THE TRUTH

The apostle Peter in the Bible warns about:

“... false prophets ... among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you [he said], who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned” (2 Peter 1-2).

Notice his expression ‘the way of the truth’. The Lord Jesus said he was ‘the Way’ (John 14:6), and so far we’ve traced how the early Christian movement was referred to in the Acts of the Apostles on many occasions as ‘the Way’. That’s led us to think of them as a distinctive community, and now we’ll see how they derived their separate identity from their commitment to the deposit of truth which the Lord had entrusted to them, and which shaped their lives.

Before we come to that, let me tell you about the occupation of northern Cyprus by Turkish forces in 1974. Looters stripped the region’s churches, removing several dozen major frescoes and mosaics dating back to the sixth century. Since then, recovery efforts have resulted in the return of some of the pieces. A major break-through came some time back when German police in Munich arrested a central figure in the looting and selling of these church treasures. The cooperation of his former associate, a

Dutch art dealer, with the Cypriot and German authorities made the arrest possible. In his apartments police found Cypriot frescoes, mosaics, and stolen paintings - including a possible Picasso - estimated to be worth more than \$60 million.

But what the Babylonians did to the Jerusalem temple in the sixth century BC was even worse. They looted the Temple and carried away its precious and treasured vessels. Here we have the psalmist's view of what the Babylonians did to the beautiful temple Solomon had built: The enemy has damaged everything within the sanctuary.

“Your adversaries have roared in the midst of Your meeting place; they have set up their own standards for signs. It seems as if one had lifted up *His* axe in a forest of trees. And now all its carved work. They smash with hatchet and hammers. They have burned Your sanctuary to the ground; They have defiled the dwelling place of Your name” (Psalm 74:4-7).

Of course, this was not just desecration of works of art, this was a desecration of the place where God had said he would dwell on earth. They smashed up God's house like people hacking at trees in a forest, then burned it to the ground. Such contempt! As he wrote to Timothy, in his last Bible letter before he died, the apostle Paul predicted something just as bad would happen again - churches of God would be looted – by being emptied of Biblical truth. The apostle Paul shared the concern of the apostle Peter with which we began. For he also warned of those who would turn others away from the truth.

The whole emphasis of Paul's last letter is on the Word of God. Paul knew his time was short. And when time is short, the mind tends to be concentrated on the things of real value – and for Paul that meant the truth of God's Word. He tells Timothy to “hold on to the pattern” (of teaching); and to pass on to others the teaching “you have heard from me”, he says. Then he tells him to “correctly teach the word of truth”; and directs him to “the sacred Scriptures” reminding him that “all Scripture is ... profitable”. Finally, he says “proclaim the message” or “preach the Word.”

But in relation to what we've been saying, I want to emphasize three verses from Paul's letters to Timothy, three verses which are all very similar. In fact, Paul uses the same verb and noun in triplicate as he gives this command to Timothy. Its first mention is found in First Timothy chapter 6. There, Paul says: “Timothy, **guard** the deposit entrusted to you” (1 Timothy 6:20 ESV). Then he follows that up in 2 Timothy 1 – which is the very next chapter he writes to Timothy, and says: “But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to **guard** until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” He then continues by saying: “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, **guard** the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:12-14 ESV).

Three times, you'll notice, Paul refers to something which had been entrusted to him by the Lord, and now in turn, of course, to Timothy to whom Paul has passed it on. Some translators describe it as a 'deposit'. That makes us think of what we do at a bank. We deposit money there for safe-keeping, and for the bank

to use on our behalf so that we gain interest on it. So a deposit makes us think of something valuable we possess but which we give into the care of someone else for them to look after for us.

And that's exactly the picture here – three times over in fact. To apostles like Paul first of all, the Lord Jesus had deposited the truth of God's Word. That's something valuable. Through the teaching of the apostles, this deposit of truth first given by the Lord had been deposited in the first churches of God, which were planted as a result of the apostles passing on what the Lord had taught them. Now, as Paul faced up to death, this concern was uppermost in his mind: that these churches would be looted of this valuable deposit by the action of false teachers bringing in error, and introducing wrong teaching.

