

ABSOLUTION

Samuel J. Mikolaski

Written in 1977 for the proposed *Tyndale Family Bible Encyclopaedia*

It is not clear to me what Tyndale Publishers (IVP), Wheaton, Ill., did with this project.

As commonly understood, absolution derives from the penitential system of the medieval Church and continues today as part of the fourth sacrament of the Eastern and Western Churches, namely, the Sacrament of Penance. This spiritual exercise is best known in its Roman Catholic form; however, it is also part of the Anglican tradition, and of the several Eastern Orthodox Churches. It is thus characteristic of churches which hold the doctrine of the seven sacraments as the principal means of grace.

Penance is administered in three steps: Contrition, Confession, and Satisfaction. Contrition includes repentance, which is due sorrow of mind and detestation for sin with the purpose of turning away from sin. In Confession the repentant person is required to recite all his mortal sins to a priest who, along with prayers, pronounces the remission or forgiveness of sins in the formula of absolution, *I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. Forgiveness entails the prior forgiveness by the penitent of those who trespassed against him. The third step, Satisfaction, is popularly called penance by communicants in our society. It includes prescribed spiritual exercises such as prayers, works of charity, abstinence or other hardship, and reparation for the wrong done to others, including God. The sacrament of penance is urged upon communicants frequently, especially before taking Holy Communion, in seasons of sickness, and at the time of death.

Penance, including Absolution, is intended to herald the grace of God and His free forgiveness. Despite the misunderstanding of not a few inside and outside of the sacramental traditions, the Sacrament of Penance including deeds of satisfaction does not buy forgiveness. Its steps represent due sorrow for sin, confession, forgiveness from God, and restitution for damage done by sinning. Nevertheless it has for some made of confession and forgiveness a form without living faith and has attributed to the Church and its bishops and priests power and authority which have resulted in grotesque abuses of religious sanctions and in theological distortion of free grace. The ultimate error is to suppose that forgiveness is reward for doing this or for not doing that. On the other hand the penitential system can torture the conscience as to whether one has been penitent enough or has done enough. Guilt is the horror of sin. At issue is the soul's peace with God and peace within oneself.

Christians of the non-sacramental traditions have developed a healthier though not uncritical, respect for the penitential system in recent years. It is recognized that thereby an attempt is made to relate the grace of the Gospel to specific sins. Psychologically, confession to another person is recognized as a healthy spiritual catharsis, as some evangelical one-to-one discipling programs are discovering. It is probably here more than anywhere else -- at the point of the soul's spiritual

need of forgiving grace -- that Christians of the sacramental churches are held most strongly to their tradition.

While striving to avoid offense to devout Christians of the sacramental traditions, Christians of the evangelical churches take exception on biblical grounds to focusing penitance and absolution in the hands of episcopally approved clergy.

As important as the Church is in the NT, one's relation to Christ does not depend upon one's relation to the organized Church or clergy. The premise of the Gospel is the truth of the individual soul's free, personal and direct access to God through Christ. He is the only door and the only Mediator (Jn 10:7; 1 Tim. 2:5). His sacrifice for sin is final, complete, and adequate (Heb 10: 1-13). The procurement of free forgiveness is never so stylized in the NT as to demand human priestly mediation, but only believing response of the penitent heart to the loving grace of God (1 Jn 1:8-10). That is the model of the kerugma -- the Apostolic Gospel (Acts 2:38-39; 10:43). Undoubtedly in the NT the forgiven sinner is seen to be a changed person so that restitution follows logically from forgiveness. But the free grace of God is no more attached to the condition of performing spiritual exercises in order to acquire grace than it is restricted to the ministration of episcopally sanctioned priests. Absolution is God's gift to the conscience based upon the faith-response of the penitent sinner who turns to the Lord.

One must not confuse penance with repentance; however, a penitent heart is part of true repentance. True repentance does include confession to God (Lk 18:3) and reparation for wrongs done (Lk 19:8). They are *the fruit that befits repentance*, (Mt 3:8). Confession of sin to a priest or clergyman may be of spiritual value, though widespread abuses have crept into the practice. It may also serve as an escape from biblical confession of sin to one another (which may be more difficult to do, Jas 5:16) and from forgiving one another (Mt 6:12; Lu 17:3).

In the NT, repentance and faith are the two sides of the coin of absolution (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim :25). The biblical language is *repentance to God and ... faith in our Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 20:21). Absolution is certain through the bearing of our sins by Christ on the cross as the central truth of the Christian Gospel (1 Cor 15:3-4; 2 Cor 7:10). Forgiveness and justification include their corollary, peace with God (Rom 5:1), which is the seal of true absolution.

CONVERSION

New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas
Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1974, p. 259-260

CONVERSION. A radical change, a transformation, a turning around. The term applies to non-religious responses to stimuli, or to re-orientation of mental attitudes and behavior, but usually religious conversion is intended. The term does not have a prominent place in the NT, but the idea of conversion is abundantly present in both testaments, particularly with regard to the apostolic preaching of the Gospel through which men are converted to Jesus Christ. Repentance (turning from) and faith (turning to) are usually seen as the two sides of conversion; they figure more prominently in the biblical language.

Conversion is a conscious act of the part of the subject, not an event passively experienced. For the Christian, the changed life of the converted man is the outward expression of a changed heart. Biblical examples are Paul's conversion (Acts 9), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and Zaccheus (Luke 19:210). While conversion is usually thought of in relation to individuals, societies and nations also have been profoundly affected by religious awakenings. These include Israel under Moses' leadership and during Hezekiah's reign, Nineveh as a result of Jonah's preaching, and more recent events like the English revival under John Wesley, and the Welsh revival.

The need of sinful men to be converted is declared by Jesus (Matt. 18:3) and the apostles (Acts 3:19; 15:3). In Acts, conversion is also presented under the figure of the two ways and choosing the Way of the Lord (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; cf. James 5:19,20). The new Way involves a new kind of life (Eph. 5:2; Col. 1:10; 2:10-12). Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a classic which presents conversion as entrance upon the pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

Conversion entails intellectual, emotional, and volitional elements, including a doctrinal relationship to or affirmation of Jesus Christ's lordship, acceptance of His redemptive work, devotion to Him personally, commitment of fellowship to the community of Christians, and the ethical transformation of life.

Many psychological explanations of religious conversion have been attempted. Most of these, following William James, see conversion as conscious unification or reunification of a hither divided self, with a sense of wholeness, being right and happy, resulting. Conversion is thus seen as a profound step in the creation of a self. The biblical language concerning the Prodigal ("he came to himself" KJV) is distinctly parallel. Other explanations include such terms as the integration of personality, new being, freedom, reorientation, and brainwashing. William Sargant's thesis, while interpreted as a critique of brainwashing techniques in religious conversion usually draws attention to the dangers of religious manipulation.

In its biblical sense, conversion is the soul turning to Christ and union with Him

in His death and resurrection, which baptism signifies as entering by faith upon a new life (Rom. 6:1-14).

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DOGMA

Samuel J. Mikolaski

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The earliest uses of the term denote expressed opinion or general assumptions (such as the assumptions of certain early Greek physicians when treating disease). Subsequently the term denoted right or correct opinion. It thus identified the tenets of various classical philosophical schools, and the decrees of public and religious officials (Dan 2:13 LXX; Lk 2:1; Acts 16:4; 17:7; Eph 2:15). Through the development of theology by the Church Fathers the term dogma came chiefly to denote divinely revealed truth as defined and held by the Church. For Christianity, therefore, dogma means the authoritative tenets or principle doctrines of religious belief. When codified these comprise a creed or body of doctrine.

Dogma is said to comprise the intellectual side of Christian faith, and is claimed by some to be a rational necessity. The purpose of dogmatic formulation is to investigate the contents of belief by reason; however, most Christians argue that reason must be enlightened by faith. The terms dogma, doctrine, creed, and theology are closely related. Thus Tactical Theology comprises the ministry side of Christian confession; Historical Theology comprises the study of doctrinal development; and Dogmatic Theology, or Systematic Theology, comprises a systematizing of Christian beliefs. To say that Dogmatic Theology suggests a denominational bias and that Systematic Theology transcends a particular denomination is specious.

Traditionally, European protestant theologians have used the term "Dogmatic Theology" to identify a statement of the theological teaching of the Church. The term has fallen out of use in this century, though Karl Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics* is a recent significant exception. Modern uses of the cognate terms dogmatic, dogmatist and dogmatism have tended to cast an aura of arrogance over the term dogma, though in earlier times they expressed simply positive assertion of Christian beliefs. In Britain and America the terms "Christian Doctrine" or "Systematic Theology" have tended to express what "Dogmatic Theology" expressed in Europe.

Roman Catholic use parallels that of other confessions in that dogma is truth revealed by God; however, there is added the doctrine of the *magisterium*, namely the authoritative and binding teaching role of the Church. The Church is the repository and interpreter of the truth. Thus dogma is a truth of faith or of morals when either formally defined by the Church or proposed to the faithful for belief. As such it is seen to be divinely revealed and handed down from the apostles either in Scripture or tradition. Recent tensions within the Roman Catholic Church especially since Vatican II are due in part to testing this claim on many points. For some the issue is whether the Scriptures alone are the test of dogma, whether this in fact had been the case among the Church Fathers, and whether the Scriptures as

well must test the Church.

Evangelicals generally prefer the terms doctrine and theology to the terms dogma and creed, though there is nothing in the term dogma and its cognates to preclude their use. While properly dogma embodied religious truth which has been given by divine revelation, the danger lies in the claims to definition of dogma by any church or council. That danger is where one argues from foregone conclusions or arrogant opinion which quickly leads to rationalism. For the evangelical Christian, dogmatic or theological formulation always sits on a lower tier of authority while the first tier of authority is reserved for the canonical Scriptures alone.

THE INFILLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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No aspect of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the Christian is capable of greater misunderstanding and distortion than the infilling of the Spirit. Here some Christians charge others with being grossly unspiritual because they do not seek certain experiences. The latter group in turn charges experience-seekers with emotional instability. And the non-Christian world stands back regarding the whole affair with amusement and disdain, and as evidence of fantasy or even madness. What have we to say?

Importance of the Infilling

One of the great promises of God in his creative work was that he would live in and among his people. When the race strayed from God, his work of redemption for them included the fulfilment of his original intention. Throughout the centuries of the Old Testament period, the prophets and poets rhapsodized about this prospect.

They kept alive in the minds of the people the promise of God. Later, Christ instructed his disciples to remain at Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them in fulfilment of this promise on the day of Pentecost.

Beyond the work of making Christ real to the individual at the time of his conversion, the Holy Spirit desires to fill the life of each Christian with himself to guide and instruct, to give victory over sin, and to give power for effective Christian living and serving. We can live for God and serve him only by his own power, not our own. The Holy Spirit gives this power by his infilling.

Examples of the Infilling

The Acts of the Apostles relates the story of the life and power of the early Christian church. Clearly the insight of the church members into the will of God, the quality of their spiritual life, power of witness, endurance of persecution, and zeal for expansion derived from their being filled with the Spirit.

Many impressive events in the record are associated with this infilling of the Spirit. The world was amazed at the power and boldness of the first Christians at Pentecost. Later it was found that persecution worked as fuel to feed the revival fires rather than as a deterrent. Only men filled with the Holy Spirit were chosen for church office, among whom were the seven helpers (Acts 6:3-5), Barnabas, and Paul himself. Indeed, as Paul and Barnabas proceeded on their first missionary journey, it was by the filling of the Holy Spirit that they were enabled to overcome opposition, rejoice in persecution, and win thousands to Christ. It is interesting to notice that when Paul rebuked Elymas the sorcerer, he did it in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:8-11).

Results of the Infilling

One way of understanding the importance of an event or experience is to gauge it by the results which follow. In a peculiar way this is relevant to the Spirit's infilling. The fruit of the Spirit follows the infilling; but the infilling will never be experienced unless this quality of life is sought by the Christian. For example, Paul showed that the Spirit-filled life is possible only in a life lived on a certain high spiritual plane and that the infilling of the Spirit results in certain fruit, or a kind of heavenly Christian character (Gal. 5:22-26). Why this is so will be clearer in my final point, but here note the characteristics of the fruit. It is a living experience of Christ which issues in the following:

1. *Love*, which seeks not its own selfish ends, but the good and blessing of others. The divine love in us always gives rather than demands.
2. *Joy*, that is, Christ's joy; the same joy he experienced the night before Calvary. It is a deep-seated joy of assurance that one is in the center of God's will.
3. *Peace*. First, the peace we have with God through the cross of Christ; second, the peace of God flooding our lives in times like these; and, third, the peace that ought to fill the life of the church. This is Christ's peace given to us by the Holy Spirit.
4. *Long-suffering*, that is, our forbearance of one another as God has been merciful to us. Remember to forgive your brother even to seventy times seven occasions, as our Lord said.
5. *Gentleness*. This is an inner goodness or righteousness of heart that has due regard for the fragility of human personality. An unkind word or deed may strike like a sledge hammer upon the fragile spiritual experience of another Christian.
6. *Goodness*, the kindlier side of an ideal character. One can be right but rigid and harsh. This goodness is the gentler side of righteousness softened by love, which aims to reconcile the erring one.
7. *Faith*, not just dull sentimentality, nor superstition, but an inner conviction of the truth in Jesus Christ and of the certainty of God fulfilling his promises.
8. *Meekness*, or humility; a genuine regard for one's own weaknesses before attempting to judge the weaknesses of someone else.
9. *Temperance*, masterly control, or self-control. Know what you are and know that the power of God can make you what you should be.

Insight into the Infilling

The insight our study leads to can be stated simply. While this insight is important, no one should regard it as all that the infilling means. Also, let us avoid

the comparison of a tap filling a waterpot, because the Holy Spirit is more than a power, he is a person. Our ideas of his ministry ought to run along personal rather than impersonal lines. What I have to say emerges from a combining of Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:22-26; and the first part of John 15.

In the Ephesians passage Paul stressed the volitional aspect. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. This is something that depends in part on our willingness, and the qualities of personality requisite to the infilling make clear why this is so. The analogy is clear: Man is created for freedom, but the drunken man is controlled by a power alien to what a man ought to be; he is acting in a subpersonal way. In contrast, the Christian is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, not in the sense of being possessed by a power alien to human personality, but by the presence of the living God in his life. God alone can fashion human personality into Christ's image.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is related both to our abiding in Christ and in one another. *And the one is as important as the other.* In other words, if one compares the closeness of analogy between the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-26) and what abiding in Christ involves (John 15:1-17), it will be clear that *the filling of the Spirit is related to abiding in Christ and abiding in Christ is related to loving one another.*

The Christian idea of personality is not independence but interdependence, communion, love, and fellowship. Hence Christ's exhortation that if we abide in him we will love one another. If we abide not, our lives are wasted and useful only for burning. It is solemnizing to recall the doctrine of the judgment seat of Christ when works of wood, hay, and stubble will be consumed. Every day, month, or year lived in disobedience to Christ and out of fellowship with his church is good only for burning. How much of your life will remain for glory in the day of Christ?

The secret lies in the doctrine of the Trinity. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three, yet one God, indissolubly united in the mystery of the Godhead, so the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and to one another, as members of one body. Be filled with the Spirit. Confess before God your coldness of heart to Christ and your bitterness of spirit to one another. No one who hates his brother can say he loves God.

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LETTERS TO CHINA

Prepared on request for Christians in China

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China Letter 1

HERITAGE OF A PEOPLE

From Grandfather Mai to his dear, new friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

Our mutual friend Xiao Yang has told me of your warm interest in Christian faith and has asked me to write to you to encourage you in your quest to know God and to expound to you the teachings of the Christian faith. I am glad to do so and hope that this first letter can be the beginning of a correspondence between us which will illuminate for you the golden teachings of Christ.

As Chinese people, who are we? We are the most populous people on earth and are heirs of an ancient and honorable culture. But what is to become of us in a modern world which is driven by technology and business on a global scale?

At the time of the Ch'ing School of Confucian thought three centuries ago, Western ideas were introduced into Chinese society which raised important questions such as: What should be retained from our ancient cultural past, and what should be discarded? What is of enduring value and what is no longer of any use?

We have had to adapt to change many times. I recall how many of our forefathers traveled to hundreds of places on earth seeking a new, more prosperous life, but always carried their culture with them. Some labored in the hot jungles of Indonesia and Burma and Brazil. Others became traders among the islands of the Pacific. Still others traveled to Canada and America to build the railroads. By the way, it was Chinese workers laboring under extremely difficult conditions in the mountains of British Columbia in Canada who discovered jade in the Fraser River Valley and created a whole new industry of jade art in Canada. Many of them traveled to these distant places alone, leaving wife and family behind, but family love and loyalty kept them together in spirit even when separated by thousands of miles, until they could be reunited as families.

Gradually they settled into their own communities in cities such as Vancouver and San Francisco, but clung tenaciously to their ancient traditions while at the same time encouraging their children to be educated and to enter professions such as medicine, engineering, architecture and business.

Today questions are being asked just as they were centuries ago. In a world in which change is happening with electrifying speed, will anything of value from our past be conserved and what is important to conserve? What will happen to our families and children in the face of today's rapid economic and social changes?

While tyranny has afflicted all societies at various stages of their history, including our own, tyranny has not been the deepest undercurrent of our Chinese heritage. To be sure, we have had our share of tyrants -- men and women who believed that society could function properly only by means of despotic control and by the enhancement of their own personal prestige. Myths were added to this such as the theory of the yin and the yang: that the universe is made up of yin forces which are negative, passive and weak, and yang forces which are positive, active and strong. Thus a parallel can be drawn, they said, between cosmic forces and forces within human personality. Tyrants took it as their prerogative to use cruel punishments to suppress that which they deemed to be evil and opposing forces in society, and philosophers urged people generally to subsume the bad forces in their lives to the good forces.

Nevertheless, forms of determinism which link society and human life to fate have not been the most powerful current in the stream of Chinese culture. Ironically, such myths from our past are now becoming popular to some people in the West, including America.

Our Chinese life has had a profoundly practical character which has addressed such questions as what is the ideal way of life, how can we create stability and social order, and how can we express concern for our fellow human beings?

During the Chou dynasty (6th - 5th century B.C.) the early Confucian schools asked how to live in the midst of disorder. They argued that the disintegration of traditional values and standards must be halted by the restoration of such values in personal life and society. They proposed that this could be done by imitating role models who embody moral values.

Scholars of the later Mo Tzu School said that strife was due to inadequate concern for self, family and society and that the remedy was equal concern for everyone, not graded concerns in relation to self-interest.

Then there arose the Taoist School of Chuang Tzu and his successors who said that too many traditions, social conventions and moral regulations were actually against nature and that life should be made free of them. Like some moderns today, they threw off moral norms. They sought personal fulfillment

along with agreeable coexistence with others. But it became quickly apparent then, as it is now, that such a balance of inner forces is impossible to maintain.

At the end of all such discussions there remained the question as to how to become the self we need to be? Later, Buddhist thought from India, at about 600 years after the time of Christ, put forward the premise that every human being has inside himself or herself a pure Buddha nature which becomes defiled by wrong thoughts and desires, which defilement results in pain and suffering. The goal of life, they said, is to eliminate such thoughts and desires. But the later Confucians pointed out that such absorption with the self resulted in neglect of family ties, social obligations and community responsibilities.

In light of these things, two matters ought to become clear to us: First, absorption with the self is something we Chinese instinctively react against if by this is meant becoming indifferent to others. And, second, how one gets the enablement to imitate the good when, as the Apostle Paul said, we often know the good but do that which is evil (*Romans* 6:15-20). If God has implanted in us aspiration to high ideals, why do we fail so badly in achieving them? How can we become what we ought to be? So often, our Chinese heritage has aspired to high ideals, but how can we achieve them?

It is ironic that at present we are being driven back by the realities of our changing modern life to questions of ideals, morality and community. The practicalities of our Chinese heritage have again overridden ideologies which attack the values of personhood and of one's identity within a recognizable community.

Some might call this a return to the clan, that is, to the ideal of a family or of several families which trace their descent to a common ancestor and family name. This has traditionally been our cultural strength, and it is now being utilized within our own country and globally by our people for economic ends. It is a fascinating phenomenon. Will it, and can it, succeed?

We Chinese are now in the process of making the traditional family into modern corporations. This is becoming something radically different from the corporations of Western society. The current trend has a distinctly Chinese cultural flavor. While on the surface they are described as socialist market ventures, in reality at bottom they are adaptations of clan enterprise. Can they, as is intended, create the ideal community for the modern world?

When authoritarianism finally breaks down, tradition again asserts itself. Our old ways always were to work with people we could trust. And we could trust them because we were family. We knew them and they knew us. They and we both came from our own village and district. They and we spoke the same dialect with the same vocabulary. We inter-married, which made the ties of community and family in business and community administration even stronger.

But how does one extend this household and community relationships

model into modern national and multi-national ventures? There are only so many family members available to trust and hire, and only so many marriages one can enter into. How can one bring in outsiders and develop the same basis of trust and group loyalty, because in the final analysis success in family, in business and in community administration rests on trust not on legal contract? Can such trust be created if hearts and minds are not purified and bent toward one another?

The Chinese ideal of the trusting household is truly marvelous. How does one achieve it? This vital issue is addressed in Christian faith. How does one come to a renewal of human nature, a nature which has been defiled (as our forefathers recognized) by distorting thoughts and desires? And to what end? Surely not simply to burnish the image of our ego, but to be our true self -- our God-intended self -- in relation to a community. The Apostle Paul calls this the household of faith. How marvelously parallel this is to the familial ideal we in our Chinese culture have cherished, but with a difference: the difference is God's help by his Spirit to become new people. You cannot have a good society without people who are spiritually renewed in their hearts.

This is how the Christian faith made its impact in the days of the Apostles and in the times which immediately followed them.

It is a fair question to ask, how did a group of people from an obscure province of the Roman Empire eventually transform the ancient world. The answer is by the power of a divinely-enabled, transforming, moral and spiritual ideal.

Of course there were many economic, religious and social elements which became factors in the spread of Christian faith. In the days of the Apostles religious life in the Roman Empire was cultic, impersonal and ritualistic. Conversions from one cult to another were common. An almost universally expressed theme and desire was to experience a new energized self to displace one's ordinary social identity, just like people's search for identity today which, we find, can occur only within the context of primary personal relationship groups. Just as today there was developing then a strong, growing, new, mobile, meritorious business class. And there were many poor people with desperate needs. There were also many associations for people to belong to as they sought their own identity in society. But, most important of all, there was the household structure. Examples in the New Testament include those of Cornelius (*Acts* 10), Lydia the seller of purple (*Acts* 16:14-15), Simon the tanner (*Acts* 10:6), and Philemon (*Philemon* 2). The household was the key-feature social institution within which personal worth was affirmed, within which relations were initially formed, and from which primary personal relationships extended into the community at large. This was especially the case during times of social and political unrest which threatened social disintegration. Households not only created family loyalty and called for reciprocal response, they also involved social, community and economic interdependence.

The changing face of business in the modern world is now focusing

attention on the traditional Chinese clan or household system as an economic model in a new way. The power of this tradition has tended historically to transcend changing governmental systems. This is a remarkable, but historically unsurprising, shift in social and economic practice.

During the times of the first Christians competing ideas as to the nature and worth of human beings were as vigorously debated as they are today. Then, as now, the intellectual traditions tended to denigrate the physical world as of no importance (Christians know that it is the handiwork of God) but, most important, their teachings were inimical to discrete full-blown personhood and the value of each individual person. Human beings were reduced to a transient epiphenomenon whose problems would soon be cured by death or re-absorption into some infinite, transcendent, impersonal reality. Determinism and fatalism ruled the day.

Christian teaching about human nature and the worth of individual persons is radically different. The Bible teaches that the world was created directly by God. The world, responsibility, evil and sin are not reducible to other terms. Human life is the art of the Creator and individual persons are not only the goal of redemption but are, as well, the highest level of reality.

Christianity became an attractive alternative because it conserved persons as created in the image of God who have been made for intimate familial relationships. In an age of brutality and high inflation, Christians cared about people. The Christian households had a powerful sense of community. Indeed, each household which became an extended Christian fellowship was a drastic social experiment, a cave of Adullum as when many strangers joined David and became an extended family. Emotional and social security were to be found within the Christian households. Their ethical standards were high, their devotion to the one true God was deep and abiding, and the standards of their discipleship were life-encompassing. Converts were carefully instructed, confession of faith was public, rejection of evil behavior, demonology and cultic practices was total. The power and vigor of such dedication must be seen in relation to their understanding of who God is, what the world as God's creation is, what true morality is, and what the infinite value of human beings is in view of their having been created in the image of God.

