

# Revealing Jesus

*Living as God's People  
in Today's World*

**Steve Jones**



Salt & Light Ministries

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Names of individuals in stories have been changed

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# Introduction

## The Battle Ground

A few days after arriving in Oxford as a student, I was at the high table in my college's dining hall with my fellow biology students and our tutors. I was delighted to be there, not a little proud and not a little intimidated. I knew I had been allowed into an elite institution, and that on graduation I could expect the world to be my oyster. Yet I was discovering that most of the people there were richer and more sophisticated than me. I'd already learnt that whilst it was normal to order a "point of beer, please" in Gloucestershire's pubs, it led to scorn in Oxford's college bars. I was trying hard to speak 'properly' and generally to fit in. My motives were mixed, but part of me reasoned that I couldn't make much impact for Jesus if my local accent prevented people taking me seriously.

What I didn't know was that one of my college tutors found delight every year in spotting the naïve amongst the new freshers and filling their mouths and bellies with wine. As we waited for our starter, he filled my wineglass. As we ate, he filled it again and again. I'd not been brought up to drink wine, but I wasn't about to reveal how uncultured I was in this company. The dining hall grew more and more

blurred. Eventually I noticed that I couldn't read some of the words in the stained glass right next to me.

I'm not sure what I said that night. Later, I tripped from the dining hall to the student bar, doing my best now to be one of the lads. It had been said by evangelical Christians back in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that there was no place in England so corrupting as the halls of Oxford and Cambridge. It seems that some things had not changed and that I was not immune.

Like most 18-year olds leaving home for the first time, I was discovering that the world is a much trickier place than at first it seems. All at once, it is delightful and it is destructive. It helps us grow and it tears us down. There are people out there who are destined to become cherished friends, and there are others determined to do us harm. There are also people who are determined to try to harm the cause of Christ. The world is a place of spiritual conflict. This book is about the battle.

## **Battlefields and Castles**

The battle takes different forms. We each have our own skirmishes. Some of these fall upon us as ambushes, like the boss who instructs you to lie in order to cover his incompetence or the colleague working late into the evening who offers a moment of physical intimacy.

Other tussles are running battles, seemingly endless, draining and disheartening. Like, how can I continue trusting God for financial provision as my

overdraft increases each month and the bills remain unpaid? Where can I find the faith to proclaim God's healing power as cancer drags my friend towards the grave? And what can we do to reverse the tide of secularism that labels the church of God's only Son as just one 'faith community' amongst many?

There are also battlefields that we hesitate to enter, for fear of what might happen to us. Like the Israelites who once sat paralysed by Goliath's taunts, we might leave to others the simple care of an alcoholic colleague or bipolar neighbour, the task of taking on the iniquity of the sex trade or the negligence of a local council.

It is said that an Englishman's home is his castle, with a drawbridge that can be raised against the world, but what about churches? Is it God's will for local churches to create their own private space, as a refuge for Christians from their daily battles?

### **Are You a Caveman or Worldling?**

A few years ago, I visited a Coptic monastery in Egypt. It was an amazing place, where visitors were welcomed and taught about God, but the monks also allowed for some of their number to become hermits. They would test would-be hermits by locking them in solitary confinement for months on end, in which their only human contact was to receive food and to pass their waste out through a small hole in the wall of their cell. If they could survive that, they were allowed

to go into the desert and seek a cave, in which they might live alone for the rest of their life.

Closer to home but further back in time, a man called Fionán set himself adrift in a tiny boat off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. Together with twelve companions, he sought a remote island on which to found a monastery. They were not disappointed. The sea currents took them to Skellig Michael, a rocky outcrop seven hundred feet high and eight miles from the mainland. There, on a narrow and exposed ledge of one of the most remote spots in Europe, they survived by trading the feathers and eggs of sea birds for food. They built tiny huts, in which they prayed and tried to live free from sin.

If you're reading this book, then you are probably not living in a cave nor on a ledge, but do you perhaps remove yourself from the world in more subtle ways? Do you sit on a bus with your iPod pumping worship tunes through your soul, drowning out the sound of human life around you? Do you find reasons not to visit difficult family members? Have you worked hard to solve your own problems, bringing peace to your own life, but can't find the time to help others?

Of course, it is necessary for Christians sometimes to retreat from their daily concerns. Some never do, and as a result become world-weary and utterly absorbed by worldly matters. Such people were once called 'worldlings'. This too is a danger for all of God's people, leading Paul to write, "*Set your mind on things*

above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2). In the same vein, Jesus said to his followers,

*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).*

In the Bible, we read that some of God’s people went into caves for their own safety or to rest, but it was only for a while. They came back out to reengage with the world with fresh purpose and resolve (e.g. 1 Kings 19:3-21). We want to be careful that our needed retreat time does not become a permanent disengagement from the world around us.

I expect you’ll agree that Christians need both to retreat from the world and also to engage with it. If so, the question we need then to address is: which battles to retreat from and which to charge into? Also, how can we tell? And what do we do when conflict comes crashing upon us? How do we live as God’s people in today’s world? To put it more simply: How do we reveal Jesus?



# Chapter 1

## What to Do?

Many Christians face moral conflicts daily. Some have to deal with corrupt officials who insist on backhanders. Others have employers who expect them to commit fraud, or to lie about a product in order to increase sales. On the other hand, a recent spate of legal cases in the UK over sharing faith in the workplace, in which Christians have ended up facing the sack or being sued for discrimination, has left many Christians feeling a tension between the desire to witness openly about Christ and the desire to meet our legal duties.

### **Serving Two Masters**

Some say that's just how it is in this fallen world, and the most we can do is to pray for grace to cope with it. This view has often surfaced when the church has felt itself in the grip of powerful rulers, like in the early days of the Lutheran Church. Martin Luther himself depended upon a powerful prince for protection from arrest, but was then expected to go along with what that prince required of him, even when it was not what Luther really felt to be right. Faced with such challenges, Luther taught that the world will often ask

Christians to do things that contradict their duty to God.

In fact, Jesus himself taught something along these lines, when he said, “*Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s*” (Matthew 22:21). This implies that human authorities can make different demands to the ones that God himself makes, and that we can’t just ignore them. Although Jesus announced his kingdom 2000 years ago, it will not come fully until his return. In the meantime, the whole of creation groans in frustration and can do no more than wait patiently for Jesus to return (Romans 8:18-25).

Still, to leave it there is a bit defeatist. Jesus did not come into the world to set an example of valiant but ultimately pointless struggle with evil. He came to destroy the works of the evil one and to save the world! If we embrace a coping mentality, then we will tend to accept social injustice as inevitable, whereas God calls upon us to oppose injustice. A survival mindset is content just to preserve what has been inherited from previous generations, instead of expecting to generate a new Christian heritage for future generations to enjoy. This mindset is slow to believe that when Jesus talks about ‘salt of the earth’ (Matthew 5:13) one of the things meant was that salt was a fertiliser that aided the generation of new life (Luke 14:35).

## **The World is Not Enough!**

If some Christians adopt the ‘glass half empty’ approach, then what do those blessed with a natural optimism have to say? Those who see the glass half full will note that Adam and Eve’s sin, whilst bringing death and suffering into the world (Genesis 3:16-22), did not totally destroy human goodness. The special godlike qualities that God wrote into Adam and Eve, describing them as his “*image and likeness*” (Genesis 1:26-27) were still to be found in Noah’s descendants (Genesis 9:6-7), and the Bible continues talking about humanity in glowing terms, as being “*little lower than the angels*” (Psalm 8:5).

As a result, there is quite a lot of good stuff to celebrate about human living. My own top ten would include:

- Marriage
- The University Museum in Oxford
- Peppermint creams
- Parliamentary democracy
- Fly fishing
- Lamb jalfrezi
- The blackhouses at Treshnish Point on the Isle of Mull

I’m sure you’ll have your own list. So, you must agree that God is at work in human culture to make a lot of it really very good.

Taking this view a bit further, some Christians say that the world is not really evil; it’s just that we need

God too. The world is actually good as far as it goes, but there are some things that it cannot provide. It's good, but not enough. The world can provide us with good friends and good food, but we need more. We need friendship with God and food that does not perish. The world is all well and good, but we need Jesus too.

This view was popularised 700 years ago by Thomas Aquinas. Sadly, it has fostered a divide between the secular (everyday) and sacred (spiritual) aspects of life, in which people live as they want to in everyday life and then add in their religious bit from time to time, treating God as a lifestyle supplement.

At the extreme, you've probably seen one of the many films in which Italian-American Mafiosi kill their enemies, then attend confession, but then carry on as criminals. More commonly, many Christians go to their Sunday church meeting and to their house group, but somehow never mention to their work colleagues that they follow Jesus. It's quite common also for Christians to live everyday life so similarly to their neighbours that no one looking on could ever tell that they had given their lives to Jesus.

### **Living for Jesus**

When Olivia started studying at Oxford University, she found that most students keep their study and their spiritual life in two separate boxes. They don't talk about their work at church or write about Jesus in their essays. She became increasingly convinced that if

she was meant to be a living sacrifice to God, then she should be doing her best in her work as a way to worship God. Taking joy in studying and refusing to be lazy became new ways of glorifying him.

The pressures of her course made her more aware than ever of her own limitations, which encouraged her to pray before lectures, tutorials and exams, not just to do well in her work but also to keep continually in touch with God.

Over time, she came to see that God was intimately involved in her work with her. As she talked with friends, she inspired them also to break down the false wall that separates uni life from God. Together, they are learning to worship God through learning and to trust him for their learning too. Following Jesus means giving him everything – all that we are and have.

