

Living in the World

Stephen Jones

Salt and Light Ministries

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Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs

Chapter 1

Worlds Apart

Fourteen hundred years ago, a man called Fionán set himself adrift in a tiny boat off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. Together with twelve companions, he was inspired by the Bible's teaching that we should "not love the world or anything in the world" (1 John 2:15). They were in search of a remote island on which to found a monastery and were not disappointed. The sea currents took them to Skellig Michael, a rocky outcrop seven hundred feet high and eight miles from the mainland, one of the most remote spots in Europe. There, on a narrow and exposed ledge, they built tiny huts and survived by trading the feathers and eggs of sea birds for food – usually bread and vegetables, since meat was considered an unnecessary indulgence.

What a contrast to Thomas Wolsey! Wolsey (c.1474-1530) was the son of a butcher who gained a university education. He was keen to win power and influence and, by the age of forty, he had become such a senior church leader that even his king (Henry VIII of England) followed his advice. In this position, Wolsey worked hard and intelligently to prevent a war with France, and he successfully founded a college that remains influential to this day. Yet, he also amassed a huge personal fortune, and often lied to get his own way. Indeed, by the end of his life he had proved himself to be as greedy and corrupt as any politician of his day.

So, which of these, do you think, appears to have most met God's expectations of us? Actually, both grieved him immensely, since both fell far short of Jesus' desire for his disciples, which is that we live among people and influence them in a godly way. Fionán failed by isolating himself

and abandoning people who were in desperate need of the gospel. Wolsey failed because others changed him more than he changed them. Jesus was aware of these opposite dangers and so prayed to his Father, “not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

The World

In the Bible, the term ‘the world’ has a number of different meanings. First, it can mean ‘the entire created order’ – oceans, hills, clouds, heavens, plants, animals and mankind (e.g. Proverbs 8:23). While this physical world is certainly subject to decay and frustration as a result of human sin (Romans 8:20-21), it is not described in the Bible as evil. Rather, the creation “declares the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1), and so points men and women towards him (Romans 1:20).

Second, the term ‘the world’ can refer to ‘the whole human race’ as, for example, in Romans 3:19, where Paul says that “the whole world” will be held accountable to God.

Third, ‘the world’ is used a number of times to refer specifically to those people who are in active rebellion against God, or to the societies that these people have created. Using the phrase in this way, the Bible describes ‘the world’ as being totally opposed to God’s ways (James 4:4), since it is under the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19) and has a corrupting influence on Christians (2 Peter 2:20). This is the world that we must be ‘in’ but not ‘of’ – living in the midst of unbelievers who are not in relationship with God, but not being like them. It was in this sense that Jesus said that his disciples are not ‘of the world’ (John 17:14).

It is in this third sense of the word that I use the phrase ‘the world’ in this book. When I want to speak of ‘the whole of mankind’ and ‘the entire physical creation’, I have used other words.

Godly Agents of Change

Jesus prayed for his disciples, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Why did he not want his disciples to be taken out of the world (that is,

corrupt human society)? Because he wanted them to carry on his mission, which was one of coming to the aid of the people of this world, “to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19). Christians must *stay* in the world in order to *change* the world.

However, Jesus knew that the advancement of this kingdom would be a battle and that Satan wields much influence among unbelievers. That is why he prayed for his disciples to be protected from the evil one. Since only godly people can advance God’s kingdom, Satan fights back by tempting Christians to fall into sin. Temptation was his first tactic against humanity (Genesis 3:1-5) and against Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). The biggest danger for Christians living in the world is that, through giving into temptation, they become corrupted by their contact with the world and fail to live in the godly way that the Scriptures call us to (2 Peter 3:11).

Inspired by the Word of God

To live godly lives in the midst of the world is no small challenge! Yet many Christians have succeeded in living this way. We know of them as ‘heroes of the faith’. Alongside biblical heroes like Abraham, Ruth, Daniel, Esther and Paul, we could name others through history, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who opposed the Nazis in Germany; William Wilberforce, who secured a ban on slavery within the British Empire; Augustine of Hippo, who influenced a large region of North Africa; Mother Theresa, who worked in the Calcutta slums; and many, many more.

How did these Christians grow in holiness whilst living in the world? From their own testimony, the most important factor was that they read the Bible and allowed it to guide their beliefs and actions. Reading its pages, they were inspired to stay amongst the people that Jesus came to save. They learned that they could not escape to some remote retreat whilst sin, pain and injustice remained to be dealt with and people remained in desperate need. Reading its pages, they also learned standards of conduct that set them apart from the people around them, and discovered the keys of how to maintain a godly life.

For us, too, reading the Bible will be absolutely crucial, if we are to be salt and light in this world (Matthew 5:13-16). In most matters of conduct, the Bible's teaching is quite clear and straightforward. For example, we are not to take bribes; we are to give generously to the poor; we are not to engage in sexual immorality. These direct instructions, and hundreds of others like them, guide us through much of life's activity. As we follow these instructions, we discover that they are not a bind but a blessing. As David said, "Direct me in the paths of your commands, for there I find delight" (Psalm 119:35).

Ungodly behaviour amongst Christians often comes from simple ignorance of what the Bible teaches. I live and work in Oxford, England, a city with a population of about 140,000, of whom 25,000 are students. As I have talked to some of these students, I have found that many of them do not even know that it is wrong to enter into sexual relations outside of marriage. (Amazing, you might feel – but true!) Their failure to live up to the Bible's standard comes, then, not from wilful disobedience of God's commands, but from sheer ignorance of them. This places on us the responsibility of teaching the Word of God in a clear and relevant way, and of encouraging Christians to read and learn the Word for themselves (sadly, this practice is not as widespread as we might sometimes like to think!)

Such ignorance of God's Word is not unique to England, however! In India, there are many Christians who still believe in old village superstitions; in Nigeria, there are church leaders who have more than one wife, just to give two examples. Clearly, Christians in every nation need instruction in the Word of God!

Of course, *knowledge* of the Bible is not enough. We must also *choose to obey it*. Since our fallen human nature tends to disobey God's instructions, we need constantly to challenge each other to live as we know we ought to live. Clear, moral preaching and regular, personal accountability must also play their part, if the church is to become "a holy nation ... a people belonging to God" that will cause unbelievers in this generation to glorify God (1 Peter 2:9-12).

Where the Bible seems Silent

Every day, we face questions about exactly *how* to live holy lives. Whilst the Bible answers many of these questions, it does not always give us direct guidance for every moral dilemma. The Scriptures were written within cultures other than our own, in other times, and in other places. They therefore do not talk about buses or computers or factories or HIV. They do not tell us directly whether to own a television or not; or how to relate to Muslims; or what to make of a hundred other issues, with which we have to engage regularly.

It is in these areas, where we have no *direct* biblical guidance, that Christians are perhaps in the greatest danger of failing to be salt and light, as we tend to react in one of three inadequate ways:

1. Enjoy!

One reaction is to think that, if God does not specifically forbid an activity somewhere in the Bible, then it can't be that bad and we can settle down and enjoy it. We can relax and join in with unbelievers, sharing in their amusements and pleasures, whether it is music, a high material standard of living, or going to nightclubs.

If you find this reaction tempting, it may help to know what the word 'amusement' literally means. To muse is to reflect, and to 'a-muse' means the opposite: 'not to reflect'. So, to enjoy the world's amusements means that we *stop thinking* and *let down our mental guard*. The trouble is, our minds are then open to any surrounding influence and, sooner or later, get corrupted. The result of our enjoyment can be that we end up thinking just like the world, yet may not even notice it! Jesus had some stern words to say about this:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matthew 5:13).

2. Escape!

A second reaction is to ignore the issue, hoping to escape from dealing with it. Whilst it is often wise to step back and wait when first faced with

a confusing moral issue, this can develop into an unhealthy habit. Instead of continuing to work out such issues, ‘stepping back’ can become the habit of constantly shying away from anything that feels complicated or dubious or challenging. This is unhealthy, because it amounts to an attempt to escape from society. The result is that Christians are no longer ‘seen’, and therefore no longer effective. Jesus had some equally clear words to say about this:

“You are the light of the world. A city on the hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house” (Matthew 5:14-16).

3. *Evade!*

There is a third reaction to ‘the world’, which is common among believers. It is to evade personal responsibility by relying on ‘the experts’ to tell us what to do. The expert need not be a theologian or an apostle. He may be your pastor or the author of the latest popular Christian paperback; but if they say, “Enjoy it!”, then we relax and let our hair down. If they say, “Flee from it!”, we give it a wide berth. When relying on an expert, we feel content that we are probably doing the right thing and, anyway, we have someone else to blame if we are wrong!

Now, whilst pastoral advice and Christian books can be very helpful, we must not make them scapegoats for evading our own responsibilities. It will not work to stand before God on Judgement Day and say, “But my pastor told me to do it!” or “But I read it in a book!” Each of us will have to give account for our own life and choices (Romans 14:10-12). Moreover, neither your pastor nor the book is there all the time. Your pastor cannot come to work with you every day or sit in a corner of your family home waiting to dispense good advice!