Christians throughout the Roman world became a household of faith. Within the Christian community there were no strangers. St. Paul speaks of this in Galatians 6:10 when he says, *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.* This means an expression of behavior which is consistent with being a part of the household of God (1 Timothy 3:15). In this household of faith one finds his or her personal worth affirmed within the context of proper moral relations. Here high ideals such as decency, frugality, diligence and industry all have a recognized place. Whether slaves or freedmen these early Christians had a common life in Christ.

None of the ideologies of the past could create the society humans

hungered for, not materialism, utilitarianism, ritualism, self-sufficiency or hedonist gratification of desire. The central question is, how does one become a virtuous person who functions in relation to the ideals of sincere, reciprocal, unexploiting love? In short, how do finite, sin-prone, selfish human beings create or develop or acquire a moral foundation for life and for the community? The Christian Gospel declares that the only security for pure and loving relationships, including the security of the household, of friendship, and of the community, is shared faith in God. This is what Christ has brought to us and this is what creates the loving relationships of a true household.

In earliest Christian times the household of faith embraced the highest ideals of family and community. The Christian communities provided a homogenous and stable set of relationships to any traveling or migrating Christian stranger. He had an identity anywhere in the Empire and was welcomed; he could worship the same one true God, he was offered hospitality and was cared for when ill. A new world *koinonia* (fellowship) and *oikonomia* (household) had been created within the framework of the existing *politeia* (social order).

Consider carefully that the family, household and community ideals of our culture may well be the divinely prepared ground for the planting of the Christian Gospel.

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China Letter 2

MESSAGE FROM ON HIGH

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

Since my first letter to you we have had the opportunity to meet. How delightful our walk along the river was. The day was bright and sunny. The birds twittered in the bushes along the bank while ducks darted here and there among the reeds. Among the questions you raised, I recall one which seemed to trouble you most: What do we know and what can we be sure of, not only generally, but also religiously? After centuries of stability in our Chinese society so much has changed. We wonder whether old certainties have been undermined by perspectives which are leading us to we know not what. I've thought a great deal about your anxieties. Allow me to share my thoughts with you more fully.

Our Chinese heritage has had a distinctly practical character, a character which responded with quick satire to high-flown ideas which had little bearing on day-to-day living. To be sure, we aspired to high social ideals, we longed for a stable societal order and, most of all, we believed that concern for our own should be reflected in our behavior and goals.

We have also been a people given to reflection. A powerful literary tradition pervades our heritage. We have valued the fruits of scholarship and the creative arts. We've reflected on the use of language and the framing of correct doctrines. We have pondered the nature of the cosmic order, our place within it,

and the purpose of life. Modern understanding of the nature of things has helped to rid us of some of the worst superstitions such as astrology which erroneously claims that our lives are tied inexorably to the fixed cycles of the stars.

But if modern science delivers us from ancient cosmological myths, what are we left with? And where does Christian faith lead in our quest to understand the nature of the world around us and the purpose of life itself?

First, do you remember that as we stood at the river bank I took a stick and thrust half its length into the water, just as the philosopher Plato did centuries before the time of Christ? This illustrates the probability that unless we reflect carefully our senses can deceive us as to what is actually the truth of a situation. To the eye the stick seemed to be bent at the water-line, but when I ran my finger down the stick and into the water the sense of touch confirmed that the stick was whole, not broken at the water-line.

Now this should not lead us into the error, as Hindu teaching does, that the sensory world is unreal and an illusion. The cure for those who think the world around us is an illusion is simply to say to them, "kick a rock." That is proof enough. Nevertheless, we wonder, "How well have we grasped the nature of things and the purpose of our lives?" We sometimes feel as if we're looking at life which appears to be like a Chinese painting of a landscape: the hills fold away into the mists and we wonder what is beyond, in the mist.

Nor have we been content with the views of those who preach deliverance from the ambiguities of this life by means of the flight of the soul to fusion with a transcendental perfect reality. We know well enough that we have too much baggage to carry for such a flight. There is too much imperfection in us to think that we can break loose from earthly defects. Our love and our aspirations are too imperfect.

Others have asked, "Why can't we by pure reason and sheer act of the will escape from the errors which entangle us?" But our predisposition to look at things in certain ways distorts the data and ingrains error. Such assumptions appear to be necessary to the formation of knowledge. There can be no new discovery with a prior theory or dogmatic frame of reference. There is no such thing as unprejudiced observation. Learning in the sense of acquiring new knowledge entails the questioning of settled expectations by a process of checking in which data are handled in fresh ways. New knowledge depends upon the interplay between categories and evidence, of seeking to eliminate error by means of the significance of data not previously so construed. The quest for truth should be that our categories state the nature of reality, or approximate it, as closely to that which is the nature of the case as possible.

For example, if the model we adopt is the materialistic one, then everything we think about will be forced into a pattern of reality which is totally mindless. If we adopt a polytheistic model, there follow the irrationalities of competing gods.

Take the case of Materialism, which has been much promoted in modern times. In Materialism freedom, and hence moral responsibility to an objective moral standard, are illusions. Can there be a problem of evil if whatever is is and there exist no objective values to distinguish between good and evil?

Today in a new way the Materialist model is being called into question. Is it the case that only atoms in space exist? The materialistic notion of the mind, that "you are the neurons," is now being seriously re-thought. Attention is being given in a fresh way to the truth that personal identity (the self, or the mind) cannot be reduced simply to physical functions of the brain. Such a model, it is argued, skews the truth about ourselves and the real world around us.

Are we willing to re-think our predispositions? Jacob had to do just that. He had run away from his father's house because he feared for his life after deceiving his brother. In the wilderness God appeared to him. Jacob was amazed. His question in *Genesis 23:16* amounts to, *What is God doing here? He is supposed to be back in my father's house.* Jacob had to change his assumptions about God. He was beginning to learn that God is everywhere present and is not restricted to a particular place. This was also the lesson the woman at the well had to learn (*John 4:20-24*).

Christians have some important things to say about all of these things. First and foremost is that God who made us has not left us to wander in the distortions of our perceiving and thinking. God has made himself and the truth about himself known to us. In Christian teaching God's purposes are inconsistent with metaphysical determinism. Central to this teaching is that God is personal and that he has created us as persons to share his fellowship and work.

However, this knowledge is not in the manner of "stop-gap" knowledge. It is not knowledge of God which fills in gaps which other kinds of explanations miss. Rather, it is the understanding that God is the Lord of the entire creation, the author of life, and that, viewed with understanding, the world yields insights as to God's greatness and power. God in his creative power is the backdrop to the entire creation, at every given moment and in every extended place of its existence. It is within this context that God has acted to speak through his prophets and, finally, in the person of his own incarnate son, Jesus Christ.

Less than a century after the death of the last apostle, a philosopher at Athens called Athenagoras, himself a convert to Christian faith, wrote that when one enquires about first principles of the universe all philosophers before him, even if unwillingly, were in agreement as to the unity of God. We affirm, he added, that *he who arranged this universe is God.* We adore him, he says, who gives the order, harmony, greatness, color, form and arrangement of the world. Such understanding is in a new way informing modern dialogue about the nature of our world.

Earlier, at the founding of the Christian faith, the apostle Paul declares

these same truths. He says that in light of the moral nature God has given to us we ought to recognize and respond to goodness and truth. The greatness of God is apparent in all his works (*Romans 1:19-20*). Paul says, *What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made, so that they are without excuse.* The created order attests to the wisdom of God. He is the giver of life and the sustainer of all things.

This is foundational to a Christian's understanding of the nature of the world and to understanding the manner of God's speaking to us. The key feature of biblical teaching is the truth that God who created all things has made himself known in human history. This is the footing for faith in God, in his providence and in his purposes, not a kind of faith which seeks to fashion the world into our own image, such as I have earlier described.

Jesus frequently spoke of this, especially when he rebuked those who demanded signs. An evil generation seeks signs, he said (*Luke 11:29*). Men claim to be able to predict tomorrow's weather, he said, but they are not wise enough to read the signs of the times (*Matthew 16:3*). He added that false leaders could deceive by signs (*Mark 13:22*).

Rather, Jesus said, no sign will be given save the sign of Jonah the prophet (*Matthew 12:39; 16:4*). What did he mean? He meant that seeking a sign is in reality a diversion from the main point. While such a demand purports to be seeking the truth, in reality it ignores that which is obvious. Our forefathers knew this well enough. They understood that the wrong is in us and that this wrong must be dealt with. The sign is that Jonah preached to the conscience and men repented (*Matthew 12:41*). If Jesus Christ the greater one is here today why do we demand magic? The truth of God in the righteousness of Christ is its own vindication.

Thus the Bible addresses the core issues of our nature and condition. God uses language -- the message of his own prophets and apostles -- to convey the truth about himself to us. God has acted in history to save his people and he has inspired men and women to comprehend the significance of those events. God gives his word -- his truth -- to us. Language and truth and history all belong together. The Bible tells us what was going on in the things that were happening and what the truth is about ourselves today. Thus the meaning of the attack of Nebuchadnezzar on Jerusalem is declared to be truly the judgment of God against a rebellious people. And the crucifixion of Christ is more than an unfortunate event. The meaning of these events addresses the realities and truth of our human condition. That person is wise who listens to the Scriptures.

Augustine is a splendid example of the change of understanding which accompanies Christian conversion. He lived about 1500 years ago in Italy where he was a renowned Professor of the Humanities. His mother was a Christian who had tried to rear him in the Christian faith but as a young man he had rebelled. He

then embarked on a winding intellectual pilgrimage.

Augustine quickly found that while many religions and philosophies professed revulsion from the physical world, they in fact furnished a rationale to justify yielding to carnal desires. He complains that they made it too easy to escape responsibility by attributing one's carnal impulses to powers of darkness. He points out that to hold evil to be an ineradicable inherent force in the natural order is too self-serving: the inconsistency of professed shame of being in the body while at the same time justifying its weaknesses and excesses in behavior.

Such views also failed to resonate with the beauty of the world as the handiwork of God. Augustine gradually realized that views which build permanent good-evil polarity into the nature of reality comprise a pseudo-intellectualism which, while they purport to honor the Light-world, in reality concede impotence in the face of Dark-world powers which in reality were human moral failure.

For Augustine conversion involved a change of understanding as well as spiritual conversion to Christ. God is Spirit and is personal. God is the creator of the world and is its sustainer. Evil originates in sin. Salvation is more than illumination, it is redemption accomplished by God through grace and the Cross. This model, this frame of reference, embraces persons as the ultimate nature of reality. Sin, responsibility, grace, the Redeemer, atonement, the people of God comprise the major elements of this understanding. Augustine arrived at this conclusion not simply by speculation or reason but by reflecting upon the divine revelation given through the prophets and in Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God.

The apostle Paul sums all of this up in the phrase, *in accordance with the Scriptures* (1 *Corinthians* 15:3). He means that the Scriptures are divinely inspired. He says, *every Scripture is God-breathed and is therefore profitable* (2 *Timothy* 3:16), which truth Peter confirms (2 *Peter* 1:19-21). Our Lord himself declared that the Scriptures are unfailing (*John* 10:34-35). Inspiration sets the books of the Bible apart from all other literature as God's word. But confessionally, submission to Scripture is a mind-set which reflects acceptance of the concept that through inspiration God has given us his truth and that we are prepared to put ourselves under the Scriptures.

We Chinese understand the value of a text. Texts conserve. They embody and comprise reservoirs of truth. They become norms. And that is the role of the Scriptures, but in a far greater way than the glories of our literary heritage.

Take, for example, the most crucial event recorded in the Bible, namely the crucifixion of Christ. What was the meaning of this event? Consider how perceptions had to be changed. The essential reality of the Cross was not the petty judicial juggling of Pilate the Roman Governor before whom Jesus was brought. Nor was it merely a day's work for soldiers who had yet another malefactor to crucify. Neither was it just a spectacle for the jeering crowd, nor the tragic end to

a messianic fantasy which the disciples had entertained. What in fact was the Cross? What was it really? It was God's redemptive act that by the sacrificial death of his son men and women should find forgiveness, new life, peace with God and peace within. How do we know this? We know it because with the vindication that the resurrection of Christ brought, the apostles finally saw the truth of what had been going on in those events in light of what Jesus had said to them. The Bible is the faithful repository of these truths. It is God's inspired word.

From earliest Christian times two important concepts have driven Christians in their study of the Bible. These are the concepts of preparation and prefiguration, leading to fulfillment in Christ's coming and saving work.

First, throughout history as recorded in the Old Testament God was preparing the way for Christ's coming. The Old Testament, says Paul, is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

Second, the concept of prefiguration highlights the coherence of the old and the new. It stresses the tying together of all that God has been doing in the past. Nothing is irrelevant. God has been carrying out his purposes. The goals of his working have been redemption and the new life in Christ.

Throughout our history we Chinese have reflected often and deeply on the meaning and purpose of life. What a word we now have: that God the creator of all things has spoken and that his speaking is for us also, as it is for all of humanity. The word from on high has come.

My dear En Guang and Xiao Qing, consider these things in the light of what the writer of *Hebrews* (1:1-4; 2:1) has to say, *In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by the word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. ... Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*

I send this with my warm greetings.

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China Letter 3

THE MOST HIGH GOD

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

Do you recall that in my first letter to you I pointed out that the intellectual side of our Chinese heritage was more concerned with how to live day to day than with metaphysical speculation? Our interests have been practical. We have

fostered family loyalty and social stability as the best ways to enhance the best interests of our people.

Nevertheless, these concerns led to philosophical speculation and myths of many different kinds.

For example, the brevity of life in the past and deep filial piety led us into Ancestor Worship. Was this due to a belief that in the afterlife the souls of the departed are spirits among the many gods which populate nature, including the sun, moon, mountains and rivers? Or, did this belief simply originate in deep familial ties of love and respect? Nevertheless, this too became mixed with uncertainty because some forms of death were deemed to be of demonic origin and such spirits were feared. In most cases we revere parents we deeply love. However, if some parents terrorized their children in life how does one rid oneself of fear of them after their death? Reverence becomes mixed with fear and worship becomes a device to placate malevolent forces.

It is inaccurate to say that our Confucian past fundamentally was not concerned with religion but with human moral conduct and social relations. All sorts of religious ideas and religious rituals were absorbed into our life. This points to the truth of our ancient proverb that *China is a sea that salts every stream that flows into it*.

There has developed among us a tradition which some regard with admiration as civilized and urbane: the theory and practice of the Three Religions (*San Chiao*). First, there is *Ju Chiao*, the religion of Confucius -- the religion of the learned. Second, there is *Tao Chiao*, the religion of *Tao* -- the religion of the Way. Third, there is *Fo Chiao*, the religion of Buddha -- the religion of enlightenment. Intellectually it was customary to adhere to one and reject the others (often as a mark of ancestral loyalty). But as a civilized person one could just as well lend patronage to them all. To some they represented indispensable sides of the triangle of life: Confucian thought concerned the ethical and intellectual side of Chinese life. Taoist thought concerned the mystical and idealistic side of life. Buddhist thought concerned the artistic and philosophical side of life.

What attitude should Christians take to our national religious heritage? An incident in the Apostle Paul's life gives us an important guideline. On one of his preaching missions Paul visited Athens, which was the philosophical and cultural capital of the ancient world (*Acts* 17:16-32). He observed that there were idols displayed everywhere on the streets of the city. These reflected the deeply felt religious sentiments of the Athenians. When he engaged people in conversation in the marketplace he was challenged by the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. They brought him before what appears to have been a quasi-judicial hearing to ascertain what he had to say. Was he a preacher of foreign deities?

Paul began his statement with a compliment: I see, he said, that you Athenians are very religious. Well and good. Indeed, you are so concerned to

honor the gods that you have inscribed one idol to the Unknown God, just in case you've missed him. However, God is not many but one. He is neither restricted to shrines nor importuned by ritual. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He is the author of life. He is the creator of all mankind (what a rebuke to racism and prejudice which is so common today, of others against us and of ourselves against one another). But, said Paul, God is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, *even as some of your own poets have said*.

Consider this: Paul is saying that even the Athenian's own ancient non-Christian poets raised questions about the concept of many gods. One thinks of the philosopher Plato whose teacher Socrates was a near contemporary of Confucius, who satirized human foibles attributed to the gods: that gods war with gods, that they plot against one another, that they take revenge, that they commit immoral acts, that they can be bribed. Plato goes on to argue that gods to be gods are unchangeable in their perfection, they cannot lie, and they cannot commit shameful deeds. Such things, said Plato, are impieties. We cannot attribute the base elements of our civic politics to spirits and then worship them. Our souls need a refuge in something higher and purer. Has this aspiration not haunted our culture as well?

The early Christians honored devotion but questioned myths. Scarcely sixty years after the death of the last apostle, Justin Martyr wrote a defense of Christian faith (in approximately 155 A.D.). He concludes with this plea to the Roman authorities: *if what we say seems to you reasonable and true, treat it with respect -- if it seems foolish to you, then despise us as foolish creatures and do not decree the death penalty, as against enemies, for those who do no wrong*.

Less than twenty-five years later, the Athenian philosopher Athenagoras, himself a Christian convert, also wrote a defense of Christian faith. As to the charge that Christians are atheists because they deny the gods (spirits) he says that Christians distinguish God from all material objects and that they have ample reason to adore God as the author of order, harmony, greatness, color, form, and arrangement in the world. He says, *our teaching affirms one God who made the universe, being himself uncreated ... and who made all things through his Word*. He goes on to cite the ancient philosophers who criticized the irrationality of many gods: *God is uncreated, impassible, and indivisible. He does not, therefore, consist of parts*.

Ponder what is of value from our own past in light of the true knowledge of God. I refer to four elements of our heritage: the ancient doctrine of Divine Providence, the idea of Secondary Spirits, the concept of Ancestor Worship, and the tradition of Imperial Sacrifice.

First, like the Athenians whom Paul met, we have deeply embedded within our most ancient traditions the concept of one supreme deity, *Shang Ti*, who created and governs the universe righteously and who demands righteousness from us; that is, from those in whom he has implanted moral responsibility. He is the Lord, the Ancestor, the true Parent of all things. This is the message of Paul at

Athens: God who made us is not far from us, but is at hand. Can we not argue that a form of true monotheism is part of our earliest heritage, and is this not something we should give heed to? Is it not time to revive this ancient understanding which appears to have been modified in our traditions into a hard-faced concept of Heaven, or impersonal Providence, or Fate? How refreshing to hear Paul speak of God the Creator not as the god of inexorable Fate but as the God of love and grace in Jesus Christ who personally cares for us.

Second, regrettably our heritage moved in a different direction, that of multiplying myths about Secondary Spirits, lower orders of beings, as against the early insight of the reality of a Supreme Being. The uncertainties of life impelled us to attribute good and evil elements to Secondary Spirits while forgetting that the Creator of all is Lord of all. Thus we developed concepts of good spirits (*shen*) and bad spirits (*kuei*) and associated them with powers of nature such as rivers and waterfalls, clouds and storms and rain, and unusual events in nature. Primarily we related spirits to the cycles of the seasons and to the seasons of life. We worshipped gods of the soil in the shrines of our fields and of the powers of life, not the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

Third, the most striking way in which we honored the world of spirits is through Ancestor Worship. This reflects our intuitive belief in life after death. And well it might, for we shall all stand before the Creator of all.

It may be true, and if so it is strangely ironic, that Ancestor Worship may have originated in our early concept of the transcendent Primal Ancestor, which concept has been transmogrified into worship of our earthly progenitors.

In any event, Ancestor Worship has been the foundation of our social and religious institutions. Above all else this has withstood change from Western influences. Upon this is deemed to rest the continuance and prosperity of one's family, of one's connection with the past and hope for immortality in one's progeny in the future.

Honoring the Tablet, the *Shen Wei*, which is the Seat of the Spirits, on which are usually inscribed the names of three previous generations is recognition of the spirits of the deceased. While the flesh and bones disintegrate in the earth, the Spirit is said to reside in the Tablet.

Christians honor the memory and heritage of the dead, but the worship belongs to God, the Father of Spirits. In the book of *Hebrews* (especially chapter 11) heroes of faith are memorialized, but their deposit on the tablet of faith comprises the written Word of God, which is a word of life, not simply a memorial to the dead.

If, as is proper, worship of the true and living God must displace Ancestor Worship among us, nevertheless our ancient custom teaches us the values of filial piety and thankfulness for our past, and reinforces the commitment all Christians ought to have to one another within the household of faith. Filial piety should be

stronger within the household of faith, not weaker, if we profess to be followers of Christ. Sincere reverence for one's tradition ought to be honored, but empty formality is of no use.

Finally, there was in our culture the tradition of the Imperial Sacrifice. While this has been done away with as a national ritual, it is striking to recall two of its key features. First, the ritual was intended as an act of homage to Shang Ti, the Supreme Ancestor, and as an act of dependence upon a Supreme Power (it is noteworthy that worship of ancestors took place only at a side altar). There was no image to represent the Supreme Ruler. Second, no priestcraft was involved. It was a simple act of homage to the great Spirit of Heaven, without ostentation. And if later changes were made in the ritual and prayers, the early concept of the Spiritual Sovereign of all things is striking.

It is in relation to such instincts that the Apostle Paul speaks of God the Creator who gives life and breath to everything, who providentially oversees the affairs of nations and, most of all, who has done all these things as indicators of his reality and personal presence, so that *they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him, and find him* (Acts 17:25-27). But, as I have said before, Paul adds that God is not far from any one of us.

This is the knowledge of God which the Christian Gospel proclaims. What is entailed? Who is God? How is he truly known? Paul declares that God is not what men and women imagine. He has made himself known. That is what we must now grasp firmly.

The core theme of the Bible is that God has made himself known specifically. It is true that as Creator there is evidence of his handiwork in the created order as Athenagoras said. The Psalmist expressed this succinctly, *the heavens are telling the glory of God* (Psalm 19:1). Nevertheless, God has disclosed himself and the truth about himself specifically. This disclosure is historical. It is concrete and particular. It is here and now, there and then. It is to these men (such as Abraham or Isaiah) and through them that the revelation about God comes down to us all. We have spiritual ancestors who are vital to the truth of the Christian faith.

To know God truly begins with a process of falsification which is accompanied by aspiration for truth. It begins with skepticism that our former notions about the gods or the nature of the divine are misguided. It moves, by God's providence, to awareness that God is an inevitable and necessary part of our existence. This is a core conviction within our ancestry and is the substance of what Paul says that *in him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28). We must first get past perspectival errors that God is many not one, and that the divine is impersonal not personal. Only then will cure for error of detail follow.

In the Bible cure for perspectival error comes through willingness to hear testimony: the testimony of those like Abraham and Isaiah that God has spoken to them and that he is holy and righteous, gracious and loving. Is there recognition

on our part of the truth of this testimony, or are we so vain as to demand dramatic signs to gratify our vanity?

Even at this point God shows his great magnanimity. His self-disclosure in the centuries of Old Testament history finds fulfillment of its promises in Jesus Christ. That is the climax toward which everything moved and is the hinge of history. Paul is saying in *Acts* 17 that God, already self-revealed, has called us to a news conference to present his eternal Son personally. God's self-disclosures in the past were concrete and particular, but never so much as in the incarnation of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem.

Throughout history God has declared and identified himself by his own name. This speaks to God's identity and to his personal nature (*Deuteronomy* 28:58; 32:3; *Psalms* 8:9). His name is not our invention but his own disclosure. He is God Almighty, the transcendent Father of creation (*Genesis* 14:18; 17:1). He is the Lord, the one who covenants in grace to sustain and redeem his people. This is the meaning of *I am who I am* (*Exodus* 3:14): *I, who have been with you in the past will be with you into your future.*

These two themes, God Almighty and the God of the Covenant, combine in the truth that God who is almighty and eternal is ever in our present. The might of the Creator is harnessed to the work of providence and redemption. Consider these themes in the song of praise which Isaiah sings. I cite several sentences from chapter 43:

*That you may know and believe me, and understand that I am He.
Before me no God was formed
nor shall there be any after me.
I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior
I am God, and also henceforth I am he,
there is none who can deliver from my hand,
says your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel
I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins.
Put me in remembrance...*

It is remarkable how our Chinese concept of ancestry fits with the biblical concept of Fatherhood. After all, the name Father is the summation of all that is intended by the truths that God is Almighty and that he is the God of the Covenant of grace. God is our true Ancestor. He alone is worthy of our worship and praise. He is the great Progenitor. His name is holy and should be inscribed on the tablets of our hearts -- the *Shen Wei* -- the place where God by his Spirit makes his home. Thus Jesus declares to us that God is Spirit, which means that God is personal and addresses us personally (*John* 4:24). This calls for reciprocal recognition on our part. That recognition will be complete only when we come directly into God's presence (*1 Corinthians* 13:12). All of this is put by Jesus into the meaning of God's name when he taught us to pray, *hallowed be thy name* (*Matthew* 6:9).

