

NT

A pattern for life
in God's house

Personal transformation
No need for an apology?
The love of God

Issue 4 2019

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NT Needed Truth

is published quarterly by the Churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God (www.ChurchesofGod.info) and may be obtained from

Hayes Press

@ sales@hayespress.org

www.hayespress.org

The Barn, Flaxlands, Royal Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire, SN4 8DY UK

 Needed Truth

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Archived issues available at

<https://churchesofgod.info/media/publications/#NeededTruth>



From the Editors' desk

It is always good to see each issue of NT come together into the finished magazine, for which our thanks go to those who work in the background to do this for us, the readers.

As we come to the last of some great topics this year, the opening and the first of the main topic articles both refer to the Lord's words: "*Whose likeness and inscription is this?*"¹ In the first, the writer deals with our priorities in life; while in the 'Firstborn' article, the author invites us to reflect on the image of God's Son, who is the *firstborn among many brothers*.² Worthy considerations!

What is the high point of your week? A read of the 'Zion in heaven' article directs us to 'elevate our thoughts above the ordinary and ensure our priorities are right'.

In 'They're out to get us' we are made aware of the great enemy of our faith, the Devil, and some of his tactics. Peter, one who, along with others, *had been with Jesus*,³ is the apostle who features in the 'Personal Transformation' article. He is the one who refers to the Devil as *your adversary [who] prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*.⁴

Then there is a meditation on the song of Mary, the mother of the Lord whom we love and serve. 'This is the wondrous story, born of a Hebrew maid'⁵ and worthy of reflection again and again.

We love because he first loved us,⁶ and the love of God is a topic that also calls for some response from our hearts and lives.

These all, together with the regular topical and news items, give us much to read, reflect and act upon, and in all these surely we are directed again to the one who has rightly been described as 'the incomparable Christ'.

Robert

References: (1) Mark 12:16 (2) Rom. 8:29 (3) Acts 4:13 (4) 1 Pet. 5:8 (5) CM Luxmoore, PHSS 6 (6) 1 John 4:19 Bible quotations from ESV



Faith in our purse

David Pattison, Leigh, England

Units of currency play a significant role in the Bible. Jesus makes powerful use of them in the parables, e.g. Matthew 20:1-16 and 25:14-30. He was, of course, betrayed for thirty pieces of silver.

Many of us carry so little hard cash around with us these days, and what we have tends to slip through our fingers so quickly, that we forget that our coinage, perhaps more than any feature of our everyday life, contains open references to our Christian faith – and has done for centuries.

Coins also reveal more subtle things about the societies they come from. Consider the modern British pound coin: the obverse ('heads') side contains, as well as the Queen's picture, the Latin abbreviations DG (Dei Gratia, by the Grace of God) and FD (Fidei Defensor, Defender of the Faith) and show the relationship between Church and State that has been a fixture of the British nation and currency for centuries.

If we go back in time, we will see that there is nothing new about coins carrying Christian imagery and inscription. However, given the persecutions by the authorities of the early Christians, it is not surprising that Roman coins do not yield much in the way of illustration.

Coins of the Byzantine Empire, founded by Constantine, are a more productive source illustrating Christianity as a 'religion of state', although only intermittently.

The English gold noble of 1344 carries the motto IHC Transiens per Medivm Illorvm (But Jesus passing through their midst went His way¹), and is an early example of how domestic currency came to incorporate scripture.

In Great Britain, piecemeal historical events were to have an impact. Henry VIII (1509-1547) established the Church of England, making himself the Fidei Defensor, as a means of getting a divorce from Catherine of Aragon; the following century, the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 brought with it new coins with smoother milled edges; and, a hundred years later still, we saw more sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing portraiture and lettering on coins and medals, as the age of industry dawned under George III (1760-1820). These things together all helped to bring about the money system taken for granted today in the UK.

Christian inscriptions were an integral part of its coinage, so much so that when the 1849 florin – the ancestor of the 10 pence piece and an early move towards decimalisation, which was not fully realised until 1971 – omitted DG from the legend, Queen Victoria was not too happy about her supposed fall from grace, and subsequent issues of the coin restored the abbreviation. The 'Godless Florin', though not particularly rare – the mintage and circulation



were too high for that – is nonetheless an item that coin collectors are keen to acquire for its uniqueness.

But what of the inscription on the coin shown to our Lord?²

And [the Pharisees] sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled.

The Roman denarius at this date signalled faith, but not of the Christian variety. It had on the obverse side the head of Tiberius, crowned with laurel leaves, and bore the legend, 'TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS'. The abbreviated Latin inscription reads: 'Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus'. This denarius' inscription would seem to imply real irony in the Lord's words distinguishing between Caesar and God.

The Herodians were Jewish political supporters of the ruling house of Herod the Great and in full subjection to the Roman emperor. Given the Pharisees' perspective on the separation of Jewish life from the influence of foreign culture, it is likely that these two groups were on opposite sides of the coin, so to speak. Though opposed to each other, they joined against Christ.

If Jesus had answered "Yes," to the Pharisees' question, He could be have been called a collaborator with the Roman occupiers; if He answered "No," He could have been charged with treason, or with inciting insurrection before the Roman authorities.

Does the distinction the Lord made between the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's imply a division of a believer's life into the secular and the sacred? More likely, it implies a priority.

We obey governmental requirements not in conflict with our first responsibility to God.³ The exchange above showed Christ to be the wonder of friends and enemies alike. The latter admire His wisdom, but will not be guided by it – will we?

References: (1) see Luke 4:30 (2) Mat. 22:16-22 ESV (3) Rom. 13:1-7; contrast Acts 4:19; 5:29

Firstborn among many brothers

James Needham, Birmingham, England

We live in a world that is increasingly obsessed by image. The clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the activities we pursue, all combine to create an image of ourselves we project into the world to influence the way others perceive us. As Christians, we are not immune – often, we buy into the world’s ideas of image and allow it to shape our behaviour to meet the image which, no matter how subconsciously, we wish others to see.

God has something to say about image, too – the image He wants us, as believers, to project into the world. But it is not an image intended to glorify us, but instead to direct the gaze of others beyond us and upward to the Lord Jesus Christ, *in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*.¹

Christ, the image of God

Opening his letter with an exposition of the supremacy of Christ, the writer to the Hebrews calls Him *the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*.² Older versions refer to *the very image of his substance* (RV). In all the New Testament, this word translated **imprint** or **image** is only found here. It carries the thought of an engraving or stamp; the means by which the precise features of an image are made to correspond perfectly with the cast that produced them.

In this, the Lord Jesus is unique, for He alone among men bears the precise imprint of the character of God; and not only His character, for the writer calls Him the exact impress of God’s *substance* (RV), His *nature* (ESV), since there is no attribute that is found in the nature of God which is not also found, in perfect correlation, in His Son. For that reason He stands unique as transcendent over all.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul also describes the Lord Jesus as *the image of God*,³ but here the use of a different word in the original language conveys a different thought. Here the thought is of representation, as with a portrait, pointing the viewer beyond the image to the true subject itself. So when Paul wrote about *the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*,³ what occupied his mind was not that the Lord is by nature deity, though that is true, but that He is the physical manifestation of God, pointing others beyond Himself to see what God is like: *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”*.⁴ It is in this sense, too, that He is *the image of the invisible God*,⁵ the one in whom we are able to see the nature and character of God who would otherwise be so far beyond our mortal sight.

Image-bearers of Christ

Our key text for this article sits within the golden chain of grace which Paul presents in Romans 8. Scanning the eternal purposes of God towards those released from condemnation through Christ, he views God’s eternal foreknowledge crystallised in the predestination of the elect.⁶ Men have tried in vain to compress these eternal purposes into the tiny confines of their minds, but we do well to emphasise the purpose for which we were eternally known and predestined: that we might be conformed to the image of Christ.