Equally, there are many subjects that no Christian expert has yet written about. I recently went to a well-stocked Christian bookshop and found a whole shelf of Christian books about evolution, and many on art and music. I also found books on how to deal with dating, feminism, credit cards, and styles of dress. I even found a book on how to react to a non-Christian children’s book that had recently become extremely popular in Britain. But there were lots of subjects on which I could find absolutely nothing,

because there has not been a Christian book written on every area of modern life.

Digging Deeper

In short, all three of these easy answers are far too shallow. To find a better way of staying godly in an ungodly world, we need to dig deeper into the Bible. We need to get into it and let it get into us. In the Bible we can find *principles* that equip us for *any issue* that the world might throw at us. As I began to pray and to dig deeper into this question, I found myself reflecting at length on a particular passage in the New Testament, which contains a number of principles to guide Christians as they live in the world.

But before you read any further, I would like to ask you to do something. Please put this book down and pick up your Bible. I'd like you to read straight through a passage, which was written by Paul – 1 Corinthians 8:1-10:33. Then, pick this book up again and I will tell you a story ...

Chapter 2

Timothy's Dilemma

Whilst getting ready for work one day, Timothy glanced out of the window and saw Mary approaching. As she knocked on his door, he sent up a quick prayer, “Lord, give me wisdom.” Since that day, nine years ago, when she had helped him to move his possessions into this apartment, he and Mary had become good friends. It had been a brand new block of apartments then, and Mary had been the first person to move in. Timothy reflected that it was no coincidence that Mary had moved in first. He had always found her to act first and think later – a character trait that often spilled over into high passions and anger.

Watching her approaching now, Timothy reflected on the gossip that he had heard the day before. Mary and her husband, John, were approaching their thirtieth wedding anniversary and apparently were planning a big celebration, to which all forty or so people in the block would be invited. Their own dining room would hold no more than ten people, and so they had made arrangements at a nearby restaurant that had enough room for fifty. Moreover, the restaurant owners had chosen a romantic theme and named the place after the Roman goddess of love, ‘Aphrodite’.

It seemed a great choice; but Timothy knew that the owners took the ‘Aphrodite’ theme rather seriously. When they prepared the meal, they gave thanks for it and dedicated it to Aphrodite, so that joining in with the meal felt like betraying Jesus. They also encouraged people to engage in passionate embraces in and around the restaurant. Those who didn't join in were sometimes seen as ‘party-poopers’. The last time he had been invited to a party like this, Timothy had made up some excuse for not

going, but he'd felt sure that Jesus would not have lied to his friends in that way. Maybe it would be better to go this time, to try to act uprightly, and to trust that his godly behaviour would speak volumes.

All these thoughts were running around in Timothy's head when the knock came on the door. He opened it to see Mary's smiling, excited face. She handed him a beautiful little scroll, which she had obviously spent time and money preparing.

She said, "It's an invitation to join us at Aphrodite's for our wedding anniversary celebrations. The plans are finally falling into place, and John and I were just saying that all we need is for our friends to come and join us. You will come, won't you?"

Food for Thought

What would you advise Timothy to do? Fionán would probably have slammed the door shut in Mary's face! Wolsey might have licked his lips! But what would Jesus have done? How would he have looked to advance the kingdom in this situation? We know that he sometimes shared dinner with people whom some in society saw as being of dubious moral standing (e.g. Matthew 9:10-11); but there is no record of his ever deliberately going to a place of pagan immorality.

Now, if you think my story of Timothy's dilemma is entirely fictitious and rather far-fetched, let me assure you that it isn't! It was, in fact, a dilemma faced regularly by many Christians in the first century A.D. There were temples in every town of the Roman Empire, dedicated to gods like Zeus, Apollos and Eros, and they were often encountered during mission to Gentiles (e.g. Acts 14:11-13; 17:16; 19:23-28). In these temples, pagan priests sacrificed the animals that had been brought by devotees of the particular god. The priests ate some of the meat from these sacrifices, but most temples received far more meat than the priests alone could eat. Sometimes the people who had brought the animal would take the spare meat and eat it together in a celebratory meal. Otherwise, the leftover meat was sold in the local market or else served up in courtyards surrounding the temple.

A large Roman household might have a room that could seat fifty people, but only about 5% of Romans lived in such households. The other 95% lived in apartments that were too small to host a party. They therefore needed to find somewhere else to have their parties, and the courtyards next to pagan temples were the nearest thing to a restaurant in the ancient world. As a result, Christians would often find themselves invited to such places by their friends or business associates. Suddenly, they were forced to ask questions they had never had to ask before becoming a Christian: Could they go to such a party or 'business man's lunch'? Would it make them unclean since the party was associated with an idol's temple? Would they be all right to go as long as they avoided the meat and any other obvious immorality? If it wasn't all right, then how would those who went to the temples ever be touched by the gospel?

And what about buying meat in the local market? Was this meat 'clean', or might it have come from a temple and have been dedicated to a pagan idol? Would eating such meat be a sin? Would it be seen as a bad witness? Could I eat meat at a non-Christian friend's house if I didn't know where it had come from?

Corinthian Confusion

Such questions exercised the early church all over the Roman empire, but perhaps nowhere more so than in Corinth, which was the empire's largest 'city of pleasures'. Whereas some cities had just one god or goddess, like Diana in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-27), Corinth had many, including Poseidon (god of the sea), Eros (god of love), Helios (god of the sun) and Asklepios (god of healing). But the dominant one was Aphrodite, goddess of love, whose temple was on the top of the hill overlooking the city, and which had, at the height of its popularity, over a thousand temple prostitutes. For Christians in Corinth, day-to-day life meant encountering false gods, their idols, their temples and meat sacrificed to them at almost every turn.

We have already noted that challenges like this tend to drive Christians in one of two directions: either to *enjoy* the world or to *escape* from it. The church in Corinth did just that, splitting into two camps.

One camp focused on God's command to be holy (e.g. Leviticus 19:2), and so encouraged Christians to flee from anything worldly. Influenced by Greek thinking, they taught that the physical world was both unclean (and could therefore contaminate people) and unspiritual (so any really spiritual person would have as little to do with it as possible). Some even appear to have discouraged people from getting married, for example. Predictably, they believed that any true Christian should avoid both pagan temples and meat that had been offered to idols.

The second camp, by contrast, remembered that 'the earth is the LORD's and everything in it' (Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 10:26); that we are made clean by Jesus, and that "what goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean" (Matthew 15:11). So, when it came to what we can eat or where we can go, they proclaimed, "Everything is permissible" (1 Corinthians 10:23) – so, what was the problem?

Now imagine what tensions such opposing views in the church might bring! One elder might stand up one Sunday and explain that Jesus wants us to be cleansed from every hint of sin, and that therefore pagan meats must be shunned for the sake of maintaining a clear witness. But the next Sunday, another elder might stand up and preach about our freedom in Christ, which must include the freedom to eat anything, even meat at pagan temples. You can well imagine the confusion in the church that resulted!

In search of some clarity, some of the Christians in Corinth wrote to Paul, their founding apostle, asking for his wisdom and advice. They were probably from the "Everything is permissible" camp, since Paul quotes that point of view in his reply. His reply is found in the letter that we now call '1 Corinthians', where he gave a specific answer to their questions about idols, temples and meats. But as he wrote about these things, he also gave five general principles concerning our approach to 'the world'. We will look at each of these principles, the first of which was – *you are free!*

Chapter 3

The Believer's Freedom

Answering questions like, ‘What about food offered to idols?’ requires the wisdom of Solomon! Thankfully, Solomon wrote down some of his wisdom, and it seems that Paul, being well schooled in the Old Testament, drew on that wisdom as he penned his reply to Corinth. In Proverbs 26, Solomon observed that there are times when it is good to ignore a question asked by an ignorant person in order to avoid getting drawn into foolish arguments (verse 4). On the other hand, it may be necessary to address the question directly in order to humble the questioner (verse 5). Paul took both of these approaches in turn, and started by appearing to ignore the question.

“Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:1-3).

To put it another way, Paul said, “Having a soft heart is more important than having an answer to this question!” Paul returned to this theme later (and so shall we); but we can see already that Paul is not about to give us a quick answer, but is more interested in our hearts. Nonetheless, he did have an answer to their question and, taking Solomon’s second approach, he went on to give the Corinthians a direct answer.

No God but One

Let’s read what he goes on to say: “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and

that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

In writing this, Paul came down firmly against those who taught that the physical world could somehow contaminate people. He reminded the church that *everything* was created by Christ and that everything is sustained by him (see also Colossians 1:16-17). Since God can only create good things, and since he can have nothing to do with unclean things, it follows that nothing in the created order can make a person unclean. Jesus himself taught that “what goes into a man’s mouth does not make him unclean” (Matthew 15:11), and Paul’s application of this principle to food offered to idols was clear:

“Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for ‘The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it’. If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience” (1 Corinthians 10:25-27).