How wonderful is the filial language of the Bible. It ought to make every heart in China jump with joy. We can sense that the ancient Old Testament teaching is the backdrop for the full-orbed New Testament teaching about God's Fatherhood, including creation and redemption, as this is revealed in Jesus Christ (*1 Corinthians* 8:6). This is the message of love: that we are God's offspring (*Acts* 17:29, *Ephesians* 3:15, *Hebrews* 12:9). Our ancestry is a redeeming Fatherhood which brings us into God's household of faith.

Let me emphasize again: the Scriptures give to us specific information about God, which information cuts a swath through the myths of the past to a true understanding of ancestry and filial obligation. The Scriptures are the canon of truth from God and about God. This means that they are the measure of what it means to truly know God.

Meditate upon the experiences of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and Isaiah, to mention but a few. All of these experienced God in specific, finite situations. Then consider how these relate to your own spiritual experiences. Keep in mind especially the place Christ has in our knowledge of God.

The experience of God occurs within the context of wonder -- wonder that is sharp and disturbing, which is in contrast to the noise of ritual intended to attract the attention of the gods. God is experienced immediately. The conviction of God's reality comes as one leap of thought. That was Paul's appeal to the Athenians on Mars Hill in *Acts* 17. In the Bible the situations in which God is experienced are not occasions to ritually wheedle God, nor are such experiences used to prove the existence of God. Rather, God is the inescapable ground of the experience and of the world. Such awareness of God and walk with God is the major theme of the *Psalms*.

The wonder in which God speaks is different from our traditional sense of religious fear or awe of unknown spirits. The wonder of which the Bible speaks is mixed with joy, the joy of recognizing that the God of the universe is present as the God of grace and love. This wonder reinforces moments of special spiritual awareness. Wonder does not numb the mind; it sharpens the mind. There is heightened self-awareness so that we cry from the heart, *Speak Lord, for thy servant hears*.

God speaks to us in stillness. The Psalmist says (46:10) *be still and know that I am God*, and *be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him* (37:7). As Elijah sulked in the wilderness God was not in the storm as a sign, but in the still small voice (*1 Kings* 19:12). And God is experienced as personal from the start. It means that God cannot be identified with any feeling, creature or object, including developing nature. God comes to us quietly, insistently, convincingly. He addresses us in our hearts and consciences. He is, as Paul says, not far from any one of us.

While God has spoken in many and varied ways (*Hebrews* 1:1-2), in the

end as promised he has spoken to us in his eternal Son. The course of all the historical disclosures leads finally to Jesus Christ. Who and what Jesus Christ is, is who and what God is.

It is at this point that the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel and the Christian faith is most clearly evident: God is personal and has personally revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

The genesis of this divine act is God's love. The intention is to disclose his righteousness in the way in which God redeems. Thus the Gospel presents to us a marvelous correlation of love and holiness. Love is linked to the truth that God is personal. Holiness is linked to the truth that God is the Holy One, and is not merely abstract righteousness.

Let us first examine the truth which the apostle John declares (*1 John* 4:8,16) that *God is love*.

Christians have become so accustomed to this fundamental truth that they are unaware how improbable it appeared to ancient philosophers, and how improbable it appears to some today.

As well, note that the truth that God is love coheres with the doctrine of the Trinity. What would love mean to an impersonal being, or to a unipersonal being? Most philosophical notions about the divine nature attempt either to deconstruct or to demythologize the idea that God is love.

The difficulties of love being part of the divine nature in a unipersonal or non-personal conception of God may be illustrated from the ancient past, which was also the period of the formation of our ancient Chinese philosophy. The philosopher Plato (who lived at about 400 B.C.) was at pains to speak of love as a sort of noble madness, and that since God's nature is perfectly simple and unchangeable it would be unthinkable, he said, to attribute love to God. Similarly, Aristotle divorces the possibility of motion or emotion from God. God is the Unmoved Mover. He is impassible, which Aristotle defined in such a way as to make love impossible to God. These definitions assume a non-personal or, as some do today, a trans-personal understanding of the divine nature. They are a far cry from biblical teaching that God acts in creation, that he acts in providence and redemption, and that he is not only loving but that in regard to his essential nature he is love.

In view of the foregoing, let us briefly look at the options which have been proposed in an attempt to define love and to detach it from a deity who is assumed to be impersonal and abstract. I cite three.

First, the idea has been put forward that love is God's way to the world ontologically. Don't let this last difficult word trouble you. It means that, as the ancient Gnostics argued, one could protect the impassibility of God by conjecturing that an overflow of the divine perfections produced the cosmic order.

This holds that the universe is not the direct creation of an impassible divine principle. Rather, the universe emanated from the primordial divine principle in a descending order of reality and imperfection. Love or desire enters into the picture only well down the scale in a material, evil-infected world, thus cannot be attributed to God.

Second, some have advanced the idea that love is the world's way to God. Love is in us, not in God. This was Plato's understanding and is the teaching of some today who see God as non-personal or trans-personal divine principle. Love is in us as aspiration of the soul to union with the divine perfection through ecstatic flight. Love is the drive which seeks to reunite us with the infinite, away from our material individualism and failures.

Third, others have argued that love is humanity's way to itself. On this psychological view there is no God out there who loves us. Rather, love is a function of the highest personal relationships, or of feeling good about oneself. God is defined as an aspect of the human psyche. God becomes a function of human nature and of human relationships. Some modern writers who hold this view define *God is love* to mean *I feel loved* or *I feel good about myself*.

None of these foregoing options squares with biblical teaching about the love of God.

In the Old Testament, far from God's being stern and unloving, he is declared to be the God of grace and comfort. The terms lovingkindness, mercy, graciousness, faithfulness, and many others, are frequently applied to God -- all of them in personal terms.

Nevertheless, it is in the New Testament that the doctrine of God's love comes to full flower. Love originates in the Godhead as the heart of the relationship within the Trinity (*John* 14:31; 17:23-24). God loves humanity savingly (*Romans* 8:37; *Ephesians* 2:4; *1 John* 3:1, 16). In short, love is the essence of God's nature. When John says that God is love (*1 John* 4:8, 16) he means that in his inmost nature the one and only living God, the Supreme Creator and Sustainer of the universe, is love. If the characteristic activity of God is to love, then God must be personal, for we cannot be loved by an abstraction or by anything less than a person.

This truth makes the full range of Christian teaching coherent: God is triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and love is the essence of the divine interpersonal relations (*John* 17:23). God deals with humanity redemptively through his love (*1 John* 4:10). As a consequence, love becomes the sphere of the Christian life (*John* 15:9) and this mode of God's dealing with us becomes the pattern of our own relationships with one another (*1 John* 4:16-21).

God's love is the key-feature of the New Testament. Jesus Christ is the gift of the Father's love. He personally and authentically manifests God's true nature as being love. The context of the Apostle's word that *God is love* beautifully

conveys the salvific nature of divine love (*1 John* 4:7-11, 16, 19 -- I am substituting the more correct term propitiation for expiation):

*Beloved, let us love one another
for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God.
He who does not love does not know God
for God is love.
In this the love of God was made manifest among us
that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.
In this is love,
not that we loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
So we know and believe the love God has for us.
God is love,
and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.
We love, because he first loved us.*

But there is another range of biblical truth about the nature of God which is the correlative of love. And they always go together. This is the truth that God is the Holy One, not merely the abstract notion of holiness, but that God who is personal is love and is holy. As to his nature, God is holy love.

In the Bible God's holiness signifies his highness, his transcendence. But his personhood and transcendence include moral perfection. Holiness rebukes sin. Holiness indicts sin. As holy, God is just and the just judge of humanity. In *Isaiah* 6 the prophet had a vision of God, high and exalted, while the cherubim sang *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts*. Isaiah immediately sensed his own defilement: *I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts*.

In our Chinese culture we have had strong feelings about moral rectitude and about social evils, transgressions and omissions such as injury to another person's rice field or to his farm animals or property and, along with this, attention to ritual purification for physical defilement. But we need to have a deeper understanding of what sin is. Can we pray to the gods for prosperity in dishonest or immoral ventures? We need to understand that sin is not only against our neighbor, or against our own best interests, but that it is against God and against his holiness. Sin is not something that can be removed ritually. Sin can be removed only by atonement -- by God's dealing with its guilt and penalty. And this is what God has done through Christ's death on the Cross for our sins. He paid the penalty for sin by his death. He died our death, but it is better for each one of us to be able to say he died *my* death. I urge you to consider not only the truth of our traditional teaching which concerns external morality and external correctness, but also our deep human need for a pure heart and a good conscience. The Gospel addresses the issue of the forgiveness of sin and there is nothing greater or more full of joy than to know with humility and gratitude that one is a forgiven sinner; forgiven, that is, by God through the death of Christ on the Cross.

Thus my dear friends at the end of all things God's holy love is redeeming holy love. Holiness and love combine in judgment and grace. God hallows and judges what he loves (Jeremiah 12:7).

In the Scriptures God's holiness and righteousness are never purely rectoral. His judgment is not merely to give every person his or her due, though finally the impenitent will be judged. His righteousness is *more* than sheer justice. True righteousness must *exceed* mere legalism, Jesus said of the cold, calculating, legalistic righteousness of the Pharisees (*Matthew* 5:20). Through grace the Holy Father not only judges, he bears the judgment in Christ. He is *both* just and justifier. This is holiness which goes beyond law (*Romans* 3:21), whereby righteousness is met and satisfied. Without holiness, love is mere sentiment. Holiness and love combine in God's redemptive purposes. Note the relation of love to righteousness in the following (*Isaiah* 45:21):

*Who told this long ago?
Who declared it of old?
Was it not I, the Lord?
And there is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is none besides me.*

Amos and Hosea exemplify the two sides of God's holiness in his personal relations with Israel. Amos announces the impartial judgment of God not only against the atrocities committed by nations surrounding Israel, but also against Israel and Judah's own religious perversions and social injustice. It is justice nuanced with grace, as the last verses of his prophecy show. Hosea mourns the infidelity of the nation, which he likens to a faithless wife whom God will not let go but will woo back to himself following punishment and spiritual renewal.

God's longsuffering is most strikingly expressed by the Old Testament term *hesedh*, which is translated goodness, mercy, pity, but most often as kindness and lovingkindness. *Psalms* 103 was composed in praise of God's lovingkindness (vs. 4, 8, 11, 17), especially the heartfelt phrase *steadfast love*. David prays, *Wondrously show thy steadfast love (Psalms 17:7)*; and, *Be mindful of thy mercy, O Lord, and of thy steadfast love (Psalms 25:6)*. God's unswerving love sustained the nation throughout its turbulent history (*Deuteronomy* 7:9-12).

In the New Testament, characteristic Old Testament teaching about God's long-suffering, steadfast love is expressed in the doctrine of God's grace (*charis*). This means God's unmerited favor. It is a fundamental category of Biblical theology: *the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men*, says Paul (*Titus* 2:11). Grace centers in the Cross, where mercy and justice meet (*Romans* 3:21-25). Grace is spontaneous, free, generous and abiding. It is God's grace, the action of love on behalf of sinful, alienated humanity. *He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4)*. Herein lies the key to comprehending the significance of God's Holy Love.

Finally, through his Holy Love God forgives and heals. Forgiveness is ever costly. Sin is forgiven as it is borne. This is the action of loving grace in the Cross. That the Suffering Servant of *Isaiah* 53 (note vs. 5, 6) is the Son of Man who comes to seek and to save the lost of *Mark* 10:45 is the key feature of the Christian Gospel. This unlocks the treasures of both Old and New Testament and addresses the true condition of humanity. The Cross is the final action of Holy Love,

*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

The only appropriate human response to grace is faith -- faith which penitently and gratefully receives the gift of Holy Love. This, my dear En Guang and Xiao Qing, is the sum of the matter about the Father and Progenitor of all things.

We Chinese honor teachers from our past. But we have long since learned that if, as was said long ago, a gentleman leaves nothing to chance, whatever a gentleman says as to ideals is not in the nature of the case achievable. It has simply not been true that if we know the good we will do the good. And if one should achieve the much-coveted ideal of our tradition, namely the Golden Mean, is that adequate? Or does the call to righteousness transcend the casuistry of balancing surfeit and self-denial? The call to faith in God through Jesus Christ is a call to righteousness. That righteousness is not merely the delicate balancing of moral scales as to cultural and social conventions, but is the righteousness which comes from the holy God who has made himself and his will known to us.

One of our early teachers said that *one may rob an army of its commander-in-chief; one cannot deprive the humblest man of his free will*. What will it be for us? Shall we remain bogged down in the old ways or meet with the living God who made us, loves us and redeems us?

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China Letter 4

LORD OF ALL THINGS

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

At the outset, allow me to apologize for the length of my last letter. What tedious reading it must have been! I was speaking about it to our mutual friend Szu-Ping Chiu who commented that theologians too often take paths over rocky hills rather than stroll through parks and gardens. When I told him how

embarrassed I was at the length of my letter, but that I was not really finished, he responded that at least paths among rocky slopes keep one alert, though I suspect that my pages probably put you into deep slumber!

The truth is that I really was not finished. As I ponder the enormity and complexity of themes about the greatness of God I feel I must continue my exposition of the matter to you. I hope it is not too pedantic. One can affect learning only to discover that little remains except to amaze oneself through indulgence in hyperbole.

Previously, I commented that while there is not an absence of the idea of a Supreme Being in our cultural past, such a Being was not deemed to be accessible to all people, only to royalty on special occasions. As tantalizing as this historical reality is, the truth of the matter is that in actual practice Chinese religion became polytheistic. Parallel to this, salvation became self-salvation -- as one of our sages said, *What the superior man seeks is in himself*.

I shall leave the theme of virtue for later comment. Here I return to biblical teaching about the greatness of God. Nothing can deflate our ego as to our own goodness more quickly than truths about God. Or sharpen dull wits as to our essential creaturely dependence upon God. Or focus attention upon our moral failures as breaches of God's laws, not merely infringement of social conventions.

I resume my exposition by connecting two things about which I have already written: that God is Spirit and that God is personal. To get hold of what I believe to be the central theme of the Bible as to the nature of God one must grasp the truth that the definition of spirit is personhood.

Jesus' words to the woman at the well (John 4:24) are axiomatic: *God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth*. It is critically important to make a connection between *spirit* and *him*. We worship neither a wisp of the imagination nor a disembodied earthly spirit. We worship God who is personal. The one we worship is not an *it* but *him*. Personhood means personal subject, which is that non-reducible reality identified by the personal pronoun *I*.

When the prophet Isaiah records God's question *to whom then will you liken God?* it quickly becomes apparent that the question must be sharpened to ask *to whom then will you liken me?* (Isaiah 40:18, 25). The first question may be deemed to be philosophical and to entail speculation. The second is personally challenging and calls for reciprocal recognition which then becomes mutual. God has come to us. Will we turn to Him? This is the force of the use of the first personal pronoun by God in the chapter which I cited in my last letter (Isaiah 43). God declares: *I am he* (verse 10). *I am the Lord* (verse 11). *I am God* (verse 13). *I am the Lord, your Holy One* (verse 15).

The two phrases *God is Spirit* and *I am he* stand together as the core biblical statement about the nature of God.

Confusion about God's identity and nature has been no less common in the West. Recently, two ancient errors have been revived.

The first view parallels Hindu speculation that God is the impersonal Ground of Being. In this view, the Ground of Being or Ultimate Reality is said to transcend personhood as the source of all things. The Son of God represents God's revealedness and the Holy Spirit represents God's ongoing impersonal presence in the world. This is an abstraction expressed in a three-fold way. But for exponents of such a view to affirm that something transcends personhood is sheer conjecture.

Another, more common modern perspective is to lock God into the developing cosmic process, not unlike Aristotle did in the past with his teaching about the Unmoved Mover. In this view, God is the immanent divine force which furnishes limit, creativity and form to the cosmic process. God is not "out there," that is, transcendent, but is "in here". Hence, the world's "coming-to-be" is the "coming-to-be" of God. God is personal only in so far as we are personal, but ultimate reality transcends personhood. God may be deemed to be personal in so far as we are becoming personal, but personhood is not God's essential nature, they say.

As I have already expounded to you, biblical teaching is radically different from such speculation.

But if, indeed, God is personal Spirit, what more does the Bible tell us about God's nature? One of the loveliest confessional statements written by Christians on a biblical footing is the one which declares,

God is Spirit
infinite, eternal, unchangeable
in his
being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and truth

Notice the three-fold qualification: God is infinite Spirit. God is eternal Spirit. God is unchangeable Spirit.

Infinity means beyond the possibility of limitation. God's greatness is unsearchable (*Psalms* 145:3); his judgments are unsearchable and his ways are inscrutable (*Romans* 11:33).

Eternity means without beginning or ending. God inhabits eternity (*Isaiah* 57:15). His years have no end (*Psalms* 102:25-27). The truth that *from everlasting to everlasting thou art God* is the foundation of faith; that the Lord, the Creator who has been our dwelling place throughout the generations will ever be the same (*Psalms* 90:1-2).

His nature, and therefore his covenant promises to us, are unchangeable. He cannot lie: it is impossible that God should prove false (*Hebrews* 6:18). I shall

say more about this in regard to God's faithfulness.

That God is the Lord is his glory. He is the infinite personal Spirit, the Creator of the world, and the Sustainer of every living thing.

Paul speaks of the glory of the immortal God (*Romans* 1:23). He relates the veiled glory of God which Moses experienced to the unveiled glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (*2 Corinthians* 3:15-18). In Jesus Christ God has removed the veil which shielded Moses from the full glory of God. Analogously, the Old Covenant represents a veil. With the revelation of God in Christ in the New Covenant, the veil of the Old can be lifted by turning to Christ. The unveiled glory is the incarnation. Jesus Christ is God present in the flesh. This is the pattern into which Christians are being transformed, through redemption, from one stage to another, namely, into the image of the Spirit-bearing humanity of the incarnate Lord:

But when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed...

And, we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.

God's glory is God's God-likeness. His glory as perfection, or brilliance, points to his holiness -- his transcendent difference from earthly kind combined with awareness of a moral perfection which indicts us. God's glory in Jesus Christ makes historically evident that which he intended humanity to be, and intends that redeemed humanity become.

While in our culture we have been accustomed to speak of many spirits which inhabit trees rocks, streams and storms, the Bible teaches us that God is one. He alone is the Great Spirit, the Lord, the Father of all things. He alone deserves our worship and praise. This is the significance of the biblical qualifiers as to who God is as Spirit: infinite, eternal, unchangeable. There is none like him. He alone is God. He has taken the initiative to open the veil so that through Christ we -- each one of us -- may have personal access into his presence.

God's greatness in the world and his greatness on our behalf is presented to us in the Bible in three main ways: God is all powerful, he is everywhere present, and he is all-knowing. These express the truth about his infinity in particular respects. Let us consider each of these important teachings in turn.

First, God is infinite in Power. He is all-powerful. He is omnipotent. This is the significance of his name as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty (*Genesis* 17:1). He is the *great and mighty God whose name is the Lord* (*Jeremiah* 32:18). He is Lord of creation, not an aspect of it (*Exodus* 15:11; *Psalms* 29:10): *He spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth* (*Psalms* 33:9). New Testament teaching parallels the Old Testament, especially in the term the Almighty (*Revelation* 1:8), which is applied to Christ. It is a self-evident truth in biblical teaching that *with God nothing will be impossible* (*Luke* 1:37).

The biblical writers do not speculate about the exercise of God's power. His power is all-embracing for the full range of his wonderful purposes. He cannot deny himself (2 *Timothy* 2:13). It is impossible for God to be false (*Hebrews* 6:18). He cannot be tempted by evil nor is he fickle (*James* 1:13, 17). He is the *Lord of hosts, the King of glory* (*Psalms* 24:10) whose power is not exhausted by what he has already created.

God by his power works not only to create and to sustain, he also by that same power acts to redeem. God's power is intended primarily to be *for us, on our behalf*. It has a relational end, which is to conserve fallen humanity through Christ's saving work. Christ's Gospel *is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith* (*Romans* 1:16). God's demonstration of power to save is not arbitrary. It is to show that he is both *just and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus* (*Romans* 3:26). The final demonstration of power was the humility of the Cross where what God justly demanded he himself provided.

Second, God is infinite as to his presence. He is everywhere present. He is omnipresent. God's presence is comprehensive. Nothing is hidden from him (*Psalms* 139:7, note the entire Psalm). That he who is enthroned in heaven (*Psalms* 123:1) *comes down* does not indicate spatial limitation but historical intervention, as in his judgments against Egypt (*Exodus* 7). Jesus declared to the woman at the well (*John* 4:20-24), and Paul declared to the Athenian interrogators (*Acts* 17:24, 17-28), that God is not localized in shrines made by human hands. He is everywhere present. He is *above all and through all and in all* (*Ephesians* 4:6).

The incarnation of Jesus Christ means that God became uniquely and personally present in the world. Christ is the *likeness of God* (2 *Corinthians* 4:4). *He has made him known* (*John* 1:18). *He is the image of the invisible God* (*Colossians* 1:15). Ever after his ascension, Christ will be present wherever his children are assembled together (*Matthew* 18:20).

The presence of God in Christ has not only redemptive significance because the Cross is God's provision; as well, there is on-going significance in the manner in which the Gospel applies to humanity. There is a relational sense to the presence of God; namely, that the relations between human beings and God should be mutually personal, not merely one-sidedly personal. God's distance from us or nearness to us depends upon our distance from him or nearness to him. Entailed is a qualitative, spiritual dimension. Sin creates distance. It separates and alienates us from God (*Isaiah* 1:15-18; 59:2). Redemption involves not only atonement but also reconciliation so that the distance between us and God is removed. Through forgiveness we return to God's fellowship. Paul felicitously says (in the case of Gentiles) *but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ* (*Ephesians* 2:13).

Third, God is infinite in knowledge. He is all-knowing. He is omniscient. God knows his creation from beginning to end, every detail of it. His knowledge is comprehensive; it embraces the entire creation. *He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?* asks the Psalmist (*Psalms*

94:9). God searches all hearts (*1 Chronicles* 28:9, note *Psalms* 139). His understanding is unsearchable (*Isaiah* 40:14). He declares the end from the beginning (*Isaiah* 46:9-10). Paul extols the unbounded knowledge and wisdom of God in his sovereign foreknowledge and electing grace (*Romans* 11:33-36; *Ephesians* 1:7-10).

God's prescience does not necessitate predetermination. To be sure, what God wills he can and will do. What does he will? The biblical answer is free good persons redeemed in Christ. We cannot know many details of God's infinite purposes, but we know what he means by Jesus Christ (*Romans* 8:11). Sin means that God has in freedom granted freedom. Redemption signifies that the freedom patterned in Christ will be realized in us. The purpose of the Creator is freedom: *if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed* (*John* 8:36, note v.32). True freedom is knowledge of and doing the will of God: *Lo, I have come to do thy will* (*Hebrews* 10:9). We are brought into that willing obedience by being taken up into Christ's obedience (v.10), which is the first and primary meaning of sanctification. Grace is a function of personal relations in virtue of which God is free and in virtue of which he provides for, and calls us to, freedom.

When the Scriptures say that God knows a person, it is equivalent to saying that God saves a person. Banishment is the obverse of recognition: *I do not know you ... depart from me* (*Matthew* 25:12, 41). The object of grace is recognition: *if one loves God, one is known by him* (*1 Corinthians* 8:3). This theme pervades Paul's thought on questions of election and grace (*Romans* 8:28-30). *The Lord knows those who are his* (*2 Timothy* 2:19).

Finally, my dear En Guang and Xiao Qing, I want to stress that these truths do not come to us through speculation, but are based upon the word of those who historically were addressed and instructed by God. Historical situations are the substance of biblical understanding about the greatness of God. Prophetic and apostolic accumulation and interpretation of historical data foster insight and nurture understanding. A review of the historical process is instructive, provided that the unfolding is seen not as evolutionary in the sense that the concept of God evolved; rather, God's gradual self-disclosure historically in the Bible comprises ever fuller understanding, along with constant repetition and reminder for humans who tend to forget or to distort the truth of the revelation.