### **The Love of God in the Hospital**

Josh was in his first year as a clinical medical student when he felt prompted by God to offer to pray for his patients. However, he knew that this might be entering a minefield. He had recently heard of a nurse at another hospital who was suspended for offering to pray for a patient.

He dealt with this anxiety head-on by asking a few senior colleagues what they thought. There was none of the hostility that he had feared. One response was complete indifference. Another simply said, “You just have to make sure the patients know that if they say no, you won't withhold treatment.” Since this concern

seemed pretty easy to meet, Josh took this to be sufficient permission to go ahead!

A number of patients were happy to receive prayer, though some did decline the offer. Once, when Josh offered to pray for a man in a wheelchair, he replied loudly, “WHAT?” The fear and anxiety was quick to rush in. Had he angered the man? Would there be serious consequences for his career? It turned out, however, that the patient was simply hard of hearing. He had also been experiencing nightmares and was actually very keen to have somebody pray with him.

Josh is now a junior doctor, and busyness is more of a problem than fear. The pressure to get through the to-do list is not at all conducive to prayer, but it’s always worth it. He says, “There’s a lot that could be done to make hospitals more efficient, but nothing beats having the love of God poured into your heart to give you the compassion you need to offer prayer, to listen carefully for his voice and be sensitive.”

## **All Change!**

God’s long term cosmic plan is “*to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*” (Ephesians 1:10). His plan is that “*every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Philippians 2:10-11), and that “*the knowledge of the glory of God*”, which is seen in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6), “*will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea*” (Habakkuk 2:14).

This plan is underway now! Jesus did not introduce phase 1 of his kingdom plans in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine and then put the next stages on a back-burner. He founded a community of disciples (called 'church') and he promised that he would build it up (Matthew 16:18). He has since proven to be good to his word.

It took 1400 years, but eventually this community of disciples came to number as many as 1 in 100 of the world's population. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, they'd made it to 2 in 100. By the Second World War, the church made up 3% of the world's population, but had jumped to 5% by 1970. The church is now embracing a further 1% of the world's population every 3-4 years, with astonishing growth especially in South America, Africa and China. God is at work to change the whole world. His kingdom is forcefully advancing (Matthew 11:12) and will take over all the kingdoms of the earth (Revelation 11:15).

If we take this seriously, then it is too small a thing either just to cope with what the world throws at us, or to see Jesus as a lifestyle supplement. The kingdom of God does not simply exist alongside human culture; neither does it operate at a different level to culture. Instead, it transforms human culture.

The kingdom of God transforms everything, but the nature of that transformation depends upon which aspect of culture we are looking at. Some aspects of human culture can be celebrated for what they are already, like the promise of lifelong commitment in marriage. Other aspects of culture, like music, are

being taken by Christians from being mere entertainment and employed in God's service. For other things, however, the only possible transformation is for them to be eradicated, like tyranny or pornography. There are some aspects of culture, like the massively unequal distribution of global wealth, which we long to see transformed and yet cannot see how that might occur and can only give ourselves to prayer.

And then there are the empty spaces, in which God uses his people to create things that were not, which is what once happened with the founding of hospitals in medieval Europe. In our day, we might think of Dr Jan White, who has been sent by our family of churches in Oxfordshire to Uganda, where she is pioneering hospice care where there has been no such care.

Of all the different kinds of 'kingdom transformation', there is one that is rather special. Jesus said that no one would see the kingdom without it. It is, of course, being born again (John 3:3). This transformation has the most profound impact on human experience and it also multiplies the potential for further transformation in the world.

## **Jesus Knows What to Do**

It's exciting to think about the many things that God is doing in the world, but it's also quite hard to get our heads around it all. Indeed, it can be quite overwhelming to try to work out what God is up to globally. Like rabbits caught in the headlights of

powers much greater than our own, we may find ourselves dithering over how exactly we ourselves join in with what God is doing in the world.

I want to be a history-maker, but does that mean becoming a doctor or a social worker? Do I have to campaign for social justice or found an orphanage? Should I take the gospel to an unreached ethnic group? Is there a way to work for the advancement of God's kingdom in the world that is within my reach? Can I join God in his mission in the world and still be me?

The good news is that it's not up to us to save the whole world. We can't even measure all of the world's needs, let alone plan a solution for them. To be honest, we don't even know all the needs in our local community. The good news is that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. He knows what needs doing. He is not caught in anyone's headlights. He is the light of the world (John 8:12).

### **Questions**

1. Are you are more likely to be a glass half-full or half-empty person when thinking about society?
2. What items would you put on a list of "good things" to celebrate about human living?
3. In your everyday life, what are the greatest needs for kingdom transformation that you are aware of?



# Chapter 2

## How to Shine

Jesus is the light of the world. He is also on record as saying to his followers, “*You are the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14). This is not a mistranslation or mistake since, by the grace of God, the people who follow Jesus are changed to become like him. His light “*shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it*” (John 1:5). Having been made more like him, we also “*shine as stars in the kosmos*” (Philippians 2:15).

In the New Testament, the word ‘kosmos’ is usually translated into English as ‘world’, but it actually has a number of different meanings. Firstly, it can mean ‘the entire created order’ – stars, oceans, hills, clouds, heavens, plants, animals and mankind. For example, in Romans 1:20: “*Since the creation of the kosmos, God’s invisible qualities ... have been seen.*”

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

Thirdly, *kosmos* is used a number of times to refer specifically to those people who are in active rebellion against God and to the cultures they have created. Using the word in this way, the Bible describes the *kosmos* as being totally opposed to God’s ways (James 4:4). It is under the power of the evil one

(1 John 5:19) and it entraps those people who never knew or who forget about Jesus Christ (2 Peter 2:20).

It was whilst Paul was writing about “*a crooked and depraved generation*”, that he reminded the Philippian disciples that they shine like stars in the *kosmos* (Philippians 2:15). So, he wasn’t just saying that we shine like Jesus, but specifically that we shine his light into the darkness – the light that overcomes darkness!

### **Shining together**

*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).*

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples as they gathered together. Not only that, but the phrase ‘city on a hill’ would have reminded Jews of Jerusalem, which is perched on Mount Zion, and they used the word ‘Zion’ as one of their names for the people of God. (Isaiah 51:15-16, Zechariah 2:7,10) So, it’s not just that each disciple is a light, but the community of disciples are together a much brighter light.

Jesus was speaking to his followers about working together to reveal to the world what God is like. We are not meant to stand in the world as solitary believers. As we each come to Jesus Christ, we find that other people have also connected to him. There are many other branches in the tree (John 15:1-8, Romans 11:17-24), many other siblings in the family (Ephesians 3:14-15), many other members of the body

(1 Corinthians 12:12). We find that we share Jesus with a lot of other people!

The New Testament describes this sharing as ‘*koinonia*’, which we often translate as ‘fellowship’. The church is not simply a group of believers who try to get on well with each other, but a people who share Christ. When a disciple of Christ travels to a strange country, she may struggle to form relationships with the local people, because they have so little in common. However, she will much more easily 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! I’ve prayed many times with people with whom I do not share a common language, but our prayers and the tangible presence of God have left us in no doubt that we are connected to each other. We are one in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

### **Separated for Purity’s Sake**

Jesus does not only unite us, but is building us together “*to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit*” (Ephesians 2:22). His Spirit is the Holy Spirit, and the Nicene Creed of the early church includes the statement: “We believe in one, *holy... church*”. To say that we are holy is the same thing as saying that we shine with Christlikeness.

God has separated his people out from the darkness of the world, so that we may shine brightly. The Bible

makes it clear that we cannot please God whilst remaining entangled in the dark world.

*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (James 4:4)*

*What fellowship can light have with darkness? ... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God ... Therefore, 'come out from them and be separate.' (2 Corinthians 6:14-17)*

## **Emily's Story**

When Emily left home, she found a group of friends who would meet up once a week to eat together in the evening. It seemed like a good way to build friendships and another girl in the group claimed to be a Christian, so Emily quickly made this group part of her life.

As time passed, however, the weekly meals started to change. As people got to know one another, personalities clashed and conversations turned to malicious gossip. The evening entertainment switched from films and chatting to playing drinking games. Jokes and language became cruder, and though Emily did not join in, she found herself having to listen to stories she would rather not hear.

The group took more and more to excessive drinking, and since everyone knew that Emily was a Christian, it became a game to try to get her involved.

Occasionally they would succeed. Their snide remarks about one another were always in her ears, making it harder and harder not to be affected by their bitterness.

Emily never deliberately sought to be rebellious, but the love of God was being squeezed out of her. She chose to join a situation that was not terrible at the time, but her surroundings changed and she was caught up in patterns of thought and behaviour that were not godly.

### **Friends of Sinners**

If we can so easily get entangled, does this mean that the monks of Skellig Michael were onto something after all? Well, *no!*

Jesus set us an example as a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19) and you can't be a very good friend to sinners whilst living in an isolated Christian community. Jesus showed us that it is possible to be separate from the world even whilst getting up close to sinners. Much as unbelievers can be friends with Christians without ever connecting to the church, we can be friends of sinners without joining in with all their games.

To achieve this, we do need to pay attention to what games are being played. For example, if I play football with a bunch of guys, football is probably not the only game being played. Some of the guys might be playing the 'good excuse to avoid time with the family' game. Others might be there for a chance to display some

aggression, whilst some just want a bit of exercise. Whilst playing football, I need to remain aware of what other games I might be joining in. Am I being drawn into aggressive behaviour? Am I allowing football to take the time I should give to my children?