Set Free!

The basis of our freedom as Christians is the fact that Jesus himself has set us free! We were once held captive to evil by our own sinful nature, so much so that even God’s instructions aroused evil passions in us, instead of the holiness that they were meant to enable (Romans 7:5). We could not help being selfish; we were under God’s condemnation and could expect only death. Not only that, the warden of this prison was Satan himself, and he actively resisted any attempts by us at escape. If we did anything wrong, he would beat us over the head, rightly saying, “You are a dirty sinner and you deserve all you get!” The glory of the gospel is that Jesus himself came down to our prison and set us free. As a verse in one of Charles Wesley’s hymns says:

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

As soon as we hand our lives over to Jesus, we experience freedom from sin and the selfishness that once plagued us, and the accusations of the devil no longer have any basis (Romans 8:1-2). Indeed, disciples of Jesus have been set free from every evil power in the world (Colossians 2:13-15) and now have authority over them instead (e.g. Luke 10:18-20). We do not need to be fearful any longer!

For the Christians in Corinth, this meant that they did not need to cower away from pagan meats. They could eat them, resting secure in the knowledge that “the one who is in you [Jesus] is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Since Jesus had freed them from sin and cleansed them, pagan meat could not now make them unclean. Since Jesus had freed them from all condemnation, they did not have to fear being judged, either by men or by God, for what they ate or did not eat.

Living Free!

An old English proverb says, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” The Bible too says that it is foolish to rush into any situation (Proverbs 19:2); but both angels and Christians need only fear God. We need not be fearful of any person or situation. Yet there are many Christians who, out of fear, avoid places where they have every authority and freedom to go.

There are many of God’s children who have not yet taken hold of their birthright of freedom. They remain locked up in *the fear of doing wrong*, *the fear of condemnation* or *the fear of what Satan might do*. If they are truly going to learn what it means to be ‘in the world’, then the first step must be to get free from old bondages and to enjoy their freedom in Christ. Then, once freedom has been gained, they need to learn to walk in it.

Returning Rats

When I was a graduate student, I did some research for a pest control company and visited their laboratories. They kept a wide range of species for use in experiments, including cockroaches, weevils, moths, termites, rats and mice. Once I got over the smell of the place, my next reaction was

surprise at the conditions in which the rats were kept. Each rat had its own spacious cage, with plenty of food and bedding. The cages took up lots of space, whilst the scientists were all crammed into a tiny office where they couldn't even stretch their legs! The rats were certainly living in luxury, but they were all being bred for an experiment in which they would be fed poison and die.

I was told that, a few months earlier, some political activists had broken into the laboratory. They objected to the animals being fed poison, and so had set all the rats free into the surrounding countryside. This happened over a weekend, and the scientists arrived at work on the Monday morning to find all the cages empty. They realised what had happened, but they also knew how rats think. So, they simply opened up the laboratory doors and the cage doors and, by the middle of the day, most of the rats had made their own way back! The rats thought that they were onto a good thing, and so returned; what they didn't know was the grim fate that awaited them.

We need to be careful not to be like those rats! Our sinful desires are cages that lead to death; but Jesus has set us free. Yet we can easily start to think, "If I am now free from condemnation, why not enjoy a bit of that sin that used to make me feel guilty?" or "If I have no fear of demons, why can't I dabble in the occult a bit? It won't hurt me." But this is the spiritual equivalent of climbing back into our old cages! So, God tells us not to use our freedom as an opportunity for indulging our sinful nature (Galatians 5:13-14). Peter put it this strongly: "Of them the proverbs are true: 'A dog returns to its vomit,' and, 'A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud' " (2 Peter 2:22).

Staying Free

Christian freedom is a wonderful gift from God; but it can also be dangerous if handled incorrectly! So, Paul did not simply remind the Corinthians of their freedom and leave it at that. He took another 67 verses to give them four more principles, all about how that freedom should now be exercised. In those verses, he called the Corinthians to think about other believers and about unbelievers, about how much temptation they could bear and, finally, about how their behaviour might affect their fellowship with God. But he started by describing how a young Christian might feel about idols ...

Chapter 4

Love for Other Christians

Let's read on and see how Paul continues his argument.

“But not everyone knows this. Some people are so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So, this weak brother for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall” (1 Corinthians 8:7-13).

What is the Conscience?

The conscience is one of God's marvellous gifts! It checks what we do against what we know to be right. It is like a stock checker going round a storeroom, checking whether what is there corresponds to a list of what should be there. With the conscience, the list is of things that I know to be right, and it checks whether or not my thoughts and actions are on that list. So, when I do something that I know to be right, like offering someone a

word of encouragement, my conscience notes that all is well. On the other hand, if I do something that I know to be wrong, like holding a grudge against someone, then my conscience observes that I know better and responds by making me feel guilty.

So, what does it mean to have a *weak conscience*? Since the Bible teaches that everyone's conscience sometimes accuses and sometimes defends their actions (Romans 2:14-15), we know that everyone's conscience is able to perform the checks that it was designed to perform. So, a weak conscience is not one that fails to check our actions against our beliefs. Rather, a conscience is weakened by *mistaken beliefs*. If I believe that something is wrong when really it is right, my conscience will make me feel guilty when there is no need. This is what Paul calls a 'weak conscience'.

Last year, some members of our church in Oxford met some Christians who believe that it is wrong to celebrate Christmas. Why? Because the Bible tells us not to trust in religious festivals (e.g. Colossians 2:16-23). These Christians were wrong to apply this particular passage to our celebrating Christmas; but it was a matter of conscience to them to avoid anything to do with it. I could just about cope with this; but when I discovered that these 'weak Christians' actually rebuke people who sing Christmas carols, I confess I did get annoyed!

However, Paul's instructions were to respect the weak, not to be annoyed with them. To understand this more, let's go back to Timothy (whom I introduced in Chapter 2) and fill in a few more details of his story ...

Timothy's Dilemma – Part Two

When Mary knocked on his door, Timothy had been saved for over twenty years, and had attained some maturity in his faith. So, when invited to an unbeliever's party, he knew he had the freedom to go, because "there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Corinthians 8:6)" and that "food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" (8:7). The main reason that he hesitated to go to Mary's party was his concern for his daughter, Lois.

Lois was now seventeen years old, but had already had an eventful life. Her mother had died when she was thirteen, and that death had had a profound effect upon her. She had turned overnight from a happy and innocent girl into a vengeful rebel. After a few difficult months in which she needed to be dragged along to Christian meetings, she had simply stopped going, and decided instead to go to a pagan group that met in a restaurant dedicated to Eros, the Roman god of lust. She had entered fully into their sordid life, including sacrificing animals to Eros and then eating the meat as an act of dedication to him. Nothing that Timothy said or did, short of locking Lois up twenty-four hours a day, could stop her from engaging in this immoral and damaging lifestyle. All he could do was to pray, and ask that God would return his daughter to him.

Then, one day, Lois came home, went to her room without saying a word and stayed there for two days. When she came out, she told her father that one of the men she had met at the group had assaulted her and that she never wanted to go there again. That night, she received Jesus as her saviour, and vowed that she would always honour him alone.

That was now six months ago; but Timothy knew that Lois would not understand him going to a celebratory meal at ‘Aphrodite’s’. Lois believed with all her heart that such places were evil, and her conscience told her that no real follower of Jesus would choose to go there.

Strengthening the Weak

In such a decision, Lois was wanting to be holy; but Paul would have described her as a ‘weak’ Christian. He wanted believers to be free from fear about ‘temples’ and to enjoy their freedom. Indeed, he saw such freedom as a sign of a ‘strong’ faith. He would not have seen Lois as a model of godliness, but rather as someone still trapped in fears concerning the power of sin and Satan. This perspective would lead most people not to be ruled by Lois’s fears, but to encourage Timothy to go to the party.

I have met Christians who believe that God will be displeased if they watch TV on a Sunday. I have even met Christians who believe that speaking in tongues is wrong. I confess that I tend to dismiss these people and say, “I’m going to turn the TV on whether you like it or not!” or “I’m going to

shout in tongues right now!” However, such brashness does not please God! *He loves people who are weak!* And he wants us to do the same (Ezekiel 34:4). So, a godly person “will take pity on the weak” (Psalm 72:13) and will seek to strengthen them. If we simply dismiss our weaker brothers and sisters, we are liable to damage them instead.

Suppose I were to watch TV on Sunday in the presence of a Christian who believed that Sunday is for the Lord, not for TV. He may be encouraged, by my example, to do likewise, even though he believes in his heart that it is wrong. This might seem innocent enough, but it may actually mark the downfall of his faith. In flouting his conscience, he has started the habit of watching TV programmes that he believes it wrong to watch. Now, what will he do if a film comes on the TV containing unhelpful material, such as profanity or nudity? If he carries on watching, the wound that my brashness has made on his conscience will have led him directly into sin. Instead of binding up the broken reed (Isaiah 42:3), I will have broken it clean in half!