At Ur and at Haran, Abraham had to believe that God would be with him even in a distant, unknown land. He left his father's house in faith, not knowing what lay ahead, except that the living God had called him and would be with him (*Genesis* 12:1-9, note *Hebrews* 11:8-10).

When Jacob fled his father's house because of his duplicity toward Esau, the vision of the ladder to heaven forced a change in his thinking about God's location (*Genesis* 28:10-22). Surely, he thought, God could not be in this forsaken place (28:16)! God must still be back at my father's house where the household gods are kept. But God identified himself as the same God who had spoken to his fathers: *I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and Isaac*. Jacob names

the place Bethel, the House of God. He had learned that God would be with him wherever he went:

*Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,
and will bring you back to this land
for I will not leave you
until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.*

From such situations comes biblical understanding of God's personhood through personal address, God's omnipresence and God's covenant making and keeping faithfulness. The true and living God rules all of nature. He is not, as the many nature spirits were thought to be, limited to one jurisdiction, tribe or nation.

In *Exodus* 3:6 God again identifies himself, this time to Moses in the wilderness, a most unlikely place: *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*. Commissioning follows: *come, I will send you* (3:10); along with God's promise of never-failing presence: *but I will be with you* (3:12). Ever after, throughout the tortuous wilderness journey Moses was assured of God's presence.

The truth about God's universal presence, wisdom and power is developed more fully and distinctively by the prophets. They prompt memory of God's presence during the Exodus and the wilderness journey. They teach Israel that God cannot be contained in a man-made religious house, even a grand temple (*1 Kings* 8:27; *Isaiah* 66:1). He who fills all the earth knows about each individual human being (*Jeremiah* 23:23-24). The prophets of Israel present us with full-orbed teaching about God's omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience.

The most complete Old Testament statements about God's greatness are contained in the *Psalms*. From Psalm to Psalm one finds expression of the soul's communion with God *on grounds of clear understanding* of God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The soul communes with God who, as Creator, transcends nature. This is the foundation of personal confidence in him,

*Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever thou hadst formed the world,
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.*
Psalm 90:1-2

Jesus declares that God is not restricted to religious shrines. He is present everywhere (*John* 4:24, note *Matthew* 18:20; 28:20). Where Jesus is, there God is, whether in his earthly, incarnate life or as the risen Lord.

Paul declares that God is not localized in shrines, nor is he dependent on the natural order which he created and sustains (*Acts* 17:24, 28). He is near at hand to everyone.

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China Letter 5

THE SON OF GOD AMONG US

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

For Christians, my dear En Guang and Xiao Qing, one thing is certain: Jesus Christ is the center of everything. He is the Creator of all things. He is the eternal Son of God who became man. He is the Savior of the world through his death and resurrection. He is the ascended Christ who intercedes for us at God's right hand. He is resident in the hearts of Christians through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He will come again to claim his own and to establish God's rule in human hearts.

Let there be no misunderstanding among us: Jesus Christ is God incarnate. This is the focus of the Bible. Let me make it very plain: Jesus is God. The entire redemption theme of the Bible rests on this theorem: that only God can save. No angel or any other created being can save humanity and the world from evil and sin. Salvation cannot be delegated. This is the work of God alone. Thus the eternal Father has sent the eternal Son to be born at Bethlehem, God incarnate, through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Lord and Christ and Redeemer. It is the incarnation of Jesus Christ which leads us into the understanding of the triune nature of God.

Let us consider the Biblical teaching on these things.

However, before we do that, I raise the common question about cultural fit. Does a Western religion fit in the East? Does Christianity suit the Chinese mentality? Should we Chinese people forsake aspects of our past to become Christians? Why should Christ be thought of so exclusively, so particularly? Why can't we simply be religious in our own culturally diverse ways?

This is an important question which deserves a larger measure of attention than I can give here. However, let me cite a intriguing parallel from the East, from neighboring Japan.

The Roman Catholic Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo has struggled with the issue of Christianity's claim to religious uniqueness and cultural accommodation in his novels, especially the one called *Silence*. He asks the critical question, Why has Japan been so impervious to the Christian gospel? It is because Christianity is Western and unsuited to the Japanese mind? Must the Western notion about God and Christ be re-thought?

Endo develops his theme in the context of seventeenth century Japan and the horrific persecution of the Roman Catholic Jesuit mission. The Portuguese priest, subjected to brutal physical and mental torture, recants his faith and

tramples the Cross.

But Inoue the magistrate does not let him off easily. He probes the priest's defection. Why have you done this, he asks?

Inoue goes on to say, "I've told you that this country of Japan is not suited to the teaching of Christianity. Christianity simply cannot put roots down here." Then he adds, "Father, you were not defeated by me. You were defeated by this swamp of Japan."

"No," replies the priest weakly, "the struggle was with Christianity in my own heart." "You can't deceive me," says Inoue, for "Christian salvation is not just a question of relying on God. In addition the believer must retain with all his might a strength of heart. But it is precisely in this point that the teaching has been twisted and changed in this swamp called Japan. The God whom the peasants serve has gradually changed so as to be no longer like the Christian God at all."

It has been strikingly apparent that Chinese people have responded to the Christian Gospel more readily than have Japanese people. Why is this the case? I think that one of the reasons is that we Chinese respond to Christ the great Teacher who shows us the way of life. We know how important a canon of writings is, hence the respect among us for the Scriptures as divinely given. We know how important classics such as the Decalogue are, as the storehouse of abiding moral and spiritual principles. As one of our sages said, the world may fall into decay, but moral principles abide. Moral teaching and virtue are the stuff of life, though while we have honored those who have sacrificed life for virtue we have insufficiently taught humility and self-sacrifice, about which some of our wise men have spoken. The Christian faith addresses those crucial concerns.

Further, we have emphasized and honored filial loyalty and filial obedience, which is so strongly stressed in the Bible (*Exodus* 20:12). We have aspired to an ideal, namely, a moral society. The Bible speaks to this directly: it is God's intention to establish proper social relationships based upon truth, goodness and justice.

In the Bible the people of God comprise a household of faith. This coheres with our traditional ideal of society committed to proper social relationships, governed as a household should be governed. In Christian faith the principles of a virtuous life and proper social relationships are built upon the infinite worth of each individual person. This transcends the concept of merely implanted abstract principle, as important as that truth is. The Household of Faith is that loving circle in which we are known and cared for. We know very well the crucial importance of family for our identity. Christianity does not erase our identity. It shows us how important we are to God and how much God loves us individually.

But what about the other part, the part about preserving the integrity and authenticity of the faith? This is something to which we must give careful attention. We cannot allow the pure truth as to who Jesus Christ is as the Son of

God to be changed into something else to suit culture or convenience. It is becoming clearer to us that we can be true followers of Jesus while treasuring many things from our past.

For over two centuries there has been a chipping away at biblical truth as to who Jesus Christ is. Some of this skepticism is very fanciful indeed. For example, rejection of the importance of historical reality in the claim that the Christian revelation does not imply factual assertions. This appears to say that the validity of Christianity does not stand upon whether Jesus of Nazareth actually ever lived. To begin with, such historical skepticism is unwarranted. It has become part of the deconstructionist mentality that the only reality is the reality of what the interpreter is thinking, not what actually took place in the past, or what an author in the past actually said or intended to say. The word incarnation is now interpreted by some to mean the presence of many god-like qualities in many ways in the world.

The range of conjecturing is truly mind-boggling. Does the word Christ really mean only the potential union of the divine and the human in the response of every person to God or whatever one might think God is? Or is the importance of Christ not that he was an actual, historical figure but the man of universal destiny for us all. Is the message of Jesus merely to show us how to relate our spirits to the ultimate goals of existence?

The fact of the matter is that the integrity of the historical data is vital to the authenticity of the Christian faith. Is it important that Jesus actually lived in Palestine two thousand years ago? Certainly it is crucial. And furthermore, it is vitally important that we give heed to what the Apostles say to us as to what was going on in the things that were happening in those days.

Other fanciful theories abound.

Most of these are based either on the denial of the supernatural, or that Jesus was simply a man of his troubled times, or they propose that Christians and others overlaid stories about Jesus with theological concepts which had little or nothing to do with his life and teachings.

The literature of the past two hundred years is full of such conjecture. They comprise one quest after another in an effort to get to the bottom of what they thought Jesus must have been -- most anything but what the Gospel accounts have transmitted to us: He was a Jewish revolutionary. The miracle stories are myths. Paul and the first Christians distilled a set of enduring moral lessons from the example of Jesus' life. The Gospels are less history than later reflections embedded in a core of dogma. He was a simple Galilean, but a striking moral teacher. This last was the most prominent view of Liberal Theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the added emphasis upon Jesus as the prime example of suffering devotion. In recent generations it has been popular to postulate that he was an apocalyptic; that is, he expected the imminent establishment of an earthly kingdom but was bitterly mistaken and was overtaken

by a cruel, untimely death. Most of these views fostered interest in what they deemed to be the religion of Jesus, rather than attention to the religion about Jesus.

More recently the emphasis has been upon the religious, social and political context of Palestinian life at the time when Jesus lived. He is now being analyzed as a man of his times. Was he a local holy man, an Hasidic Jew? Did he have private as well as reported public aims? Was he condemned because of conflict with vested religious interests, and finally put to death because of he denounced religious corruption? Or, was he a social and political revolutionary, even a publicity-seeking sectarian?

Since the Second World War an enormous quantity of manuscripts, manuscript fragments, pottery and pottery fragments, and religious sites have been found in Palestine. It will take many more years before the importance of these can be assessed in a competent way, to say nothing about discoveries to come. The data coming to hand are wonderfully encouraging. We are getting more and more confirmation that the context and events of the Gospels are authentic and that the text of the New Testament carries us back to apostolic times. The more we discover, the closer does the dating of the New Testament books get pushed back into the first century.

It will take a lot of hard scholarly work, but I am convinced that the facts of the New Testament tradition are there, and that the new labors which focus on the new discoveries will tend to vindicate the authenticity of the biblical narratives. There is surely a limit to what an historian can do. I do not think anyone can, or will be able to, give us the fullness of the mystery of Christ's person. But, nevertheless, I think that the answer of the church has been a good one: that within the community of faith, and as based upon an authentic reading of the documents of faith, the Holy Spirit testifies to him. To the question, "Who was Jesus?" the church answers with a song of praise to her God in honor of Christ, and extols the risen, living Christ who dwells in our hearts.

The first Christians could do nothing less than to declare that Jesus is God. Far from this truth being an overlay of later tradition, it is at the heart of everything that is truly Christian. Consider the following six passages:

First, the prologue of the *Gospel of John* is critically important. Verse 1 states that the eternal Word (Jesus Christ) from eternity was with God and was God, and that all things -- the entire creation -- were made through him. Verse 18 declares that the only Son (which can read *only God*), who is in the bosom of the Father, has made the Father known.

Second, in *John 20:28* Thomas exclaims openly *My Lord, and my God*. This is a direct statement as to Jesus' deity.

Third, in *Romans 9:5* Christ is declared to be God over all, and blessed.

Fourth, in *Titus* 2:13 Paul anticipates *the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*. This sentence can just as well be translated *the appearing of the great God and our Savior*.

Fifth, the author of *Hebrews* (1:8-9) quotes from *Psalms* 45:6-7 where the Son's exaltation is declared to be enthronement on the very throne of God: *but of the Son, he says, thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever*.

Sixth, in his *Second Epistle* (1:1) Peter speaks of our faith as *standing in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ*.

These passages are unambiguously clear, though there is much more in the New Testament which supports the view that the New Testament Christians confessed clearly that Jesus is the eternal Son of God made incarnate at Bethlehem.

It is silly to say that the ancients were people of a pre-scientific cast of mind and thus more susceptible to mythology. A careful reading of key early Church Fathers shows how they strove to dissociate themselves from pagan superstition, anthropomorphic myths and how keen was their logic to conserve the historical character of Christianity. The framers of the Early Church creeds were not philosophically unsophisticated. They knew very well what they were doing. Modern critics react negatively to the classical statement that Christ *is of one substance with the Father*.. This terminology is not the jargon of Greek philosophy which is alien to what some think was simple, peasant Galilean faith. There was an urgency to state concretely the significance of the new reality -- the Incarnation -- by means of language which had not previously addressed such a possibility. It was a reality looking for a language.

The early Christians sought to guard the transcendence and personhood of God. God is personal. God is revealed personally in Jesus Christ. Hence the doctrines of the incarnation and the trinity follow from the historical reality of the experience of the disciples with Jesus Christ and in light of his teaching.

We have gone about as far as we can go to dissect -- some might say to dismember -- the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ. This attempts to unravel what are alleged to be disparate strands of the New Testament and which, they say, can no longer be held together consistently. But we must return to the truths of the New Testament on grounds of the authenticity of the historical record to accept Jesus Christ the messianic Reconciler as the theological center of the New Testament and the Christian faith.

The great Christological passages of the New Testament are thrilling witness and attestation. In addition to the ones I have already cited note: Christ was begotten of the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary (*Matthew* 1-2, *Luke* 1-2). He is the Sustainer of all things (*Philippians* 2:2-11, *Colossians* 1:15-20). He is the only Mediator and Savior (*1 Timothy* 2:5; *Hebrews* 1:2, 9:15). He is the Messiah, God's redemptive agent (*Acts* 2:22-36, *2 Peter* 1:16-19).

Christians do not claim that their language can or does encompass the mystery of the incarnation, only that the language attests to its truth, and that it guards the truth at its boundaries. These boundaries are straightforward: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (truly God) and Son of Man (truly man), the incarnate Lord, in whom and through whom alone salvation is brought to humanity (*Acts* 4:12, *1 Timothy* 2:5-7).

The first disciples of Jesus ask us to do this: *Come stand where I stand and see if you can see what I see*. Such a stance, as relevant today as then, conserves the reality of the way we see history and does not undermine the objectivity of the data. This ought to appeal to us Chinese in view of our bent toward the issues of real life and practicality.

The early Christians quickly rejected re-formulations of the incarnation to make of it something different.

First, they rejected what we now call Adoptionism, which is the teaching that incarnation means the Holy Spirit-inspiration of the human Jesus, not the conjoining of the divine and human natures in one person. They taught that the earthly Jesus was endowed with the Christ at his baptism, but that this divine element could not suffer, so the Christ left him prior to the suffering of the Cross.

It would appear that the Apostle John vigorously opposed this view (*1 John* 5:6) when he declared that Jesus Christ came not only by water (that is, by his Baptism and endowment with the Spirit) but also by blood (that is, by the suffering of the Cross) and that it is the one person, the Lord Jesus Christ, who does these things, not that Jesus and the Christ can be separated as to identity and role.

Second, the early Christians rejected any subordination of Christ the Word, as Arius taught, and some teach today. The definition of the nature of the Word is pushed back to before creation to the question of the origin of the Word. In this view, Christ existed before the Incarnation. He is the instrument God used to create the world. As the highest created being within the counsels of God and as the agent of creation he is worthy of worship. But he had a beginning of existence. Therefore he cannot be God in the sense of sharing the nature of the Supreme Being. He is like God, but is not of the same reality (substance) as God. He is transcendent and God-like, but is not God incarnate.

It was because of errors such as these that the first Christians in New Testament days, and early Christians in the generations closest to the time of Christ, sought to guard the integrity of faith in Christ the Lord through careful confessional formulation.

Historically there exists a core of belief about Jesus Christ which has been consistently held, which reflects the apostolic kerugma and is a measure of the teachings of all church traditions which profess common faith in Jesus Christ the

Son of God, whether they be Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, or Protestant Evangelical.

The earliest and, apparently widely used, formulary is the New Testament confession that *Jesus is Lord*. This attests to his divinity (*Acts* 11:17, 20; 16:31; *Romans* 10:9; *1 Corinthians* 12:3; *Philippians* 2:11; *Colossians* 2:6). His name and lordship are on a footing of equality in the trinitarian Baptismal Formula (*Matthew* 28:19; *Acts* 19:5; *1 Corinthians* 6:11). He is the Christ come in the flesh (*Mark* 8:29, *1 John* 2:22). He is the Son of God (*Mark* 3:11, 5:7; *Romans* 1:3-4; *Hebrews* 4:14; *1 John* 4:15, 5:5). The early tradition is clear also from *Acts* 8:37, though that sentence is not in the oldest manuscripts. The parallels drawn between Father and Son are clear in formulae such as *1 Corinthians* 8:6. Paul says that while for others there are many "gods" and "lords,"

*yet for us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things and for whom we exist,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

This theme is repeated in passages such as *1 Timothy* 2:5-6 and 6:13-16, and in the status accorded to Jesus in benedictions and salutations such as *2 Peter* 1:2 and *1 John* 1:3. There is a core of belief, an irreducible body of teaching, and this concerns the truth of the eternal Son of God made flesh. The body of truth is called *The Faith* (*Galatians* 1:23, *1 Timothy* 3:13, *2 Timothy* 1:14, *Jude* 3, 20). These apostolic teachings, along with what I have already cited, comprise the foundation of everything that the early generations of Christians tried to state confessionally in the well known Creeds of the Church.

The earliest formulary we have, outside the New Testament is the Apostles' Creed,

I believe in God the Father Almighty;

and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of the Father,
whence he will come to judge the living and the dead;

and in the Holy Spirit,
the Holy Church,
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh,
the life everlasting.

This formulary, along with the confessional statements of the New Testament, carried the church forward to the Council of Nicea, when the churches had to counter the subordination of Christ. The Creed of Nicea, formulated in 325 A.D., re-states the ancient faith, firmly declaring faith in the deity of Christ,

We believe in one God Father Almighty,
Maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God
Begotten of the Father as only-begotten,
that is of the substance of the Father
God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God,
begotten not made, of one substance with the Father
through whom all things came into existence,
both things in heaven and things on the earth;
who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made
flesh,
and became man,
suffered, and rose on the third day,
ascended into the heavens,
is coming to judge living and dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the statement of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. concretely summarized the faith of Christians from that day to this. It restates the truth that Christ is truly God, of one substance with the Father. It declares that Christ is complete man having a reasonable soul --he is one substance with us. It declares that Christ has two natures, divine and human, without division or separation. It declares that Christ's two natures are without change and are unconfusedly distinct. Finally, it declares that the two natures comprise one person and subsistence, who is truly God and truly man.

I suggest that you draw a square on a piece of paper. At the four corners write one of each of the following: True God, True Man, Two Natures, One Person. This is the heart of Christian understanding and confession of the truth of who Jesus Christ is. We can discuss the implications of the biblical material within the confines of the boundary of the square, but if we step outside the boundary of the square we are departing from the apostolic faith.

These are the parameters of biblical teaching and Christian faith. At the inmost principle of his being Jesus Christ is true God. The eternal Son took to himself flesh and became true man. The purpose of the incarnation is redemption from sin, triumph over the power of evil and our reconciliation with God. This is what it means to say that *Jesus is Lord*.

What does this imply for our understanding of the nature of God? Here we must give attention to the teaching of the Bible about the Holy Spirit and the

Trinity.

Who is the Holy Spirit, and what does the Holy Spirit do? In the Bible the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is intended to be a comfort and joy, not an obscurity. Above all, the teaching of the Scriptures is that the Holy Spirit is Christ-centered. Thus the truth of the Incarnation is closely linked to what we are to think of the Holy Spirit and the nature of God as triune.

In the Old Testament many and varied activities are attributed to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, is everywhere present.

The Spirit is God personally present and active in his creation (*Isaiah* 40:12-31; *Zechariah* 4:6).

The Spirit is the agent of creation and is its Sustainer (*Genesis* 1:2; *Job* 33:4; 34:14-15; *Psalms* 33:6; 104:24-30).

The Spirit is the life-giver (*Genesis* 2:7; *Job* 27:3).

The Spirit is the enabler, empowering men and women in the Old Testament for special tasks (*Exodus* 31:3; *Judges* 6:34; *1 Samuel* 16:13).

The Spirit is the agent of revelation and inspiration to convey God's word (*2 Samuel* 23:1-3; *2 Chronicles* 24:20; *Nehemiah* 9:30).

The Spirit renews spiritual life (*Psalms* 51:10-12; 139) which truth David probably originally learned from the prophet Samuel.

Side by side with the somber theme of humanity's fall and resulting disposition to evil in Genesis is the beautiful, haunting of a new age to come and redeemed humanity. The Old Testament anticipates the restoration of creation (*Isaiah* 11:6-9; 65:17-25) and a new Spirit-endowed humanity (*Isaiah* 32:15-20; *Ezekiel* 36:26-27; *Joel* 2:28-29). The Spirit-bearing humanity of Messiah is to become the pattern for the new man in the new age (*Isaiah* 61:1-2). In the Old Testament God promises to restore the broken created order and to restore mankind by giving to humanity a new heart and a new spirit, a new vision and new power, through the coming Messiah, the redeemer.

This promise is fulfilled in the New Testament. The pattern of the man or woman of the Spirit is the Spirit-bearing humanity of our Lord. Thus the primary sign of the Spirit's coming is not Pentecost, as some suppose, but Bethlehem and the earthly life of Christ. The fulfillment of *Joel* 2:28-29 occurs first not in *Acts* 2:16-21. Rather, Pentecost is the consequent sign of the Spirit's coming. The primary sign is the prior, Spirit-bearing humanity of Christ (*Acts* 2:33). This is clear from *Luke* 4:18-21. Christ the Lord bears the Spirit according to the pattern of his own sanctified humanity. It is this reality -- the reality of the new Spirit-bearing humanity -- that is to be realized in us.

Parallels drawn between the life of Christ and our lives are significant.

First, Christ was begotten of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit (*Matthew* 1:18). We are begotten again by the Spirit at our conversion to Christ (*John* 3:1-16; *1 Peter* 1:23-25).

Second, Christ was baptized in the Spirit to identify him as the Son of God and to mark the inception of his public ministry (*Mark* 1:10-11). We are baptized in the Spirit at conversion (*Acts* 2:38; *1 Corinthians* 12:13). Thus conversion, reception of the Spirit, believers' baptism and being joined to the body of Christians are seen in the New Testament to be several sides of one event.

Third, Christ was raised to resurrection life by the Spirit (*Romans* 1:1-4), which is the pattern of our own post-baptismal resurrection life in Christ (*Romans* 6:1-11).

Fourth, Christ triumphed over the evil one at his temptation by the power of the Spirit (*Luke* 4:1-13). We are taken up into his triumph to live victoriously. He won the victory for us on the same ground on which our ancestor Adam failed (*Romans* 5:12-20).

Fifth, Christ embodied the Spirit-filled life (*Luke* 4:1, 14), which we are to share (*Romans* 8:11).

Last, Christ ministered to others by the power of the Spirit (*Luke* 1:14, 4:18). Our witness and ministry are to be Spirit-empowered (*Acts* 1:5, 8).

Each of us is called to faith in Christ in order that the qualities of Christ's life should be duplicated in us. The mandate of the Spirit is not to magnify himself, but Christ. This is why the truth of the Incarnation and the truth of the working of the Spirit are so closely woven together in the New Testament. Jesus said, He shall glorify me (*John* 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-14). This is what Paraclete, the Spirit's name, means: one who comes alongside each of us as helper and guide (*Romans* 5:5; *1 Corinthians* 3:16).

Consider this: who had more of the Spirit than Christ the incarnate Lord? In his humanity he is the pattern of the Spirit-filled life. Hence we strive to be like him. The fruit of the Spirit is the sum total of Christ-like moral and spiritual qualities (*Galatians* 5:16, 22-25). The true mark of the Spirit is permanent Christ-like change in us.

The relationship of the Holy Spirit to us is personal. It is not merely invasive divine power. From the standpoint of the work of the Trinity, the truth is that both Christ and the Spirit dwell in the Christian soul but not in the same way. Christ is the indwelling content of the Christian life. The Spirit is the quickening cause. The indwelling of Christ is the effect of the quickening.

It is from these theological truths and spiritual realities that we come to an

understanding of the triune nature of God. Hence belief in the triune nature of God is not peripheral to Christian faith. It is a revealed truth. It follows from the practice of trinitarian religion by the first Christians in the New Testament. The doctrine is based upon the revelation of the unity of God the creator in the Old Testament, the truth of the incarnation of the eternal Son of God at Bethlehem and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The doctrine is not a later philosophical attempt to complicate original unitarian faith. The facts of revelation and redemption necessitate trinitarian faith.