Paul saw the Lord's teaching, of which he'd been made a steward, as something 'good,' something 'beautiful' in fact (extra adjective (*kalos*) in v.14) - a precious treasure, no less. It was to be held in trust from the Lord until 'the Day' he would stand before the risen Christ at his judgement-seat to give an account of his stewardship. Until then, it was to be 'guarded' or 'kept' as a prized possession. So with a word of military command, he says to Timothy – three times – 'guard it!' I wonder if we have a passion for God's truth, like Paul did? It's the fact that Paul tells Timothy three times over to guard the deposit of truth that shows his intensity, his passion. If Timothy succeeded in guarding the truth, keeping it from attack by all who'd dispose of inconvenient bits, then this would be a demonstration of the Spirit's power.

There's an illustration of what Paul means when he tells Timothy to 'guard' the truth. Once when Paul gave his testimony of how

he came to Christ, he said: “And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him” (Acts 22:20). When it says “watching out for the coats”, it is exactly the same as “guarding the coats” – the word he uses to Timothy. Those coats were peoples’ treasured possessions, and they’d charged Paul with the responsibility of making sure nothing happened to them while he was looking after them. They had handed them to Saul (or Paul as he later became known), and they expected them to be returned in the same condition as before. So that’s what Paul meant here too.

The Lord’s handed his truth to us, and will one day require it again at our hands or at least demand an account of our stewardship. The truth, as Paul handed it to Timothy, was no mere outline or rough sketch of truth. What Paul had handed to Timothy for safe-keeping was “the pattern of ... sound words.” The word ‘pattern’ means a mould or model, so something definite and very precise. One Bible version in fact translates it as ‘the standard’ as in the standard teaching in all the then churches of God. And that’s exactly what it was. For Paul taught the same thing wherever he went – he says “as I teach everywhere in every church” (see 1 Corinthians 4:17; 7:17).

In one part of the world where churches of God are growing fast today, I asked what was drawing people. I was told it was their evident adherence to this very same standard apostles’ teaching of the first century – something they were spreading through a network of cell groups for home Bible study. Not a few who had applied for fellowship, professed to having been led to the Saviour by the earnest zeal of teenage girls in that church. Women were

winning women with the Word in home Bible study settings. Interviewees said they were impressed with the biblical role of women in worship there – by this they meant sisters remaining silent with their heads covered exactly as we read of in First Corinthians - but they were equally impressed by the same sisters' earnest devotion to sharing the Word. They would doubtless say that faithfulness to the biblical pattern promotes growth in their experience. But the point is: they are guarding the pattern in the way of the truth as at the very beginning of Christianity.

## CHAPTER 6: THE WAY OF WORSHIP AND SERVICE

Paul said “according to the Way which they call a sect, I ... serve ... God.” These words are found in Acts 24 verse 14 and quite obviously they’re talking about the way of Christian service and worship. We’re saved to serve, and our chief end is to glorify God. If we look in either the Old or New Testament of our Bible, we find that the public service or public worship of God is closely linked with the subject of God’s house on earth. For example, the letter to the Hebrews has a lot to teach us about such worship, and it links us back to the time of Moses when it says in Hebrews 3:

“Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ [*is faithful*] as a Son over [God’s] house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.”

The first place to start would seem to be by clarifying what exactly is meant by ‘God’s House?’ Nowadays this expression means different things to different people – for example, any place for (usually Christian) public worship may be referred to as a house of God - so it’s important to be clear on the actual Bible meaning. The writer of this Bible letter tells the people for whom this letter was originally intended that they are God’s House – in fact, linking himself with the readership, he says “whose house we are”. So it’s no longer a physical house or building: “whose house we are,” he says - and then he adds the condition: “if we hold fast ...”