This idea of image-bearing is seen again in 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul compares the glory of the old covenant with the glory of the new. Although it came as a *ministry of death*,⁷ the old covenant had its glory, seen in Moses’ face which shone as he emerged from the presence of God.⁸ Yet its glory was passing away, just as the shining of Moses’ face gradually faded, concealed beneath a veil to hide *the outcome of what was being brought to an end*.⁹ How different is the new covenant, the ministry of righteousness!¹⁰ Its glory is not diminishing, but progressive as *we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*.¹¹

Transformed and conformed to His image!

Transformation describes the effect on us – being changed so fundamentally beyond our ‘earthly’ nature to adopt a new form entirely different from what we have left behind; and **conformation** describes the outcome of the change, for the transformation we experience by the Spirit is to take on the likeness of Christ, being conformed to no other image but His.

This is the image which God requires Christians to project into the world. It is not an image that points others to our strengths, our achievements or our affluence. It is an image that points beyond us entirely, by which the world is caused to see *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*.¹² It is for this purpose that we have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ, that the world might behold in us, as we are being transformed from glory to glory, the image of Him who is the image of God.

Firstborn amongst many brothers

In this transformation of believers to conform to the likeness of Christ, the Lord Himself retains His supremacy. The articles in this series have highlighted how God’s perspective of the firstborn is not constrained

by our thought of the one born first in time. To God, the firstborn bears the authority and dignity conferred by that title. And amongst those whose image is conformed to the image of Christ, He retains the pre-eminence and dignity of the one who is called the firstborn of God.¹³

And yet, those who bear His likeness receive dignity in being called His brothers. But in what sense are they His brothers? Again, it is the writer to the Hebrews who helps us, writing in chapter 2 of the author of salvation who was made perfect through suffering. *He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source,*¹⁴ and it is for that reason He is not ashamed to call them brothers. It is the Lord Himself who sanctifies, and we who are sanctified by Him, for He has become *to us ... sanctification.*¹⁵ The meaning of the Greek is literally that He and we are all out of one; that is, having the same origin: God the Father. By virtue of the sanctifying work of Calvary, we who have put saving faith in Christ have been born of God, being brought into relationship with the Father through the Son, by which we have been made His brothers in order that we might be conformed to the image of Him who is pre-eminent over all.

Hebrews 2 goes further still. Drawing from Psalm 22, one of the great psalms of the cross, and seeing the collective purpose for those now called His brothers, the writer pictures the great victor of Calvary standing in the midst of the congregation of the redeemed, declaring to them the name of His Father and leading them in responsive song!¹⁶ What a picture of those who have known the

power of the cross being united with Him in joyous congregation, and led by Him in praise to a shared Father as He still points His own to the one whose image He bears!

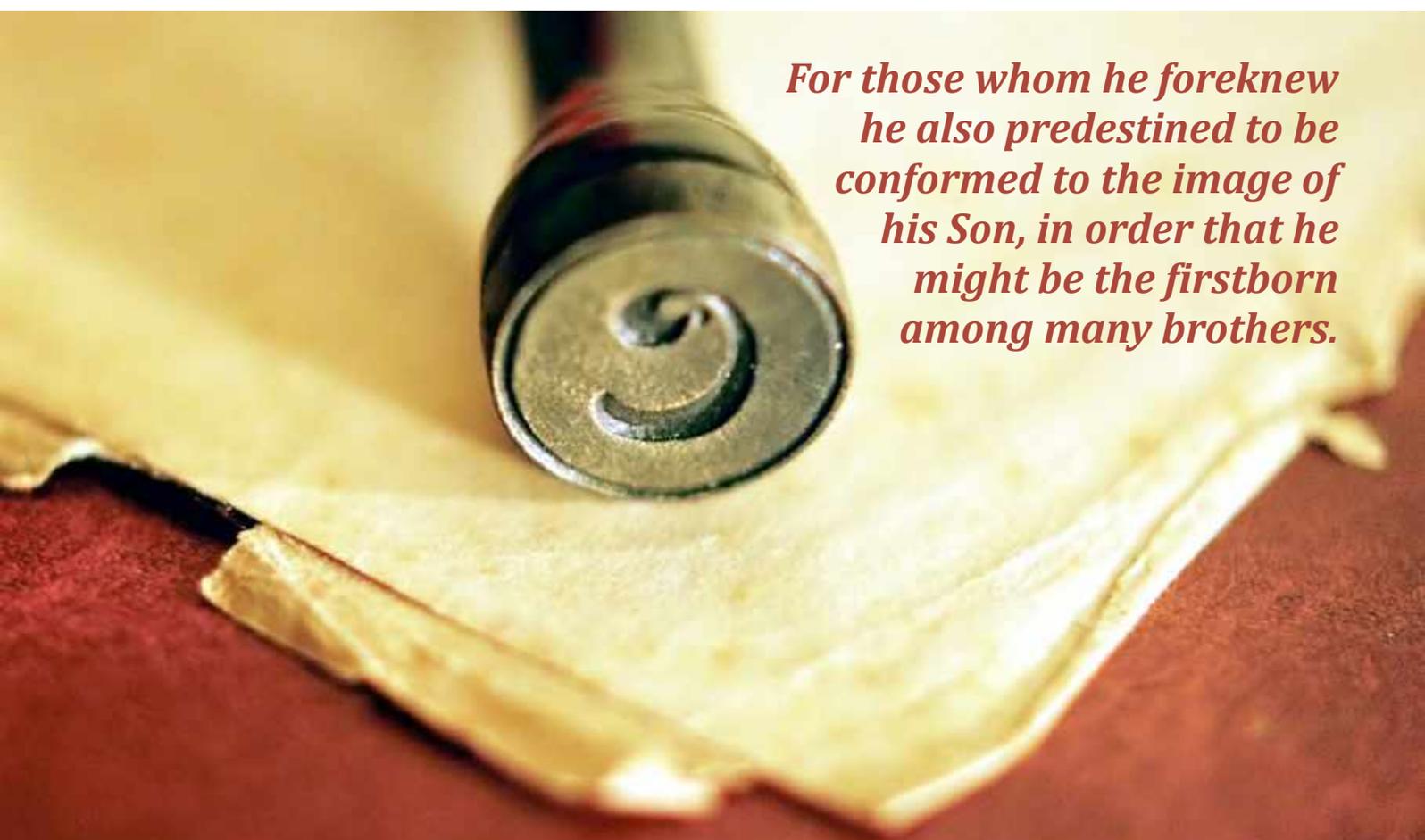
A lesson from a coin

So we are called to bear His image. But bearing an image carries responsibility. *“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”*¹⁷ the Lord asked, holding up a denarius before the crowd. When they answered that it belonged to Tiberius Caesar, they were told to give to him what belonged to him. The image and inscription were indicative of ownership, for the one whose image we bear is an indication of the one to whom we belong. For so long as we insist on projecting an image of ourselves, we’ll only give the world at large a sad reflection of itself. God has a far higher calling for us – to reflect instead the image of His Son, to represent His character so that people around may look at us and see Him who is pre-eminent and dignified as the firstborn of many brothers.

References:

- (1) Rom. 8:29 (2) Heb. 1:3 (3) 2 Cor. 4:4 (4) John 14:9 (5) Col. 1:15 (6) Rom. 8:29 (7) 2 Cor. 3:7 (8) Ex. 34:34-35 (9) 2 Cor. 3:13 (10) 2 Cor. 3:9 (11) 2 Cor. 3:18 (12) 2 Cor. 4:6 (13) Heb. 1:6 (14) Heb. 2:11 (15) 1 Cor. 1:30 (16) Heb. 2:11-12 (17) Mark 12:16

Bible quotations from the ESV



***For those whom he foreknew
he also predestined to be
conformed to the image of
his Son, in order that he
might be the firstborn
among many brothers.***

High points

Zion in heaven

The highest ascent

Graham Schleyer, Liverpool, England

In this brief article we will consider the immense privilege of God's people to worship collectively at the breaking of bread service, the preparation or readiness required and finally the presentation at the gathering itself.