The words of the ancient confession which derives from the church fathers is the best statement of this truth that I have ever found: *We worship one God in trinity and trinity in unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.* Earlier, the philosopher Athenagoras, whom I mentioned to you earlier and who lived at about 175 A.D., wrote in his defense of Christians against charges of atheism because they did not worship the gods: *Who, then, would not be astonished to hear those called atheists who admit God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit and who teach their unity in power and their distinction in rank?* At about the same time Irenaeus, an effective evangelist as well as theologian, declared that belief in God the Father, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit are three crucial articles of faith. He then relates these directly to our salvation: *Therefore the baptism of our rebirth comes through these three articles, granting us rebirth unto God the Father, through his Son, by the Holy Spirit.*

Biblical foundations of trinitarian faith are that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each declared to be God in the unity of the godhead. First, the Father is God. The monotheism of the New Testament is parallel with that of the Old Testament (*Deuteronomy* 6:4; *1 Corinthians* 8:6; *James* 2:19). There is but one true and living God (*Deuteronomy* 4:35, 39; *Isaiah* 45:5, 22). While recent studies have reopened the question of trinitarian adumbrations in the Old Testament, most Christians believe that the doctrine emerges clearly only in the New Testament. Second, the Son is God (*John* 1:1, 18; *Hebrews* 1:2). The New Testament precludes assigning to Jesus Christ anything less than full deity, as I have already said. Thus no form of either Subordinationism or Adoptionism is consistent with New Testament teaching. Third, the Holy Spirit is God (*John* 15:26) whose nature must be understood in fully personal terms (*John* 16:7-15; *Acts* 13:2).

The personal language of the Bible calls for seeing that each member of the godhead is personally distinct. The greetings and salutations (such as *2 Corinthians* 13:14; *1 Peter* 1:2), the baptismal formula (*Matthew* 28:19) and the numerous trinitarian passages put the work of the three persons of the trinity on a common footing as the work of deity (*1 Corinthians* 12:4-6; *Ephesians* 1:2-5, 13; 4:4-6).

God is not one person. There are persons in God. Thus the godhead of the Father is identical with that of the Son and the Holy Spirit. By *one* and *unity* we do not propose to transfer enumeration from the persons to the essence of the divine nature. Christians do not seek to reduce the trinitarian language of the New Testament to terms which may be more congenial to a preconceived notion of

what one must mean. We accept the trinitarian language of the New Testament full-fledged.

It is important to observe that Christianity began as a Jewish sect and that its monotheistic trinitarianism yields no trace of embarrassment from any charge of polytheism or tritheism. But neither can an abstract conception of "one" (absence of multiplicity) determine our concept of unity as applied to God. This scarcely fits the personal language of the scriptures. The closest to a New Testament definition of unity occurs in *John 17:22-23*: *That they may be one, as we are one; I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfectly one.* The logic of the matter is simply this: internal complexity is a sign of imperfect unity only if all approximations to unity are to be measured by a scale of degrees of absence of internal multiplicity. But this is not so if the degree of unity is to be measured instead in proportion to the intensity of the unifying power in the life of the whole. This is what I believe our Lord is saying in the words *that they may be one as we are one.*

Only fully trinitarian faith makes intelligible the key elements of the Christian doctrine of salvation. If God is but one person, then the third century Church Father Tertullian had it right when he quipped that those who say so *have put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father.* I believe that the deepest truth of our salvation is that it is as true to say that God sent his Son into the world to redeem us by the Son's death and resurrection as it is to say that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

Trinitarian faith is confessed and conserved more by trinitarian worship than simply creedal recitation. The baptismal formula *in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit* and the greetings and salutations embed trinitarian confession in customary Christian usage. Prayers are addressed to God the Father (*Matthew 6:9*; *11:25-27*; *John 11:41-42*; *17:1-4*); in the name of God the Son (*John 14:13*; *15:16*; *16:23-26*); through the power of the Holy Spirit (*Romans 8:14-15, 26*).

Historically, trinitarian faith simply expresses the significance and finality of the revelation God has made in Christ, the redemption accomplished through Christ's cross, and the re-creation of believing men and women who confess faith in the incarnate, crucified, risen Lord.

Trinitarian worship enriches Christian experience and it casts a bright light upon the meaning of the resurrection and eternal life as essentially a life of persons and interpersonal relations (*John 17:20-23*).

For the present, Paul teaches us (*Romans 8:10-17*), we receive the Spirit from the Father through Christ. The Father who raised up Christ also quickens us. What God did for Christ he does for us because we share the same indwelling Spirit. As partakers of Christ we are joint heirs with Christ and are able to say *Abba, Father*, looking to the day when we shall be called to the fellowship in glory of the blessed God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

From root, or spring, or fountain one
A threefold lighted form hath shone:
For where the Father dwells above,
There dwelleth too his own heart's love,
His glorious Son, wisdom perfect,
And of all worlds the architect;
And in the unity combined
The Spirit's holy Light hath shined.
One root of good, one fount of love,
Whence sprung the bliss supreme above:
And the bright holy lamps divine
In equal glory ever shine.
(Synesius, died about 430 C.E.)

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China Letter 6

IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED...

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

Where did it all come from? That is a natural question to ask as one thinks about the universe and our own place in it. Before you read the rest of this letter, I want you to go out this evening to a quiet place, away from the lights of the town. Then gaze up into the heavens and ponder the immensity of the universe. How vast it is! Beyond our comprehension. Especially when we understand that most of the stars we see are not individual planets, but are vast galaxies which are inconceivably numerous and so far away that we cannot grasp the concept of such distances.

An important aspect of our Chinese heritage has been respect for the created order and a concern for all living things, which undergirds our tradition of formal rules of proper conduct toward one another. Nevertheless, while our early tradition speaks of the Supreme Ruler (*Shang Ti*) as the True Parent of all things, in our teaching the Supreme Ruler has not been accessible to us. We accepted the reality of the world in a practical way, resisting any tendency to make of it an illusion, but we widely believed that the spiritual elements of the universe were embedded in objects of nature, such as the sun, moon and stars.

From a biblical standpoint, these rational convictions and expressions of belief reflect the truth of Paul's statement that *ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (Romans 1:20)*. What are some of those perceptions, which are buried in our tradition, to which we ought to give greater heed?

Our classical writings record words of some of our profoundly wise rulers.

They conceived of a righteous Supreme Ruler (*Shang Ti*), who is preeminent over all in heaven and earth, all other spirits being subordinate to him (*Book of History, Shu Ching*). While early legends spoke of the mythical figure P'an Ku who chiselled the early chaos into shape, we have the more forceful words of Kuan Yin Tzu, in records of the Chou dynasty, saying that heaven and earth did not come of themselves, there was one who made them. As well, a disciple of Confucius, Tzu Hsia, referring to *Ti* said *God is the Lord the Creator: the maker (ancestor) of heaven and earth*. This is repeated in one of the ancient prayers of the Imperial Sacrifice, *It is thou, O Lord, who are the parent of all things*.

Modern science is showing us in new ways how vast the universe really is, and how marvellously it has been fashioned. It is now recognized that the universe is indeed tuned to very fine tolerances and that even a very slight shift in the balance of elements or forces would have made life as we know it impossible. The immensity of the universe staggers the mind. One scientist has said that if one could count all the grains of sand on all the seashores of the world, the number of stars and planets in God's universe is greater. There are approximately 100,000 million (100 billion) stars in our galaxy alone. Then there are all the other stars receding into space, each of which is itself really a galaxy. One is overwhelmed by the greatness and mystery of the created order. How small we are, yet the Bible assures us that the Supreme Ruler of the universe cares about every one of us. He is accessible to us because he has taken the initiative not only to make himself known to us but also to come to us in Christ.

In the biblical revelation, creation is the work of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is uniquely biblical. Indeed, in the Bible the work of creation and the purposes of redemption are joined.

In the Old Testament, the word to create (*bara*) is used almost exclusively of God's actions. It signifies God's independence from the world and transcendence over it. He is Lord over all powers and gods, and is our Redeemer. In the latter part of the book of *Isaiah* where the words creator and to create often occur, they are used in the context of God as Creator and Savior. God's independence and sovereignty do not register his detachment from us, or inaccessibility, but his sovereignty in grace also to come to us in love and redemption.

Hence we should pay particular attention to how unique the creation narrative in *Genesis* 1-2 is. There were myths and sagas in the Near East about the creation in those days, just as there are in our ancient past. But *Genesis* is different from these. There is in the *Genesis* account a core of teaching which is that nothing but God existed before the creation of the world. There is no suggestion in *Genesis* of stuff existent alongside God out of which he fashioned the world as a modeller may mould his clay to bear the impress he wants. I remember reading the comment of an English atheist about the distinctiveness of the *Genesis* account in which he said that any authentic interpretation of *Genesis* must recognize that in the narrative there is insistence on absolute dependence of the world on God, there is posited no eternal dualism of God and matter, and there

is a direct assertion that the world had a beginning through the creative action of God. This is both an accurate and a fair-minded assessment of the narrative.

The substance of the biblical teaching can be summarized as follows:

The Lord, **God the Father**, is the Creator: *I am the Lord who made all things ... I made the earth, and created man upon it (Isaiah 44:24; 45:12, 18; note also 42:5, and Nehemiah 9:6).* **God the Son** is Creator and Sustainer, says Paul (*Colossians 1:16-17*): *in him all things were created ... created through him and for him ... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* To this may be added the word in *Hebrews 1:2* that God has spoken to us through his Son, *through whom also he created the world.* **God the Holy Spirit** is Creator. In *Genesis 1:2* occur the familiar words *and the Spirit of God was moving upon the face of the waters.* Moving means *hovering over the waters.* Again, teaching in the *Psalms (104:30)* parallels the *Genesis* account: *when thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created.*

From the beginning of the Christian era Christians have admired and respected the universe as the handiwork of God. One is reminded of Athenagoras' delightful tribute to the beauty and harmony of the universe in his apology to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius late in the second century of the Christian era, which I have previously cited. Modern science enlarges and strengthens grounds for wonder and admiration. The frontiers of human knowledge have been extended so far that today the vastness and complexity of the universe is impossible to grasp. Along with this, Athenagoras' injunction that Christians worship the Creator not the creation - a reflection of biblical teaching - is more achievable today than ever before, due largely to scientific de-mystification of nature and the unmasking of superstitions about nature. It is ironic that in modern scientifically and technologically sophisticated societies re-mystification of nature, including superstition, is on the rise even among Christians, who advance string-pulling religious formulae to jerk God here or there at will. We must remember that God is Lord of creation and that we need not fear spirits which we imagine inhabit trees and rocks and hills.

The limitations of our knowledge should teach us humility. It is important to remember how often in the past we have had to correct wrong ideas about what our world is really like and how it works. Keep in mind that our knowledge is built up through the interplay of categories and evidence. In the past we have entertained wrong categories and have forced the evidence of the way our world really is into the shape of those wrong categories, such as that the earth is flat, or that the earth remains still and that the sun goes around the earth. I believe that in our finite situation humility should teach us that our knowledge, including scientific knowledge, passes through dogmatic phases; phases which we are loathe to have challenged because we are so comfortable in them. Eventually the truth of the data finally forces error elimination and we are able to move forward to better understanding. Paul said that *we see through a glass darkly*. We should not fear scientific discovery -- only distorting the data God has placed at our disposal as to the true nature of the world around us. It is very hard to escape from

myths of the past.

Today we are witnessing much less dogmatism by some scientists about the nature and origin of the universe. Old scientific postulates have had to be revised. For example, the old materialist assumption about the nature of the atom has, quite literally, evaporated and with it the underpinnings of the materialist dogma as to the ultimate nature of reality which was so popular earlier in this century. Purely mechanical and deterministic explanations of the world are breaking down.

A surprising number of modern scientists, including physicists, are now turning to a theistic explanation of the complexity of the world and the cross-over between theology and science is being investigated afresh. Some of these scientists are saying that to believe that impersonal matter, which may have a limiting potency, and randomness by means of organic naturalism, have produced a rational universe, is unpalatable. They argue that mind must be involved rather than merely randomness and chance in order to account for the subtle conditions which are hospitable to life. This also suggests to me that new generations of Christians must arise who, while accepting the Christian claim to revelation will work diligently in the scientific disciplines in order to better understand the nature of the Creation. It is surely true that *the heavens declare the glory of God* (*Psalm 19:1*). If, as we Chinese have believed, divine providence is an important factor in the world, then we who are Chinese Christians need to study carefully how God works in the world both providentially and creatively.

Basic to the *Genesis* teaching is that God created the world *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing. Now, "out of nothing" is an odd phrase but the intent is clear: unique activity to bring into existence that which did not exist before. There was no forming, eternally existent matter. Nor was the universe created out of a negative primal beginning (chaos or darkness). It was created by divine fiat.

The linguistic foundation for this in *Genesis* is the Hebrew verb *bara*, whose derivation is obscure but whose meaning based upon use in the creation narrative is clear. Essentially the statement is about God and the power of his creative word. The fundamental question *Genesis* addresses is why anything exists at all. Creation concerns not an abstract, detached First Cause; nor a Creator locked within the struggles of an evolving order which he hopes to lure forward; but the transcendent, personal God who *saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good* (*Genesis 1:31*).

While the use of *bara* appears to include on-going creative activity, as possibly in *Psalm 104:30*, the two aspects of creation, ictic and process, are correlated in the Scriptures. They are not independent concepts so far as God's creative activity is concerned. The use of *bara* here identifies activity unique to God; he is the subject of the act of creation; he alone creates. The object of *bara* (the accusative of the verb) is always the product, never the material out of which things are fashioned. It is an extraordinary act, not a common one, an act which is appropriate only to the creating activity of God.

Implications of the narrative are:

a) Only God is eternal, matter is not. There is no Dualism in *Genesis*. Whether the matter spoken of in *Genesis* pre-existed the present form of the universe is not the issue because it too was the creation of God.

b) God stands over and above his world, he is not locked into it. He is transcendent (*Isaiah* 41:4; 48:12). Pantheism or Panentheism cannot be posited from the *Genesis* narrative. The world is not necessary to God's life; God is necessary to the world. This is the significance of,

*I, the Lord, the first,
and with the last; I am He.*

c) Nevertheless, God acts in the world. The world is not independent of God. He is immanent in it.

d) Use of the word of God (*God said...*) as the energy of the creative act, which is by fiat, safeguards the conception of creation from emanation. The world is not an extension of the divine being (*Psalms* 33:9; note *Isaiah* 45:12; 48:13 and *Psalms* 148:5-6,

*For he spoke, and it came to be,
he commanded, and it stood forth.*

Passages which parallel the thought of the foregoing concepts include *Amos* 4:13; *Psalms* 90:1-2; 102:25-27; 104:1-4; *Isaiah* 42:5; 55:10-11.

In the New Testament, the vocabulary for creation is diverse. The words "to create" and "creator" are used in a manner which is parallel to the Old Testament term "to create" (*1 Peter* 4:19, note also *Romans* 1:25 and *Colossians* 3:10). They signify the act of creating (*Romans* 1:20; *2 Peter* 3:4); the totality of the creation (*Romans* 8:39; *Colossians* 1:15, 23; *Hebrews* 9:11); and, each creature or created thing (*Hebrews* 4:13, *Romans* 8:19-20).

The term *world* identifies the creation as an ordered world, as a cosmos not a chaos (*Acts* 17:24); the inhabited earth (*Colossians* 2:20; *1 Timothy* 6:7); fallen humanity as alienated from God (*John* 7:7; 15:19; *1 John* 2:15); and, along with the foregoing, signifies worldly possessions and values (*1 John* 2:16).

The inhabited world in the sense of the community of humanity or social order is identified by the term *oikoumene* (*Romans* 10:18; *Hebrews* 2:5; *Revelation* 3:10).

Finally, the universe in its temporal connotation is referred to by *aion*, translated age or era upon era. Very often its use parallels the use of *cosmos* when describing the world as evil and alienated from God (*Galatians* 1:4; *1 Corinthians*

2:6-8; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 6:12).

That creation in the New Testament is *ex nihilo* (involving no previously existing matter) is clear. *Hebrews* 11:3 declares:

*By faith we understand
that the world was created by the word of God,
so that what is seen
was made out of things which do not appear.*

Luke reports this doctrine as an assumption (*Acts* 4:24; 14:15; 17:24), as does Peter (2 *Peter* 3:4). Paul's language is dramatic: *from the foundation (casting down) of the world* (*Ephesians* 1:4). He explicitly says that God *gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist* (*Romans* 4:17).

Biblical teaching focuses not on the mode or time scale of creation, but on God's sovereignty and providence. He is the source of all things, including life. He is responsible for the kind of world he created - a world in which sin and evil could arise because of creaturely abuse of freedom. As Creator, God is wholly good and is our heavenly Father. His sovereignty in history will yet be shown through the establishment of his kingly rule.

As God's handiwork, the Creation is not incidental to his purposes even though his central focus is on human beings whom he created in his own image. The Creation exists for ends greater than human existence and human relationships. It, too, is the object of redemption. In short, the Creation does not exist for exploitive human ends. Stewardship obligations are laid upon human beings in exchange for tenure. This does not mean that resources are not to be extensively utilized and developed. Nevertheless, the Creation has its own intrinsic value in relation to God's purposes. Human beings are stewards of divinely given resources.

Only a fool is blind to the beauties and wonders of nature. Only a fool vandalizes nature. Anyone who has lain face down and put his nose among the blades of grass to observe the beauty and vigor of a single living blade as it reaches for the sky, or who has tried to photograph the grace of a flower, will have recognized and appreciated the artistry of the Creator. His trademark is stamped in every living thing. Hold Nature up to the light and the divine hologram will be clearly visible. As Paul discusses human spiritual opacity, he says (*Romans* 1:20):

*Ever since the creation of the world
His invisible nature,
namely, his eternal power and deity,
has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.
So they are without excuse.*

What form does the creation take? This is an important question, upon

which I can only begin to touch here. In regard to the ancient questions of perfection and change, God is himself perfect and unchanging, but he has nevertheless acted to create and has sovereignly created a world in which change takes place under his providential care. It is a world that is both material and spiritual. Matter is the non-personal substance of the world. Matter is that which is acted upon. Spirit is that which is self-moved, hence spirit and personhood are synonyms. Spirit is non-reducible spiritual reality: personal subjects, such as we are, embodied in matter. As well, spiritual beings are created for freedom, which is the capacity to make conscious decisions that have outcomes. In other words, in the Christian doctrine of creation determinism is denied.

The reality of spirit and freedom confirm the reality of contingency in our world, of which they form a part, and validate our confidence in a scientifically dependable world. Increase of control, including moral self-control, marks also an increase of freedom. The whole earth will be filled with the glory of God when freedom is exercised according to the will of God. That this kind of freedom should exist within a universe in which contingency is neither an illusion nor irrational is testimony to grace as key feature in the mode of the relations between God and the world.

This is where grace fits in as the indispensable feature of God's relation to the world, given God's personal nature and his purpose to create human beings in his own image. The importance of this truth is often insufficiently grasped.

The biblical doctrine of grace is not a monotone. It is a harmony of two tones which unite in a majestic symphony: there is the salvation meaning of grace, and there is the meaning of grace as to the form of the creation. The latter is in view here, following a brief identification of the salvation sense of grace.

The salvation meaning of grace will be addressed later under the doctrine of salvation. The foundation of salvation is that we are saved by grace, and grace alone. It is the sense of grace as God's unmerited favor to sinners; of his opportune, unsolicited aid to the needy and helpless. It is, as well, grace as the ongoing feature of the Christian life. This carries with it questions which divide the Christian communions as to how grace is received and whether grace concerns primarily imputed or infused righteousness, or both.

But grace as a factor in the form of the creation is central to our understanding of the kind of world God has created. Grace as the mode of God's relationship to the world comprises the frame of reference of the salvation sense of grace.

In regard to the form of the creation, grace is the mode of God's relation to the world in virtue of which God's perfection and independence are re-affirmed, and the independence of the world and the reality of freedom are assured. The doctrine of the *creation-out-of-nothing* implies not only that the world had a beginning but also that it is of such and such a kind. Grace is the rationale of a world created by the personal God for persons. It is a rationale which is at

variance with other models such as that the earthly is related to the heavenly as appearance is related to reality; that the world flows from the being not the will of God; that God is locked into an evolving process and is himself evolving; or that the infinite being of God must be shielded from the non-being of the natural order by intermediaries.

Grace says that God is neither too proud to create a real world nor is he too remote to care for it. The doctrine of grace is uniquely relevant to modern thought in view of the reduction of human beings to bundles of non-personal motor-affective responses. This is the doctrine of materialism. In our time the pursuit of personal identity reflects deep concern about the nature and future of humanity.

The Christian creation-personhood viewpoint may be more important to the future of humanity than has been assumed. For Christians, human life is not a transient mode of existence in which a more enduring system of patterns expresses itself, whether transcendentalist or impersonal cosmic process. In these grace in the Christian paradigmatic sense is not needed because freedom is an illusion. This is the core of Augustine's dissatisfaction with the Idealist systems which he details in the *Confessions* along with his turning to the Creation-Fall-Redemption world view. In a unique way the biblical categories are a call to arms for the defense of the essential nature and infinite value of human beings in the modern world. Ultimately the reduction of human nature to behavioral responses, or the merging of human nature into some alleged higher reality, is immoral.

By maintaining that human beings are spiritual and creative agents, which attests to their being more than causally determined creatures, and more than ephemeral reflections of another world, Christians do not opt out of the scientific age and neither do they concede the debate to transcendentalist mythologies or despairing materialism. Christian belief is anti-reductionist and is person-preserving.

Freedom is the chief end of creation and grace makes realization of freedom possible. Without grace there cannot be inter-personal relations and freedom. Grace allows for the power of choice. Grace furnishes the framework in which freedom is not only possible but in which it becomes a reality. Grace meets humans at the points of their unfreedom, beckoning them into the freedom of sons and daughters of God. God is not detached and remote from us, he is near at hand to every one of us.

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China Letter 7

MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

The other evening I attended a superb concert of traditional Chinese

music. Among the artists was one of our most celebrated pipa musicians. His final selection, *Ambushes From All Sides* (), which he played beautifully, fully justified his reputation as China's foremost pipa player. As the rush of music rose and fell, I thought of all the turmoil, the ups and downs of our history and all the suffering we have endured. Is this the destiny of the human race? Can there be peace and harmony, watered by love? This is the great theme of Christian faith: that God's love envelops broken humanity to restore us into the image he had first intended. I've thought a great deal about this since my last letter to you about the Creation. It is time for me to address more fully matters concerning our human nature and our human condition in light of biblical teaching.

But first, let me address the issue of the distinctiveness of the Christian faith, our Chinese heritage, and accommodation. This is hardly something new to you or something I need to remind you about. It has been a divisive issue. The question is: are our classical Chinese texts antithetical to Christian teaching, or can some of them be interpreted as indicators of divine providence at work in human society to conserve elements of the truth about God's working in his Creation, including in human nature? Paul addresses this matter in *Romans* 1:19-23.

I do not believe that it is untenable casuistry to hold that the Lord of creation has left himself with a witness in the created order, within the human conscience, and in elements of recorded human understanding. Paul also speaks of this to the Athenians in *Acts* 17:28. I believe that some of our classical texts attest to this truth. The biblical revelation teaches us that God has made himself known as Creator and as Redeemer. As we grasp more fully the truth about God's creative activity we will take joy in his working throughout history and in his creation, and not be filled with superstition and fear that all around us bad spirits haunt the environment.

Let me back up a little, before I consider matters which concern human nature. The uniqueness of the Christian faith rests upon three important teachings: that God by his Spirit is the Creator and Sustainer of all things; that God is our loving heavenly Father; and, that Jesus Christ, the Founder and Foundation of our faith, is the Son of God and is, as well, the Brother of all humanity.

First, God by his Spirit is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Our ancient classics speak of humanity being divinely good. We then must ask, why is there so much evil? Why are we ambushed by evil? Have we faced up to the reality of sin and evil? As well, our classics do not speak of God's help being available to every individual person.

Second, God is our loving heavenly Father. *Malachi* 2:10 speaks of the only creator who is also the only Father of all. He is the Father who pities his children (*Psalms* 103:13). His fatherly love is more tenacious and enduring than even the finest human fatherly love (*Isaiah* 63:16; 64:8-9). It is love which has stood the test of time and the generations. Only the Bible unfolds the truth that

God is not only wise and sovereign, but that he is also love. His love is shown in his infinite patience with us in our failings, and in the manifestation of his righteousness in Christ to suffer for the sins of his erring children.