This condition is something he says a lot more about, later in this letter. There's talk of the danger of 'falling away', for example, in Hebrews chapter 6, verse 6. Now, let me say this very carefully: if God's House comprises everyone who's known salvation through faith in Christ, then this 'falling away' means falling away from salvation. For if to have a place in God's House means receiving Christ's salvation – and only that - then falling away from God's House can only mean losing that same salvation.

But the Bible does NOT teach that, once saved, we can be lost again – as this book in an earlier chapter has already shown. Therefore, God's House is to be distinguished from the vast company of all those who have known salvation by God's grace through personal faith in Jesus Christ, and is also to be distinguished even from all currently living believers. The Bible deals with the security of our salvation in so many ways as to put beyond the shadow of a doubt the fact that we can never, never be lost again, after having believed in Christ for salvation, salvation which is from the penalty which our sins deserve.

Which shows us that the defining issue for a place in God's House is not the possession of salvation, for although Hebrews tells us we can fall away from God's House, yet we can never be dispossessed of our salvation. There is no need whatsoever for us to hold fast to our salvation, for the Lord Jesus himself holds us fast, and assures us that no one can snatch us away from him. But, regarding what's called God's House, we evidently do need to hold fast, just as they did, to whom the author of Hebrews wrote some two thousand years ago. All those who have ever at some point come to saving faith in Christ include myriads of believers who are now dead. But God's House at any time does not

even include all true living believers, for there is that condition applied: ‘if we hold fast ...’

The Hebrews’ letter was written as its name implies, to early Jewish Christians – the very first Christians being, of course, Jews. They had left behind the ceremonial Law of Moses to embrace Jesus as the Messiah, and so follow the teaching of his apostles. And following the apostles’ teaching brought them into the New Testament Churches of God. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us how this came about. These churches spread outwards from Jerusalem mainly as a result of the various missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. There isn’t the slightest evidence that some practised baptism while others didn’t; no indication whatsoever that some churches had elders whereas others had a different form of government. They all served God according to the Way, which was then regarded as a sect by mainstream Judaism.

So they were a persecuted community then. It’s clear from Paul’s words earlier, that there was a stigma associated with belonging to ‘the Way.’ And some of them, by the time that the letter to the Hebrews came to be written, had come to feel life would be easier outside of ‘the Way.’ They felt life would be simpler again if, as in the old days, they were just going along with the Law of Moses like the majority of folks around them, at least in Israel. To people just like that, to those who were wavering on the brink of leaving the community of churches of God, the writer of the Hebrews’ letter makes his appeal by the Spirit of God: ‘don’t go back; don’t fall away.’

To quit their association with ‘the Way’ would not mean the loss of their salvation, but – and this is the main point of the entire letter – they would miss out on everything that was special in serving God together in the biblical community of Churches of God. It would be a falling away in terms of their service – and from the privileges and responsibilities which attended it. In short, they would lose their place in God’s House – they wouldn’t lose their salvation, remember – but they would lose their place in God’s House. That clearly defined community of believers, as described in the pages of the New Testament, was where God lived by his Spirit, in a way that answered exactly to earlier eras when the place where God lived on earth – his House – was known as Moses’ Tabernacle or Solomon’s Temple. This historical background helps us to understand better what the writer to the Hebrews was saying in those words we quoted earlier from:

“... but Christ [*is faithful*] as a Son over [God’s] house - whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:6).

Our place in God’s house is conditional, as theirs was – but conditional on what? What’s this hope set before us which we’ve got to lay hold of? Is it the hope of the Lord’s coming? No! Let the writer himself explain what that hope is, from chapter 6:19-20:

“This hope [he says] we have as an anchor of the soul, a {hope} both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever.”

Ah, of course. The Lord Jesus is being presented in the letter to the Hebrews as our Priest as well as our Saviour. And connected with that, we can now see that the hope to be grasped is the ‘high priestly hope’ which is to do with the revealed fact that:

“Christ [in his ascension after resurrection] did not enter a holy place made with hands, a *mere* copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24).