Privilege

As the title indicates, this has to be the highpoint of spiritual service directed to God *in spirit and truth*.¹ The unique privilege of ascending into God's presence ought to fill us with joy and anticipation.² Paul contrasts the fear and trembling that was associated with Moses ascending a physical mountain to meet with God, with the blessedness and wonder of God's people ascending into heaven surrounded by myriads of angels.³ We need to grasp this compelling truth to experience the reality of what we are commanded to do in remembering the Lord Jesus on the first day of the week: bring, come and worship.⁴ In holy priesthood service we come to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵ The prospect of this 'out-of-this-world' experience will elevate our thoughts above the ordinary and ensure our priorities are right.

Preparation

Our worship is motivated by love towards God and His unlimited grace towards us. Consequently, God's love in our heart moves us to bring an offering of thanksgiving that is prepared prior to the gathering. That doesn't rule out spontaneity as moved by the Spirit, but the norm is to come prepared, exercised to present our offering to God (silently or spoken) out of appreciation for the Lord Jesus Christ. This will cost us something in terms of our time and effort. King

David would not accept what was to be offered to the Lord without it costing him something.⁶ Again David delighted to give to God from his own personal treasure over and above all that he had already provided for the temple offerings.⁷ Week by week Mary saved up from her earnings an amount that grew to become the purchase price of that costly perfume poured over the feet of her beloved Lord Jesus given out of appreciation for her Saviour's love for her.⁸ This also suggests the putting aside of an amount from our income to give to the Lord as we are blessed and as our heart moves us to give. An important aspect of our preparation, too, is examination of our personal holiness and putting right any matter that would obstruct or distract from our participation.⁹

Presentation

We are entering heaven and coming before the King of kings and Lord of lords. How should that make us feel about our readiness and presentation? Thankfully, because our Lord Jesus is there already, in His office of great high priest,¹⁰ our acceptability is not in question. In coming through Him, we are covered by His blood.¹¹ Moses spoke to Israel regarding the males of Israel that "*they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed.*"¹² The following verse states that "*every man shall give as he is able.*"¹³ What is in our hand on a Lord's Day morning and how should we present it to our great God? It's important to realise that God accepts the worship of His people, however feeble, through the Lord Jesus.¹⁴ Our words might not come out as we intend some of the time. How thankful we should be, then, that the Lord Jesus makes up fully for our

... you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ... (Heb. 12:22)



inadequacies of expression and endeavour. Malachi spoke of the carelessness of the priests in allowing blemished animals to be offered, communicating the Lord's pointed response "*Should I receive that from your hand?*"¹⁵ Our aim should be to present our appreciation of the Lord Jesus from the scriptures to the best of our ability; Christ-centred and scripture-based. That gives us a wide canvas from Genesis to Revelation. Our worship will converge on the lofty themes of our Lord's appearances in humiliation as Son of Man,¹⁶ in resurrection as Son of God,¹⁷ in the presence of God for us as High Priest¹⁸ and in splendour and glory as our returning Lord.¹⁹

The highpoint of our week is the highpoint of our spiritual service which takes us as a worshipping people into heaven before God in spirit and truth. Can you imagine a better prospect and aspiration than that?

References: (1) John 4:23 (2) Heb. 10:19; 9:24 (3) Heb. 12:18-24 (4) Ps. 96:8-9 (5) 1 Pet. 2:5 (6) 1 Chron. 21:24 (7) 1 Chron. 29:3 (8) John 12:3 (9) 1 Cor. 11:28 (10) Heb. 4:14 (11) Heb. 12:24 (12) Deut. 16:16 (13) Deut. 16:17 (14) 1 Pet. 2:5 (15) Mal. 1:13 (16) Titus 2:11; Heb. 9:26 (17) John 21:1 (18) Heb. 9:24 (19) 1 Cor. 11:26; Heb. 9:28

Bible quotations from NASB

They're out to get us!

The Devil

Sean Johnston, Belfast, N.Ireland

This is the final article of the trilogy, 'They're out to get us', looking at the enemies of the faith: the world, the flesh and the Devil. It is no coincidence that there are three perceived enemies of our soul as these sources of temptation are viewed as being in opposition to the trinity. We could possibly think of a link to them in the parable of the sower where the 'unproductive soil' reflects this triad in the path (Satan takes away), rocky places (the flesh complicit as the believer falls away) and the thorns (worries of the world). They are present in the letter to the Ephesians 2:1-3 ('course of this world'; 'prince of the power of the air'; 'the lusts of the flesh'). We have been forewarned so therefore we ought to be forearmed. For He who is for us is not against us, as *a three-fold cord is not quickly broken*.¹

We are all too aware of the spiritual battle that is happening all around us, and has an impact within us, as we *fight the good fight*.² Every morning we are encouraged to acquaint ourselves with the Lord's new mercies and feel the power of His abounding strength as we embark on our day. However, how many of us have the battle plan set out before us on a daily basis?³ For sure, one thing that is guaranteed is that the Devil is on the prowl looking for any sign of weakness so that he may pounce.⁴ He does not tempt us with the first thing that comes to his mind but rather, seeks to look for the weakness in our mind. He unleashes a catalogue of temptations designed specifically for us to be ensnared. Satan is not the ugly, distasteful, cloven-footed creature that he is often depicted as. He is a subtle, conniving creature with attractive, persuasive powers. Ezekiel 28 tells us that he was created by God and endowed with glories and honours excelling those given to any other creature. Verses 12 to 19 give us the most graphic and illuminating portrayal of Satan in the whole bible. Therefore, we need to be alert to his advances and prepare ourselves to repel him at all times: a daily resistance;⁵ a daily refusal to give him an opportunity;⁶ and a daily stance against his schemes.⁷

'God is the great general in this warfare. He can see behind enemy lines and knows exactly the strategies that will be used against us'.⁸ He has recorded them for our benefit so that we will not be outwitted.⁹ Satan may appear mighty; however the Lord is Almighty as He sets the parameters.

We must become in experience what we are in Christ. This is our duty. Let not sin reign. Be active, eradicate it, kill it. God promises us that

sin will have no dominion over us,¹⁰ but it's not the born-again believer's salvation that Satan has in his sights; rather, it's our service to God. It's interesting to note that those on a battlefield are referred to as servicemen. Let the battle be based on this fact: that the victory has already been won. As the hymn writer says,

'Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,
But the King's own army none can overthrow.'¹¹

So as we cluster around His 'standard', being drawn in by the captain of our faith, we should not be ignorant of Satan's devices. Instead, we should be alert, keeping him firmly in our sights.

The subtlety of Satan is seen in the garden of Eden where the father of all lies speaks untruths to Eve, generating deception. He has nothing to do with the truth.¹² The **seed** of doubt is sown, and not being dealt with, grows into a **weed** that chokes the word of God. This in turn, remaining unchecked, becomes a **deed**; a behaviour not honouring to God. This develops into a **need**, an addiction which crystallises into **greed** – the pursuit of sin at all costs. This is how Satan operates as sin first fascinates and then assassinates. Sin can be defined as any feeling or thought that comes from a heart that does not treasure God over all other things.

Be ... alert and of sober mind ... standing firm in the faith.¹³

References:

(1) Eccl. 4:12 ESV (2) 1 Tim. 6:12 (3) Luke 9:23 (4) 1 Pet. 5:8 (5) Jas. 4:7 (6) Eph. 4:27 ESV (7) Eph. 6:11 (8) J. Piper, Desiringgod.com/Satan's ten strategies (9) 2 Cor. 2:11 ESV (10) Rom. 6:14 ESV (11) FR Havergal, PHSS 385, v.4 (12) John 8:44 (13) 1 Pet. 5:8-9

Bible quotations from NIV unless stated otherwise



Personal transformation

Peter transformed

Stephen McCabe, Belfast, N.Ireland

As this series has progressed, we have seen that personal spiritual transformation is a ‘whole person’ experience that **must** involve the conscious, purposive, bringing of both **mind** (NT 2019-01) and **body** (NT 2019-02) under the leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ – He is our teacher, and we are His students.