Building rather than Breaking

It should be clear by now that Timothy should avoid going to Mary’s party for the sake of his daughter, Lois, in order to avoid damaging her conscience. But as well as avoiding the negative, he can seek the positive. He can use the opportunity to start teaching her that Jesus has defeated all powers and principalities. He can pray with her for full redemption from her past. He can confess to her his own weaknesses and explain how he has learnt to find God’s strength in his weakness. It may even be that, eventually, Lois may be able to return to an idol’s temple, strong in the freedom that Christ has given her – certainly not to not take part in the idolatry, and certainly not into a setting where there was clear immorality being practised; but equally, not fearful of mixing with non-Christians on their own ground. Until then, it is better for Timothy not to go.

To give up our freedom in this way is not always easy! It may mean giving up doing something we enjoy, or avoiding places we like. It may place a strain on other friendships. But we cannot allow our being ‘in the world’ to encourage other Christians to be ‘of the world’. Nothing – not even our freedom – is worth such a price.

Chapter 5

Love for the Lost

As children of God we are free from sin and fear and are able to enjoy all that God has created. Yet, as we have just seen, if we love other Christians, we will sometimes renounce our freedom. Likewise, love for unbelievers will also compel us to give up our freedom, but in very different ways.

Laying Aside our Rights

Let's go back to Paul's answer to the Corinthians again. He has just argued that, as the founding apostle to their church, he could be seen as having certain 'rights' – though he has never made use of those rights. He then goes on to apply this principle to the Corinthians and their present situation.

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Paul knew that he had been set free by the gospel of the kingdom and that it was now his duty to share that gospel with unbelievers that they too might be set free. Paul was a zealous Jew who had enjoyed living at the

very heart of Jewish life. Yet, for the sake of the gospel, he had left Israel, had trekked through many a wilderness, had experienced shipwreck several times, and had often been on the run. He had received beatings as he sought openings for the gospel, and he had accepted poverty in order to bless others with heavenly riches (see 2 Corinthians 6:3-10; 11:22-29).

Clearly, he had been prepared to put aside his own comforts and preferences to show love to the lost; and so must we. This may mean giving up the freedom to go where we want, and to go instead where we are needed, which may well be the dirtiest, darkest, even most devilish of places. At other times, it may mean putting up with the legalism of others, in order to find an opening for the gospel of forgiveness.

A Continuing Choice

A superficial reading of Acts might suggest to us that Paul, who had lived comfortably amongst Jewish Christians, one day made a radical move into another culture – that of the Gentiles – a culture with which he became increasingly comfortable and perhaps even preferred. But a more detailed reading of Acts shows quite a different story. At the start his ministry, Paul did give up being ‘a good Jew’, for the sake of Gentiles. But then he happily went to synagogues and took on Jewish customs again, in order to reach the Jewish community in each city. Again, he was prepared to move in academic circles when necessary, as he did in Athens, or to argue with all-comers in the public square, as he did in Ephesus. Then he returned to the religious establishment in Jerusalem and was just as comfortable there. In other words, he was prepared to adapt how he lived again and again.

Paul did not move to a new culture and quickly settle once more into a predictable lifestyle, in which he knew just what to do. Rather, he constantly strove to reach more people, in new places and new cultures. He held all his personal likes and dislikes lightly enough that they did not get in the way of any relationship or ministry that God might initiate. Every day, he had to choose whether to rest content in his Christian freedom, or to give it up for the sake of those who were lost in sin. This lifestyle of love for the lost will involve pain and giving up much that is precious to us. It is always costly – but always rewarding!

A Dangerous Choice

Let me tell you a story to illustrate this point.

‘Ebola’ is a fatal disease which strikes all the bodily senses and for which there is no cure. Having caught the disease, an unpleasant death usually follows within days. You can catch it simply by being within a few feet of someone with the virus when they cough. Unsurprisingly, it quickly becomes epidemic in a local community. The disease first hit the headlines in 1976, following outbreaks near the Ebola River in Zaire. Since then, there have been numerous outbreaks. One of these started in September 2000 in Lacor, a Ugandan town just north of the equator, where there is a Christian hospital which was founded by Dr. Piero Corti and his wife, Dr Lucille Teasdale.

In September 2000, Dr. Corti was away from Lacor raising funds for the hospital. He was by now alone, because his wife had died in 1996 of AIDS, contracted from suffering patients. When the ebola virus struck, the hospital superintendent, Dr. Matthew Lukwiya, was also away. Both doctors returned to Lacor and Dr. Lukwiya soon diagnosed the virus as ebola. Knowing that they were going to need as many beds as possible, he discharged any patients who could move. At that time, the local government hospital would not accept ebola patients, and everyone infected with it was coming to the Christian hospital. Very soon, the hospital was full of dying patients, with new patients constantly arriving.

When news of the virus broke, many people locked their children indoors or frantically boarded buses for Kampala, the capital. Some victims were left to die alone in the street. The medical staff was spending as much time calming the panicking population as caring for the sick and dying. Then two more nurses and a doctor died. At this point, even the four hundred medical staff panicked. A meeting was held, and Matthew Lukwiya gave everyone a choice – they could leave or stay. If they left, no one would think badly of them, since everyone else in the area was trying to get away as fast as possible. If they stayed, it would be to nurse infected patients, offering care and comfort until they died. Hardly any of the medical staff left. They preferred to stay, putting concern for the patients above concern for their own safety, and continuing to care for people throughout the crisis,

which lasted into November. Whilst helping a male nurse who had contracted the virus, Matthew Lukwiya also contracted ebola and died in early December 2000.

These Christian nurses and doctors were free to leave Lacor, but they understood that love is better than freedom. Whilst those who were ‘of the world’ were fleeing, these precious believers, who were not ‘of the world’ chose to stay ‘in the world’ for the sake of those in need. Having chosen to stay, they were able to say, “To those at risk from ebola, I became endangered by ebola, in order to win those with ebola.” What a powerful testimony! These men and women certainly number among the heroes of our faith.

Love in Conflict

Sometimes, this kind of selfless devotion to the lost will conflict with love for other Christians. In Timothy’s story, Timothy would have been motivated by his love for daughter, Lois, to avoid the pagan party. On the other hand, his desire to reach Mary and John with the gospel would have motivated him to go. Paul was well aware of this kind of conflict, and made it clear which motive should have priority:

“If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake – the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours” (1 Corinthians 10:27-29).

Two thousand years later, most of us are not invited to pagan temples; but in other ways we will sometimes feel that our concern for other believers is in tension with our love for the lost. For example, we might feel we need to miss a particular church meeting in order to spend time with unbelievers; but there is a danger of setting a bad example to younger Christians, such that they stop attending church gatherings altogether. When we feel such a tension, our first priority is to avoid damaging our fellow believers. The church will never succeed in changing the world if Christians are constantly injuring each other!

Chapter 6

Testing Times

We have seen that the question of how to live godly lives in the world faced Christians two thousand years ago as clearly as it faces us today; but we can trace the question even further back in the history of God's people. Around 1500 BC, Moses led the nation of Israel out of Egypt. As a people, they had seen God move in amazing ways. With their own eyes, they had seen the ten plagues in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea. *They had been set free!* When there was no water for them to drink in the wilderness, God had caused a stream to emerge from the rock at Horeb. Each day in the desert, they had eaten manna from heaven and seen God's manifest presence in the form of a pillar of cloud. In fact, Paul says that Christ himself was with them at that time and that, though they didn't know it, they were drawing spiritual life from him, as he explained to the Corinthians:

“I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers ... all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

These blessings strengthened the faith of the people of Israel, such that they put their trust in God (Exodus 14:31). However, when Moses went up Mount Sinai, the people were quick to turn away from God:

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us.’ ... So all the people took off their ear-rings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an

idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt’... Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry” (Exodus 32:1-6).

Making this calf was not entirely the Israelites’ idea. Archaeologists have found hundreds of metal calves both in Egypt and in Canaan, many of which pre-date the Exodus. Many of them are inscribed with the name ‘Baal’, which means ‘lord’, and they were placed in shrines and worshipped as gods, with feasting and revelry. As the Israelites wandered through the desert behind the cloud of God’s presence, they carried with them memories of Egyptian idols, which would have been brought back to mind as they also met with calf-worshipping Canaanites. Despite all that the people of Israel had seen of the living God, they saw these idols as an attractive alternative. God had set them free from slavery in Egypt, but they quickly turned from him and used their freedom to worship idols.

Take Care not to Fall

The relevance of this to Christians in the world is plain. We must be careful that our freedom does not become a doorway to fresh temptations. As Paul put it:

“Now, these things occurred as examples to us to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry’ – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died ... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the age has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:6-12).

If the world’s temptations have the power to make us fall into sin, we might think it safer to leave human society and live as hermits in a lonely desert. But let’s remember that the people of Israel did not forge their golden calf amidst the Egyptian pyramids or in the shadow of Canaanite cities, but whilst they were wandering in the desert, cut off from civilisation. Remember too that Jesus was tempted by Satan whilst in the desert (Mark 1:13).