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 discern the shared beliefs that lie behind those activities. It's not that playing football itself is right or wrong. Neither is joining a mums-and-babies group or a book club or a choir simply right or wrong. There is no blanket moral judgement to be made about becoming a car salesman or a local councillor or a soldier. It all depends on what other games are being played by the people involved. Are the mums gathering to support each other in the hard task of caring for little ones, or is it one big gossip session? What exactly are the book clubbers reading? Is the choir singing wholesome tunes? Is it a seed bed of extra-marital affairs? Are you being allowed to sell cars honestly? Does your political party or platoon conduct itself with honour and treat people with dignity?

Someone recently asked me about a position he had applied for, and for which he was getting a lot of criticism from his friends. It was with an arms manufacturer and his friends felt that to work in that industry was simply immoral. In fact, it might have been immoral, but that was not obvious up front. He

might have found that his first job was about selling arms to tyrants, but he might also have worked for the company all his life and only ever have been asked to work on projects that contributed to disarmament. My question for him was whether he would be ready to walk away from the company at the point that he was asked to do something against his conscience.

This dilemma might be frequent in the arms trade, but the same question could apply to all of us. Are we prepared to walk away from something that is leading us into moral compromise? Or would we rather keep living in the world, however dim it causes our Christ-light to become? Do we love the world at the expense of our friendship with God?

### **There be Devils!**

The Bible teaches that the world (in the sense of those people who are not following Jesus) is under the control of the devil (1 John 5:19). The world is more than just people who are making ungodly choices. There are demonic powers at work. For example, the seductive power of a pop star, the kind that turns heads and sells videos, is often not just the result of natural beauty. When we speak of someone casting a spell over us, we are touching on a spiritual reality that might be lying under the surface.

If we share in ungodly things with other people, whether with unbelievers or in the church, we are participating in nothing less than 'the table of demons'.

*The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 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 10:20-22)

The context of this strongly-worded teaching was ancient Corinth, where Christians were being asked to join in pagan celebrations. Despite the strong words, this was not a blanket ban on all meals with the pagans since, also according to Paul, the Christians in Corinth were allowed join with pagans in their private homes in eating meats that had been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 10:27). They needed to steer clear of the actual pagan temples (1 Corinthians 10:14-17, 21), but there were all kinds of 'in between' situations, such as eating near the temple or eating in a pagan house where prayers were offered to idols. However, Paul didn't allow the Corinthians to shrug their shoulders and say, "If God were really bothered, he'd have made it more obvious for us"! He wrote in very strong terms about arousing the Lord's jealousy, and then came back to make the point even more strongly in a later letter:

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? ... Therefore come out from them and be separate. (2 Corinthians 6:14-17)*

Whilst it is easy to stray into demonic fellowship, it is not a trivial matter, for it will make our relationship with God suffer. Every Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit, in which God has chosen to dwell (1 Corinthians 6:19). 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.

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. When Israel joined in with the religious practices of other nations, 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) It is this new covenant in which we live and in it Jesus has taken all the punishment owing for our moral failures. However, God's nature has not changed, and he still detests sin and unfaithfulness in the same way as ever. His love for us is unwavering, but he still hates it when we become entangled with demons.

## **Questions**

1. Do you know what 'games' are being played by the key groups that you are a part of?
2. Are there any issues where you are tempted to think, "If God were really bothered, he'd have made it more obvious for us"?
3. How do you respond to the idea of God's hatred for our unfaithfulness?

# Chapter 3

## Breaking-Down Strongholds

Sadly, the truths about demonic activity in society are not covered in our schools' National Curriculum, and so most of us grew up unaware of the spiritual bondages that plague us. Like animals born in a circus, which have never known freedom and live under the artificial rules of their keepers, we might not even know that it is possible to be free from certain constraints.

The Coptic monastery that I visited a few years ago contained a stronghold, which had been built in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century. In centuries past, this community of monks used to be attacked by Bedouin raiders, who would sometimes break through the compound's outer wall. When this happened, the monks would retreat into the stronghold via a single hole about 6 metres off the ground and then pull in the ladder, making them totally safe from attack. The raiders could roam free through the rest of the compound but, when they had moved on, the monks would come back out and return to life as usual.

Paul wrote:

*The weapons we fight with... have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)*

So, the image is of Christ having come into a person's life and doing away with the old demonic influence and associated ways of thinking, but some bits of ungodly thinking stubbornly clinging on, like people in a stronghold. Paul says that the Christian need not live with this unsatisfactory state of affairs, but that we have the power to demolish even these strongholds and so to bring every last part of our thinking under Christ's control.

### **Strongholds in the West**

What are the worldly ideas that Western Christians live with, often unaware of their significance because we've never known life any other way? What follows is not a complete list, but these are all very real and really demonic.

*Materialism - being absorbed by physical things*

Most cultures around the world accept that there is a spiritual reality as much as there is a material one. In the West, however, spirituality is not a part of mainstream culture. It sits on the edge of Western culture as a minority interest, whilst the glossy

magazine racks focus on physical things such as sports, food, clothes, gadgets and homes.

Mainstream European culture fans into flame the desire to accumulate more and more stuff, which is closely linked to the raw desire for more money. In contrast, Jesus taught that: *“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 or more stuff. Yet it's so easy for Christians to buy into a culture of spending long hours at work in the hope of getting just a bit more money, often at the expense of family life.

We can also be affected by celebrity culture. Following the lives of our favourite celebs, we might not go so far as to join the screaming fans at their public appearances, but hours spent in the gossip columns, celebrity mags and watching TV talent shows might each indicate an unhealthy interest in human 'idols'.

Finally, materialism leads logically to hedonism, which says, *“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”* (Isaiah 22:13). If there is no spiritual reality, then indulging in wine, food and sex makes lots of sense.

The Bible teaches that this absorption with material things is not the natural state of humanity. Rather, it

should be normal for the material world to point us towards spiritual realities (Romans 1:20). Our irrational obsession with material things is described as a punishment for having rejected God. We therefore need to be set free, in order to begin to perceive spiritual reality for ourselves.

*Rationalism – “I must understand before I can believe”*

Christians are often described as having a blind faith. When unbelievers say, “I wish I could have faith like yours”, what they mean is, “It must be nice to be able to think like a child, suspending disbelief.” Christians can find this quite intimidating. Some have even taken on board the idea that their faith is only an irrational, personal preference, and have exchanged the old language of right and wrong for talk about ‘what is true for me’.

Modern education teaches us to learn techniques and to value sensible procedures more than the messy complexity of stepping out in faith. If you would rather go to six seminars on healing than offer prayer to a single work colleague, then I would suggest that, whether you like it or not, rationalism is quenching your faith. But it need not continue to do so. We don’t need to be intimidated into hiding our faith from rational questioning.

Take for example, the classic argument against miracles, which goes back to the philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776). He argued that if someone reported a miracle to him, it would never make sense to believe

it. He argued that the laws of nature are reliably consistent and people are not. Therefore, reports of miracles – which are exceptions to the laws of nature – are most likely to be the result of human delusion or deceit.

At first reading, that sounds like a good argument and many people use an argument much like it to dismiss any reports of answered prayer. However, this argument is actually circular. All it does is define a miracle as something that is really unlikely and then conclude that reports of miracles are unlikely to be true. Hume never imagined a situation where healing and prophecy were common occurrences and his argument would not apply under those circumstances.

The example of Hume highlights the way in which every rational argument comes from a person and is affected by that person's prior beliefs and by the limits of their imagination. On realising this, some people then become deeply sceptical of all truth claims. This scepticism has been labelled 'postmodern', but let's note that it is just another expression of this stronghold of rationalism. The rationalist says, "I must understand before I can believe." The sceptic agrees but says, "No one really understands and so I won't believe".

And yet it is the case that we believe many things without beginning to understand them. I bet you can immediately name five things that you rely on every day but cannot explain, like your mobile phone or your spouse's love.

Faith in this witness is then a foundation for deciding whether it is rational to believe other witnesses. The point is that one doesn't start with just reason or just faith. Both are always at work. They are inextricably intertwined. Put another way, reason and faith are natural bedfellows.

In Western culture, however, reason has rolled over and pushed faith out, and many of us have been educated in a loveless and sceptical rationalism. We therefore need to be set free to think like Christians.

*Individualism - defending one's rights*

Ever since Cain abdicated his responsibility to care for his brother (Genesis 4:9), people have been tempted to care for themselves rather than for their family or society. In recent years, increasing geographic mobility, easier routes to divorce, greater control over family planning and the rise of careers built on 'transferable skills' have together raised individualism to new heights in the West. It is widely accepted that each person has a right to whichever lifestyle makes them happy.

We see this not only in the lack of remorse that many people feel about divorce, but also in the number of people who are unwilling to have children because of how much it would interfere with their existing lifestyle. We see it in the decline of long-term commitments between employers and their employees, and in the shift away from communities that expect some conformity from their members

towards fluid networks that could never be policed. We see individualism in the church when Christians think in terms of having their own ministry and focus on their own personal development, rather than asking what they can contribute to their church's ministry, their company's growth and their local community's needs.

Jesus did not think in terms of 'his ministry'. He did not defend himself (Isaiah 53:7), but submissively joined in with what the Father was doing (John 5:19). Indeed, it is inconceivable that the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit would ever make their own decisions without reference to each other. The three are one God.