We have also seen that real transformation to Christlikeness is **possible** (too often, I fear, we undermine our spiritual growth by believing it is **not**), looking at the dramatic example of Paul (NT 2019-03). I’m sure that we can each think of other disciples that we know today who also testify to the reality of spiritual transformation by their daily living – authentically showing the death of self, so that the life of Christ may be manifest. I urge you to speak to them about their experience.

This article will seek to present another encouragement for us that spiritual transformation is possible – in fact, more than just possible. It **will** happen, if we intentionally train both mind and body as disciples (read ‘apprentices’) of our living teacher, Jesus Christ, under the direction of His Spirit. Peter provides such an encouragement. He wasn’t erudite, as Paul was. He began his journey with Jesus just like you and me – uneducated and untrained in spiritual things, at times driven by his emotions, which included anger, jealousy and pride. But we can look at specific instances in Peter’s life to see how his sitting under the teaching of the Lord Jesus had impacted on his behaviour and character, and show that, through the course of Peter’s life (through data gleaned from the gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and his own letters), a transformation toward Christlikeness was taking place. We may ask, ‘what made the difference for Peter?’ The answer is

simple, but not easy. Jesus chose His disciples to be **with Him**¹ – and after three years of living and learning from the Teacher, this was recognisable to others.² **He spent years as a student earnestly learning from Jesus, his teacher. In this way he became trained – the same will be true for us.** The Lord said, “*everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher*”.³ This is a simple answer to the question ‘what makes the difference?’, but it requires sustained commitment and dedication – **discipline.**

Peter protesting

We often characterise Peter as impulsive and outspoken – it is perhaps an oversimplification of his character, but we have plenty of examples! A positive aspect of this is seen in his response to the Lord’s question, “...*who do you say that I am?*”⁴ where Peter confidently asserted, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”⁵

This is quickly followed by a negative example of the same character trait in the subsequent verses. When the Lord Jesus began to speak of His suffering and death at the hands of the Jewish leaders,⁶ Peter again jumps in, this time in protest – “*This shall never happen to you!*”⁷

Peter had just declared the Lord Jesus to be God’s Messiah – His Son. Yet now we find Him directly contradicting the Lord’s words – so much so that the Lord responds to Peter by saying, “*Get behind Me, Satan!*”⁸ What is going on inside Peter?

We see a similar thing happen on the night of the Lord’s betrayal. After hearing of the striking of the shepherd and the scattering of the sheep,⁹ Peter declares, “*Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall*

away.”¹⁰ However, we know that, as the Lord said, Peter would contradict his own words by denying that he knew the Lord Jesus three times.¹¹

Perhaps we see in Peter times of mental assent to the person and position of Christ on these occasions, but the Lord incisively diagnoses Peter’s problem – “*you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.*”¹² What a lesson for Peter (and us) to learn! Peter’s mind was not filled and focused on God’s interests – instead, he was blurting out what he desired to be true.

Furthermore, we might say that sin was still dwelling in Peter’s members (see, for example, Rom. 7:23) – his tongue betrays this. There is conflict in Peter’s early disciple life – he desires to live for the Lord, but we have seen in our series that will power is often not enough. **Mind and body must intentionally and habitually** be brought under His leadership. Peter’s training is not complete!

Peter at Pentecost

Prior to Pentecost, we perhaps see a lack of direction seeping into Peter’s life – “*I am going fishing*”.¹³ He knew the Lord Jesus had risen, but what were the implications of this for his life now? The Lord Jesus graciously taught him that his life would be full of purpose – “*Tend My lambs... Shepherd My sheep... Tend My sheep*”¹⁴ – teaching that began to shape Peter’s thinking and future direction.¹⁵ With the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost,¹⁶ and having been in a position of disciplined learning under the Lord Jesus for over three years, Peter is fully equipped for transformation to Christlikeness. At Pentecost, we see an uneducated fisherman stand boldly and expound the Word of God to the gathered crowd, demonstrating that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of David,¹⁷ and

explaining what was happening in Jerusalem that day through the words of the prophet Joel.¹⁸ No longer a public denial of the Lord Jesus, or a proclamation of what Peter desired to be true – but a public identification with the crucified and risen Lord and Christ, and a submission to God’s Word. At Pentecost, Peter preached what God had shown to be true through the resurrection of Jesus. At Pentecost, Peter’s mind was set on God’s interests, and his tongue was yielded to His service as an instrument of righteousness.¹⁹

Peter and Paul

It is instructive to look at Peter’s interaction with Paul in the New Testament – we learn something about Peter’s maturing character. In Galatians 2, Paul describes the arrival of Jewish men from Jerusalem to the church in Antioch, where he and Peter had been mixing and eating with Gentile believers. When the men from Jerusalem arrived, Paul tells us that Peter began to withdraw and hold himself aloof from the Gentiles, *fearing the party of the circumcision*²⁰ with their message that salvation depended on circumcision as per the custom of Moses.²¹ Paul calls Peter out publicly about this (*I opposed him to his face*²²), essentially pointing out that ‘the party of the circumcision’ were denying by their actions the truth that, on the basis of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, all who believe are accepted equally – both Jew and Gentile are new creatures, entering into God’s new life through the Lord Jesus.

This was surely another learning and character-shaping experience for Peter. While we don’t read directly of his response in the Galatians account, we know that he didn’t stubbornly dig his heels in over this. He was teachable. He knew when to concede. In fact, in the subsequent Acts 15 discussion of the relationship between Jew and Gentile, it is Peter (not Paul) who stands up to say, “...we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are”²³ There is no sense of bitterness or wounded ego about this clash with Paul later in the New Testament – in fact, in later life he

wrote in his second letter referring to the wise teaching of *our beloved brother Paul*²⁴ – Peter had grown, transformed, into a gracious man. He had learned to be so in discipleship (disciplined apprenticeship) to the Lord Jesus, and under the direction of the indwelling Spirit.