In other words, there’s place in heaven, a holy place, now containing the Lord Jesus as our high priest and this is the sanctuary where the public worship of the people of God takes place. The sure hope of those comprising God’s House is one of accessing that same place in worship through the Lord Jesus Christ in his role in heaven for us as high priest. Again the writer’s appeal comes to those whose allegiance to the Way was wavering – and this time it’s an appeal not to “throw away [their] confidence” (v.35) by “shrinking back” (vv.38,39) and “forsaking [their] ... assembling together” (v.25). Not to throw away their confidence? What confidence? Wait a minute. Doesn’t this take us back again to the words with which we started? “... but Christ [is faithful] as a Son over [God’s] house - whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:6).

Yes, there were two parts to the condition – hope, which we’ve dealt with, and confidence. But in the same chapter where they’re told not to throw away their confidence, we have it clearly explained what that confidence is. Verse 19 of chapter 10 says:

“We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart” (Hebrews 10:19).

So, it's expressing the same idea, the same wonderful revelation about a spiritual entry through public worship into the very place in heaven where Jesus now acts as high priest. This is quite literally the high point of true spiritual worship (John 4:24), and it's biblically defined here in terms of those who would continue in 'the Way', not abandoning its worship gatherings. What's more, the clear implication is that those who fell away from the apostles' teaching would miss out on any enjoyment of this wonderful spiritual experience in worship in God's House.

## CHAPTER 7: THE WAY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:1-4).

These are surely among the words that have brought the greatest comfort to the greatest number of people! They also are full of insight regarding the life and work of a shepherd. I'm told it's almost impossible for sheep to be made to lie down and be at rest unless they are free from fear, tension, aggravations and hunger. Only the shepherd can make sure these conditions are satisfied. Sheep, of course, require water and in a dry land the shepherd knows where the best drinking places are.

The shepherd will keep his flock on the move from pasture to pasture. This prevents over-grazing but also prevents re-infestation of the sheep with internal parasites or disease, since the sheep move off the infested ground before these organisms complete their life cycles. Shepherds, certainly those in Bible times and lands, took their flocks to summer pastures up on the mountains. Every mountain has its valleys, sides scarred by deep ravines. And the best route to the top is always up these valleys. The shepherd leads his flock up the paths that wind through the dark valleys where wild animals might be lurking.

Then it'll be the shepherd's job to protect the sheep. He used the rod for this – as well as using it to correct any wayward sheep that insisted on wandering away. On the other hand, the staff as opposed to the rod, was what he used to draw sheep close to him for inspection – and to guide the sheep by laying the tip of the long slender stick gently against the animal's side and applying pressure in the direction he wanted it to go.

This pastoral picture is then taken up and used to serve as a parable within New Testament Christianity. The Lord Jesus spoke of himself as 'the good shepherd' (John 10) with individual believers being his sheep. But you generally see sheep in a flock, and that's true of how you see believers throughout the New Testament. We find them being gathered into 'the churches of God' as an expansion of 'the little flock' (Luke 12:32) which Jesus had spoken about earlier. Peter, one of Christ's first disciples, was to become an early leader, an elder or shepherd – of which there were many in each and every church of God in New Testament times. For example, here's an extract from one of Paul's missionary journeys. Luke records how Paul returned to churches he'd previously planted:

“... strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:22-23).

Elders - plural - in every church, notice that. Paul would speak to one group of them later in his travels. To a gathering of elders, all drawn from the Church of God at Ephesus, he said: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28). That emphasizes the work of an elder or overseer – they're the same person - as acting like a shepherd leading the flock in paths of righteousness. So, as we were saying, Peter was an elder and so a shepherd over and among the flock as it was spread across the local churches of God in every location where they'd been planted in those days. As he wrote that first Bible letter of his, at one point in it, he addresses the elders of the grouping of churches he's writing to – and by the way it must have been a large grouping of churches as the list of place names contains five Roman provinces. But these churches were all united by means of the connection between their elders – anyway, let's get to First Peter chapter 5 where Peter says:

“... I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:1-4).