As people made in God's image, we too receive our identity from others (Genesis 5:3) and two individuals may be united into one through marriage (Genesis 2:24). The church is not simply a group of individuals, but a single body (1 Corinthians 10:17). We therefore need to be set free from our self-determination and to commit ourselves to community membership.

### **You Can be Clean and Free**

If you recognise that you have been trapped in any of these wrong ways of thinking, don't despair! It is easy for Jesus to forgive you and to transform you. Your problem will only continue if you try to sweep it under the carpet:

*If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

*(1 John 1:6-7, 9)*

If you really want to be free, find someone who will hear your confession and will pray for you. It need not be complicated, and you will find a strange new ability to live God's way.

If God is stirring you to deal with something, I want to ask you please not to read any further until you have contacted a pastor and arranged a time to meet. There's little point filling your head with more words if you are not going to act on the things God is already highlighting!

### **Radiant Stars**

As we walk in Christ's light, a miracle occurs. Christ accompanied all the Israelites in their desert wanderings (1 Corinthians 10:1-5), but Moses was allowed into God's radiant presence and spoke with him face to face (Exodus 33:11). When he came back from these special times with God, Moses' face shone with so much radiance that people responded to him as they would have responded to the LORD. They were afraid to come near him and they placed a veil between themselves and Moses' face. (Exodus 34:29-35)

When Jesus died, the veil that had symbolised the separation of people from God's presence was torn apart (Mark 15:38). The way into God's presence now stands open (Revelation 4:1), and we can approach the one "*who alone is immortal and lives in unapproachable light*" (1 Timothy 6:16), "*the Father of the heavenly lights*" (James 1:17). There, with unveiled faces, we may contemplate the Lord's glory and there we are "*transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory*" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

One of the most encouraging things anyone ever said to me came in a most unexpected setting. I was visiting a dear old saint in hospital. She was in dreadful pain from diverticulitis and frequently suffered debilitating asthma attacks, which meant ever more frequent stays in hospital, and she really hated going into hospital. She was a woman of powerful prayers and she prayed with all her heart that God would keep her out of hospital, but when it became clear that she had to go in for a while, she would say, "There must be something that God wants me to do for him in there." Whilst in hospital, and despite her pain and weakness, she would meet someone who was backslidden and lead them back to Jesus or see someone healed through her prayers in Jesus' name or share the good news about Jesus with someone who had never heard it before.

I walked into the ward where she was staying, wondering in what state I would find her. I had been praying earlier that day, but my prayers had been

pretty feeble. I knew that I did not have much to offer to someone who had been walking with Jesus for nearly three times as long as I had been alive.

As I sat down next to her bed, this wonderful woman turned to me and said, “Oh Steve, it’s so good to see you. You always shine with the Lord’s presence and you’ve brought him in with you. Thank you so much.” In that moment, I knew that this was true and that this was purely a miracle of God. The Father of lights was at work to make me like his radiant Son and she had seen it.

I am not the only Christian to have experienced this. It’s actually pretty common. In his book *The Art of Pastoring*, David Hansen writes of something similar in his own experience as a pastor:

When I walk into a hospital room, the people seem to experience the coming of God. Just to say it sounds egotistical. But sometimes on hospital calls, it is as if I am not even there. God is there.

This should not surprise us, nor is this reality limited to pastors. Jesus said to his disciples, “*He who receives you receives me*” (Matthew 10:40), and this is true for all who follow Christ. The more we walk in Christ’s light, confessing our worldly entanglements and being purified from sin, the more we will represent and reveal him to the people we encounter.

## **Questions**

1. Which do you find most absorbing – wanting to buy stuff, trying to be like the celebs, seeking pleasure or knowing God?
2. What difference might it make to ‘think like a Christian’ in your workplace or family? Are there ‘rational’ decisions that you need to review with a more spiritual mind?
3. Have you taken seriously the need to be free of the cultural strongholds of materialism, individualism and rationalism? Is there anything you need to do about them?



# Chapter 4

## Grace in a Fallen World

Since it is godly people who overcome the dark world, Satan fights back by tempting Christians to fall into sin. The biggest threat to Christian influence in the world is that, through giving into temptation, we would fail to look like Jesus.

### **Learning from the Ancients**

Temptation begins early in the Bible story and continues through every generation under the old covenant. The serpent tempted Eve, which led her to tempt Adam, and they both made bad choices (Genesis 3:1-6). Abraham was tempted by fear and gave his wife to another man (Genesis 12:10-20). Achan was tempted to keep some gold, silver and pretty clothes, when God had told him not to (Joshua 7). Saul was tempted to use worship procedures to serve his political convenience (1 Samuel 13:8-14). David was tempted to acquire Bathsheba for a wife by murdering her husband (2 Samuel 11). Amnon was tempted to rape his sister (2 Samuel 13). And so it goes on...

There are some instances of heroic resistance to temptation, like when Joseph shrugged off the sexual advances of his boss's wife (Genesis 39:6-12), but they are exceptional victories. The general pattern is one of

moral failure, such that Jeremiah could say: “*The heart is deceitful ... and beyond cure*” (Jeremiah 17:9).

These stories, despite being under the old covenant, are of direct relevance to Christians, as Paul explained:

*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... [Yet, they] sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.*

*(1 Corinthians 10:1-11, parts)*

## **Temptation Comes from the World**

Whilst some individuals got into trouble all by themselves, many of the temptations facing the Israelites came from the mainstream culture of the Ancient Near East that surrounded them. God warned them against this culture of idol worship (Leviticus 18:1-27), which was typically accompanied by prostitution (Genesis 38:21-22, 1 Kings 14:24) and witchcraft (Deuteronomy 18:9-11) and on occasion by child sacrifice (2 Kings 3:27, 17:31, Deuteronomy 12:31). But right from the start the people did not heed his warnings. (Exodus 32:1-6, Numbers 25:1-3) Throughout the following centuries, the nation of Israel got thoroughly embroiled in the surrounding culture. Reading through 1 and 2 Kings reveals that most of the kings followed the surrounding mainstream culture

most of the time, even as far as sacrificing their children (2 Kings 16:3).

This seems very surprising, if not shocking. How could they stoop so low? They probably never made a clear decision to get into this stuff. Rather, small everyday connections with the surrounding culture led to temptations that they found hard to resist. This is why the Law of Moses laid out very clear expectations about what cultural practices would be allowed in Israel. Whilst some foreigners could join the people of Israel (Exodus 12:48-49, Deuteronomy 23:7-8), they were expected to adopt the Jewish way of life (Leviticus 18:26). God's people were told to avoid many specific things from the surrounding culture that would give rise to temptation, such as making animal statues (Deuteronomy 4:15-18), planting certain trees (Deuteronomy 16:21), raising standing stones (Deuteronomy 16:22) or even having foreign hairstyles or clothing fashion (Deuteronomy 21:10-13).

Wisdom dictates that you don't leave a hungry child in a sweet shop, an alcoholic at a free bar or two lonely people alone together in a hotel room. These situations all spell T-R-O-U-B-L-E, and the best option is to get out fast! There are many times when we simply need to get up – perhaps saying to others present, “I'm sorry, but I'm just not comfortable to be here” – and to distance ourselves from the situation.

It's worth us considering what might be the predictable sources of temptation to us today. I'd like to highlight just a few.

*The visual image*

Like never before, life today is saturated with visual images – whether on billboards, in magazines, on TV, in films or on the internet. They catch our attention and, as we gaze, we often connect quite profoundly with the messages they contain. Some images edify us; but advertisers are often aiming to stimulate our greed, lust and ambition. Modern life, especially in cities, can feel like swimming through a sea of images.

Clearly, we cannot avoid seeing all unhelpful images, but we do have some control over what we see. We can resolve not to buy certain magazines, not to watch certain kinds of films and not to go to certain places. We need to know what sorts of things affect us personally and not to be swayed by other people telling us that it's OK. We also need to learn to look away quickly rather than gazing at length! If King David had learnt this one skill, he might have avoided adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11:2-5, 12:11).

*Beguiling role models*

Modern life presents us every day with images and stories about attractive and successful celebrities, whose example we are then tempted to follow. We tend to become more like the people we spend time with, and hours spent gazing at the lives of celebrities lead us to absorb some of their ideas and lifestyle. For many people, celebrities fall somewhere between the role of film character and friend. Magazines tell us about their famous and wealthy lifestyles, assuming

that we want to be like them – even though they often exhibit self-indulgence and suffer from broken relationships.

Many films and books present us with ‘heroes’. These are the characters that we are expected to admire. We are led to see them as the ‘good guys’ and to support their attitudes and actions. Yet most of these modern heroes seem to achieve everything single-handedly, displaying their independence and proving that they don’t need anybody else. This way of life is presented attractively wherever we look, and yet it goes against what we know to be true as Christians: that we can only succeed with God’s help and can do nothing without him and without other people.

Other mainstream role models lead us towards destructive behaviour. In the incredibly popular ‘Twilight’ series, the central focus is a romantic relationship. When this relationship encounters problems, the heroine turns to self-destructive action, deliberately crashing a motorcycle in search of a near-death experience. This is not presented as a sign of her personal insecurity and obsessive tendencies: it is portrayed as a bold and admirable statement of desperation from someone very much in love! For the large numbers of teenage girls who adore these characters and long to be part of a similar love story, this episode nudges them to view suicide as an admirable thing.

If we spend more time thinking about people in magazines, novels and films than we spend reflecting

on what God is like, then we need to beware that we may be transformed into their image, rather than becoming more like Christ.