Pebble to pillar

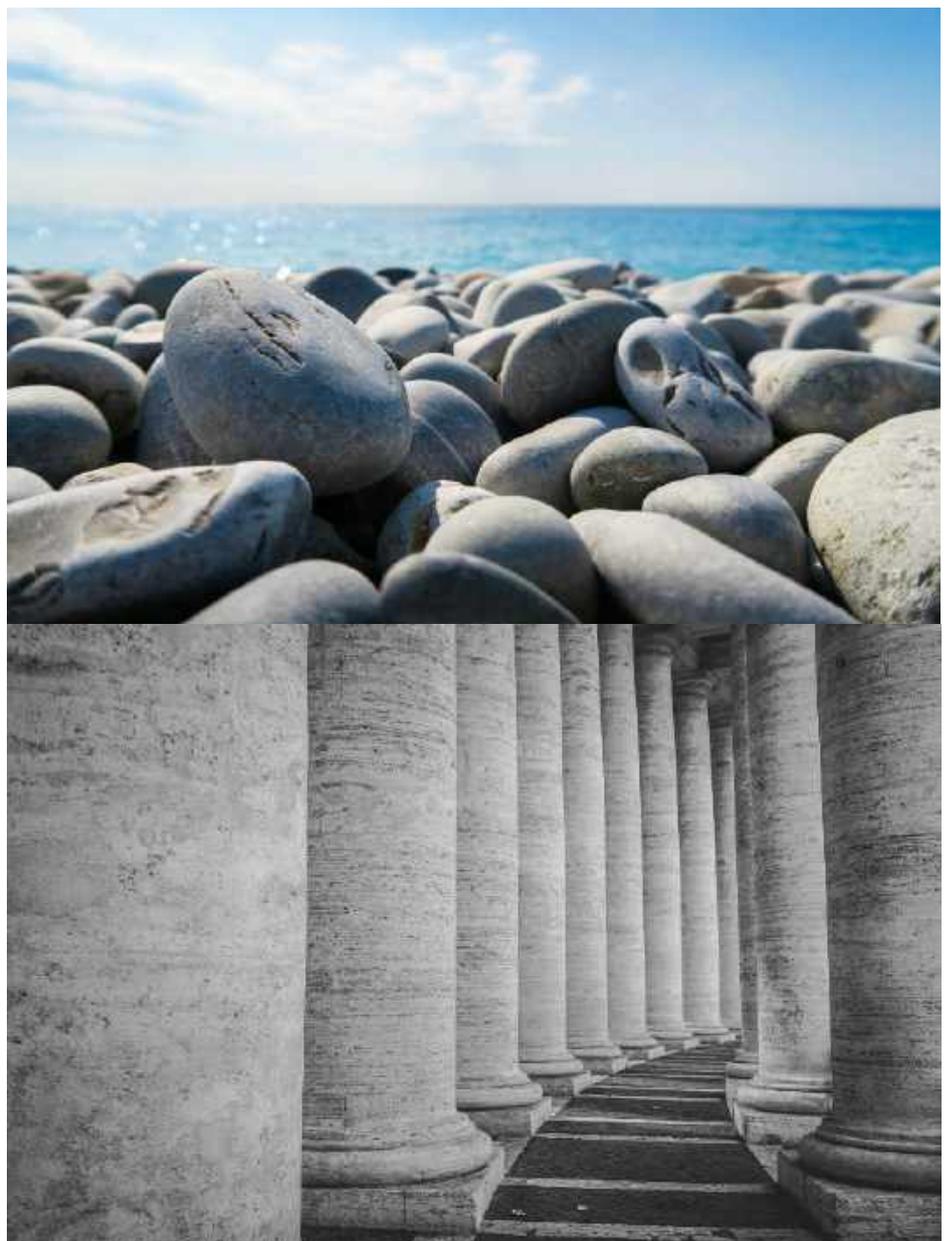
His name means ‘stone’ or ‘pebble’ (Gk *Petros*), but Peter became a pillar by reputation in the New Testament churches of God.²⁵ Reliable, sound, measured, perhaps in contrast to his early character traits, refined in the crucible of service for, and with, the Lord – and ready to have his hands stretched out like his master, and be taken by others where he did not wish to go.²⁶ Do you want to become a pillar among the churches?

Personal spiritual transformation to Christlikeness is not instantaneous – the life of Peter demonstrates that it is the result of consistent and earnest training under our Teacher, mind and body brought under obedience, with the direction of His indwelling Spirit.

References:

- (1) Mark 3:14 (2) Acts 4:13 (3) Luke 6:40 (4) Mat. 16:15 (5) Mat. 16:16 (6) Mat. 16:21 (7) Mat. 16:22 (8) Mat. 16:23 (9) Mat. 26:31 (10) Mat. 26:33 (11) Mat. 26:69-75 (12) Mat. 16:23 (13) John 21:3 (14) John 21:15-17 (15) 1 Pet. 5:1 (16) Acts 2:1-4 (17) Acts 2:25-36 (18) Acts 2:16-21 (19) Rom. 6:13 (20) Gal. 2:12 (21) Acts 15:1 (22) Gal. 2:11 (23) Acts 15:11 (24) 2 Pet. 3:15 (25) cf. Gal. 2:9 (26) John 21:18

Bible quotations from NASB



Can you help me with this?

Peter Hickling, Cromer, England

The institution of the Remembrance is recorded in the synoptic Gospels, when the disciples were told to *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*¹ Many churches have elaborated this simple initiation, calling it a sacrament, reception of which imparts divine grace. Is this justified? The reasoning behind this is that the Lord Jesus said *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*² This is combined with *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*³ and, *Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*⁴

These words caused difficulty at the time when they were spoken. Scripture records that *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*⁵ The problem lay in too literal an understanding of what was said. The disciples would clearly have understood what was meant when the Lord Jesus took a loaf of bread and said *“This is my body,”* because He was there with them in a body, so there was no confusion. It was like my producing a photograph and saying *“This is my wife”*; nobody would think that I was married to a photograph!

The literal interpretation of the Lord’s words has caused difficulties and misunderstandings for centuries. A literal interpretation of the Lord’s words is always the right starting point, but we know He often spoke metaphorically.⁶ He told His disciples to take the loaf and cup in remembrance of Him, but it does not follow from

this that anyone who does this has eternal life. It can be stated as a general rule that a physical action cannot by itself produce a spiritual result; a parallel instance is that Christians should be baptised, in obedience to the command of Scripture,⁷ but baptising someone in water does not make him a Christian.

The leaders of the Reformation, of course, had inherited all the doctrines of the Roman Catholic church, and sought to challenge and re-establish them on the basis of Scripture. A principal item of this was the doctrine of transubstantiation; that the substance of the bread and wine were changed into the body and blood of Christ at consecration, only the appearances of bread and wine still remaining. A meeting was convened at Marburg in Germany by Philip I of Hessen in 1529 at which he hoped to secure agreement between the leading theologians of the day, but although agreement was reached on fourteen points the principal protagonists, Luther and Zwingli, could not agree on the fifteenth. Both Luther and Zwingli agreed that the bread in the Supper was a sign. For Luther, however, that which the bread signified, namely the body of Christ, was present ‘in, with, and under’ the sign itself. For Zwingli, though, sign and thing signified were separated by a distance – the width between heaven and earth. Luther believed that the human body of Christ was ubiquitous (found everywhere), and hence present in the bread, whereas Zwingli said that God the Son was ubiquitous, while His human body could only be in one place, at the right hand of the Father. The main issue for Zwingli, however, was that Luther put *“the chief point of salvation in physically eating the body of Christ,”* for he connected it with the forgiveness of sins. Zwingli correctly pointed out that salvation is by Christ alone, through faith alone and not by faith and bread.

We return to the arguments of the first few paragraphs. Participation in the commanded ordinances is for those who have put their faith in Christ, and want to obey His commandments. Christians today have their differences, but we need to bear in mind what Oliver Cromwell said, *“I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.”* It is therefore always good to reaffirm Biblical truths from renewed study.

References:

- (1) Luke 22:19 (2) John 6:51 (3) 1 Cor. 10:16
- (4) John 6:53-54 (5) John 6:66 (6) e.g. John 10:9; 15:5; Mat. 5:29 (7) Acts 10:47-48

Bible quotations from ESV



Songs

Mary's song

Peter & Felicity Doël, Crowborough, England

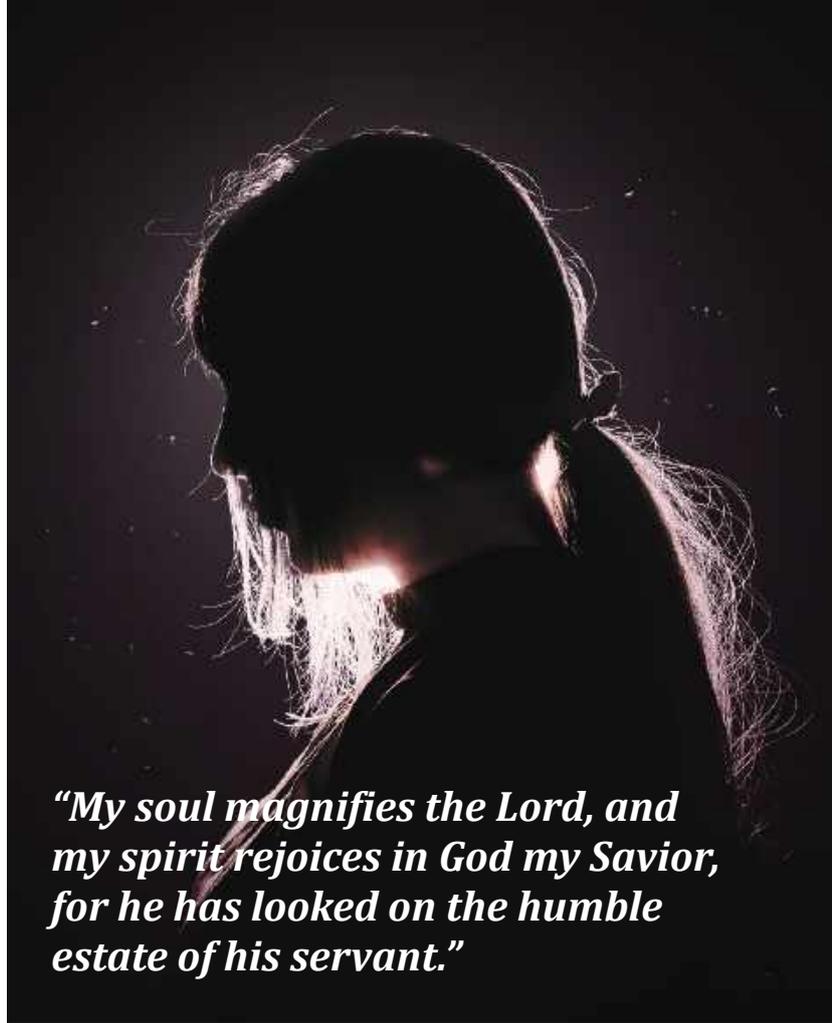
Mary arose and went with haste ... entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth, writes Luke in chapter 1 (v.39-40). Then, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb (v.41). And then, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you ... the mother of my Lord..."(v.41-43).