Temptation can come as forcefully in the desert as in the city! The truth is, we cannot escape temptation altogether, however hard we try.

Refiner's Fire

We often think of temptation as something wholly negative. However, God will use for good what Satan intends for evil. Whereas Satan tempts us in the hope that we will fail, temptations can also strengthen our faith (James 1:2-4). To help us understand this, let's consider a goldsmith's furnace. The goldsmith puts an impure lump of gold into the fire and heats it until it melts. As it melts, the impurities float to the surface, forming a scum that can be skimmed off. This reveals how pure the gold was, since a purer gold will produce less scum. The goldsmith then removes the liquid gold from the fire, and it cools down and becomes solid again – only now it is far more pure and far more valuable.

Temptations are just like being in the goldsmith's fire. If we fail and allow temptation to lead to sin, the flaws in our character and faith are exposed. But if we successfully resist the temptation, our faith is strengthened and its worth proven. The Greek word used in the New Testament to mean 'temptation' can also be translated 'test' or 'trial'. So, we can think of temptations as examinations of our faith.

Having warned the Corinthians about temptations, Paul then went on to give them some encouragement:

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful: he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide you with a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

What can we draw from this?

1. All temptations are predictable

This verse tells us, firstly, that the temptations we face are not unexpected or unusual. Instead, they are common to all people, and so they should not surprise us. We can look back to our previous experiences and the experiences of others, and see the range of temptations that come to people. They are to do with basic physical desires (such as hunger and

lust); wanting to control my own life or the lives of others; wanting to hide my shame and guilt; wanting to avoid my responsibilities; wanting to avoid hard work, inconvenience or pain. Having identified these temptations, we can be prepared for them, even choose to avoid them.

2. *All temptations are 'passable'*

God promises that we will never be set an impossibly hard exam. We can always pass it! This does not mean that we will find all temptations easy to overcome. Just like school exams, temptations can be quite hard work; but God promises that we will never be set a university exam whilst we are still at infant school. We need never despair that a temptation is too hard for us. We can resist it, sure that success is possible for us as we call on God's grace.

3. *All temptations require God's power*

We overcome temptation through the strength and direction that God gives us, not through our own power. When Jesus was tempted, he turned to the Scriptures for his strength (Matthew 4:1-11), and we too can gain strength to resist temptation through memorising Bible verses and calling on them in our time of need. We also need to ask the Holy Spirit for help, since it is he whom God sends to help us in our weakness (Romans 8:26).

The Principles so Far ...

Christians living in the world today will be faced with many opportunities to fall into sin just as Israel fell in the desert some 3500 years ago. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians about idol temples, he warned them to avoid and to resist temptation. This was Paul's fourth principle – alongside (1) our freedom in Christ, (2) love for weak Christians and (3) love for the lost. We will return in Chapter 8 to the question of how these different principles fit together; but first we must look at Paul's fifth principle.

Chapter 7

Sharing with Demons

Have you ever seen a pack of wolves? There are usually about a dozen animals, and they spend most of their time lounging about together. The young cubs are generally ignored by the rest of the pack and play most of the time. However, the adult wolves have a clear ‘pecking order’. All the wolves must submit to any animal higher in rank than they are, but can bully wolves lower in rank. When two wolves in the pack meet, the higher-ranking one will often snarl and look as big and threatening as possible. The lower-ranking wolf must respond by rolling over onto its back in submission. If it doesn’t, it will be attacked and probably injured. No adult wolf can ever let its guard down and be entirely at rest.

However, a transformation regularly comes over the pack. When it is time to hunt, one wolf will let out a low-pitched howl and several others will join in, altering the note of their call so that it harmonises with the first. Then, with no further signal, the whole pack will move off together to start hunting. When they find prey, the pecking order is forgotten and the pack functions like one animal, with each wolf playing a different role. When hunting, there is no bullying, arguing or infighting. The pack is more united at this moment than at any other time.

Christian Fellowship

It strikes me that people are quite like this! When we have nothing to do, we quickly begin to compare ourselves to each other and to argue with people close to us. Instead of building each other up, we start tearing at

each other, sometimes causing significant injury. But when we have a common focus, the bickering is quickly forgotten, as we look outwards instead of looking at each other.

This fact of human nature is captured in the New Testament word for fellowship, *koinonia*, which is derived from another word, *koinos*, meaning ‘common’. ‘Fellowship’ is about *having something in common*. It is not simply about a group of believers who happen to get on well with each other, or who have a pleasant time together, but about a people who share common beliefs and activities focused on Christ. When a Christian travels to a strange country, he may struggle to form relationships with the local people, because they have so little in common. However, he will quickly forge friendships with local Christians, because they immediately have so much in common – even if they cannot express that to one another fully in words!

This ‘fellowship’ is demonstrated in a most powerful way in the breaking of bread, which Paul writes about in the midst of his answer about food offered to idols:

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Fellowship Involves ‘Sharing’

All human fellowship works in the same way. Whenever people develop friendships, they participate together in some common activity and belief. For example, in a football team, friendships develop around the common belief that football is a worthwhile game and the common activities of training and playing games. In every workplace, friendships develop around the common belief that the work is good to do, if only to earn one’s wages! This is a very important perspective for Christians seeking to stand firm in the world. It means that we need to look beyond the actual personalities and activities of a group of people, and to see the shared beliefs that lie behind those activities.

When we do this, we will find that many shared beliefs in ‘the world’ are quite acceptable to us as Christians. For example, when a group of non-Christian mothers get together socially with their children, they are sharing in the belief that the children need an opportunity to make friends with other children. There is nothing in this to displease God and a Christian mother could be quite happy joining such a group.

Playing with Evil

However, not all friendships are so innocent. When I was about eleven years old, I developed an interest in a certain game together with a group of friends. This game was very popular at the time and involved one of us creating, in his imagination and within certain rules, a village or island. This person then invited the rest of the group to imagine characters who lived in that place. Again, our imaginations were guided and constrained by the game rules. We would then spend hours pretending to be those characters. In our imaginations, we went on adventures, saving people in distress or conquering the world! I loved these games, and we would often spend a whole school holiday playing them.

This was at a time when my faith was just starting to develop and I was learning to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s voice. Unexpectedly, the Spirit began to trouble me whenever I played this game. I did not know *why* he was bothered by these games; but, in obedience to his prompting, and much to my friends’ annoyance, I gave it all up.

Now, years later, I think I understand what was going on all those years ago. The game rules required us to imagine evil characters in every game, and then to make evil decisions on their behalf. So, whenever I played the game with my friends, we were sharing the belief that, “It’s all right to play at being evil.” I didn’t recognise how wrong this was at the time, but the Holy Spirit did. I was training my mind in ungodly thought patterns, and he wanted none of it!

Demonic Fellowship

Paul’s fifth principle for living in the world, then, follows from this understanding that *all fellowship involves common beliefs and actions*. He

reminded the Corinthians of this and that Christian fellowship always has a spiritual dimension, using the examples of breaking bread, which is a direct sharing in Christ himself (10:16-17), and of the Jewish sacrifices, which were a sharing of the life of God. He then went on to say that all fellowship in the world equally involves sharing in spiritual realities. In the pagan temples, people were not sharing in Christ, but with demons:

“Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Corinthians 10:18-20).

A Thin Line

So, how does this apply today? Let’s take an everyday example. Imagine yourself going to a party at the house of an unsaved friend. As you enter through the door, you quickly realise that most of the people there are, like the host, unbelievers. You can tell this from the kind of language that they are using, from the way some of them are flirting with each other, and from the fact that some of them seem to be drunk. Nonetheless, you can’t see any alcohol, there are a number of pleasant conversations going on, and you see several friends there whom you know are near to finding faith in Christ. You remember that Jesus ate comfortably with ‘sinners’ and so decide that you are going to follow his example and try to get to know these people. There is even some gospel music playing, and a number of people are dancing in the garden, so you go and join them. So far, so good.

During the next half an hour, most of the people at the party also join in with the dancing. Then, the person who has been playing the music disappears and someone else takes over the sound system. The gospel music abruptly comes to an end and is replaced by songs about ‘one-night stands’ and sexual immorality. Everyone else seems happy enough, and some are clearly being inspired by the lyrics! You have not done anything different, but the quality of the fellowship has suddenly changed. You know that the

partygoers are now sharing in something ungodly and that continuing to dance with them will mean sharing in it too. So it's time for a decision!

The dividing line between beneficial fellowship and demonic fellowship is often very thin and easily crossed. According to Paul, a Christian could certainly join with pagans in their private homes in eating meats that had been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 10:27), but needed to flee from the idolatry of the pagan temples, which the meals there clearly pointed to (10:14-17, 21). Yet, there were all kinds of 'in between' situations, such as eating in a pagan house where prayers were offered to idols, or eating near the temple with a group of non-religious pagans. At the distance of two thousand years and with no pagan temples operating in that way today, we struggle to see where the dividing line fell amongst all these activities. What we can see is that it is easy to stray into demonic fellowship, and that we must beware of doing so.