### *New technologies*

Almost all technologies are morally neutral, since they can be used for good or ill. Mobile phones can be used to support family members or to slander them. The web can be used to access pornography or Bible texts.

New technologies are not in themselves any more dangerous than old ones, but they provide more temptation for two reasons. Firstly, current new technologies are often not understood by the authority figures in our lives, such that we can easily hide from them what we are doing.

Secondly, the newer the technology, the less established wisdom there is about how to steer ourselves towards wholesome usage. We now know that it is wise to install parental controls and monitoring software to help us all to avoid the internet's dark side, but it took some years for this to become clear.

Let's make sure that the latest shiny gadgets do not dazzle our moral judgement, because that is just what they are likely to do.

### **Refiner's Fire**

All of this might make us fearful of the world and its corrupting power. Yet that is not where the Bible leaves the matter. It says that the dark cloud of temptation has a silver lining. 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.

The Greek word used in the New Testament to mean ‘temptation’ also means a ‘test’ or ‘trial’. Peter explained that trials can work like a refiner’s fire, which proves the reality of whatever faith we have (1 Peter 1:6-7). Jeremiah spoke of the Jews’ suffering in exile as a refining test (Jeremiah 9:7) and Zechariah promised further refining tests for God’s people (Zechariah 13:9).

What does it mean for temptation to refine us? Goldsmiths today often use chemicals to test their metals, but in the ancient world they tested them with fire. An impure lump of metal would be placed in a crucible and heated until it melted. As it melted, various impurities would float to the surface as a scum that could be skimmed off, or sink to the bottom as residue that could be left behind when the pure gold was poured out. A quick comparison of the amount of pure gold against the size of the original impure lump would reveal how pure the lump had been. At the same time, the testing process also served to refine the gold, cleansing it of its dross.

So, when the Bible says that temptations are like being in the refiner’s fire, it means that such trials both reveal our moral impurities but also prove whatever moral strength we have. We can thank God for the strength he has given and, once we see these

impurities, we are better able to skim them out of our lives.

When Jessica's daughter moved away from home and fell away from her relationship with God, her initial response was to worry for her child, fearing what harm might befall her in this new situation. Some of her fears proved groundless, but others were confirmed. Jessica's anxiety became a great burden to her and she became ill under the weight of it. However, instead of giving up hope, she learned to pray more and more and to entrust her family's wellbeing to God. She came to understand how dependable and loving God is in difficult situations. She grew into a stronger intercessor, who could respond calmly to new problems, as she trusted God in a more powerful way.

Through prayer, with the support of Christian friends and in the power of the Holy Spirit, temptation can lead to personal growth.

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)*

## **More than Conquerors**

The Bible also promises that we can be victorious in all our trials:

*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)*

God promises that we will never be set an impossibly hard exam. This does not mean that we will find all temptations easy to overcome, 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 in the knowledge that success is possible for us as we call on God's grace. We should not think that the world will inevitably corrupt us.

Jesus was very clear about this. Not only did he come into the world and live a sinless life, but he asked his disciples to *"be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Matthew 5:48). Western Christians tend to read these words with disbelief. Our scholars tend to suggest that Jesus didn't really mean it, but John Wesley dared to take Jesus at his word. His driving vision was to spread scriptural holiness through the nations. He believed it was possible for ordinary men and women to 'partakers of perfection'. This did not mean that they would never do anything wrong, but that they could expect the Holy Spirit to renew them in the image of God, to enable them to love God truly and to empower them to live for God. With God's help, Christians can expect to be victorious in our battles with sin.

## Sticking to the Word of God

Wesley experienced a lot of opposition to the use of the term, 'perfection', but he stuck with it because he found it in the Bible. In Jesus' own response to personal attack, we see that he too quoted scripture word-for-word. When tempted, he did not simply dismiss the devil by asserting his personal authority, saying, "I'm the Son of God, so be off with you!" He set an example that we can follow of quoting scriptures that showed the right way to think in the situation. Repeatedly, he said, "*It is written...*" (Matthew 4:1-11).

When we are in the midst of temptation, we experience conflicting feelings. Part of us wants to do the right thing, but part of us is well up for sinning. In that moment, we can suddenly see compelling reasons for making both the right and the wrong choice, and our feelings can shift by the second between confidence and despair, passion and peace. The most likely exit from this whirlpool is that we will go down the tubes!

In these moments of temptation, the scriptures are a firm rock on which we can once more plant our feet and gain our bearings. In 21<sup>st</sup> Century Europe, the Bible is very accessible to all of us. We can choose to read it and store away scriptural truths in our thinking. If we do so, we will begin to find solid footing and to overcome temptation, just as Jesus did.

## **Learning to Overcome**

Chloe first experienced depression when she was still in school. The way people treated her led her to believe that her value was very low, and she developed a mind-set about her importance in the world that did not line up with God's perspective. However, when she prayed for God's help, he answered very swiftly, as she was taken out of that hostile and lonely environment and placed in a Christian family that enabled her to belong and feel valued. She had a number of spiritual experiences when praying for her mind and health, which further convinced her that God was actively involved in her healing.

Yet Chloe still felt negative and low from time to time, especially in the face of criticism or disappointment. She prayed against the sense of hopelessness that could still overtake her, knowing that it was contrary to the message of the Bible, but despair would still grip her in these moments. Eventually Chloe realised that while God was doing so much to heal her, she also had a responsibility to take captive every thought. She took to filling her mind with scriptural truths. She anchored herself in biblical hope, so that she would have a foundation from which to fight.

It is an on-going process, and even today Chloe still has to choose to reject certain ideas. She sometimes depends on her Christian friends to help her discern between truth and lies. However long it may take, she

is determined to continue with her battle plan of aligning her thoughts with God's word.

## **God is with Us**

The world around us will certainly tempt us. These temptations are a trial that we do well to avoid. Still, God is with us when we are being tested and he makes it possible for us to stand firm and even to become more like him through these difficult times.

There is a wise balance here. We need to be careful to avoid temptation and yet we are also more than conquerors. We are able to stand for Christ in all circumstances, but sometimes the best battle plan is a tactical retreat. Running away is allowed, but it would be hard to picture the church as Christ's conquering army if that were our only tactic.

Whilst we pray "*lead us not into temptation*", we also remember that God can "*deliver us from evil*" and that "*the kingdom, the power and the glory*" are his (Matthew 6:13). We do not have to avoid all risks for fear that God will then be unable or unwilling to help us through any trouble that gets stirred up. We do not call upon a weak God, but upon the one who has unlimited power. I suspect that many of us need a boost of faith in God's power.

I know that I once did.

## **In the Power of the Spirit**

Before I took on leading Oxford Community Church in 2005, the Spirit of God called me to one side. I was

about the same age as Jesus had been when he began his ministry, and I felt that if even he had fasted in the wilderness as a preparation for ministry, then I needed to do something similar. I had a vague idea that I needed more confidence in God. As well as that, I reckoned that I needed to set an example to the church of a leader serving God in the world, but I was already totally absorbed in church life. I had been looking for something to do that would get me out into the city, for a day a week and for at least a couple of years, but none of the many options I'd looked at had seemed suitable.

Oxfordshire is not known for its wilderness places, but the Holy Spirit led me to undertake a prolonged fast. I did not set out to fast for as many as 40 days and I have no idea how Jesus managed to walk out of the desert after fasting for that long. In the first week, I functioned pretty normally. In the second week, I only had enough energy to do about 50 hours' work. In the third week, I was down to about 30 hours.

A few days before I planned to start eating again, I was weak and feeling less and less able to function, to hear God or even to recognise his presence. With great care, I drove out of the city to a forest and I prayed, "God, I thought you led me to do this! I've lost over 2 stone and I've lost all sense of perspective. What gives?"

And then came a miracle!

God spoke with what seemed like an audible voice, and he said, “Go and volunteer for the Citizens’ Advice Bureau!”

The next day, I went to the Bureau in Oxford’s city centre and asked if I could volunteer. The receptionist replied, “Sure, but you need to agree to do a day a week for at least a couple of years. Would you be able to do that?”

This, however, was not the miracle.

I trained to offer advice about benefits, debt, employment, immigration and housing, and I did that for just over 2 years. On one occasion, a woman sat before me, asking for advice about her legal options as her husband was preparing to leave her. She paused, looked at me intently and without any warning said, “I can see that you are spiritual man. I really want to know if there is anything else that you can say that would help me right now.” I offered her some words of hope and gave her the contact details of some people who would be able to talk to her more freely.

Events like these, though most wonderful, were not the miracle.

The miracle had occurred back in the forest and deep in my inner-being. In the wake of God speaking to me, I gradually realised that I myself had changed. I had a new-found confidence to go into the world, not intimidated by what people would think of me and my faith. Like the early church, who met with God and spoke his word boldly (Acts 4:31), I had received the Spirit afresh and been empowered to represent God in

the world with confidence. This was the grace I needed to step into ministry in our fallen world, and it has remained with me.

Just as the Bible is available equally to us all, so is the Holy Spirit. If you are not sure that you've been baptised in the Spirit, or if you know that you need to be filled afresh with him, I hope that you too will allow God to draw you aside for a fresh encounter with his grace.

### **Questions**

1. How do you feel about being told to “be perfect as God is perfect”?
2. Is there a time when you learnt to overcome temptation? What made the difference?
3. What role does the Holy Spirit play in your experience of living under grace?