An arrival, a greeting, a recognition, a leap, a Spirit-filling, an exclamation, and a blessing. Then Mary burst into God-centred Spirit-filled praise. In the companionship of the two women united, as never before in their experience, by the thrill and apprehension of unexpected motherhood, there is God Himself. God, mighty, great, and strong; God identifying with the homely, humble and hungry. God, merciful and gracious and surprising in His deeds. "My soul magnifies the Lord," cries Mary, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."(v.46-47) This is joy beyond the natural, and excitement beyond the normal.

What sort of person was Mary? She was probably in her late teens, living with her family in the village of Nazareth when Gabriel came to her. Being a girl, she was unlikely to have received much education. However, she must have had a sound grasp of the prophecies about the Messiah. At a time of foreign occupation, the Jews must have been longing for their Messiah as never before.

Mary came from a humble background (v.48), yet she accepted without question that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. Did people generally assume, like the Magi, that He would come from a palace?¹ Not Mary! She recognised throughout her song that God was turning the accepted order upside down. She, the humble girl from Nazareth who needed a saviour just as much as anyone else (v.47), asserted that "he who is mighty has done great things for me" (v.49) and "all generations will call me blessed" (v.48). She knew that "his mercy is for those who fear him" (v. 50) and that "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." (v. 51). Rejoicing that "he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate: He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (v. 52-53), she showed complete assurance in her faith and personal knowledge of her God, not a second-hand derivative religion.

When Gabriel came, Mary was troubled, afraid and questioning. Hardly surprising! Later there would come more questions and much to ponder.² But her song reveals certainty about her God and delight in what He



"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant."

has done that seem to be her life's true centre. Never recorded after the angelic visit as being on her own, her faith was lived out, as a mother's faith so often is, with demands and expectations of and from others. In the last scriptural record of her, Mary was steadfast in prayer with the disciples, her family included.³ She surely was an example to them for earlier, we are told, *they did not believe on Him.*⁴

Young though she was when she poured out her song, Mary was familiar with her God and could see beyond the religion of such as Job's friends, who thought that blessings of prosperity and a large family were the only indicators of true faith. She never would have riches by earthly standards, as exemplified by the offering of poverty that she brought.⁵ She and her family became political refugees and had to escape to Egypt for a time. She did not have an easy life by our standards.

Mary was able to trust in God's grace and mercy to carry her through her present situation as an unmarried mother and on into the future. By the time she stood at the foot of the cross, Mary must have faced many challenges, the greatest of which was seeing her son die. Simeon had told her "a sword will pierce through your own soul".⁶ Yet she relied on her knowledge of her God and was able to accept His plan.⁷ And what a plan it was!

References:

- (1) Mat. 2:1-2 (2) Luke 2:19, 51 (3) Acts 1:14 RV
- (4) John 7:5 RV (5) Lev. 12:8; Luke 2:24 (6) Luke 2:35
- (7) Luke 1:38

Bible quotations from ESV unless stated otherwise

The love of God

Jo Johnson, Buckhaven, Scotland

... *this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*¹

In these few words, John describes the origin and depth of the highest possible kind of love: the love of God.

The love of God emanates from the triune God.² Such undeserved, amazing grace was made known when the Father sent the Son into the world to be our saviour, and whose continuing love for His children is demonstrated by the communion of the Holy Spirit.² This 'communion' means far more than simply His 'being present' with us. Communion with God is an ongoing, ever deepening friendship in which He shares His thoughts with us and we with Him.

In our English Bible, the word 'love' makes no distinction between the various Greek words for love: *phileo* (brotherly love), *philanthropia* (normal human kindness) and *agape/agapao* (love which chooses to love, regardless of whether love is given in return.)³ The last can be the sort of love Paul describes in Romans: *perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.*⁴ However, the love of God far exceeds the greatest acts of human love: *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*⁵ Such is the love of God in all its majestic, infinite glory.

The world offers a counterfeit version, summed up in the glib, unthinking mantra 'Love is Love'. This is trotted out to justify any kind of relationship, no matter how degenerate. By contrast, the love of God never sweeps sin under the carpet: *the LORD reproves him whom he loves.*⁶ He calls out sin for what it is: rebellion against a righteous, holy creator. Pride and self-choosing are the enemies of true love.

The love of God, as presented in His Word, is a love that

'goes beyond the highest star,
and reaches to the lowest hell.'⁷

The God of love:

- Created both the lake of fire and the new Jerusalem.⁸
- Destroyed the Egyptians in the Red Sea and saved Israel.⁹
- Sent His beloved Son to die so that we would not perish, but have eternal life.¹⁰

The love of God will never allow rebellious, unforgiven sinners to spoil the new creation He has planned and is preparing for the eternal well-being and blessing of those who love Him. God is the righteous judge. He knows how to *keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of*

*judgment*¹¹ and the false charge that God is unfair or lacking in love cannot be sustained.

'The love of God is righteous love
Inscribed upon Golgotha's tree,
Love that exacts the sinner's debt;
Yet, in exacting, sets him free.'¹²

*God is love.*¹³ The essential nature of God is sublime, majestic, righteous, holy love. He is the originator of that dynamic *agape* love which propels men and women to accomplish the most noble of deeds, for *love is from God.*¹⁴ As created beings, we reflect God's character in greater or lesser degree. As new creatures in Christ Jesus, saved persons can learn to go beyond the limits of flawed human nature, and love others in the way that God loves us. Such love was demonstrated by the Lord Jesus. Even as cruel nails tore His flesh, He said: "*Father, forgive them...*"¹⁵

*We love because he first loved us.*¹⁶

*God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*¹⁷ If the love of God has been so gloriously imparted to us then it can flow through us to others. Such love is uniquely characteristic of Christ's followers: "*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"¹⁸

In his first letter to the churches of God, John wrote: *If someone says, "I love God," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?*¹⁹ These words were written to redeemed persons and show that it's possible for believers to revert to a carnal, fleshly way of relating to others, instead of walking by the Spirit.