The Lord is Jealous

Though it is easy to stray into 'fellowship with demons', it is clearly not a trivial matter, for it will make our relationship with God suffer. God desires faithful love from his children, and we read many times in the Scriptures that nothing angers him as much as unfaithfulness in his people. For example, when Israel strayed into fellowship with other tribes and joined in with their religious practices, God said to them, "You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!" (Ezekiel 16:32). His reaction to their unfaithfulness was in the strongest terms and brought the strongest judgment: "I will turn you over to [your lovers] for punishment, and they will punish you according to their standards. I will direct my jealous anger against you, and they will deal with you in fury. They will cut off your noses and your ears, and those of you who are left will fall by the sword. They will take away your sons and your daughters, and those who are left will be consumed by fire" (Ezekiel 23:24-25).

Thankfully, God also promised Israel a new covenant in which their sins would be dealt with mercifully (e.g. Ezekiel 16:59-63) and a new covenant established in which there would no longer be punishment for fellowshiping with the world – indeed, one in which God's people would

be empowered to reach out to the world. As Christians, we now live in that new covenant. However, God's nature has not changed, and he still detests sin and unfaithfulness in the same way as ever. He recoils from us when we chose to be participants with demons. So, Paul wrote plainly:

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (1 Corinthians 10:21-22)

Every Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), in which God has chosen to dwell. He wants this temple to be a clean and fitting place for him to dwell. He is not pleased to see that demons were invited in and have left the place in a mess. When he comes to bless us with his fragrant presence and finds a sulphurous, demonic stench hanging in the air, his jealousy is aroused. If we love God, we will want to please him by remaining clean.

There are some areas where remaining clean is particularly hard work. These ‘danger areas’ require extra care, and I want to mention two areas that are an increasing challenge to many Christians today.

Danger Area 1 – Money

The Bible teaches that those who “think that godliness is a means to financial gain” are “conceited and understand nothing” for “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:3-10). Yet, those who preach a ‘prosperity gospel’ find a hearing in many churches. They teach that if only we were better Christians, we would become rich. Some teach that the key is faith, others that the key is tithing and generous financial giving (often to the ministry in question!).

Jesus taught that money can be one of the most corrupting influences of all, describing it as a potential idol that can replace God: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Luke 16:13).

God certainly does not require us to be poor, but he does want us to be “content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Philippians 4:12), so that we are not driven by

the desire to accumulate more money. In every nation, people are motivated by a desire to have ‘just a bit more’, and it is easy for Christians to get caught up in that tide. For example, we can spend long hours at work to ensure extra income or promotion, at the expense of family life. Even our financial giving can become ‘demonic fellowship’ if we do it out of greed, in the hope that God will see it and reward us with yet more wealth.

Danger Area 2 – Visual images

New technologies mean that, all around the world, we are increasingly surrounded by visual images – whether on billboards, in magazines, on TV, in films or on the internet. All images have a spiritual dimension, since looking at them has a moral and spiritual effect upon us. Gazing at an image amounts to fellowship with the creator of the image, since it means sharing an interest in the image, the message it contains, and the spiritual reality that stands behind it. It is therefore important to consider whether that spiritual reality is good or bad, whether it pleases God or furthers Satan’s agenda. Some images edify; but others merely provoke lust and greed.

Of course, advertisers aim to provoke in us a desire for their product, and therefore many posters and magazines are full of images designed to play to our greed or ambitions. Pictures of beautiful women and handsome men attract attention; and advertisers, newspapers, film makers and booksellers all use such images to ‘hook us’. The result is that life in any nation of the world can feel like swimming through a sea of images, many designed with ungodly intent. City dwellers, in particular, can get blasé about such images because we are surrounded by so many of them, and even cease to notice the effect they have on the human spirit.

Clearly, we cannot avoid all unhelpful images, but we do have some control over what we see. We can resolve not to buy certain magazines and not to watch certain films (no matter how ‘good’ our friends tell us the film may be!). We can avoid places that are full of beguiling posters, and we can always choose to look away quickly rather than gazing at length! This may seem like a small thing, but failure to look away quickly, you may remember, was the start of King David’s moral downfall and the ruin

of his family (see 2 Samuel 11:2-5; 12:11-14). The images that we see today can be just as dangerous.

Putting It All Together

We have now looked at Paul's fifth principle: discerning the spiritual reality that people are sharing in, and avoiding anything demonic. We can place this alongside the other four principles and see that we have plenty of Biblical direction about how to be 'in' but not 'of' the world. We are to live in the freedom that Christ bought for us (chapter 1), to consider the effect of our actions upon fellow Christians (chapter 2) and unbelievers (chapter 3), and to be wise concerning temptations (chapter 4) and 'fellowship with demons' (chapter 5). So now we need to look at how these principles work together, enabling us to remain holy right in the midst of corrupt and corrupting human societies, and so to be agents of godly change.

Chapter 8

For the Glory of God

Can we take these five principles that Paul outlined to the Corinthians and put them together in one coherent vision of how to engage with the world? Throughout history, Christians have found different ways of doing this and so have had a variety of approaches to the world. Sadly, many of these have been unbalanced. For example, some groups have placed such a strong emphasis on the need for Christians to love each other that they have become a holy huddle and failed to love and change the world. Others have become so involved with the world that they have lost any distinction from it and ultimately any message they might have to change it.

Amidst the variety of approaches that Christians have taken over the centuries, it is possible to discern five basic types. These were first described by the theologian Helmut Richard Niebuhr, over fifty years ago, in his book ‘Christ and Culture’. All of the approaches found in the church at large today still fit into those five types (though the headings that follow are mine rather than his):

Christians should oppose human culture

At various times, some Christians have strongly emphasised the demonic nature of the world and its capacity for corrupting godly men and women. They have therefore believed that all human activity is under God’s judgement, and that the right response is to flee the world. We saw in Chapter One that Fionán did just this and, sadly, many other Christian hermits have done it too, neglecting love for the lost and losing sight of their freedom to be in the world. This approach is clearly wrong.

Christians should be immersed in their culture

At the other extreme, some believers have made much of God's sovereignty over all of humanity and of our freedom to engage with society. They have claimed that, since God is Lord of all, he can be found in every human culture, and we can even seek him by engaging with society. Many people, like Cardinal Wolsey, have been led by this view to participate so fully in the activities of the surrounding culture that they have ended up engaging in demonic fellowship and proving unfaithful to God. This second view is just as wrong as the first.

Christians live with two masters: God and culture

This third view recognises that what the surrounding culture expects of Christians will often contradict their duty to God. Modern examples might include a government official expecting a bribe from you before issuing required papers, or your employer expecting you to commit petty fraud or to lie on his behalf. Many Christians live daily with such tensions and can often see no immediate resolution to their particular dilemma.

This view was first taught by Martin Luther and is more balanced than the first two. Rather than focusing on just a couple of Paul's five principles, it seeks to remember them all, but holds that the different principles are contradictory and will always be in tension with each other. It assumes that culture will always have a corrupting influence, and so there will always be a tension, for example, between a godly love for the lost and a godly desire to avoid temptation.

However, Paul never wrote about such tensions and the way he wrote clearly implies that his principles all work together, not against each other. Equally, the Bible shows that culture will not always have a corrupting influence. It teaches instead that the kingdom of God is continually advancing and taking over the kingdoms of this world, such that culture is often transformed from ungodliness to righteousness. So, we must also reject this third view!

Christian spirituality is unaffected by culture

Fourthly, there is the view that God and 'spiritual' things are of much greater importance than 'natural' things. This does not mean that culture,

business, politics, art, science, etc. are evil, just that they have no value of their own. The effect of this is to place some of Paul's principles (e.g. love and freedom) over others (e.g. caution about where we go and the company we keep). After all, if it is only what goes on in our hearts that really matters, we can join in with any fellowship we like, prioritising love for unbelievers over the dangers of being in the wrong place.

This view takes seriously the fact that creation is fallen, but it forgets God's solution. God did not give up on creation and focus his attention instead on 'spiritual' matters. Rather, he decided to redeem creation, by setting in process a plan to renew all things through Christ. It is not correct to see 'spiritual' things as distinct from, or superior to, 'natural' things, as if there were some sacred-secular divide (a very Greek idea!). God created Adam and Eve with the intention that they get involved with each other and with the physical world (Genesis 1:28), and this is still his desire for people today. We are not saved from the physical world, but saved in order to live godly lives within it.

Christians should transform culture

Thankfully, there is a fifth view that does provide a coherent vision in which all of Paul's principles work together. It is based on the kingdom of God, which does not simply exist alongside human culture; neither does it operate at a different level to culture. Instead, the kingdom of God directly invades the world, forcefully advancing into Satan's territory as men and women are born again and start living God's way. As it expands, God's glory is increased on the earth, and this is the purpose towards which all of Paul's principles are intended to work:

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (1 Corinthians 10:31-33).