Third, the Founder and Foundation of our faith is the eternal Son of God, but the Son is not a far-off abstraction nor a detached potentate. He is our Brother, the first-born of humanity, which means that he is the true head, the Progenitor, of the human race, and that his humanity is the pattern God intended for us, into which he redeems us (*Matthew 25:40; Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6*). Hence, he who redeems us into his own image is not embarrassed to call us brethren (*Hebrews 2:11*). This is the great and holy ideal of Christian teaching.

Enough of that for the moment. I will speak of God's Fatherhood and Christ's Brotherhood again as I end this letter.

I return to our early heritage. Confucius' teaching emphasized the sacred character of a moral community, as a brotherhood of humanity under a universal sovereign Creator. Confucius taught the essential goodness of human nature as divinely implanted. Religion became chiefly ritual reaffirmation of moral and social principles and proper social relationships. The fundamental evil is social impropriety, rather than transgression of divine law for which were responsible and culpable. Superiors in family and society are responsible for lack of exercise of proper authority, and inferiors are responsible for lack of appropriate deference and subordination. On the basis of this premise the well-being of humanity depends on loyalty, discipline, hierarchy and authority, first in the family and, second, in the community. Salvation becomes appropriate behavior, good role models, and exemplary government by trustworthy officials.

Is this a realistic and adequate assessment of the human condition? Confucius acknowledged the need to reform society and human nature. To begin with, he claimed to be a transmitter, not an originator. And he confessed to certain shortcomings and moral failures. He hoped for improvement, if only he could have fifty more years for study.

Would to God that another fifty years would ensure development of perfection in any one of us, but it will not happen and it cannot happen because of our sinful condition. We may agree that obligatory morality is the stuff of life. But what about our failures and deficiencies? The Bible calls this sin. We need to grasp that sin, which is destructive of social relationships, is more than social impropriety, and that it is linked to a fundamental flaw in human nature. We need more than the Silver Rule, that what we would not want done to ourselves, we do not do to others. In the Christian statement of the Golden Rule, to do unto others as you would have them do to you is reflected the existence of a positive moral standard, not merely the reflex of recoiling from injury. At issue is the essential difference between right and wrong as established morally by the Creator, and our responsibility to do that which is good, and guilt when we do that which is evil.

This brings us again to the doctrine of creation and the teaching of the

Bible that evil has entered into the world because of sin. This means the Fall, which resulted in the ongoing sinfulness of creatures created by God for freedom and goodness. We must see that, given the Christian doctrine of Creation, the Fall is historical. We cannot take refuge in its being merely a symbol, and that it stands for the truth about every person, or the truth about the human race. Biblical teaching states the truth about how sin originated, that evil in nature is a derivative of sin, and that death is due to sin. The Fall is related to the realities of contingency and freedom in the world, it relates the origin of sin and evil to a moral not a non-moral cause, and it furnishes a rationale for the on-going universal human predicament in, and propensity to, sin.

The problem of evil has its sharpest and most uncomfortable edge within the implicates of the doctrine of Creation. Evil is not a co-eternal principle with good (no ultimate dualism). Evil cannot be defined as unreality or non-being. Evil cannot be reduced to good, or redefined as good, in some super-coherent infinite divine rationality or being. Evil is not the fault of a sub-deity, a demiurge, to shield the absolute from involvement. Evil is not a necessary, native cosmic condition against which God himself struggles and against which he invites us to struggle along with him. Evil is not a myth about non-being from which humans emerge in the struggle to achieve full self-consciousness or authentic existence. In Christian teaching the origin of evil is related to a bad will. It has an ethical base.

If God is good and is the Creator of the world, whence evil? The biblical answer is: It is a standing truth for Christians that evil has originated within creation through creaturely rebellion permitted by God. This is the meaning of the Fall. God did not create the world not knowing the ends of his actions. He created a world in which evil intrudes through a moral default. He did not create a creature who must fall but who could fall, knowing, as it were, that he had within himself the resources to deal redemptively with creaturely rebellion.

Whether the Fall of Adam and Eve was preceded by a pre-mundane Fall of Satan and angelic beings is immaterial to the central point. The principle stands. I believe that there was an historical pre-mundane Fall and that the Fall of Adam and Eve was precipitated by Satan's temptation. References to the fall of Satan and angels are found in *2 Peter* 2:4 and *Jude* 6. Related references include *John* 8:44, *2 Corinthians* 11:3 and *Revelation* 20:2.

The *Genesis* 3 narrative of the Fall says that evil originates within creation in opposition to, yet by permission of, God's will, and that it has the positive character of an act of rebellion. In short, it originates in sin. We cannot lift the Fall out of the time series without falling either into metaphysical dualism or into unmoral monism. Given the premises of the doctrine of Creation, whatever else it might have been, the Fall *must* have been an event in time. We cannot divorce its religious value from the historical event.

All of the foregoing follows from the biblical teaching that humanity was created in the image of God. Do you recall parallel teaching in our ancient classical tradition? God is the author of the human spirit.

What is that image? Beware of what is fashionable in opinion on this matter. For example, that relationship is the divine image (that is, the male-female relationship). Or, that dominion is the divine image because, some have said, God gave men and women dominion over the creation. Or, as many ancients thought, that reason is the divine image. What the Bible means is that the image is the essential spiritual reality, selfhood, personhood. No function of that reality is the image. The reality itself is that divine image, and that is personhood.

Hence I'm going to suggest that you think of the divine image in a four-fold way: a self, a rational self, a valuing self, and a purposing self.

First, by selfhood I mean that which the personal pronoun "I" expresses as commonplace of language. It would be wrong to make the commonplace incomprehensible. I take the self to be a non-reducible reality which we know ourselves and other selves to be by an immediate intuition. A person is not simply a unity of conscious experiences but is the subject of that unity. A person is the subject of experiences mediated through a particular body in space and time. He or she is a spiritual agent. The self is in the physical world but may not be reduced to any description of it, including functions of the brain and the body. While many facts about the operation of the central nervous system are now known, we are no closer to being able to give a scientific account of self-conscious life. Attempts to explain mind in terms of physical properties sidestep the reality of self-consciousness itself. Many voices are being raised today against the neurobiological, mechanistic or physicalist view of human nature (the view that "you are the neurons") rather than of the intelligent interactive agent. At its center Christian faith conserves persons and refuses to reduce them to physical functions of the brain.

Second, the self is a rational self. To say that intelligence is the crown of human nature does not deify reason. Everywhere in Scripture the appeal is made to intelligent, rational beings. Paul's attack on the wisdom of the world in the first two chapters of *I Corinthians* is not an attack upon intelligence but upon misuse of reason.

Third, the self is a valuing self. As spiritual beings we share a common sense of right and wrong and a common sense that it is always better to do right than to do wrong. This moral sense responds to the moral law which is identified ethically in Platonic theory as The Good, and described in Scripture as the righteousness of God. We are fashioned in such a manner as not merely to respond to stimuli nor merely to be governed by mores, but by an unconditional standard of value; by what ought to be the case, or by what we ought to do.

The experience of unconditional moral obligation is uniquely human. If it is real (and I believe that it is) then like anything else that is real, it cannot be proved. It is apprehended as an immediate datum of experience.

Unquestionably humans are creatures of habit, easily conditioned into patterns of behavior; nevertheless, morality is more than mores, and human

responses in moral situations reflect awareness of an objective standard of righteousness, of right and wrong, which transcends mores.

That human beings are moral selves goes beyond questions of behavior, moral rectitude and justice. Included is the capacity for commitment to high spiritual, and esthetic ideals and deep altruistic self-giving.

Fourth, the self is a purposing self. The image of God entails the capability for conscious, free, purposeful actions which are guided by high ideals. While in physics the concept of Indeterminacy has opened new understanding, behaviorists refuse to allow for contingency and freedom as real aspects of the world and of human experience. But there is no scientific basis for denying the freedom of the will.

Personal life which is spiritually qualified has a capacity for purposeful, creative activity. Persons can choose to act with increasing freedom or choose to act in ways that increase habituation and therefore limit freedom of action; for example, drug addiction. Conversely, habituation can serve freedom creatively, as in the skill of a concert pianist. Nevertheless, the higher the spirituality of personal life the less causally predictable are its choices (except in their moral quality) because as the spirituality of life increases its choices refer less to the antecedents of action and more to moral, esthetic and creative goals in relation to which decisions must be taken. Creativity is a mark of the image of God.

The image of God defines the essential nature of human beings. Freedom is the capacity of persons to make conscious decisions which are morally qualified. In view are the Creator's ends to create free, good persons who will become co-workers with himself. Spirit equals personhood equals the image of God. No theological, psychological or social theory is credible which denies the reality of freedom and its corollary, moral responsibility.

The Bible does not teach that the spirit, or soul, or person, pre-existed birth. The best understanding of the origin of the soul was put forward many centuries ago by Tertullian, an early Christian teacher. He tried to take account of the sovereignty of God and the reality of a dependable created order which would take adequate account of the transmission of personality characteristics from parent to child. Based on the account of the creation of the first human pair in *Genesis* 3, Tertullian said that the entire outflow and reproduction of the human race was God's gift at the creation; that is, nature proving herself true to the commandment of God to *be fruitful, and multiply*. This affirms the continuity of the providentially supervised creative process as the rationale for the transmission of psychological and other characteristics from generation to generation.

If human beings are universally prone to sin, what is sin? How may we define sin? On this the Bible is replete with statement and example.

Sin is a form of evil and is probably its genesis. We observe a least four forms of evil: First, ignorance (evil often results from even well-intentioned acts).

Second, ugliness (distortion of life and environment, the twisting of things, the frustration of incompleteness). Third, suffering, especially undeserved suffering (due to disease, catastrophe and evil intent). Fourth, sin (willful acts by rational beings). Of these Christians identify sin as the worst form of evil because it is the corruption of a person's inmost being. Jesus said that *there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him ... For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts ...* (Mark 7:15, 21). Sin is not curable by human progress, it is an obstacle in human social relations, and it hinders faith in God.

Sin violates that which is right by an act which is wrong. The difference between right and wrong, and doing that which is wrong, is the defining moment for sin. Right and wrong stand for objective characteristics which attach directly and inalienably to acts and their consequences. Christians agree with moral realists that we are each subject to an unconditional standard of value. But Christians hold that right and good are judged morally by more than the standard of being conducive to the maximum possible good (conversely wrong and bad by what is inimical to it). Christians are also sympathetic to the idealist premise (as in Plato) that right and wrong relate to the standard of the ultimate good and that it is always better to do right than wrong. But they relate the rightness or wrongness of acts not simply to intrinsic good but to the Biblical revelation that the good and right are what God wills. To ask whether the will of God is good is redundant.

Christians insist that the Bible reveals the will of God in specific terms. Christian morality is not based upon situational ethics in which every person does that which is right in his or her own eyes (*Judges* 21:25). Moral judgments are more than culturally fashioned and biologically induced responses. Nor are they simply expressions of feeling so that "that is wrong" really means "I don't like that." Nor do Christians teach that good and right are dictated arbitrarily by God.

In the Bible the range of terms which identify sin, define it, and address its consequences is extensive. The following lists serve as an introduction to a very large topic. They do not exhaust the meaning of sin. I list only generic terms and merely one reference, but encourage you to follow up with more detailed study of the Scriptures. Many other cognate forms are utilized in the Scriptures.

In the Old Testament sin and the sinful condition are defined in the following ways:

1. Missing the mark or doing wrong as blameworthy failure or coming short (*Psalms* 32:1).
2. To err through ignorance, to wander, apostasy (*Isaiah* 53:6).
3. Perversion or distortion by evil doing (*2 Chronicles* 6:37).
4. The burdensomeness of life due to sin (*Job* 5:6-7).

5. Want of integrity or rectitude (*Hosea* 10:13).
6. Transgressing the law or that which is right (*Psalms* 17:3).
7. Breakup and ruin due to sin (*Isaiah* 3:11).
8. Rebellion; refusal to be subject to lawful authority (*Isaiah* 1:2)
9. Lawlessness, anarchy (*Psalms* 1:1).
10. Treachery, faithlessness. breach of trust (*Joshua* 7:1).
11. Falsehood, deceit, such as the emptiness of idols (*Isaiah* 41:29).
12. Guilt, even for unwitting sin (*Leviticus* 4:13).
13. The reproach, shame, disgrace of sinful behavior (*Proverbs* 25:10).

In the New Testament sin and the sinful condition are defined in the following ways:

1. To miss the mark, shortcoming (*Romans* 3:23).
2. Godlessness, impiety, irreverence (*Romans* 1:18).
3. Disobedience, refusing to hear (*Romans* 5:19).
4. Lawlessness, breaking the law (*1 John* 3:4).
5. Transgression (*Matthew* 15:2-3).
6. Lapse, failing (*Ephesians* 1:7).
7. Ignorance which accompanies sin (*Ephesians* 4:18)
8. Failure to fulfill duty (*2 Peter* 2:19-20).
9. Unrighteousness, lack of conformity to God's will (*Acts* 1:18).
10. Badness, worthlessness (*Romans* 1:30).
11. Corruption, contagious evil (*Matthew* 12:34).
12. Base, worker of evil (*James* 3:16).

The biblical terminology for sin is simply an entry into its rich storehouse of teaching and biography. Biblical biography is the mother-lode for mining the true meaning of sin. There are many examples: Abraham's attempt to deceive Pharaoh. David's sin with Bathsheba. Solomon's pursuit of pleasure and fame. Israel and Judah's rebellion and faithlessness. Whole books are devoted to the theme, such as Isaiah and Hosea. The Psalms and Proverbs and the teaching of Jesus focus upon what sin is.

I have sometimes wondered how best to classify the human propensity to sin. The following seven concepts may be useful: To rebel against, despise, hate God. To miss the mark, to fail. To pervert justice, to twist, destroy. To rebel, transgress, betray. To act out of ignorance with evil resulting. To act out of bondage, or the conditioning effects of sinning. To love impurity, corruption. This last as described in the Bible is an awful state: to consciously call good evil, and evil good (*Isaiah 5:20*).

In church tradition, there is a rubric which ought to be valued as an instructional tool in fresh ways today, namely, the *Seven Deadly Sins*. I suggest this along with their correlates: the four philosophical virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, Justice; and the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Love, as useful teaching tools. The Seven Deadly Sins are: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lust.

Pride is inordinate self-esteem, leading to one's being puffed up and stiff-necked. God is not in the proud. They are too full of themselves.

Envy trivializes and belittles the excellence or accomplishments of others, or thinks it a right to have what anyone else has. In so far as it chips away at gifts that God gives to others it harbors contempt for the sacred.

Anger is a short madness. It is the devil's furnace and is highly destructive. It is built on a fixation of hate or a perversion of love.

Sloth is not in the first instance laziness, but is a state of dejection, of indifference. It is refusal to meet the responsibilities and pick up on the demands of life. The Bible is full of warnings against sloth. It is opting out from under the burdens of life.

Avarice is pictured in the miser whose idols are possessions or money. It is love of possessing, not stewardship which uses resources for the glory of God and the good of others. Possession defines one's position in society and massages the ego.

Gluttony is obsession with food. The image is that of the bulging eyes and face. It is caring most of all for what one will eat or drink, with little regard for moderation or self-discipline.

Lust is perversion of love. It is sin against one's own flesh and against the persons of others. True love entails continence, commitment, tenderness, permanence.

Consider that in the Bible sin is taken seriously. Sin is more than social impropriety. We must face squarely the moral evil in human nature which makes us sin-prone. In view of this fact, the biblical statement is all the more marvelous for its poignancy: *God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners*

Christ died for us.

This prompts me to come back to my earlier theme of God's loving Fatherhood toward us in Christ. The writer of the *Book of Hebrews* states this truth explicitly (*Hebrews* 12:9-11).

This is a remarkable passage of scripture. The text draws an analogy between earthly and divine fatherhood and then interprets divine fatherhood in relation to our on-going filial relationship to the Creator of all.

He begins with a truism: each of us has an earthly father who quite properly disciplines us. The unspoken assumption here is that both the discipline and our obedient submission to discipline are proper. This has surely been at the center of our Chinese familial structure and obligation.

He then challenges his readers, and us, to understand that God the Creator is the Father of our spirits. This means every human being and, hence, of every individual Chinese man, woman, boy and girl.

But, he adds: whereas our earthly parent disciplines us for a time, until we reach maturity, and sometimes *at their pleasure* (which means uncertainties of mood and judgment), God our heavenly Father nurtures us for our ultimate good, *that we may share his holiness*. This is nurturing, redeeming, transforming Fatherhood. And it is the heart of our Lord's teaching about Fatherhood, as the following comment shows.

As I write this, I am reminded of the theme of the pipa instrumental music which I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, *Ambushed From All Sides*. I speak of Jesus' words from the Cross as he suffered not only the pains of crucifixion, but also of taunting by those who chose to be his enemies, and abandonment by most of his followers (*Luke* 23:46). As he died on that cross for us Jesus cried, *Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit*. In his agony, he called out to his heavenly Father, as we may today. But notice his words. In place of the names of God in *Psalms* 31:5 which he is quoting (*Elohim*: Sovereign Lord of Creation; and *Yahweh*: Lord of the Covenant) Jesus says *Father*. This one term sums up all that Christians can say about God: our heavenly Father, the refuge of his people in their distress.

Loving Fatherhood is a dominant theme in the New Testament. Over three hundred references attest to this truth. God is spoken of and addressed scores of times as Father. But it is in the deeply moving, intimate form of address as *our Father* that the truth of his unchanging love for us is the strongest.

In our tradition the Supreme Spirit has been understood to transcend his subjects, to exercise authority from above, to rule through law, to command obedience, to be just and impartial, and to cause wrongdoers to suffer. The Bible teaches as well that God the Lord is the supreme authority over the earth and over humanity. It teaches obedience to God's laws and specifies what those laws are,

beyond law and custom being simply expressions of social mores. It confirms our deepest instincts that wrongdoers will be -- indeed, ought to be -- punished.

But in the Bible, God is more than principle and his righteousness is more than moral rectitude as well as being greater than social mores. It is righteousness tinged with grace. As Creator he is our Father. This means that his law comprises not merely a cold moral code, but is our Schoolmaster to bring us to Christ as Paul declares (*Galatians* 3:24). He creates, loves, redeems, nurtures. It is as a derivative of this Fatherhood that Christ is our Foundation, our Redeemer, our Brother.

Note carefully the teaching of *Hebrews* 2:10-13. We who in God's providence have one origin, and are now the redeemed through Christ's self-humbling, death and resurrection, are those Christ is not ashamed to call brethren. We who are created by God can know true life only by submitting to God's control: to be *subject to the Father of Spirits and live* (*Hebrews* 12:9).

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China Letter 8

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

My last letter may have depressed you. Any consideration of the human condition inevitably will have its dark side. Especially if we realistically face up to the radical evil within us rather than evade the issue through rationalization. The entrance of sin into the human race produces not only on-going transgressions of God's law, it also fogs our understanding by making self-deception not only easy but attractive. Inevitably solutions to humanity's problems and our own personal sinfulness become skewed. The error of self-salvation is the product of self-deception.

The comments of the great church father Augustine, written over sixteen hundred years ago in his *Confessions*, are instructive on this point. Somehow our thinking needs to be straightened out due to the effects of sin, even though awareness of God as being external to us and as immutable may be deemed to be intuitive and certain; that is, that God is truth itself. God's revelation in the Scriptures illuminates and straightens out our weak understanding. Are we too proud to accept the testimony of the witnesses of Scripture and by accepting that testimony to move away from credulity, superstition, wrong opinion, and rashness? Augustine said that God acts upon us by the incentives of our perceptions to will and to believe. This begins by a process of falsification when we first awaken to the possibility of error: "thus far I may have been deceived, but I must press on to the truth by being willing to allow my assumptions to be tested."

As we re-structure our thinking we will see clearly see clearly that evil is

not a necessity of existence but is voluntary, as contingent upon our free acts. Sin is essentially pride, a pride which desires to live and act in independence of God. While this free will along with reason distinguishes us from the rest of the animal creation, Augustine said that we must begin to understand that nothing can make the mind the companion of lust (sin) but its own will and free choice. Defection of the human will from that which is right and good is due to imperfect piety; the failure to acknowledge that God is God, as Paul indicates in *Romans* 1:21. Augustine describes this as a swerving of the will, as being quite crooked away from God.

At this point Augustine gives us a marvelous insight, the truth of which modern behavioral studies confirm. This is that the conditioning principle bears not only upon our bodily reflexes but also upon the ways we think. Not only do carnal appetites weaken reason and the will, they also skew reason through false perceptions. The result is that error and false opinion defile our lives.

Augustine speaks of the results of such conditioning as bondage due to custom or habit. We know this to be true biologically through lusts such as gluttony and sexual incontinence. We also know it to be true socially because we tend to become like the people we associate with. More critical, however, is mental conditioning: the conceptual crookedness which occurs when our minds are taken over by various fantasies and superstitions which have nothing to do with the realities of our human nature, of our actions, or of the world around us.

One of these has to do with our willingness to allow undermining of freedom and responsibility with concepts which blame something else or someone else for our failures, or which re-define our moral failures as merely social lapses. Augustine said that this is failure to recognize that we are bound not by another man's errors but with our own iron will.

Augustine had ransacked old conceptual schemes, including the teaching of Plato and Aristotle, the Manicheans and the ancient Skeptics, in his effort to find the solution to the issue of failure, guilt and responsibility. There had to come for him not only emotional repentance for sin, but an intellectual repentance as well -- a radical *metanoia*, a word in New Testament teaching which means an intellectual about-face, a radical change of mind. This change of thinking involved re-fashioning his understanding of evil and sin. Sin and evil are not to be understood metaphysically and then cured by re-phrasing their meaning (curing them by thought). Sin is action producing guilt and its only cure is divine action. This is the meaning of the Cross. God has acted redemptively to deal with our sinful acts and the guilt which accrues to sinful behavior.

The fundamental issue religion must deal with is not only to encourage aspiration to high ideals, but to inform us what to do about evil and sin as realities of the world and human experience, which cannot be cured either by re-defining them or thinking them away. Therein lies the cruciality of Christ's Cross.

Think of it: our heritage has said that *what the superior man seeks is in*

himself. Where is the inner dynamic to achieve high ideals? If we are so self-reliant, why do we continue to sin, even if we re-define sin as impropriety? Furthermore, in our tradition there has not been the principle of divine self-sacrificing redemptive love. This is true divine fatherly love.

The Christian Gospel consistently calls us back to its center, which is the extraordinary conclusion of the life of Jesus Christ. He was falsely charged and unjustly condemned. He was cruelly crucified. His tomb was sealed and guards were put in place. His disciples gave up hope and went home. Yet on the third day after his crucifixion the tomb was empty. At first, his disciples could not credit the reality of his resurrection. But he appeared to his disciples, spent some days among them, then he ascended into the heavens, from whence we look for his coming again.

What is the meaning of Christ's Cross? How could anyone crucified and helpless do anything for anyone else in all the world?

I have a picture of a line drawing which was made by an unknown skeptic on the wall of a cave early in the Christian era, during the second century after Christ. It illustrates what a skeptic might think of Christ and his Cross. Two straight lines make a cross. On the Cross is roughly drawn the body of a man. At the foot of the Cross is drawn the kneeling figure of a man under whom are scrawled the words, *Alexander is worshipping his god*. But the head on the shoulders of the crucified figure is that of an ass, not of a man. This shows the depths of unbelief in the efficacy of the Cross.

I ask again, What was the Cross? Paul declares that the indispensable teaching among Christians can be only *Jesus Christ and him crucified* (*I Corinthians* 2:2; 1:23), and *far be it from me that I should glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (*Galatians* 6:14). The Cross of Christ is central to the Christian Gospel. The New Testament declares that the salvation of the world depends upon the death of the Son of God incarnate. This truth follows from pivotal teaching in the New Testament. I want first to summarize New Testament teaching before proceeding to expand upon several important points of that teaching.

First, the Cross was not an historical accident. It was not an event which took God off guard. It originated in the eternal counsels of God and is God's act for the salvation of the world. It is an act of loving and gracious condescension.

Second, the Cross has a distinct bearing upon the world's evil and upon human sin. The Cross points to the restoration of Creation and the abolition of suffering as well as dealing with human guilt. The Cross has a cosmic impact.

Third, The Cross is the judgment-death for sin. Christ's death is indispensable to salvation and it is sufficient in relation to the judgment of God against sin.

Fourth, The Cross signifies that it is by the death of Christ that human beings are saved and, further, that Christ's death is the death of death for us in virtue of his resurrection.

To sum up, the Work of Christ originates in the gracious will of God. It has to do with sin. Its means is the crucified Christ. Christ's death was sacrificial. This means that it was vicarious, representative, and substitutionary. The spiritual end which Christ's death secures is reconciliation or renewed fellowship with God based on the forgiveness of sins. These themes pervade the New Testament.