By contrast, an unregenerate person is *dead in ... trespasses and sins.*²⁰ The difference between a believer on Jesus and someone who is spiritually dead is the difference between a dead plant and a living one. When the sun shines on a dead plant, it only hastens its decay. *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*²¹ Only God can waken the dead.²²

My father once told me about a shepherd-hearted overseer in his local church who, meekly and without retaliation, bore the brunt of another Christian brother's indignation about some perceived injustice. Dad later asked him why he had not replied to the verbal onslaught. That Christlike man replied: "He's a brother for whom Christ died." This is the kind of spiritually mature love God is looking for in us. The kind of love that deliberately chooses to love in

the face of provocation, when our natural instinct is to hit back. But it's also the kind of love which 'speaks the truth in love'.²³ It doesn't seek popularity. We need heavenly grace and wisdom to know 'when to speak ... and when forbear.'²⁴

*God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*²⁵ The word 'abide' means to dwell. If the love of God is the air that we breathe as followers of Christ, we will 'live' in God and God will 'live' in us. This is what the Lord Jesus meant when He said "*abide in me and I in you*".²⁶

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love..."*²⁷

Dwelling in the love of God and obedience to His commands are inseparably linked: "*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*"²⁸

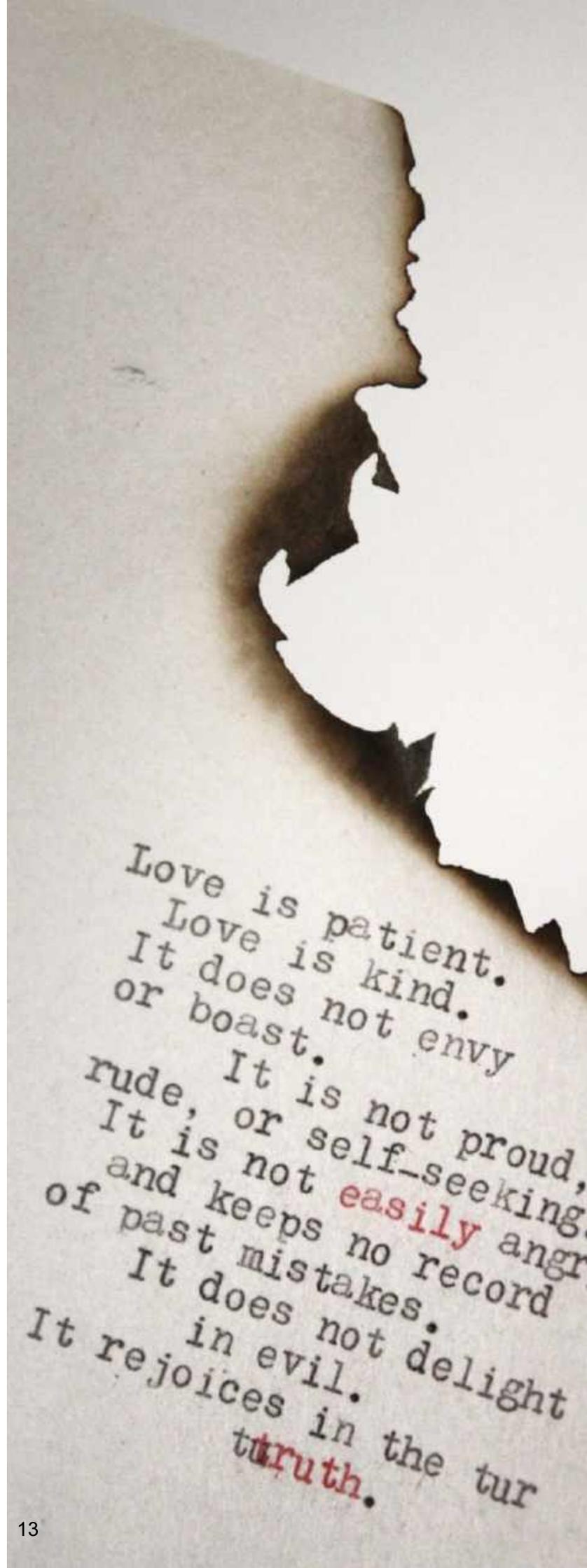
We cannot claim to be living in the love of God unless we obey His Word and we will only obey it if we are motivated by the love of God. Love without obedience is self-indulgence; obedience without love is self-righteousness. A spirit of loving obedience requires the removal of self: *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*²⁹

Jude exhorts: *keep yourselves in the love of God.*³⁰ We must actively maintain this position. When I sit in the garden on a summer evening, the house casts a shadow. If I want to stay in the sunshine, I have to move out of the shadow. When the challenges of living and loving for Christ cast their shadow, we must actively move into the sunshine of God's love through prayer, and the reading and enjoyment of His Word. Abiding in Christ; abiding in God; abiding in love.³¹ The love of God will flow through me to others in the measure that I do this.

References:

- (1) 1 John 4:10 (2) 2 Cor. 13:14 (3) see W.E. Vine, Dictionary of New Testament Words, for further elucidation of these words (4) Rom. 5:7 (5) Rom. 5:8 (6) Prov. 3:12 NASB (7) F.M. Lehman, Gospel Songs 7 (8) Rev. 20:15; 21:2 (9) Ex. 15:19 (10) John 3:16 (11) 2 Pet. 2:9 (12) H. Bonar (13) 1 John 4:8,16 (14) 1 John 4:7 (15) Luke 23:34 (16) 1 John 4:19 (17) Rom. 5:5 (18) John 13:35 (19) 1 John 4:20 NLT (20) Eph. 2:1 (21) 1 Cor. 2:14 (22) John 6:44 (23) Eph. 4:15 (24) W.C. Piggott, PHSS 382 (25) 1 John 4:16 (26) John 15:4 (27) John 15:9-10 (28) John 14:23 (29) Gal. 2:20 (30) Jude 21 (31) John 15:1-17; 1 John 4:11-16

Bible quotations from ESV, unless stated otherwise



No need for an apology?

Martin Jones, Hamilton, Canada

I had a big shock recently when an online article¹ informed me of the sudden demise of apologetics. Fortunately, on closer inspection it turns out that, as in the case of Mark Twain, reports of its death had been greatly exaggerated!

The premise of the writer, Stephen McAlpine, is simple:

‘In the same way that the age of steam swept away the age of sail, the age of apologetics has been swept away by the age of kategoria. Robust proclamation is the future. Artful persuasion is the past ... In the social media age ... people have lost patience with the delay tactics of apologetics and are demanding we cut to the chase.’

Criticizing what he terms as ‘cultural apologetics’, McAlpine cites the case of a church that ran a hip music venue, and which came to be derided when their underlying ‘fundamentalist beliefs’ were eventually exposed by a local journalist. However, this ‘artful’ approach has much more to do with (possibly ill-advised) bridge-building than it does with apologetics. Has Stephen McAlpine massively misunderstood what apologetics – Biblical apologetics, at least – is about? It’s nothing to do with ‘apologising’ in the modern sense, neither should it be soft-pedaling nor peddling a half-baked gospel!

The story, perhaps apocryphal, is told of how a church once displayed a large banner proclaiming ‘JESUS IS THE ANSWER!’ Someone cheekily came along and wrote underneath: ‘BUT WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?’ Doesn’t that sum up where almost all western nations are today? You might have heard of the recent TV series about the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Imagine driving through an at-risk area of Russia with a lorry full of anti-radiation suits and shouting “THIS IS THE ANSWER!” out of the window. Only those who could decipher English, and had learnt the dangers of invisible radiation and how this protection could save them in this crisis would respond (if they’d had time). It’s likely to be the same when we try to preach the gospel of an invisible God to save people from an invisible hell, using a Book which is largely foreign to the hearer!

Paul’s speech in Acts 17 shows that he understood apologetics. I like to imagine a Christian going over to Paul at the end to somewhat embarrassedly tell him that, unfortunately, not only did he fail to quote a single verse of scripture, he had completely forgotten to mention the cross of Christ! Paul admits that this was entirely deliberate. But Paul, didn’t you tell the Corinthians once that you’d *resolved to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified*?² How could you possibly fail



to mention the pivotal event of history? And wouldn’t using some prophetic verses have been wise? The answer is that there was groundwork to be laid first – about the existence and nature of the true God, and the reality of sin and coming judgement. On the other hand, when Paul preached to educated Jews, his approach was a bit different:

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded ...³

The cross, the scriptures and the hot-button Jewish topic of the Messiah are now front and centre; but look at the different words used to describe how he evangelised:

Reasoning: *dialégomai* – giving and receiving information with someone to reach deeper understanding

Explaining: *dianoigó* – to open up completely (see also Luke 24:31-32);

Proving: *paratithémi* – to set before someone in teaching (see Mat. 13:24);

Proclaiming: *kataggelló* – to exactly, decisively announce/herald a message in a definite (binding) way.