Paul was convinced that everything would fall into place as long as we have our eyes fixed on increasing God's glory through the adoption of people into his family. The key question we must constantly ask is: *what will bring most glory to God?*

This question will heighten our desire to live in and to tell people about the amazing freedom that Jesus has won for us. It will fuel our determination to see people born again. It will remind us to treat other Christians with gentleness, so that the glorious image of Christ in them will in no way be marred. It will also remind us of the utmost importance of remaining in relationship with the Father, and so motivate us both to resist temptation and to remain pure.

Transformation in the Highlands

If we will put God's glory first, above our own comforts and desires, then the rest will follow, and he will transform the world around us. All our heroes of the faith were zealous for God's glory and convinced that he would work through them to bring many into his kingdom.

One of my heroes is Thomas Boston. He was a very ordinary man, born in a place that never featured large on the world stage. We know little about his childhood, except that he was a quiet boy who was easily alarmed, and that he was born again at the age of eleven. He did not come from a rich family and only managed to afford a college education by foregoing regular meals. During that time he developed a strong dislike of sin, and soon gained a reputation as a preacher of doom and condemnation. At the age of twenty-one, he fell in love with Catherine Brown, but was unable to marry her until he was twenty-four. Soon after their wedding, she began to suffer from an undiagnosed mental illness that lasted for the rest of her life. Tragically, two of their five children died in childhood.

Yet, despite all of these circumstances (or perhaps because of them), Boston was zealous for the glory of God. Looking at the ungodly state of society around him when he was still in his twenties, he wrote in his book, 'The Art of Manfishing', "This day seems to be a day of darkness and gloominess; the glory [of God] is departed even to the threshold of the temple." His concern for God's glory further developed his dislike of sin, but it also awakened in him a sense of mourning for the lost souls around him, and he began to weep for people who stood in need of salvation. He also began to mourn at his lack of success in impacting the people living around him, and wrote: "Who can give me help in this case but the Lord

himself? And how can I expect it from him but by prayer, and faith in the promises, and by consulting his word where I may, by his Spirit, learn how to carry and what to do, to the end the gospel preached by me may not be unsuccessful?”

Eight years after writing this, he moved to the remote valley of Ettrick in the Scottish Highlands, in order to lead the church there. Ettrick then had no roads and was cut off by snow for weeks at a time. The population numbered just under four hundred, of whom some sixty went to church, but not all of whom were born again. The people were full of pride and conceit, and they had a general rebelliousness that made them far from receptive to this newly arrived minister. People came to gossip outside the church building each Sunday, shouting so loudly that the meetings inside were disturbed. Immorality of every kind was rife.

Still, Boston believed that Ettrick would be transformed by the power of God. He began to visit every single person at home and tried to talk to them about Jesus. Often he would be out-argued and ridiculed. He came to dread visiting some houses, yet he carried on doing so for the next twenty years. Towards the end of this time, his wife’s situation became steadily more tragic and his own health also became frail. Still he held youth meetings every week and visited anyone in the valley who was sick, even if it meant fighting through a storm under bodily distress.

Daily, Boston would spend time in prayer, asking for God’s strength and direction, and pleading on behalf of the people of Ettrick. He was able to write, “I lean on Christ for help in his own work ... in temptations and trials, I endeavour to lift my soul up to him. I feel help from the Spirit ... Many times I have gone to prayer very dead and have come away with life.”

Thomas Boston died in 1732, after months of illness; yet God had indeed used him powerfully. When he went to church for the last time, 777 born again believers broke bread together. Most of them had been saved through personal conversations with this man of God. After twenty years, the Ettrick valley had been transformed. As Thomas Boston had sought to glorify God, the kingdom of God had taken over!

Chapter 9

Wisdom from the Spirit

In this book, we have been looking at the advice that Paul gave to the church in Corinth about pagan idols and their temples. Now, whilst believers in some nations (for example, India) do have to deal directly with the issue of idols and temples, most Christians in the West in the 21st century will never have to face this. In fact, different issues confront Christians in each culture. Our brothers and sisters in Uganda face many moral dilemmas that simply never arise in North America, and vice versa!

It is therefore important for each of us to take Paul's five principles and to apply them to the situations and issues that we each face in our own cultures. To help you apply these principles to yourself and your own situation, here are a number of, what I hope will be, thought-provoking questions ...

Questions for Personal Application

- Are there any areas of your life where you remain bound by fear? If so, what are you afraid of, and why?
- Have you ever held back from doing something simply for the sake of another 'weaker' Christian?
- When was the last time you did something uncomfortable, motivated by a desire to "become all things to all men" so that you might save some?

- Do you sometimes feel the Holy Spirit prompting you to leave the company of non-Christians? If so, do you obey that prompting? If not, do you need to cultivate a greater sensitivity to the Spirit?
- Are you generally more concerned with God's glory, or your own reputation?

Questions about Places

- Can you think of any places in your town or area where Christians absolutely should not be found?
- Can you think of any places in your town or area where Christians could go, but only if exercising great caution?
- What would you say to a young Christian who wanted to go to such a place?

Questions on Activities

- Can you list five social activities, which could be seen as 'permissible' but not 'beneficial'?
- What spiritual beliefs lie behind those activities?
- What might happen to a Christian involved in those activities?

Questions for Leaders

- Do the people you lead often ask you for the answer to their moral dilemmas? Would it change their questions if you were to teach them the biblical principles outlined in this book?
- After talking about food offered to idols, Paul's very next comment is: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1). Do you set an example of godly living that the people in your church can follow?

Depending on the Holy Spirit

You may struggle to answer all of these questions. In fact, if you have answered them quickly and easily, I suggest that you go back and try again, because these are questions that require a degree of wisdom and insight that truly stretches all of us! Indeed, it is often far from obvious how to

carry out Paul's last challenge to us, to do everything "for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Thomas Boston was painfully aware of this, and he wrote in his journal that he certainly could not glorify God in his own strength or wisdom. Rather, he continually went to God, asking for help, and found "help from the Spirit". Likewise, we each need to lean on God daily. In other words, being *in* but not *of* the world requires us to walk in step with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25). As we do this, he will give us all the help and direction we need. Just look at some of the things the Spirit gives us:

1. *He gives us love*

Love is the main guiding principle of Paul's advice on how to live 'in the world' (1 Corinthians 8:1-3). We only gain this love after experiencing God's love for us (1 John 4:19), through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

2. *He gives us wisdom*

It is often far from obvious when to "become all things to all men" and when to hold back. It requires wisdom to know when to stand firm in the world, and when to flee from the world. God gives wisdom to all who ask (James 1:5) and the Holy Spirit gifts us with words of wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:8), so that we can act rightly in each situation. This wisdom may come as a clear 'word of wisdom' or, more often, as a feeling of spiritual discomfort as the Spirit agitates us to leave or avoid a certain place or situation.

3. *He gives us power*

The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence within us. When faced with temptations to sin or when struggling to step out of our comfort zones, we can always turn to God, and he will give us the strength that we need (Isaiah 40:29-31).

4. *He gives us discernment*

We often cannot tell when we have strayed into demonic fellowship, but the Holy Spirit can. The ability to discern what is going on spiritually is therefore also a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10), and it is

only through listening to him that we can successfully avoid all wrong fellowship in the world.

5. *He gives us vision*

The Holy Spirit gives us dreams, visions and prophetic words, showing us how he wants us to influence the world. He will tell us the part we can play in transforming the whole of society. He will also show us where and when and how to increase God's glory.

Isn't this amazing? Throughout this book, we have seen just how complicated it is to maintain a godly life in the midst of ungodly people, perhaps leading us to wonder whether we can ever achieve this lofty goal. Yet, if we will only recognise our dependence on God and ask for help from the Spirit, he will give us all we need. Then, we will love as we ought to love, go where we ought to go, say what we ought to say and act how we ought to act. The Holy Spirit really does enable us to be holy!

Chapter 10

My Witnesses

Have you wondered why God leaves us here on earth? Since he desires us to be holy, why doesn't he just take us all to heaven now and transform us into glory, rather than leaving us in a fallen world, where we are open to temptation and demonic attack? Why doesn't Jesus return now, bringing the fulness of God's kingdom in a moment?

The answer to this question provides the backdrop to the entire issue of 'living in the world', since it touches on why we are here and faced with the challenge of living in the world at all. The biblical answer to this question is that God is delaying Judgement Day because he loves all people, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus prayed that his disciples would not be taken out of the world. Rather, *he sent them into the world* (John 17:15-18). His purpose in sending his disciples to live among non-Christians was that, in bearing witness to the truth, they would bring people to repentance and so make more disciples (Matthew 28:19).