# Chapter 5

## Loving the Church

God loves to pour out the grace that we need to be victorious in a fallen world. He has not only provided us with his Word and his Spirit, but he has also given us the Christian community, the church, as a further source of grace. What a huge help it is too, when our Christian sisters and brothers spur us on (Hebrews 10:24), encourage us (1 Thessalonians 5:11), hear our confession and pray for us (James 5:16) or teach and admonish us (Colossians 3:16). Yet, sadly, church life does not always do everyone quite so much good.

### **Christmas Crisis**

Some years ago, my wife Bev and I were hosting our church 'small group' for a Christmas chill-out. We had mince pies in the oven and wine mulling on the hob. We also had a long-recovered alcoholic in our group. As we got ready for the evening, my thoughts went something like this:

Our alcoholic friend might have an issue with us serving wine. Still, it's only mulled wine. Doesn't most of the alcohol boil off? Yes, probably. Anyway, we have some soft drinks too, he'll

know what's what, and it'll be his own decision what he drinks, not mine.

The whole group duly arrived, and everyone in turn opted for mulled wine, including this particular friend. With little thought, I poured him a glass.

Ten minutes later, the murmur and tinkle of festive conversation was interrupted by an angry voice. "I can feel the alcohol in my blood! I've been dry for 10 years and... Steve, you shouldn't have served me that wine. How could you do this to me?"

Our friend rushed out of the house into the cold night, leaving everyone looking at their leader (i.e. me), presumably wondering how I could have been such an uncaring klutz. Now, this friendship meant a lot to us. We had seen this man choose to start a relationship with Jesus, been privileged to help him live in the good of that choice, and also learnt lots from what he had to share with us. I understood enough about the power and depth of alcohol addiction to fear that this incident would probably lead him back to the bottle, ruining his life and maybe even his faith. I hadn't meant for that to happen. I simply hadn't cared for him, and so learnt the hard way that careless people can't really complain about the consequences of their actions.

### **A Divided House Cannot Stand**

Thankfully, after much fervent prayer and by the grace of God, this incident had no lasting consequences for our friend's fight with the 'Demon

Drink' nor for our friendship, but it goes to show how much power we Christians have to do each other harm. It is frighteningly easy to treat other Christians carelessly, forgetting that the opening chapters of the Bible associate such negligence of our duty to care with a most evil crime (Genesis 4:1-9).

It is especially easy to be harsh and uncaring towards those Christians that we don't naturally get on with. In the early Roman church, the believers apparently struggled to care for those church members who lived just a bit differently to them. Paul had to instruct them not to act in any way that would cause harm to other believers, even in the detail of what they ate (Romans 14:15-16, 19-20).

Nowadays, Christians are not bothered with food laws, but there is some disagreement about just how important church meetings are. I might feel that I need to miss a Sunday church meeting in order to get some DIY done, but Paul's point is that I need to pause and consider what example I'm setting for less mature Christians. Might they get the wrong end of the stick, conclude that Sunday attendance is unimportant and stop attending altogether? In other words, we need to make sure that our lifestyle choices don't harm our fellow Christians.

This makes sense, since the church will never succeed in changing the world if Christians are constantly injuring each other! A divided community will not thrive for long. Business gurus tell us that

companies rarely fail due to external pressures, but often because of internal fractures.

This is not just a sensible way of thinking, but a biblical one. In the church in Corinth, the disciples disagreed about whether they were allowed to eat with unbelievers, whose food might have come from a pagan temple. Paul's solution makes for interesting reading. Knowing that Jesus had declared all foods 'clean' (Mark 7:14-19), he sided with those who said that it was OK to do so (1 Corinthians 8:4-6, 10:25-26), but he then said that they still should not do so if it was going to trouble another church member (1 Corinthians 8:9-13, 10:27-30). This is very much like saying that it's OK to go clubbing, unless one of your Christian friends has a problem with it, in which case you can't do it.

However, Christians who are more mission-minded can get very frustrated by this. It can feel like there is a race to run, but we can only move at the pace of the slowest person. It can feel like the pastor-teachers rule the roost and that the pioneers and evangelists are being rejected. It can feel like the great missionary might of the church will be domesticated and bound into a holy huddle!

If you feel these things, it might help you to remember that it is not just down to you to save the world. It is not just your personal race, but a team task. However strongly you surge forward, it won't please God if you push the rest of your team into a ditch along the way.

## **Parasites on the Body?**

What is true of individual believers is also true of communities of believers. It is right not only for Christians to care for each other, but also for local churches to support each other, as we see in the example of the early church (Acts 8:14, 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, Colossians 4:16). No church is an island, and neither is any cell group. Christians who forget this are liable to form breakaway groups, citing problems with the church they are moving away from. They may have made a correct assessment of the weaknesses of the group they are leaving, but what use is there in diagnosing a church's problems if there is no desire then to help?

In the church today, there are lots of people moving on from 'established churches' and starting new kinds of churches. Some are called 'fresh expressions' or 'emerging churches'. Some of these have been motivated primarily by mission (e.g. workplace church, café church), others by forming community (e.g. house church, organic church) and others by fresh patterns of worship (e.g. alternative worship, new monasticism). Some are indeed cutting-edge and doing well, but many others are in trouble or have already folded. Although you wouldn't easily see this from their websites, there is growing evidence that the new churches that are thriving are not those following a particular format or with a particular vision, but rather those that are healthily connected to a larger body of disciples.

One denominational leader goes so far as to say that for new churches to succeed they need to be allowed to be 'parasitic' upon a larger church or network. Now, writing as the biologist that I once trained to be, I think that 'parasitic' is not quite the right word for these relationships. The right words are 'mutualistic endosymbiosis'.

This mouthful of a phrase means that a smaller organism lives inside the larger one and they both do each other good. For example, there is a kind of tiny green plant that lives inside corals, and they both do each other good. The coral provides a structure within which the tiny plants find certain nutrients that are really rare in the open ocean, enabling the plants to grow faster and to multiply faster than they ever could do alone. As they grow, the tiny plants produce organic carbon and make minerals available to the coral, out of which it forms new structure. Together they build a reef that teems with hundreds of species of animals and make it worth learning to dive.

The ways in which churches, individuals and movements can build each other up are almost too numerous to mention. An individual can lead worship in a church meeting that leaves people radiant with God's presence. A church can channel funds to the neediest individuals and support the Christian upbringing of children without Christian parents. A larger church or a network can support specialist ministries that compensate for the imbalances in local churches.

It is a conceit to imagine that we can thrive by ourselves, either as individuals or as an isolated Christian community. We need each other.

## **God Loves the Church**

Of course, the call to care for the church is not just about what is good for us. Wise pastors will remind us that we Christians need to care for each if we are all to enjoy fullness of life, but that's not the whole story. Wise evangelists will also remind us that we need to build each other up in order to be effective missionaries. This is true, but there is another reason that is much more profound.

Those nearest to God's throne in heaven sing of Christ purchasing people for God (Revelation 5:9), picking up on the Old Testament theme that God has acquired a people for himself, to be the object of his love and devotion (Deuteronomy 4:34, 2 Samuel 7:23, 1 Chronicles 17:21, Psalm 4:3). Father God loves the church as his children. It pleases him to see his children, who believe in him, being cared for (Matthew 18:6). So, he really does not like it when his people are treated badly, whether by other nations (Isaiah 49:25-26), their own leaders (Isaiah 3:13-15, Ezekiel 34:1-10) or simply by each other (Psalm 12).

Our experiences of church life might sometimes lead us to question why God loves the church, but we cannot deny the truth that he does indeed love it. We most often think of Jesus dying on the cross to save sinners (Romans 5:6-8), but the Bible also describes

Jesus' death as being for the church (Ephesians 5:25). God is not just rescuing individuals to be conveniently warehoused together in congregations until they die and go to heaven. He is building a global body in which he can take genuine delight, even as a bridegroom takes pleasure in his bride (Revelation 19:6-8, 21:9-10).

Whereas we feel a tension between investing our limited energies in the church or in the world, our limitless God feels no such tension. In his grand plan of undoing the effects of human sin and restoring harmony to the whole of creation (Ephesians 1:9-10, Colossians 1:19-20), the church is a 'firstfruit' (James 1:18, Revelation 14:1-4). This means that the church is a sign of all that God is going to do. It is the setting where his salvation is seen and the people through whom it is made available.

So, as we seek to live well in this life, breaking free from strongholds, overcoming temptation and shining with Christ's light, we ought to value the Christian community highly, to lend it our personal support and to care for its members.

## **Questions**

1. In the way you exercise your Christian freedoms where are you most at risk of failing to care for others?
2. In what ways have you felt 'held back' by being considerate of the 'slower'? What does God have to say to this?
3. What example could you give of 'mutualistic endosymbiosis' (p63) in your local church or small group?



# Chapter 6

## Loving the World

In the film, *The Matrix*, Agent Smith says:

I hate this place. This zoo. This prison. This reality, whatever you want to call it, I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I've somehow been infected by it.

This is quite the opposite of how Jesus feels about the world. He longed to gather people close to him, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37). He came down from heaven into the world, not only to be near us, but to become one of us. He was born into a body like our bodies. This is what we mean by 'incarnation'. God literally became man (John 1:14). He grew up in our world, hearing its sounds and learning it from the inside. For over 30 years, he listened to its tunes and its jokes, before he finally spoke into it. When he raised his voice, it came out in the heart language of the people around him. Jesus did not find it to be filthy language that might somehow infect him. He took human words, the expressions of the world around him, and with them he spoke truly of the love of God.