This was not simply a take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum, nor was it a soundbite, sloganeering gospel either. It was a robust gospel, set upon an equally robust foundation, and starting from where the hearers were, not where the preacher wanted to ultimately take them. Ultimately, the hearers were ‘persuaded’ based on a phased, comprehensive dialogue which culminated in preaching for a verdict.

Whenever this biblical approach is taken, there is surely no need to apologise!

References: (1) <https://stephenmc Alpine.com/the-age-of-apologetics-is-over/> (2) 1 Cor. 2:2 (3) Acts 17:2-4

Bible quotations from NIV

Personal story

Drawn to the light

An interview with Master Tepere, Mwanakhu, Malawi

My maternal grandfather had been the most spiritually active in my family. It was he who collected me from my parental home to accompany him to church ceremonies.

During my days in primary school, I was given a Bible distributed by the Gideons. In it, God spoke to me through John chapter 1:1-5, and that was when I fully trusted in Jesus as God's eternal Son. He it was who'd come to enlighten me from the darkness of sin, and I gladly received Him (John 1:12). Those early verses of John's Gospel have always remained very special to me.

While progressing through secondary and tertiary education, I also participated in a Christian choir and other responsibilities. I married and became independent of my parents, but in our marriage, my wife Esnart and I tried to remain dependent on God. By that, I mean from the beginning of our family life together we believed in prayer before everything we do. Thankfully, we have inspired the same sense of dependence on God in our children. Currently, our whole family does not engage in any activity without first asking for God's hand to be on that activity.

You're setting us a good example too. How did you hear about the Churches of God?

I enjoyed studying the Bible, and being hungry to understand it better, I began to search for spiritual literature in order to widen my spiritual horizons. It was at this time that I first came across printed material from the Churches of God: Why I worship in a Church of God. I read it eagerly, and discovered the real truth about how God wants us to worship Him. This book pointed me back to the Bible itself, the Word of

God. I had first come to delight in the Eternal Word who became flesh (John 1:14) – that I might experience God's life, light, grace and truth (John 1:4,14) – and I wanted my growth in these things to continue through His written Word, the Bible. My satisfaction in the teaching of the Churches of God is that it is ultimately restricted to, or supported from, the words of God.

But I couldn't understand everything in that Book by myself, so I set off in search of people to clarify some points. Of course, this forced me to find out the actual location of nearby churches of God, so that from them I could find out accurately what their literature meant. My quest brought me to the Church of God at Milepa, where I met one of its overseeing brothers, Isaac Topesa. He was kind enough to share further instruction from God's Word with me concerning the Churches of God.

How did this interest develop?

I began to be excited to put this teaching into practice in my own locality. They encouraged me to find any others who might be like-minded. I searched out my good friends Ezwick Makawa and Moses Alumelo and gladly shared with them everything I'd learnt. After hearing the whole story from me, they began to show interest as well. The Milepa church organised some spiritual lessons for us and soon a few of us began moving forward in baptism and attending Milepa church services remotely. Gradually, we came to a point of having our own mission work.

Numbers grew over a period of about 3 years until we were more than 50 persons, all added to the fellowship of the Church of God at Milepa some distance away from our homes which are in and around



Chiringa. What a special occasion it was when, on Sunday 21 April this year (2019), a church was planted close to Chiringa in Mwanakhu village! It was in that village location that a man called Stanford Wayawaya had been listening to Search For Truth radio broadcasts. Through correspondence in 2005, he had been the first in these parts to receive Church of God literature.

Sad to say, he's no longer in good bodily condition, and we are grieved at his suffering. We feel pain as we see his pain. As a church family we are moved to help him and his wife as we are able, for example by transporting him to clinic appointments and supervising the application of his treatment. He was God's instrument to bring us spiritual help; and now we can be God's instruments to bring him physical help.

That reminds us of Romans 15:27! Finally, may we ask: What goal do you have in serving the Lord?

Stanford heard the truth about churches of God from the radio, but not many people here have access to such sources of information. It's my ambition to attend Church of God training sessions if they could be conducted annually. Then I – and others – can be equipped to deepen the understanding of brothers and sisters already in local churches of God throughout the rural parts of Malawi. We have much to learn!

Online Christian soldiers

Martin Jones, Hamilton, Canada

Have you heard about ‘keyboard warriors’? It’s a somewhat dismissive term to describe someone who hides behind a cloak of anonymity (and a shield of distance) in an online forum or on social media to say things, that they’d never think of saying to a stranger’s face – and quite often as part of a heated discussion about a hot topic. Engaging online is not for the faint of heart – in fact it can so often result in rudeness, unkindness, bullying and even threats that many famous people have decided to steer clear of online interaction altogether, even if it hampers their connecting with people they’d like to.

Perhaps the term takes on a new meaning when applied to a Christian ‘warrior’ attempting to engage in apologetics online – for one thing, it’s certainly not for the faint of heart! A recent attempt to both engage and publicise the magazine’s existence via sponsored advertising on the NT Facebook page was certainly an interesting experience – and it highlights some key things to bear in mind when seeking to speak of God and His Word online.

The sponsored post itself seemed completely inoffensive – an image of God’s creation and an invitation to view the latest magazine online. Using Facebook’s algorithms to reach other Bible believers, overall engagement was extremely high in terms of views and comments, many of which appreciated the image. On the other hand, clicks to the link were proportionately quite low – perhaps it was overshadowed by the image (it’s impossible to tell without running parallel tests).

But what wasn’t expected, given the deliberate targeting, was the response of a few, clearly strongly unbelieving, who saw the advert, were for some reason quite incensed by it and decided to respond with negative comments. Perhaps Facebook’s algorithms have room for improvement, but it left a choice – engage or not? Although not the original intent, it was decided to respond, not to ignore.

We have to leave the results of the interactions with the Lord, and we can pray that something said will lodge with them to be used by the Spirit in future. But here are some helpful tips if you ever decide to enter into some form of spiritual dialogue online:

1. Be prepared for time to be consumed – often, even one dialogue will go on various tangents, which is multiplied when other people join the debate! You’ll probably have to be selective about which topics to pursue. It may be worth suggesting that the dialogue be taken ‘offline’ to keep things manageable and to pursue things in more depth.

2. Remain cordial at all times – remember that what is written online will be seen by many and may be there permanently. You may find you’re deliberately provoked to say something you will later regret. It’s probably wise to avoid knee-jerk replies; instead take time away from the computer to consider your next response.

3. Don’t try to win an argument – it’s easy to lose sight of the main objective to preach the gospel, rather than score points. Don’t forget praying for guidance as to what to say and how to say it.

4. Try to probe for assumptions and drivers – when you encounter a controversial or seemingly baseless statement, ask the person, “What makes you say that?” It’s often helpful to make people consider what might be behind what they think – perhaps a misunderstanding or a negative past experience is clouding their objectivity. It’s never a bad thing to understand ‘where they’re coming from.’

5. Let the Bible speak – try and find an opportunity to provide a relevant Bible verse, which the Holy Spirit can use, rather than rely on reason or logic alone. On top of that, direct to reputable online resources that your debater can perhaps visit later – it’s not all down to you!

6. Know when to stop – the Holy Spirit must be actively working with them for your words to have any effect, which is especially difficult to discern in this form of evangelism. It may simply be that the seed you have sown in this case has fallen on infertile ground. But keep sowing elsewhere!

NT Needed Truth
Published January 15 · 🌐

Read Christian magazine NT online <https://churchesofgod.info/wp-content/uploads/.../07/01-19.pdf>

18,356 People Reached 3,357 Engagements Boost Again