In what follows I give you a short, representative list of New Testament texts to meditate upon, but there are many more:

The writings of Peter and his associate Mark: *Mark* 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; 14:36; *1 Peter* 1:18-21; 2:24.

The writings of the historian Luke: *Acts* 2:23, 36; 3:17-18; 4:26-28; 5:30-31; 10:39, 43; 13:28-39.

Theological statements of Paul about the meaning of Christ's death: *Romans* 3:21-26; 5:8; 8:3, 32; *1 Corinthians* 15:3; *2 Corinthians* 5:14-15, 21; *Galatians* 1:3-4; 3:13; *1 Thessalonians* 5:9-10.

The writer of the *Book of Hebrews*: *Hebrews* 1:3; 2:9; 3:1; 5:1-6; 9:26, 28; 10:12.

Finally, the writings John, the beloved disciple: *John* 1:29; 3:14-16; 10:17-18; 12:31-33; *1 John* 1:7; 2:2; 4:10.

The key-feature text of the Gospels as to the cruciality of the Cross is *Mark* 10:45:

*For the Son of Man came also not to be served but to serve
and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

As we study the meaning of Christ's Cross we must conserve the New Testament data. The Work of Christ is a coherent, logically consistent whole. But it is like the unity of a diamond which is cut with many facets. The many metaphors and images are like the facets of a diamond. As one turns the diamond, each facet reflects the unity and inner beauty of the stone. So it is with the metaphors and images which highlight the Work of Christ.

We shall grasp more fully what the Work of Christ means when we comprehend better the twin truths that God sent his Son into the world to redeem us by his death on the Cross, and that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and has now given to us the ministry of reconciliation. The meaning of Christ's Cross can be grasped only within the context of faith which is fully trinitarian.

I shall now proceed to expound several of the major New Testament themes as the essential meaning of the Cross.

First, the Cross demonstrates the nature, intensity and scope of God's love. The Cross does not buy the love of God, it is the fruit of the love of God. Salvation is rooted in the love of God, and the Cross is the gift of that love. As I pointed out in my earlier letter to you, love in the Bible is not merely a function of human relations, but is inherent in the unity of the triune life of God. Hence the Cross as the expression of the love of God is God's holiness in action. Paul says, *God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)*. Just as a child in a loving relationship with its mother knows where its heart belongs, so the human heart which responds to Christ's love knows its true Lord, Master and home as expressed by *John 3:16*:

*For God so loved the world
that He gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him
should not perish,
but have everlasting life.*

Second, Christians universally hold that the death of Christ on the Cross was a sacrifice. In the Scriptures sacrifices have several different meanings and serve several different functions, but the primary function is to serve as a vehicle for confessing sin, atoning for sin, and renewing fellowship with God through forgiveness based upon atonement. In the Bible sacrifice is understood through the concepts of representation and substitution. This is how Christ's vicarious sufferings and death bear upon the forgiveness of sins. Paul says (*Ephesians 1:7*):

*In him we have redemption through his blood,
the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of his grace which he lavished on us.*

Based upon *Philippians* chapter 2 we understand that Christ's sacrifice is first and foremost a divine act of loving condescension. In Christ God put himself at our side to suffer with us and for our sins. Second, Christ's sacrifice recognizes the moral nature of evil and sin but through atonement provides free forgiveness. Third, the Cross speaks to the problem of evil and pain. Like Jesus, the Christian can bear evil redemptively. Fourth, atonement has a relationship to resurrection because Christ's resurrection speaks of resurrection life in him.

The most important sacrifice in the Old Testament is the one performed on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), described in *Leviticus* chapter 16. This is the sacrifice which is employed as the analogue of the sacrifice of Christ in *Hebrews* and referenced by Paul in *Romans 3*.

On the Day of Atonement the High Priest first sprinkled blood for himself, then for the people, on the Mercy Seat in the Holiest Place of the Tabernacle, which was entered only once a year. *Hebrews* interprets this in relation to Christ's

perfect, unrepeatable sacrifice. His blood is not sprinkled on the earthly Mercy Seat, but in the very presence of God. The torn veil is the tearing of his own flesh on the Cross as the opening of the way into God's presence in heaven. *Hebrews* is telling us that the Atonement has to do with God himself, which Paul also states in *Romans* 3:21-26. It is something God does in relation to his own holiness, but here I want to focus on the vicarious element in relation to forgiveness.

The New Testament declares repeatedly that Christ makes the perfect and final sacrifice for sin. Thus one of the key connecting and cohering links between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the truth that the Suffering Servant of *Isaiah* 53 is the Son of Man who gives his life a ransom for the many of *Mark* 10:45. This passage is pivotal,

*For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

It is fundamental to the teaching of the New Testament that a life was given in death for the sin of the world. There is a cost attached to forgiveness. The cost is the sacrifice of Christ. Its power is the dynamic of its vicariousness not only to bear the sin but also to renew the sinner: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* (*John* 15:13). The vicarious sacrifice of Christ does indeed relate judicially to the penalty meted out to sin. It does indeed relate regeneratively to life, renewing the spirit of altruism and self-giving in the heart of the penitent one. But in regard to sin the first function of vicarious sacrifice is to absorb the offense. Only then can forgiveness become reality.

A key issue for many modern people, and perhaps within our own ancient tradition, is the very concept of divine forgiveness. It is a significant fact that in our naturalistically oriented age, in which it has been assumed that a biological and behavioral explanation can be given for all wrong behavior, a more sympathetic eye is being turned to the relation between religion, including sin and guilt, and mental health. A-morality can contribute but cannot cure personality deviation and societal disorder. The person who, though mistakenly, condemns himself even to the point of thinking that he has sinned unpardonably, is closer to spiritual recovery than the person who blames others or impersonal biological factors.

The inner destructiveness of unconfessed sin is dramatically described in the psychologically apt metaphors of *Psalms* 32:3-5,

*When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer*

*acknowledged my sin to Thee,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord';
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.*

What happens when one person forgives another? It is not merely a verbal transaction like saying simply 'I forgive you,' but a moral one. I mean that something must happen between the one offended and the offender and that unless it happens in the one offended forgiveness cannot take place. Forgiveness entails far more than re-orienting the feelings of the offender to feel good about himself, or even merely re-orienting the feelings of the offended party. The guilt of the offender is surely there, as David says in *Psalms* 51:3-4,

*I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me,
Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned,
and done this evil in thy sight.*

What happens in forgiveness, in the heart of the one who forgives? Why is God's forgiveness related specifically to the sufferings of Christ's cross? Paul says, *in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses* (*Ephesians* 1:7).

Something happens in the one who forgives. The forgiver redeems the situation. But it is not merely love saying 'I forgive freely.' It is love acting holily, otherwise forgiveness of sin jeopardizes God's holy law. Expiation and forgiveness connect.

Fundamentally the issue concerns the nature of creation. God has given us freedom and in relation to the risk this entails (if we can so speak about the sinful abuse of freedom) he maintains his holiness by means of law and penalty. But God is not only the author of freedom, he becomes also the object of our actions and he by forgiveness soaks up, as it were, the force of our sinning. Indeed, the infinity of his love is the measure of his capacity to absorb our sins.

This epitomizes one side of the truth of the Scripture *that Christ died for our sins* (*1 Corinthians* 15:3), or *that he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree* (*1 Peter* 2:24), or *that for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin* (*2 Corinthians* 5:21), or that he is *the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world* (*John* 1:29). These texts have in view more than bearing penalty. They speak of bearing the sin itself. The capacity of a vicarious act to bear sin is the power to forgive. For forgiveness to take place sin must be borne.

We arrive at this fundamental biblical theorem: sin is forgiven as it is borne.

Implicit in the meaning of Christ's vicarious sufferings is the capacity of the one who lovingly condescends to enter into another's burden and to bear it. Forgiveness is always tragic and costly because forgiveness bears the wrong and absorbs the evil of the wrong. This is part of the objective side of forgiveness

which comprises the basis for the subjective experience of being forgiven.

Nothing is spiritually higher or deeper in Christian faith than the assurance that through Christ's Cross one can be, indeed is, a forgiven sinner.

The third theme is that of redemption. Christians are '*the redeemed of the Lord*.' Like sacrifice, in the Bible redemption is a key concept which defines how God accomplishes salvation for us by means of the Cross.

The concept of redemption relates to the evil which plagues the world and the sinful condition of humanity. This condition is pictured as one of bondage from which humanity needs deliverance, or helplessness which calls for aid by another. In *Hosea* 11:1 Egypt is a metaphor for bondage from which God delivered his son Israel.

Another metaphor is the picture of our sinful condition as a slave-market from which humanity must be redeemed. Jesus speaks of the slavery which sin becomes (*John* 8:34-36) from which he, the Son, can free humanity. Peter's epistles provide a running commentary on the theme by referring to sinfulness as moral enslavement (*2 Peter* 2:19) from which one can escape through the fulfilled promise of redemption (1:4). This extends the redemption theme of *1 Peter* 1:18-19.

Two key ideas as to the meaning of redemption have sometimes been juxtaposed: deliverance and ransom.

First, Israel's deliverance from Egypt was indeed redemption, interpreting redemption as deliverance by God's power, not redemption by payment of price. But if redemption means deliverance without ransom being paid, what becomes of the Cross?

Second, redemption commonly means rescue by payment of ransom, as in the traditional understanding of *Ephesians* 1:7, *redemption through his blood*. To this can even be added an aspect of the meaning of substitution, in the sense that Christ our substitute is the price paid for our redemption, though for the most part substitution concerns his bearing the judgment of sin in our place.

'Redemption' by payment of price in the sense of a substitute is clear in the critically important passages *Matthew* 20:28 and *Mark* 10:45 where 'in place of' is stated. The verbal form 'to redeem' equally strongly conveys the same meaning: *who gave himself for us to redeem us* (*Titus* 2:14, note also *Luke* 24:21). In *1 Peter* 1:18-19 the contrast between redemption being *not* by payment of silver and gold *but* by the blood of Christ dramatically reinforces the concept of redemption by payment of price. Thus references to Christ as the Redeemer which clearly mean Deliverer need to be understood in this light. That God redeems by means of foresight and mighty power and that Christ is the ransom-price of the deliverance are correlatives in the New Testament universe of meaning. This is evident from the reinforced form of the term to redeem where the blood of Christ

is the ransom-price (*Romans* 3:24, *Ephesians* 1:7, *Colossians* 1:14, *Hebrews* 7:15) and in the statement that Christ himself is the ransom-price: *who gave himself as a ransom for all* (*1 Timothy* 2:6).

Redemption by purchase from the slave-market of sin adds weight to the foregoing. Paul declares you were bought with a price (*1 Corinthians* 6:20; 7:22-23), having in view the slave-market analogy. This parallels teaching in *1* and *2 Peter*. The preposition *ex* is added to *agorazo* to reinforce the idea of 'being bought out of' or 'rescued from' in *Galatians* 3:13 where Paul says that Christ *redeemed us from the curse of the law*. The passage does not confuse or conflate the two ideas, they coinhere. They cap off what is meant in Christ's key kerugmatic statement that he has come to give his life as a ransom for many (*Mark* 10:45, *Matthew* 20:28).

If the blood of Christ is the price paid what can be the meaning of this difficult term for redemption? Does the term blood stand for life or for death? Some have said that it means life and suggest that we participate in Christ's life as it is poured out in death, not that Christ's blood stands for judgment death in relation to the penalty of sin. But this interpretation of the meaning of blood in relation to Christ's sacrifice is inaccurate. In both the Old Testament and in the New Testament blood in the veins signifies life, but when spilt violently it means death and calls for recompense. In the New Testament the term blood signifies the death of Christ. It symbolizes all that the Cross means, but particularly the Cross as the judgment death for sin.

The meaning of the concept in the New Testament is many-sided. It is used in relation to: propitiation, *Romans* 3:25; justification, *Romans* 5:9; ransom, *1 Peter* 1:18-19; reconciliation, *Ephesians* 2:13; reconciliation of all things, *Colossians* 1:19-20; atonement or expiation, *Hebrews* 9:7, 11-14, 22, 25; sanctification, *1 Peter* 1:2; covenant, *Hebrews* 13:20.

The shedding of blood signifies life taken violently, for which crime expiation can be only life for life, blood for blood. The theological significance of blood in relation to forgiveness stands in the vicarious nature of Christ's sacrifice, and in relation to atonement it stands in the penal element of the death of the Cross. The blood of Christ stands for the death of Christ. That is the price of our redemption.

The fourth New Testament concept which describes the meaning of Christ's work on the Cross is atonement. Atonement deals with both the judgment of God against sin and the expiation of the sin.

Be sure of one thing: this has nothing to do with the notion of buying God's favor in the sense of an offering being made to the gods to appease their anger and win their favor. We must not place the love of God and the righteousness of God into conflict. Atonement is the gift of love, not an appeasement to win divine favor.

Atonement deals with condemnation, guilt and alienation. The obverse of these is removal of condemnation by the gift of forgiveness based upon sin-bearing, the removal of guilt by the satisfaction of God and the reckoning of righteousness to the sinner's account, and the bridging of alienation through restoration of fellowship with God who has been propitiated. It is easy to see why some have construed this matrix to have pagan overtones. Nevertheless, I believe that this opinion misconstrues the data and therefore inevitably reaches wrong conclusions. The issue cannot be resolved by fine-tuning subtle differences between Christ being our representative, not our substitute, because the whole instinct of the Gospel is that he does something for us which we could not do for ourselves and that the idea of substitution cleaves indissolubly to what his representation of us before God can mean.

Atonement in the Bible is part of a system of ideas. One must not alter the meaning of theological terms just to suit taste. This applies particularly to atonement which includes not only the expiation of sin but also propitiation of wrath. Atonement is the teaching that by means of Christ's sacrificial death sin is expiated and guilt is removed, having in view the judgment of a righteous God against sin, the aim of which is to make God and sinners 'at-one'. That is, on moral grounds to reconcile two estranged parties justly. Key concepts in this are guilt, judgment, reparation, propitiation, expiation. Can the guilty sinner be justified before God? Paul's fundamental question is, *How can God both be just and justify the sinner?* (Romans 3:26).

In what sense is Christ 'put forward' in *Romans* 3:25 as the propitiation. The Mercy-seat was the cover of the Ark of the Covenant where the High Priest once a year sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. Paul and the author of Hebrews are saying that Christ himself is that Mercy-seat, the blood is his own, and the altar is the very throne of God. The expiating of sin turns aside the righteous judgment of God. Expiation of sin and propitiation of wrath are two sides of a single coin, and they cohere with the entire system of ideas which comprise the doctrine of Christ's work.

How can propitiation and expiation be understood in relation to God's holiness and love?

The law of God is not the vindictive expression of an angry deity who must be appeased by offerings brought by the offerer. It gives expression to the public, universal righteousness of God. It codifies, we might say, the normative morality which governs the interpersonal relations between God and the world, and of all personal relations. If a relationship is personal and loving, it is as well moral or it cannot be loving. Law and morality are of the essence of personhood. Thus the jealousy of God in the Bible has nothing to do with vindictiveness. It has everything to do with the true character of unrelenting love which acts holily. The law of God is not something which stands above or over against God, it is the expression of his very nature. God's law is not legalism; it is his righteousness.

Punishment is a condition of freedom, as well as a vindication of

righteousness. While punishment may deter and in some cases it may even reform, these cannot comprise its moral justification. Indeed, if the sole justification of punishment is deterrence and reformation then it is fundamentally immoral. The morality of punishment rests squarely upon vindication of just law and appropriate retribution for wrongdoing. Deterrence and reform may be helpful by-products of punishment, but the *only* moral justification for punishment as punishment is that it be deserved.

God preserves the conditions of the loving relations between himself and the world by law and punishment. That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself signifies that God's righteousness is not purely rectoral but that it is tinged with grace. What God demands he himself provides. The atonement, like forgiveness, is something that first happens within the triune life of God before it has any meaning for or bearing on humanity. To reject penalty for sin and in relation to the Work of Christ is to cut off our moral nose to spite our face.

The death of Christ is indispensable for redemption. In it what God demands he himself provides. He is both Judge and Victim. No outside agent propitiates God. Real understanding of the Atonement depends upon better understanding of the triune life of God. God himself, in love, provides the propitiation, the Mercy-seat, in the wounded flesh of the Eternal Son made incarnate. It is not a sacrifice made *to* God but *by* God in relation to his own righteousness.

Not only does the death of Christ express the truth of our relation to God as sinners, the mode of that death is the expression of a perfect Amen to God's holiness by the suffering Savior in the midst of judgment. This is the significance of Gethsemane in the Gospel narrative: *not my will but thine be done*, spoken with agony accompanied by sweat like great drops of blood falling to the ground (*Luke* 22:44). I find this to be a salient theme in *Hebrews*, especially the tenth chapter (note 10:10): Christ's mode of submission to the judgment-death of the Cross is something that we cannot do but into which we are taken up. Sinners are taken up into that divine Amen to the righteous judgment of God, into the quality of the act of obedience as well as the fact of the self-offering. The writer of *Hebrews* says, *by the which will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all*.

Holy submission which is also vicarious submission becomes enabling submission for us to acknowledge the righteousness of God's judgment against sin. Christ is presented as the propitiation, or as propitiatory. The Atonement means that Christ has turned away the divine wrath by expiating sin. Christ himself is that Mercy-seat, that place of meeting, the place where 'at-one' becomes reality. We ought to read *Romans* 3:25 as *whom God foreordained to be the Mercy-seat in his blood*.

Christ has absorbed the execution of the full judgment against sin, thus expiating sin, and bridging the gap of alienation between God and humanity. Wrath is passed over because it is satisfied. Love and propitiation consistently

belong together: *in this is love ... he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins* (1 John 4:9-10; note also 2:2). In the New Testament propitiation concerns not human activity to propitiate God, but divine action in relation to human sin and guilt and the judgment-death of sin.

The loving, vicarious bearing of sin and judgment reveals holiness. In relation to humanity, Christ's submission was universal under the conditions of solidary judgment which embraced the guilt of the entire human race. Christ died for us and for the whole world, and because he died for all every Christian can gratefully say, '*Jesus died for me.*'

Fifth, Christ is our Mediator. His relation to humanity is universal. This is his High Priestly role. He is the only mediator between the one true God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). He is the mediator of the New Covenant (*Hebrews* 3:1, 7:21-24, 8:6, 9:15, 12:24). His High Priestly mediation is unique and unrepeatable. It is not the mediation of the repeated sacrifices of the Aaronic priesthood. Nor is it the advocacy even of a qualified interceding mediator. Rather, it is advocacy of the qualified mediator who is both High Priest and Victim, whose sacrifice will not and cannot be repeated again, and whose own blood makes final atonement for sin.

The finality of the action of the Mediator results in his perpetual mediatorial ministry for the redeemed at God's throne, and through the redeemed to the world at large (*John* 17:9, 2 *Corinthians* 5:11-21, *Hebrews* 2:17-18, 4:15, 7:25, 9:24). It follows that a central concept of the Christian faith is priesthood as universalized witness by Christians to the fact and efficacy of Christ's unrepeatable reconciling sacrifice.

All of this depends upon the truth and reality of the incarnation. Christ sustains a generic and universal relationship to humanity. *It behooved him to be made like unto his brethren*, says the writer of *Hebrews* (2:17). In ancient times Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, said that life and immortality have come to humanity through Christ because he attaches man to God by his own incarnation. In his books called *Against Heresies* Irenaeus goes on to say that Christ represents us because he entered into communion with us and passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God. Christ recapitulated in himself the long roll of humanity, furnishing us all with salvation. He summed up in himself the ancient creation of the line of Adam, as Paul speaks of this in *Romans* 5. This is what the ancients meant by the deification of humanity in Christ. They meant the restoration of humanity's original relation with God. This is both Christ's once-for-all mediatorial accomplishment and his on-going intercession for us.

Our reconciliation to God through Christ is grounded in atonement and depends upon forgiveness. Forgiveness which leads to reconciliation is costly. The Cross of Christ is thus the objective ground of the reconciliation and of our own subjective response.

There is more: Paul in *Ephesians* 2 relates reconciliation to God with reconciliation among people who are alienated from one another. Faith in Christ creates a new community of faith, hope and love. Christ the Reconciler is the agent of peace. In place of ethnic and social splintering there is created one new humanity which is jointed together as a universal household of faith (2:19-22).

How do such love and such reconciliation come about? In the power of the same Cross which reconciles us to God, and in the pattern of the same submission and obedience of the Son of God who trod that path before us. His obedience has a universal character. In the power of his perfect acceptance of and submission to the will of the Father, we accept and submit. The power of evil is thereby exhausted in the death to sin, in the confession of God's holiness, and in the holy commitment of a self wholly dedicated to God.

Christ's continuing mediation is the guarantee of righteousness in us. Thereby the purpose of true freedom is vindicated. Christ in himself is the justification of the ways of God with humanity. In Christ God's purpose to create free good persons who will self-consciously share his fellowship and work is brought to fruition.

The work of Christ in relation to our sanctification is the climax of Christ's mediatorial act. God's law becomes engraved on the heart. The mode of his willing submission becomes the dynamic of ours. The *Hebrews* passage leads to the confluence of redemption and sanctification (10:14) *because by one sacrifice he has perfected forever those who are being made holy*.

Finally, sixth, in the New Testament the Cross is presented as a victory. How can one who is hanging helplessly upon a cross be deemed to have won a victory? Did not his detractors who stood near the Cross mock him on this point (*Matthew* 27:11, 27-31, 42)?

In what sense was Christ's passion a public triumph over the power of evil? Please understand that in the New Testament the passion itself is in some important sense stated to be a victory, a victory of awesome proportions and of immense significance. Indeed, Irenaeus, whom I mentioned a little while ago, remarks that the serpent is conquered by the harmlessness of the dove. What can this mean?

The victory is shown in the triumph of good as good over evil as evil, of God's eternal Amen to holiness in the passion and judgment death of the Cross. The power of evil has been shattered in Christ's sinlessness and obedient response to the death of the Cross. The victory was his inviolable moral perfection. This is what Jesus meant when he said *Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world* (*John* 16:33). Nothing highlights this victory more than Christ's words in the night of his betrayal, *The Prince of this world comes but has nothing in me*. That is, there is nothing in me to which he can attach himself, Jesus is saying. In the Garden he prays, *My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done* (*Matthew* 26:42). And he drank it -- to the dregs.

Christ's obedience robbed evil of its power to corrupt and brought the possibility of duplicating that victory in humanity: the power of a vicarious act to bear the evil uncorrupted, to absorb it, and to forgive. This has released a new moral force into the world. This is the continuing power -- the redemptive and reconciling power -- of Christ's Cross among his own. This is the difference drawn in the New Testament between our being called upon to suffer *for* Christ and to suffer *with* Christ. Paul could not have made this difference clearer than he has in *Romans* 8:17.

Christ warned his disciples that they could indeed drink of his cup and be baptized with his baptism (of death), *Matthew* 20:22-23. Peter speaks of partaking of Christ's sufferings, *1 Peter* 4:12-13. Paul talks about making up in his own sufferings that which is lacking in Christ's, *Colossians* 1:24. How can Christ's sacrifice be said to be both perfect and unrepeatable yet fulfilled in some further manner? There is the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, *Philippians* 3:10, and the bearing about in the body the dying of Christ, *2 Corinthians* 4:10. In short, evil is triumphed over just as sin is forgiven, namely, by being borne. Thereby its energy is absorbed and transformed from power to work evil to power to do good.

This has a very deep meaning of us in our times. It teaches us that evil does depends upon how it is taken, and how it is taken by the Christian must be determined by the meaning of the Cross. We who have suffered for the sake of Christ must learn to absorb the evil. That is a redemptive and reconciling and forgiving act. Anything less will, like a pebble cast into a quiet pool, simply spread the rings of evil wider and wider.

Christians are called upon to suffer with Christ, which means to absorb evil as God's redemptive agents. Shall pain and suffering, misunderstanding and faction, extend from us because of our vindictiveness, even if we have suffered unjustly, or are we ready to forgive, just as we have been forgiven?