## **Cultural Chameleon**

The apostle Paul is probably known best for his words – his preaching and his letters – but he was also a man who lived out the gospel for people to see. Following Jesus' example, he was prepared to put aside his own comforts and preferences in order to better connect with people. He had grown up as a zealous Jew, brought up on the stories of Jewish heroes who had chosen death rather than be force-fed bloodied meat by their Greek overlords. His whole cultural heritage led him to avoid Gentile foods, but he saw the need to eat with Gentiles in order to reach out to them and became a passionate advocate of Jews and Gentiles eating together (Galatians 2:11-16).

Later, when he returned to Jerusalem, he submitted himself to take part in Jewish purification rites in order to establish better relationships with the local Jews (Acts 21:17-26). On his journeys, he took time to learn the cultures of the cities that he visited, so that he could speak relevantly, even when the culture he found greatly distressed him (Acts 18:16, 22-23).

In other words, he was a cultural chameleon, but not because he was confused about his own beliefs or pushed around by the people that he met. He was motivated by love for people (2 Corinthians 5:11-14), and he was able to be so flexible with his cultural clothing precisely because he was so confident of his spiritual identity (Galatians 3:26-28).

## **Crossing Continents**

When Joab sent a wise woman from Tekoa to persuade King David to be reconciled to his son, Absalom, she appealed to God's nature, saying, "*He devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him*" (2 Samuel 14:14). The task of crossing cultures is very much like this. We have to devise ways of connecting with people, so that they may not remain estranged from God. This requires two things from us.

Firstly, it requires us to understand the estranged person. If the Christian church is sealed off from the world in its own subculture, then however superior that culture may be, it is like the father who can never remember how to be a child and is therefore looked upon as a foreigner by his children. Such a father does not need to become a child again (or he would cease to be the father that the children need), but he does need to listen to his children and to understand them, if he is ever to communicate successfully about things that really matter.

Missionaries who have crossed continents know about this. They have shared in the early morning chores and the late night discussions of cultures far from their own birthplace. Many have lived on inadequate funds and inadequate diets. They have faced diseases long banished from developed countries. And all to become close to people that God loves, in the hope of making a way for the message about Jesus.

Secondly, the task of cross-cultural communication requires us to be deeply immersed in our Christian identity. The history of the Jesuit Order in the Roman Catholic Church has some dark chapters, but they have also produced some of the very best cross-cultural missionaries the world has ever seen. A Jesuit at the Court of the Emperor of Japan became so learned in Japanese etiquette that he was always consulted on occasions of state, and therefore had the ear of the royal elite. Jesuits were amongst the first to reach India and cross the Himalayas, leaving in their wake disciples who shared their own fierce passion for Jesus, but without European cultural baggage. Some of their disciples wore saffron robes and were more knowledgeable about Hindu teaching than the Brahmins themselves, perfectly placed to lead others to Christ.

These men were able to bury themselves so deeply in foreign cultures and to remain true to Christ because they were even more deeply stained with Christian identity. The Jesuit Order requires a young man to be trained for 14 years before being commissioned, ensuring that their missionaries are marked indelibly with Christ!

Their stories remind us that the most effective Christian communicators are not simply those who get closest to the people around them, but those who have the deepest knowledge of God.

## **God in a Prison and a Coffin**

The most influential Christian movements, those which generate the most creative new forms of culture, are those which do not merely react against the culture that surrounds them, but have a strong vision inspired by God.

In the early 1980s, Olmos Prison near La Plata in Argentina was known as a 'pit of hell'. Nearly 3000 inmates were housed in this maximum-security facility, and it was so chaotic that the authorities had turned over its running to the mafia and drug dealers serving time. Riots, murders and sexual abuse were commonplace. There were lots of churches nearby, but none were able even to get inside the prison, let alone make a difference.

Into this mess, God spoke in 1983 to a man called Juan Zuccarelli. Juan had a desire to preach the gospel, but no desire to go into Olmos – yet God gave him the vision to apply to become a prison guard. Being a guard at Olmos was not a pleasant job or even a safe one, but having taken on that role, Juan was able to bring in another man to preach the gospel. They were soon using a radio station that broadcast directly into every cell. Prisoners began to give their lives to Jesus and gradually a church began to grow within this awful prison. By the late 1990s, about half of the prisoners were members, and the reoffending rate amongst released converts was less than 1%. Friends of mine have visited this church, and describe it as one of

the most powerful blessings they have ever experienced.

In Liverpool, as in most European cities, there are goth communities. Goth culture is hard to define, but involves wearing black, being open to discussing subjects that are normally taboo, like death, and together forming a place of belonging for people who feel themselves to be misfits in 'normal' society. You rarely see goths in church. So, who is reaching them?

In 2010, Liverpool Cathedral hosted a Halloween event called 'Night of the Living Dead'. It was advertised with a video trailer that looked like a horror movie. The event itself started with a funeral march and a coffin was carried in and set up in front of the altar. In the gloom, people screamed out in fear and terror. Then, out of the coffin stepped a hooded man, dressed like a medieval priest, but shining in bright white clothes. He spoke of the fear-filled zombie half-life that is acknowledged at Halloween, and appealed to people to abandon it for fullness of life in Jesus.

In Olmos and in Liverpool, God's people were working hard to take the gospel into places and cultures where it had not been before. Confident of the truth of the gospel, inspired by God and secure in their Christian identity, they had paid attention to people's real issues and begun to communicate in ways that made sense.

## **What Would it Take?**

I first began to think about these matters in the wake of a failed attempt to reach out to the gay community of Oxford University back in the mid-1990s. The student Christian Union had arranged a joint meeting with the Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Society (as it was then called) to discuss sexual ethics, which had been seen by the Christians as an opportunity to share the good news of what Jesus could do for the LGBSoc members. In fact, it quickly descended into bitter argument and may have done more harm than good, confirming the impression that Christians see gays as beyond redemption.

I began to ask myself, “What would it take for LGBSoc members really to understand the gospel?” I began to see that it would take a lot more than one evening. It would require more than saying, “God has the power to change your sexuality”, when that really did not sound like good news to them. It would require some Christians to become friends with LGBSoc members and to listen to their friends’ stories. It might involve attending a number of LGBSoc events, before they could learn how to communicate the good news about Jesus in a way that would really sound like good news!

I did not find the courage to take these steps, largely because there were no Christians willing to join me and I did not think I could do it alone. I am now no longer a member of the University. Sadly, to my knowledge, no one else has taken these steps over the

last 15 years. And I hear the words that God spoke to Isaiah echoing down the centuries: “*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*” (Isaiah 6:8)

As God looks across the place where you live, what is he asking? Whom shall I send to the gay community? Who will go for us to the bikers? Whom shall I send to the lads at the local pub? Who will go for us to the taxi drivers? Whom shall I send to the Women’s Institute? And who will go for us to goths?

### **Making Sense in French**

A few years ago, a couple in Oxford began to hear God asking, “Who will go for us to Paris?” There are many good churches there, but mostly reaching foreigners and not the French.

John and Naomi knew that they were called not simply to gather Christians, but to establish something that would make sense to secular French society, as well as to the Muslim community in Paris. This meant holding back from starting public meetings and instead choosing to listen to the people in the surrounding community, to learn their values, attitudes and lifestyles.

Along the way, they had to make a lot of small changes to their daily lives. In the first summer in Paris, Naomi realised that if she wanted to meet mums in the park with their young son, she could not take him home for tea at half past five, according to English custom. That’s the time when people are going out in Paris, and so the family adjusted their routine. They

also found that 'tea-time' was the best time to have a Sunday church meeting, as most people were free late on a Sunday afternoon and were feeling relaxed at the end of the weekend.

John reckons that whilst changing mealtimes and bedtimes required some effort, it has been far more challenging to keep working at finding ways of meeting people outside of church, and taking the Gospel to them:

It has meant writing out time in our diary that could have been used more 'productively' in the short term, and spending time with people who wouldn't help us with our immediate goals. It has meant a lot of listening. We seek to meet people, watch how they live, find out what's important to them and their attitudes to faith. As we've started to live in a way that makes sense to people, we feel we can introduce something of the challenge that Jesus brings to our way of life. In the early days, that meant inviting neighbours round for a Good Friday aperitif, and toasting Jesus and our neighbourly relations! Now it often means running events that celebrate traditional Christian festivals in a family-friendly way, where we invite the presence of God and speak the Gospel. It's about keeping on moving outwards, making new relationships, adapting our way of living and speaking the truth in a way that makes sense.

## **The Fire Triangle**

A new church is growing in France out of the good soil of loving relationships, disciplined prayer and “speaking the truth in a way that makes sense”. A growing number of French people have given their lives to Jesus for the first time.

However, it is common nowadays to meet evangelicals who seem embarrassed about the whole notion of ‘truth’ and who approvingly quote Francis of Assisi’s instruction: “Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.” In other words, words are out of vogue and actions are in.

I think I understand why this shift has occurred. It is possible (and sadly all too common) for people to preach truth without much love, and for Christians to neglect the biblical virtues of listening to others, of incarnating the Word in bodily action and of addressing social injustice. And it is true that people will find our words empty unless they are accompanied by loving actions.

Still, the advice attributed to St. Francis is clearly quite daft. He cannot ever have been a married man. Otherwise he would have known that even well-meaning actions are easily misinterpreted. Good verbal communication is the lifeblood of good relationships.