The Holy Spirit Again

Now, if living godly lives in the world is an impossible task only made possible by the Holy Spirit, then bringing unbelievers to repentance is an even more difficult task, which also requires the Holy Spirit! Knowing how difficult this task would be, Jesus told the disciples not even to start until they had been "clothed with power from on high" through the Spirit (Luke 24:49).

Yet Jesus also had tremendous confidence about what would happen once they were filled with the Spirit. His last words on earth were a simple statement of what the Holy Spirit would achieve through his disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

A Health Warning!

I am really writing this as a warning to you. If you have been blessed with a desire to live a godly life, and if this desire has led you to call upon God for help, then the Holy Spirit will sanctify you (that is, make you holy), but it will not stop there! I want to give you an idea of what God might now do with you.

Once you invite the Spirit to work on your life, he will not only grow you in holiness, he will also start to make you into a powerful witness. He will not only give you strength to remain in the world, but will actively thrust you out into the world, for the sake of men and women who are perishing. If you are willing to embrace this and to follow the Spirit’s leading, then you are in for the time of your life! Of course, God will ask you to do things completely beyond your ability, but then he will give you the strength to do them. You will be forced to walk in daily dependence on the Holy Spirit.

This is where the Christian life starts to get really exciting! It is about carrying on the ministry of Jesus. It is about going to people wherever they are. It is about knowing we are empowered, through the promised Holy Spirit, “to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19).

There really is no greater joy than knowing that we are pleasing God by living clean, and being used by him to change the people around us. May God increase this desire in all our hearts and so equip us to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world!

Appendix

Seven Works of God

Of course, our calling is not simply to avoid being tarnished by the wrong things of this world, but to go out there and start to make a difference in it! And so I want to end this book by looking at some of the things that the Holy Spirit might do with and through you, as we consider seven things that God has been doing through different members of our family of churches, as they have asked the Holy Spirit to help them to live in the world as they ought. Of course, God is doing far more than just these seven things! But I trust that these alone will stimulate your praying and your action.

1. Planting churches

A healthy local church will always be seen as a ‘city on a hill’, bringing glory to God; but there is a limit to how far away it can be seen. If the whole world is going to see the light, there needs to be a city on every hill! There is perhaps nothing that increases God’s glory so much as church planting!

Churches are planted in many different ways, according to the Spirit’s leading. In Bombay churches have been planted across the city by sending out ‘sons’ around whom a congregation has gathered. A church in Kyole, Nairobi, began after a week’s crusade during which hundreds were saved. In Basingstoke, a large congregation was broken down into several smaller congregations, and these have gradually grown into distinct churches.

However it is planted, each new church is a tremendously powerful entity. It becomes ‘salt and light’ in a new community and has the power to reproduce itself. It is by this strategy more than any other, I believe, that

God is enabling more believers to stand firm in the world and also to proclaim the truth.

2. Education

Proverbs says, “Train a child in the way he should go; and when he is old he will not depart from it” (22:6). Christian education therefore has the potential to change a nation. However, in many nations, education is tightly controlled by the state which often imposes a humanistic approach, where education is centred upon humanity, rather than God. Instead of Christ-like selflessness and humility, the goals taught in these schools are self-fulfilment, self-sufficiency and ‘making good’ in life.

In the context of such ‘worldly’ education, many churches have been led to set up Christian schools, providing an alternative to state-run education. The Salt and Light family has been involved in starting Christian schools in many places, including Canada, England, India, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. The children leaving these schools are different from most other children in those nations, and we believe that many will be powerful witnesses in their lifetime.

In addition, many Christians have been led by God to be teachers in state-run schools. This choice flows from the belief that Christ will certainly transform culture, as the yeast of the Kingdom is mixed into the dough of the world. These teachers often bring the word of God and godly values to children who would never otherwise hear them.

3. Helping people in need

There are needy people in every nation. As well as the universal need for forgiveness and salvation, there are many people who need food and clean water, affordable housing, medical care or just a shoulder to cry on. The church should be at the forefront of such care, and the Spirit has led many of our family of churches to do just that. For example:

- Across Uganda, Deliverance Churches have spearheaded ‘Operation Joseph’, a nation-wide project providing agricultural tools and training, and aiming to ensure that no one is without food.

- In Walsall, England, teams visiting the ‘red light’ district have helped prostitutes to start a new life.
- In Nairobi, Kenya, Deliverance Church Umoja has provided the government with HIV-free blood at a time when AIDS has threatened the supply of blood for life-saving transfusions.
- In Bombay the Baptist Church provides health education and practical help in slums around the city.

These are, of course, just a few of the many projects being carried out by our family of churches around the world. Such projects transform individual lives, but they also cause the church to be held in high regard, with far-reaching implications for the gospel. There are also many of our people who are helping others in practical ways outside of church projects, through their work with the government or non-Christian charities. Their personal influence is often less obvious, but their impact is often as great.

4. The workplace

Many of us spend most of our waking hours at our place of work. It is there that we use most of our energy and meet most unbelievers. For most working men and women, their experience of the world is largely in the workplace; so living in the world has a lot to do with how to be a good employer or employee.

Many employers in our churches have taken the opportunity to run their business differently from ‘the world’. As with Christian schools and church-run social projects, they set the overall atmosphere and often see direct changes in people’s lives. For example, they leave room for their employees to have a good family life, even if that is sometimes at the expense of the business. They are also in a great position to introduce the gospel into the workplace. For example, some businessmen have invited their church leaders and other Christian friends into the office or factory to meet the people and to share something of God’s love.

Employees generally have less opportunity to change the system. However, God also uses them as agents of transformation, influencing the workplace culture day by day. For example, offering to pray for colleagues in need is a powerful witness, which has led to many people being born again, or at least beginning their spiritual journey.

5. *Crossing cultures*

The Holy Spirit does not only want us to be witnesses in the place where we live, but also to go to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It is not surprising, then, that God has led many of us to take the gospel to other nations. For generations, missionaries have gone from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and South America. This flow of missionaries continues today, whether through long-term workers or short-term visiting teams; but it is very exciting to now see a stream starting to flow in the other direction, as churches that have long received missionaries are now sending people back to help the church in the West.

Crossing cultures does not have to mean crossing continents. There are huge cultural divides within each continent, and many of those cultures do not have a thriving church. Churches in East Africa send missionaries cross-culturally into Muslim North Africa. North Americans are going to the Inuit in the north and to nominal Catholics in the south. Christians in South India are going to the Muslim and Hindu North. Churches in the UK are sending people into mainland Europe to support and to plant churches in what is largely a spiritual desert.

6. *Creativity*

Music, images and objects can have a powerful impact on our emotions and thoughts. The artists, musicians, journalists and designers who created them therefore influence many people and are often at the forefront of cultural change. For example, the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960’s, which has had catastrophic effects for Western society and is now affecting the whole world, would never have got off the ground without the hundreds of rock’n’roll songs that carried it into public life.

Christian creativity, fuelled by inspiration from the Holy Spirit, is a seed-sowing exercise with wide-reaching effects on the world. Sometimes, Christian art, music and design will convey the gospel message directly, but more often people will simply wonder where Christians get such good ideas, and why they use them to build people up, rather than for selfish gain. Spirit-inspired creativity can help change both people and culture.

For example, as I write, there are half a dozen people in our home in Oxford, who have come to view my wife’s paintings. Over the past week,

as part of Oxfordshire's 'Artweeks' festival, we have had over 125 people visit us at home for that purpose. Almost all have thanked my wife, Beverley, for the calmness and serenity that they find in her images, which they say is a stark contrast to other artists' work! We have seen a widow begin to believe that life can begin again, and children stimulated to think respectfully about the world that God created. Many hearts have been softened, and many people that we have not met before have wanted to talk to us about their dreams and cares – a rare event indeed in Western Europe!

7. *Politics*

The Holy Spirit has also been leading some Christians into politics. It is said that the first rule of politics is "Always be there", since you cannot influence the discussion unless you are sitting at the table. Yet Christians are often absent from political life, seeing it as a modern day 'idol's temple', at which power and personal gain are worshipped. The church frequently condemns politicians, with the effect that many politicians have a very low view of the church. Yet God is leading some Christians to get involved in politics, changing the way that the government views Christianity.

John Isaacs leads South Bay Covenant Church in San José, the largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area. Since 1996, he has joined with many pastors there in praying together for the Bay Area. This group spoke with the mayor of San José in 1997 and asked what she saw as the city's greatest need. She told them that it was the rapidly increasing rate of juvenile violent crime, and the pastors agreed that their churches would pray specifically for that issue. Two years later, San José was listed as the safest large city in the USA! The churches are gradually being seen in a more positive light, and are increasingly invited to play a part in public life, such as going into state schools with a Christian message.

It is exciting to reflect upon what God is doing in the nations of the world, and to realise that the Holy Spirit, who inspired and empowered those works, is dwelling in us too. It is my prayer that God will use this book to provoke more and more people to call upon him, asking to be filled with the Spirit, until we are all growing in godliness and going out as powerful witnesses into the world, into every walk of life in every nation.

Let it be so, Lord!