So Peter was - as we say - a shepherd, being an elder among the New Testament churches of God. He recognizes the supreme authority of the Chief Shepherd who is Jesus Christ, but equally he acknowledges those fellow-elders of his in all the churches who, along with him, are under-shepherds, caring for the churches on Christ's behalf. They're a fellowship of elders ruling over a fellowship of interdependent churches: which formed one flock overall in which no individual church was able to do as it pleased. Rather, all were accountable to a united elderhood. This was the system of government for the churches of God in the Christian community known as 'the Way.'

Like the eastern shepherd with which we began this chapter with our quote from Psalm 23, spiritual shepherds like Peter had a duty of care for the believers in their charge, to guide them in the ways of the Chief Shepherd. The natural tendency for sheep to go astray was reflected in the case of those believers in New Testament times who, after committing to follow Christ in the traditions of his apostles, began to swerve aside from the way of the truth, away from the way of righteousness. Now, as we reminded ourselves at the beginning, one main duty of shepherd care is to guide the flock in paths of righteousness. Peter, as a shepherd, was concerned about this, as we see from his second Bible letter, in which he says – speaking of those who had turned aside:

“For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known

it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit" and, "A sow, after washing, *returns* to wallowing in the mire" (2 Peter 2:20-22).

When Peter says it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, he can't be meaning the way of salvation, for how could it ever be better to be unsaved than saved? So by the way of righteousness - which it would've been better for them not to have known - he must be referring to their place of accountable service in a local church of God, following the way of the apostles' teaching. Since they'd now be held responsible for openly turning their back on it, it would've been better for them never to have been associated in public church testimony in the first place.

The 'Apostles' Teaching' (Acts 2:42) was, of course, originally given to them by the One who could say 'I am the Way' (John 14:6). Jesus calls himself 'the Way' and he's also called 'the Righteous One'. So those who keep his commandments in God's Word can fairly be described as following the way of righteousness. The psalmist spoke of God's Word as altogether righteous (see Psalm 19:9). But this also means that righteousness should be the trademark of Christian disciples. For did not the Lord Jesus say to his disciples:

"Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these

things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:31-33).

Notice how God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness are brought together. God’s kingdom, Jesus said was given to ‘the little flock.’ And from Paul’s missionary journeys we’ve seen it spoken of in the same breath as the churches of God which Paul was planting, and in which he was appointing elders (Acts 14:22,23). In a similar linking of the kingdom and righteousness, Paul could remind believers at Rome that: “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

So, the flock of God in the inter-linked churches of God, all together expressing God’s kingdom on earth, and as ruled over on behalf of Christ by a united elderhood, ought to reflect the righteousness of God. In character, it ought to be seen as the way of righteousness. That’s a real challenge as to our lifestyle, our manner of life. So, in conclusion, we’ve seen that the first Christians were identified in the New Testament history book of Acts as ‘belonging to the Way’ (Acts 9:2). The conviction that early Christian history, as given in the book of Acts, is more than merely descriptive has been the key to what has been presented in this book - which has pointed to ‘The Way’ as still being the way for disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ to follow. This is the Way of Christian service until Christ’s return, and it includes the way in which churches of God are to be governed. It has been a privilege to show you ‘The way.’

**Teach me Thy Way, O Lord**

Teach me Thy way, O Lord, teach me Thy way!

Thy guiding grace afford, teach me Thy way!

Help me to walk aright, more by faith, less by sight;

Lead me with heav'nly light, teach me Thy way!

When I am sad at heart, teach me Thy way!

When earthly joys depart, teach me Thy way!

In hours of loneliness, in times of dire distress,

In failure or success, teach me Thy way!

When doubts and fears arise, teach me Thy way!

When storms o'erspread the skies, teach me Thy way!

Shine through the cloud and rain, through sorrow, toil and pain;

Make Thou my pathway plain, teach me Thy way!

Long as my life shall last, teach me Thy way!