If I fight for social justice and care for the poor, even though these things are close to God’s heart, I may not serve to communicate the abundant grace of God to needy souls. Unless I also speak of Jesus, unless

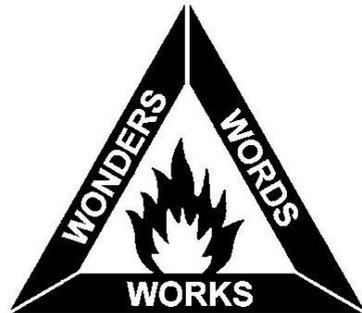
I explain his message, my good work will likely as not be seen as an attempt to salve my guilty conscience or to avoid facing up to the emptiness in my own life. It is only when I speak of Jesus that the reality of the kingdom of God becomes clear. People will not believe unless they hear a message (Romans 10:14).

So, we need to resist all attempts to prioritise good works over good words or *vice versa*. God clearly desires both. Rather like wine and cheese, both can be good alone, but they are much better together!

I suppose someone might quote Paul on the kingdom being about power not words (1 Corinthians 4:20), but I would reply that Paul did actually preach quite a lot, and is therefore not a good witness to call in support of wordless mission. A better way to read that verse is simply that we need signs and wonders to go with the words (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Romans 15:18-19).

Let's think about the 'fire triangle'. This reminds us that a fire requires fuel, heat and oxygen – all three. Take away any one of those and the fire will fizzle out.

In the mission of God, there is a fire that comes from the beautiful combination of works, words and wonders. If we take away the spoken message, the mission will fizzle out.



The world is happy enough with our acts of service and with our prayers for people to be healed and blessed. It is specifically the word of God which is resisted and which we are therefore tempted to neglect for the sake of an easier life. That's why I, for one, pray for the grace to "*proclaim it clearly, as I should*" (Colossians 4:4), knowing that speaking the truth in a way that makes sense requires as much listening to the culture as it does confidence in the gospel.

### Questions

1. Which are the groups in your community or on your heart who are not currently hearing the good news about Jesus?
2. What would it take to reach them with the Gospel?
3. Which of words, works and wonders are you most comfortable with using to express the Gospel? Which are you least?

# Chapter 7

## Shining like Children

It's really good to learn to do the right stuff, but there remains the matter of motives. We might be motivated to do ministry in order to make us feel important or to impress others or because it feels good to be needed. We might reckon that there is money to be made from it. We might just enjoy being the people who shape the future. Out of Paul's many co-workers, he identified only Timothy as being truly motivated by love. Everyone else was in it for their own interests (Philippians 2:19-21).

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul goes through the 'fire triangle' of Christian mission and states that each aspect is pointless without love. Speech without love is just a pointless noise (v1). Prophecy and miracles without love are nothing (v2). To serve the poor without love gains nothing (v3).

At this, most of us nod our heads and agree that, yes indeed; we ought to be more loving. Some, however, might query how Paul's teaching makes sense. After all, whatever the motives, the clothed poor do seem much better off than the naked poor and miracles are always pretty good!

Elsewhere, Paul acknowledges that Christian ministry born of mixed motives is better than no

ministry at all (Philippians 1:15-18), but even then he swiftly comes back to the importance of being motivated by love for others, not by what we can get out of it (Philippians 2:5-8). Why does this matter so much?

It matters because the goal of ministry is not just to bless people, but to reveal Jesus. If we are not motivated by love, then we are acting like workers hired into God's family business rather than behaving like family members. If we don't look like members of God's family, then we won't represent and reveal God to people.

### **Jesus the Son**

Jesus was not a hired worker. He came as the Son of God and showed what the Father is like. He did not do this by following a protocol or using a special technique. It was not that he came from heaven with a list of approved activities with which to bless people. Jesus was able to reveal God in Palestine through his words and actions, not only because he knew the culture and knew the scriptures, but because of who he was and how he related to God.

One of our daughters is currently missing her two front teeth. At my parents' house last weekend, we found a photograph of me at the same age, a grin revealing the same missing teeth. Apart from our hairstyles, you could hardly tell us apart. I am her father. She is my daughter and her smiles show people what I was like as a boy. It does not depend on her

being busily occupied with tasks that I give her. She just has to be herself.

Jesus is the visible representation of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), because he is one with the Father (John 10:30) and is one God with him (John 1:1). As the Nicene Creed states, he is “the only-begotten Son of God... God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

As the second person of the Trinity, Jesus did not decide what to do for himself, even though he knew that his decisions would naturally agree with what the Father would do. Instead, he said, “*the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing*” (John 5:19). Part of being the Son is an everyday dependence on the Father.

### **Doing what Jesus did**

When Jesus invited people to follow him, he was also offering them the opportunity to become like him. He did not only come to save people from condemnation, but to show how we might be restored to the pristine condition of perfect humanity, which the Bible describes as being made “*in the image of God*” (Genesis 1:26-28).

There is a very practical side to this, in which it is up to us to imitate Christ, asking “What would Jesus do?” and making an effort to do what we see God doing. This is an exciting opportunity, but it can also

feel like an impossible challenge to be like Jesus. After all, he is... well, he's Jesus!

One reason that we find it hard to imagine becoming like Jesus is that we forget he became truly human and lived on earth as a man. We rightly believe Jesus to be divine, but as a man he also depended on the Father and was anointed by the Spirit. He followed the Father's lead (Luke 22:42) and his miracles were done in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14-20, Acts 10:37-38). Jesus did not expect his own ministry to be the historic high point of miracle-working. He knew that other humans, empowered by the same Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) would do even greater things than he had done (John 14:12).

Another reason that we Christians have low expectations for our personal futures is that we think we've worked out what our gifts are. We've read the various lists of gifts in Paul's letters (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Ephesians 4:11-13) and decided which we have and which we don't. That's fair enough, but it is a mistake to think that God has no more gifts to give to us. You don't check your bank balance and then expect to live off that money for the rest of your life. So, why do we think like that concerning gifts from God? When we've assessed what gifts we currently have (and don't have), it should lead us to think about working with other Christians in teams, but it should also provoke us to ask for more (1 Corinthians 14:1, James 4:2b).

Right now, I am definitely stronger in some of the ‘Ephesians 4’ ministry gifts (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher) than others. However, since God is transforming me into the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18) the most important thing for my future is not what I’m like right now, but what Jesus is like. I read in the Bible that he is apostle (Hebrews 3:1), prophet (Mark 6:1-4, Luke 24:19), evangelist (Mark 1:15), pastor (John 10:14) and teacher (Matthew 7:28-29). I can therefore expect God to keep growing me in all of these five areas, and I’m asking for more.

### **Being God’s Children**

Of course, becoming like Jesus is not just about what we do. It goes deeper than that, affecting what we believe and even the reality of who we are. Through faith in Christ, we are born again (1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 5:1). The old has gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our identity is changed. We have been re-born as spiritual children of God (Galatians 3:26, 1 John 3:1). This is not a mere surface change, as if we had a layer of divine make-up carefully applied to cover our human acne. Rather, the “*image and likeness*” of God that was part of the original DNA of the human race (Genesis 1:26-28) is restored in us, as we are renewed in Christ’s image (Romans 8:29-30).

As God’s adopted children, we have received a new family identity (Ephesians 3:15, 1 Peter 4:16), and all

that we do flows out of that identity. For much of human history, people expected family identity to determine what you did. English family names like Carter, Cooper, Fletcher, Taylor, Smith, Butler, Mason, Wright, Constable, Page, Marshall, Tanner, Cheeseman, Potter and Baker all indicated to children what their parents did. These children did not have to behave in a certain way to become a Constable or a Baker. They grew up knowing that it was who they were.

So, the children of God do not reveal him to the world by following a clever programme, but by acting out who we really are. Having been transformed by new birth, we find that we really do love people, we really do know the truth about God and we really do have his authority. Our big challenge is not to discover the shape of 'my ministry', but to learn to live openly as a child of God. The rest all follows.

### **Walking with the Father**

Jesus had immense authority on earth, but remained really dependent on the Father, hearing from him what he needed to know (John 8:38a, 14:24b). It's the same for his followers. Even in the moment that Jesus told the Twelve that they finally knew everything about his business, he also taught that they could do nothing without him (John 15:15 cf. 15:4). When he later gave them authority to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20), he also told them to wait until they received another divine helper, the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

We can try to achieve God's work through programmes and techniques, but as Corrie ten Boom, who survived the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbrück, observed:

Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you.

## **The Calling**

Our nation is a challenging place for Christians to live, but by the grace of God, we will not only survive here but thrive here. He will bless us so abundantly that we will not only cope with the world, but see it transformed.

Britain's greatest need is not for more money or a more stable government. Neither is it for church programmes and activities. The people of Britain do not need us. They need Jesus.

God has a plan for introducing himself to this nation. It is to encourage and empower his children, the church, really to live like the children of God.

This is a good plan! It brings us peace and joy. It places a high priority on us enjoying an intimate and loving relationship with God. It means that we have brothers and sisters in Christ, providing mutual support. Since people become children of God through a genuine new birth by the Holy Spirit, this church buzzes with newness of life, bursts with fullness of life

and yearns for holiness. When we speak, our mother tongue is the word of God and our prayers are heaven's top priority. In worship, we gaze upon Christ, the first-born head of redeemed humanity, wide-eyed and blinking and open-mouthed. As we reflect upon him, the Light of the World, we come to reflect him more and more, transformed into his image and likeness, so that we cannot but radiate his love in the world, revealing him to others.

Our Father is the father of heaven's lights. He made us in his image. He made us to shine.

### **Questions**

1. "The goal of ministry is not just to bless people but to reveal Jesus". How does this compare to the way you approach helping others?
2. How does the truth of the full humanity of Jesus affect your expectation of becoming like him?