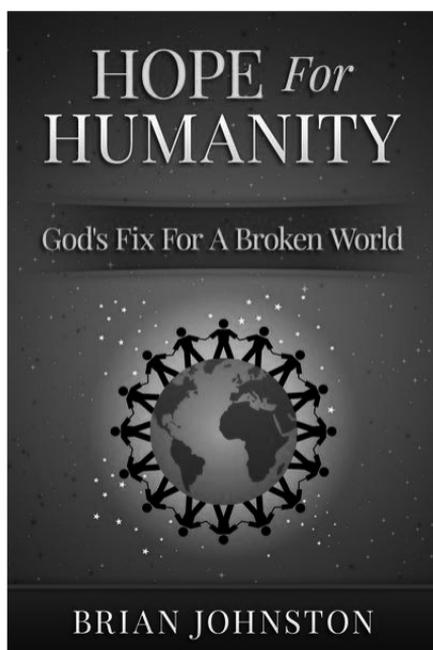
Where'er my lot be cast, teach me Thy way!

Until the race is run, until the journey's done,

Until the crown is won, teach me Thy way!



Did you love *The Way: Being a New Testament Disciple*? Then you should read *Hope for Humanity: God's Fix for a Broken World* by Brian Johnston!



A conversational book, full of anecdotes and illustrations, yet direct and challenging - ideal to share the gospel or to strengthen and sharpen your own faith. Daily headlines remind us that this world is broken in so many different ways; an honest look within ourselves reveals deep problems too. This book pinpoints the same cause and the same solution – God's sending of His Son on a mission that would lead to a cross – with a challenge to every reader to accept or reject it.

## Also by Brian Johnston

Healthy Churches - God's Bible Blueprint For Growth

Hope for Humanity: God's Fix for a Broken World

First Corinthians: Nothing But Christ Crucified

Bible Answers to Listeners' Questions

Living in God's House: His Design in Action

Christianity 101: Seven Bible Basics

Nights of Old: Bible Stories of God at Work

Daniel Decoded: Deciphering Bible Prophecy

A Test of Commitment: 15 Challenges to Stimulate Your Devotion to Christ

John's Epistles - Certainty in the Face of Change

If Atheism Is True...

8 Amazing Privileges of God's People: A Bible Study of Romans 9:4-5

Learning from Bible Grandparents

Increasing Your Christian Footprint

Christ-centred Faith

Mindfulness That Jesus Endorses

Amazing Grace! Paul's Gospel Message to the Galatians

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Learning How To Pray - From the Lord's Prayer

About the Bush: The Five Excuses of Moses  
The Five Loves of God  
Deepening Our Relationship With Christ  
Really Good News For Today!  
A Legacy of Kings - Israel's Chequered History  
Minor Prophets: Major Issues!  
The Tabernacle - God's House of Shadows  
Tribes and Tribulations - Israel's Predicted Personalities  
Once Saved, Always Saved - The Reality of Eternal Security  
After God's Own Heart : The Life of David  
Jesus: What Does the Bible Really Say?  
God: His Glory, His Building, His Son  
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Knowing God - Reflections on Psalm 23  
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Christ  
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Great Spiritual Movements  
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Total Conviction - 4 Things God Wants You To Be Fully Con-  
vinced About  
Esther: A Date With Destiny  
Experiencing God in Ephesians  
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Five Sacred Solos - The Truths That the Reformation Recovered

Kingdom of God: Past, Present or Future?  
Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith  
Stronger Than the Storm - The Last Words of Jesus  
Fencepost Turtles - People Placed by God  
Five Woman and a Baby - The Genealogy of Jesus  
Pure Milk - Nurturing New Life in Jesus  
Jesus: Son Over God's House  
Salt and the Sacrifice of Christ  
The Glory of God  
The Way: Being a New Testament Disciple  
Power Outage - Christianity Unplugged  
Windows to Faith: Insights for the Inquisitive



## **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](http://www.churchesofgod.info)). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://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.



## About the Publisher

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