I close with this thought: In the Cross God has done something which has universal appeal unless we are totally morally opaque. That something reaches inside the community of moral life, into the human condition of personal sin and personal guilt, of responsibility and judgment, of penitence and longing for healing. There dawns realization that what happened on the Cross was *for me*. If conscience is open we become aware of correspondence to need. The Cross appeals to all that is in us which says that we are not what we should be, or could be, but want to be. First and foremost we long to be rid of guilt which cannot be cured by blaming our genes or others or our social situation. The Cross takes up into itself all our pollution, weakness and guilt. It is like a suit made to order, not to mask the embarrassing, unsightly parts, but to clothe the forgiven sinner in a white robe because the Savior has dealt with the moral blemishes. The Cross creates capacity to respond in souls almost too far gone to feel it. This is the power of the truth that *God so loved that he gave ... and of I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me...*

Happy is the person who allows the moral realities of Christ's work on the Cross to impinge upon life. That person is hard indeed whose heart weeps no tears of penitence whenever the account of Christ's passion is read -- and in an age which focuses on self-fulfillment it is read all too infrequently -- for the power of this Gospel breaks sin's power and sets men and women free. The finished work of Christ is replete with moral appeal. Let us stand before that Cross, wondering at the spectacle, rejoicing in its simplicity, amazed that Christ died for our sins, but ready to move from sweeping generalizations to murmur *Jesus died for me*.

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China Letter 9

THE CHRISTIAN WAY

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

There is an interesting convergence upon a common point between aspects of our ancient teaching and the teaching of the Christian Gospel. The common point is obligatory morality. We human beings transcend the animal world because we are obligated to acknowledge a transcending moral standard and are obligated to live by it. But how?

Our ancient philosopher Confucius wrote that whatever a gentleman conceives of, he must be able to say; and whatever he says, he must be able to do. Another ancient teacher, Socrates, said something parallel: if one truly knows the good he will do the good. However, our human difficulty has been that clarity is not enough. Too often we know the good we ought to do but instead we do evil. Thus our confidence in the moral supervision of the world is not matched by our grasping adequately the moral evils of human nature. The doctrines of the clarity of the mind and the invincibility of the will have not been able to produce the good life or an ideal society.

The Gospel of Christ aims at the center. It calls for transformation of the heart, the mind, the conscience. It calls for the transformation of human nature by means of a new beginning which amounts to a new birth. The true issue has never been that we don't need to be transformed, but how to bring it about? When Nicodemus spoke to Jesus he was dumbfounded that Jesus said to him *you must be born again*. Nevertheless, Nicodemus' response was the proper one, *how can this happen?* Intellectual clarity is not enough. We need inner renewal. The heart is the fountain of action.

In our tradition we have defined destructive relationships as social impropriety. But what is the cause of social impropriety? We've attributed it to emotional incoherence, delusions, being of two minds, misguided judgments, and confusions.

All of these comprise part of our traditional arguments as to how to become men of integrity, or men who are upright. Why do we not pursue the right

way? Is it simply lack of clarity, or is there something deeper at work? The point of the Christian Gospel is that what we are will determine both what we know and what we will. Ponder that point. Confucius' sharp remark that he had never seen a man who loved virtue as much as sex speaks to the same issue. What solution have we pursued? We have thought that education as a reforming and sustaining agent would deal with domestic and national disorder, along with the rules of a social structure which call for hierarchy, respect, acknowledgment of authority, filial loyalty, and discipline.

Consider this difference: a tradition, in many ways admirable, which calls for pursuit of a moral way on the mistaken grounds that human nature is good, as against the teaching of the Gospel that human nature as we know it needs transforming and that the norms of a decent society will flow from within -- from a good heart. It is the difference between seeking the way and, by God's grace, being put in the way.

This latter understanding is the sense in which the Christian faith is called The Way in the Bible. It is not the way of delicately balancing the scales of social propriety, but of God's transforming love which recreates men and women who then are enabled to walk a new path.

Our scholars have debated these questions for over twenty-five hundred years. Did not our early schools get their impetus from problems of the disintegration of traditional values and norms? We thought that by cultivating the self to embody values, by imitating role models, we could cure our social ills. We re-defined concern for the self to include concern for one's family, the community, and the nation. We even espoused the doctrine of equal concern for everyone -- a laudable ideal -- until some among us adopted the modern doctrine that all social conventions are against nature, that we should free ourselves of moral impositions and simply pursue personal fulfillment. Then there were those who intellectually withdrew into a fortress of no hope. They said that life is made up of never-ending conflict of bad and good forces (the yin and the yang) and that one must simply accept a never-ending moral struggle in which the good may not triumph. The only solution, they said, is authoritarian control.

Can we overcome our domestic disorder and warring? This long-lasting and deeply troubling social question boils down to the question of whether we can be the persons we know we ought to be? The Christian Gospel addresses human failure not merely as infringements of social conventions but as defects of character with which only God can deal redemptively. It is time to recognize that our evasions point to the truth about the human condition. We can no longer fall back upon the ambiguities of that human condition as the way of life.

In what sense is Christian faith called The Way? The oldest name for the Christian Faith in the New Testament is *The Way of God* (Acts 18:26). Other early variants are *Way of the Lord*, *God's Way* and *The Way*. Identification of Christianity as *The Way* occurs often (Acts 9:2; 16:17; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14). This designation is surely rooted in Jesus' own word about himself as The Way, the

Truth and the Life (*John 14:6*).

What did the Christian Way entail? How did the Christian Gospel reach into the lives of ancient people and bring them into the Way of Life? Take away modern technology and one finds that religious and social life in the Roman Empire when the Gospel began its spread around the world were very much as they are today.

Religious life was cultic, impersonal and ritualistic. Its function was chiefly to enhance social cohesion and patriotism. Many celebrated the cycle of life, such as the fertility cults. A common theme was concern for personal identity. Many of the religious acts purported to displace one's ordinary social identity, or to link one with an other-worldly reality. The religions were lonely and impersonal and a profound sense of fatalism in relation to fate or the will of the gods pervaded society, just as today the importance of individual personhood has been denigrated.

Just as today, there was a vast increase in trade and commerce, which allowed the formation of a large, mobile, entrepreneurially oriented middle class. But granular individualism resulted in keen personal loneliness, as is so characteristic today. The poor lived for the pressing needs of the moment, while a new aristocratic class sought to preserve and extend the advantages of their new-found wealth. At the same time the aristocratic classes became deeply oriented to traditions of their past rather than to the future and sought to erect monuments to themselves.

The paternalistic authority of the state began to overshadow and to displace the authoritarian paternalism of the household. It is noteworthy today that the crowded, alienated segments of modern urban society feel a deep sense of isolation where the worth of the individual has diminished. There remained, as today, the household concept, where personal worth and relations, decency, frugality, diligence and industry had a recognized place. In our time also this too often has become a memory of the past, not a present reality.

There developed then, as today, many associations. These, like professional and vocational associations in our own time, provided stable relationships for some as substitutes for the family and the extended family. But it was the parallel formation of the Christian associations, the house churches, the Christian conventicles, which gave new meaning to associational life and provided a homogeneous set of relationships to new Christians. The Christian churches became extended families. They comprised true households, based upon faith in Christ. Wherever a Christian went in the Roman Empire he or she had an identity, was welcomed, was offered hospitality, and was cared for when ill. A new world fellowship (*koinonia*) and household of faith (*oikonomia*) had been created with the framework of the existing societal structure (*politeia*). The worth of the individual, whether bondman or freedman, was a key feature of the Christian appeal. In fact, Christians became the most trustworthy, faithful, industrious and productive members of society.

Do you recall the words of Athenagoras, the early Christian philosopher, whom I cited to you in an earlier letter, as he wrote a defense of Christians to the Emperor, Marcus Aurelius. He says (*Plea*, 32) that Christians have a law,

which requires us to have right relations with ourselves and with our neighbors. Hence according to their age, we think of some as sons and daughters. Others we regard as brothers and sisters, while we revere those who are older as we would fathers and mothers. We feel it a matter of great importance that those, whom we thus think of as brothers and sisters and so on, should keep their bodies undefiled and uncorrupted ... For we center our attention not on the skill of making speeches but on the proof and lessons of actions.

Of what value is an ethical or religious system if the worth of individuals is diminished? Christian faith teaches that every individual person is created in the image of God and is of infinite and eternal worth. Christians do not discuss the values of friendship in terms of gratifying one's own needs, but as reciprocating the love of God which they have themselves experienced to others within the household of faith and, by extension, to the whole of humanity.

What is human worth? Have we answered this question today in terms of increased barren individualism. The current soul-searching in our society about the decline and diminishing of the family, the erosion of the sense of natural community and of the bonds of national and mutual natural affection suggest that today we are confronting issues parallel to those of the ancient world into which the Christian faith was launched.

Utilitarianism, self-sufficiency, need-satisfaction -- none of these answer to the highest levels of aspiration of the human soul. But, on the other hand, how does one become the virtuous person who functions in relation to the transcendent value of sincere, reciprocal, unexploiting love? In short, how do finite, sin-prone, selfish human beings create or develop or acquire a moral foundation for life and live by it. Augustine, who wrote extensively on friendship, concluded that the only security for pure and loving relationships, including the security of friendship is shared faith in God. He drew an analogy between the hidden, impalpable elements of faith in God and the hidden impalpable elements of the loving trust which is inherent in true friendship (*Concerning Faith of Things Not Seen*, 3, 4; note also *On The Profit of Believing*, 23):

But you say, that you therefore believe your friend, whose heart you cannot see, because you have proved him in your trials, and have come to know of what manner of spirit he was towards you in your dangers, wherein he deserted you not. Seemeth it therefore to you that we must wish for our own affliction, that our friend's love towards us may be proved? ... If this faith be taken away from human affairs, who but must observe how great disorder in them, and how fearful confusion must follow? For who will be loved by any with mutual affection (being that the loving itself is invisible) if what I see not, I ought not to believe. Therefore will the whole of friendship perish, in that it consists not save of mutual love.

Whence the virtue which can be the foundation of true friendship or, as we would say today, authentic relationships? Christianity became an attractive alternative in the ancient world. In an age of brutality and high inflation, Christians cared about people. The Christian conventicles had a powerful sense of community. Emotional and social security were to be found within the Christian communities. Their ethical standards were high, their religious devotion to the one true God was intense, and their discipleship was life-encompassing. Converts were carefully examined, confession of faith was public, separation from the evils of society, demonology and cultic practices was total. But they were not anti-social. The power and vigor of such dedication must be seen in relation to their view of God, the world, morality and humanity. The existential appeal to faith was joined to conserving human beings of whatever station in life as values in themselves .

Hence the logical bridge between the earthly and the heavenly realms is not that of impersonal ritual, but that of persons who, created in the image of God, are abiding realities and values. Human life is the art of the Creator and discrete personhood is not only the goal of redemption but is, as well, the highest level of reality. If the Bible has any message at all, it is the message that God has in view a community of free good persons who will respond to his love, have duplicated in their lives the grace of Christ, and live in relationships of reciprocal love.

That is the meaning of grace. It is rooted in the New Testament term *charis* (grace), which includes two main elements: (a) undeserved graciousness, kindness, favor which (b) bears fruit in a new quality of life (*charismata*) through a new dynamic released in life. Salvation in Christ is based upon God's grace. It means that salvation depends upon God's unmerited favor, as free, unearned gift. Grace is God's attitude to human beings who are sinful and under judgment for that sin. Grace is also expressed in God's action towards us in our helplessness or, as we have said traditionally, in our ambiguous state (meaning, fundamentally, our inability to live up to the moral light we have).

Awareness of our own condition, and awareness of God's grace leads to conversion which is personal: the turning of individuals to God in penitence and faith. Repentance and faith are like the two sides of a coin: they of necessity belong together, and together they sum up the meaning of conversion.

Repentance means turning away from sin and from patterns of thinking which issue in sinful courses of action. It involves a change of mind which results in a change of direction: *I thought this, but I now see that I was incorrect; I did this, but it was wrong.*

True repentance includes self-consciousness of sin - *I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me (Psalm 51:3)* - along with recognition that the sinning is directly against God. But this can amount only to remorse unless there is a distinct turning away from wrong ways of thinking about one's behavior and responsibility, an option which opens up once the good news of

God's grace and love is heard. Jesus promised that it is uniquely the function of the Holy Spirit to bring about awareness that leads to repentance (*John* 16:14-15).

In this same equation, faith is turning to Christ in the act of turning from sin. It is faith in Christ. Paul says, *Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ* (*Romans* 10:17). Faith involves a conviction as to the truth of what is believed and trust in the one who is that truth. Conviction as to the truth of who Jesus Christ is and commitment to him personally as the Savior are conjointly the meaning of faith in the New Testament.

The fact-basis of faith is clear: to believe *that* (*hoti*) Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (*Romans* 5:10; 10:9; *1 John* 4:2-3; 5:1, 10) is the indispensable foundation of faith.

Acceptance of someone's credible word (*moi*) is clear from *John* 4:21 where, when Jesus says *Woman, believe me*, he means *take what I say to be true*.

Trust in, or commitment to, a person is the sense of *believing in* (*eis*) someone, as in *John* 14:1 and *1 John* 5:10.

Similarly, to *believe upon* (*epi*) Christ (*Acts* 16:30) is all-inclusive. The call to faith embraces the truth *about* Jesus as well as commitment *to* Jesus. There can be no commitment to Jesus without some truth-basis of knowledge about Jesus.

This is the thrust of Paul's description of the preaching and receiving of the Gospel in *Romans* 10:8-13, which is crowned by the previously mentioned conclusion in verse 17 that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Thus, Christian faith includes, first, belief (assent to the facticity of the historical data concerning Jesus Christ); second, conviction as to the truth of what is being said interpretively by the Apostles and apostolic writers about that data; and, third, trust, i.e., personal commitment to the personal object of faith, which combines within itself the first two elements. Faith is best understood as trust, which underscores the personal character of the relationship, but it is a trust which includes the assent of the mind, the consent of the will, the credence of the intellect and the confidence of the heart. Faith in the heart of human beings answers to grace in the heart of God.

Repentance and faith move us to transparency. This is the clarity our ancient fore-fathers sought. It is the true cure for the isolation which feeds modern depression and the deviant behavior which plagues our society. Moderns who 'have-everything' are weighed down with meaninglessness. There is a modern torpor (*acedia*) which eats at the soul, and its root is pride; a pride which refuses to change. How can individuals give up the possibility of becoming the persons they are? That is the challenge of repentance and of faith. The only way out is to give up the pride and the modern enjoyment of melancholia and to find the

untapped happiness and usefulness which forgiven sinners have discovered in the reservoirs of Christ's love.

I now come back to what Jesus said to Nicodemus, *you must be born again*. Conversion to Christ means entrance upon new life. It means to be born anew. New life begotten of God's Spirit through the Gospel is a unique New Testament concept.

What happens in regeneration? It is new life begotten by a divine word through God's Holy Spirit. That new life makes of believers partakers of the divine nature. Paul speaks of new life in place of deadness (*Ephesians* 2:1) and of putting on a *new nature* which is created after the likeness of God (*Ephesians* 4:24). He epitomizes the new beginning as the *new creation* those become who are in Christ (2 *Corinthians* 5:17). Peter speaks of the new birth as partaking of the divine nature (2 *Peter* 1:4). The filial relationship expressed in 1 *John* 3:2 (*we are God's children now*) is an extension of the becoming children of God and new birth themes already cited in *John* 1:12 and the Nicodemus passage.

The new birth takes place from above (*John* 3:3, 7). This is the literal rendering of the term *anōthen* which we usually translate *born again*, or *born anew*. It is God's act, not something which humans accomplish. That is the significance of *from above*.

How does regeneration come about? The answer is through the Gospel -- through the giving and receiving of a word of truth. Regeneration is the inner change as to nature which comes about through the direction change that repentance indicates and faith seals. James (1:18) writes that the new spiritual birth occurs by God's will through the word of truth. Paul speaks of being the begetting father of the Corinthian Christians through his preaching of the Gospel to them (1 *Corinthians* 4:15). In a change of metaphor (*Galatians* 4:19) he rhetorically asks whether he must again go through the pains of begetting and birth over the Galatian Christians because of their defection, or threatened defection, from the truth of the Gospel.

The full significance of the new birth metaphor comes through the equation of the Word of God with the seed. The divine word is the seminal trigger for new spiritual life. It is striking that Peter carries the Johannine metaphor to an interpretive conclusion (1 *Peter* 1:23). The seed is not like perishable semen which can produce only flawed human nature, but it the imperishable, unflawed, living and abiding word of God which begets new life. It is the truth of the Gospel, the precious and very great promises (2 *Peter* 1:4) which, when implanted in the heart, quicken new life. It is the good news (1 *Peter* 1:25) gladly received, which generates new birth. No proxy faith can generate this reality. It follows from hearing about and personal commitment to Christ. Jerome, the fourth century Latin Church Father, commented that we are not born Christians but become Christians by being born again: *Christians are made not born* (*Letter* 107.1; note also *Against Jovinianus* 1.39).

The great blessing of conversion to Christ is assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Can anything transcend this joy? Consider the feelings of the Psalmist in *Psalms* 32, along with David's confession in *Psalms* 51. These are among the most poignant passages in all of the Bible.

The ground of justification is forgiveness. Thus justification and forgiveness deal with our guilt and the attendant penalty against sin and, as well, with the evil effects of our sinning. In relation to human sinfulness and responsibility, justification concerns the expunging of sin and its guilt. God has done this through the judgment death of Christ.

With regard to justification, we discern a thread in the Scriptures which leads to Christ and his Cross: The first hint is in *Genesis* 15:6 where Abraham believed God and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. The second is *Psalms* 32 where the person who confesses sin finds that God does not impute iniquity. This psalm is a dramatic psychological paradigm of confronting guilt and release from it once sin is confessed and forgiven. The third is *Habbakuk* 2:4, where faithfulness has in view the foundation of faith for the life of the just (picked up by Paul in *Romans* 1:17 and *Galatians* 3:11, and by the writer of *Hebrews* in 10:38). This strategic theme is then developed in Paul's preaching and teaching (*Acts* 13:38-29 and the entire books of *Romans* and *Galatians*). Additional references simply reinforce the critical importance of justification by faith for Paul: *Romans* 3:21, 27, 28; 4:3-4; *Ephesians* 2:9; *Titus* 3:5.

Justification concerns real guilt. Justification has in view our standing before God's bar of justice. The issue is this: if God is just to judge sin, how can he forgive the sinner? How can God be both just and justifier (*Romans* 3:26)? The answer is through Christ's Cross on which Christ bore the penalty of our sins and cleared our account before God. We are acquitted because the penalty has been paid. More than that, we now stand in Christ's righteousness -- it is imputed to us. God reckons Christ's righteousness to us. Justification means to account righteous based upon the perfection of Christ. It is complete, never to be repeated. Jesus Christ is thus both the foundation of peace *for us* (*Romans* 5:1) and the foundation of wholeness and renewal *in us*. As an aid to understanding the wholeness of this teaching, the chapter-break between *Romans* 5 and *Romans* 6 is regrettable. On grounds of freeness of grace and the righteousness in Christ, Paul can ask, *Shall we continue in sin?* By no means, he says.

Justification restores the sinner's true relation to God. The human condition is identified by sin, guilt, condemnation and alienation. Justification entails the removal of condemnation through forgiveness which is based upon Christ's bearing of the condemnation. Alienation is removed because the gap between God and humanity has been bridged by Christ's holy submission under judgment. Hence, Paul can declare that God is both just and the justifier of the person who believes in Jesus. This is the high point of the praise which Paul reaches at the end of his argument on justification in *Romans* chapter 8: no guilt (*who shall bring any charge against God's elect?*, 33); no condemnation (*who is to condemn?*, 34); no alienation (*who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*,

35). Justification is a judicial act issuing in an attitude which coheres with a morally renewed and transformed life.

In its primary sense, justification clearly means to declare just in a judicial sense. Paul's intent is to declare that the demands of God's holy law as the condition of life which God and humanity share have been fully satisfied by Christ's life and in his death. It deals with the objective relation between God and humanity created by sin and guilt. While there is the danger of divorcing righteous living from righteous standing, we must emphasize the truth of the latter.

It remains to reinforce three truths: First, the ground of justification is not human faith but the righteousness and merit of Christ. Second, the means of justification is faith alone (note *Acts* 13:39). Faith in humanity is the appropriate response to grace in God. Third, the on-going spiritual values of justification are significant: it is related to the forgiveness of sins (*Acts* 16:18; *Romans* 3:24-25), to spiritual wholeness (*Romans* 5:1-6) and to confident sonship and service (*Romans* 8:1, 17). The verdict God gives *vis-a-vis* the righteousness of Christ rightly looks forward to the correct verdict on the final day of judgment (*Romans* 2:16 in relation to *Romans* 5:18, 21).

Thus in the totality which comprises salvation we see the following: conversion involves a person's change of direction and attitude, regeneration concerns a change in inner nature, justification concerns change in one's judicial standing before God, and sanctification embraces all three in that it envisions a renewal of life into a Christ-like image.

Forgiveness and justification are thus fundamental to the apostolic understanding of the Gospel. Peter proclaimed forgiveness in the first recorded sermon in *Acts* to a largely Jewish audience (2:38) in his defense of Christian witness (4:3), and to the Gentiles as well (10:43).

In the last recorded sermon to his fellow Jews at Antioch, before he turned to the Gentile mission, Paul, as Peter did at Jerusalem, vindicated the Gospel as the message of forgiveness through Christ (*Acts* 13:38), which he repeated before King Agrippa (*Acts* 26:18). Forgiveness is the core issue of the Atonement. Forgiveness is what Christ purchased substitutionarily for sinful humanity on the Cross (*Ephesians* 1:7; *Colossians* 1:14). On grounds of God's having forgiven us, we ought to forgive one another (*Ephesians* 4:32).

Forgiveness is not merely a formality. It is not something that is merely verbal, without cost. It does not logically follow from love unless the one who forgives redemptively absorbs the evil that has been done. Sin causes offense and injury. If the offense works like a cancer to spread the evil by the reaction of the offended party, forgiveness is impossible. The power of a vicarious act, in particular the vicarious sufferings of Christ, is the power to increase the store of good by absorbing the power of evil. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*, stands at the heart of God's forgiveness. Christ on the Cross triumphed

over the worst barbs of evil because they could not corrupt him.

To absorb evil is the foundation of forgiveness. Something must happen in the heart of the injured party before anything happens in the one needing forgiveness. The injured one stays the evil; the situation is redeemed. That is the objective basis of forgiveness. It entails triumph over the corrupting power of sin by transforming its power for good. Atonement is not mere transaction. God deals with evil both morally and ontologically. Sin is forgiven as it is borne.

God has entered this world personally in Jesus Christ. God in Christ has accepted the guilt, pain and judgment of sin. Indeed, as the sinless one, he alone fully experienced what sin and judgment mean. The Cross is no mere gesture of love. By the Cross God has dealt with evil without either denying the reality of creation or the freedom he has given to human beings. Through the Cross a new principle has been released into the world, namely, that it is greater to bear suffering than to inflict it; that love is able to go outside itself to make the burden of others its own. Forgiveness exhibits the power of vicariousness, the regenerative power of a redemptive act. Just as God forgave long before any single person repented, Christians are called upon to practice forgiveness in their interpersonal relations.

Entering upon the Christian Way begins with receiving new life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Do you recall the ways in which the Gospel was preached by the Apostles in the book of *Acts*? There is a wonderful sense of joy, of freedom to declare God's grace, and to make a legitimate offer of the Gospel to all who heard them preach. The message of love is to every human being in all the world.

As the Christian mission began on the Day of Pentecost, Peter concluded that first great apostolic sermon with the words *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)*. The offer is free and open. The assurance is real: God will forgive as we turn to him in Christ, and he does indeed impart his Holy Spirit to every penitent soul. Peter does not say that every penitent sinner might receive the Holy Spirit, but that every person who turns in faith to Christ shall indeed receive God's Spirit, the giver of life.

The apostolic preaching means this: conversion, baptism, reception of the Spirit and union with the body of Christ are really one event. This is the force of Paul's teaching in *1 Corinthians 12:13*, *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit. In Christ we become part of God's family, the household of faith.*

We enter the Christian Way by responding in faith to Christ through the preaching of the Gospel. That Gospel is *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household (Acts 16:31)*. And just as the Philippian jailer found the Lord, so may the teeming millions of our own people find Christ and

become his disciples.

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China Letter 10

THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

In our time there is a weakening of moral order, which is reflected in the ease with which moral standards are dismissed and in the dilution of the moral power of the law.

First, morality has been defined popularly as reaction to peer pressure: obedience to rules which parents or the community arbitrarily impose for what is deemed to be the common good; or obedience to evil standards imposed by evil peers, which is perversely viewed as loyalty to the standards of the group.

Second, many forms of alleged victimization now in vogue are used to justify criminal behavior. This is known as the *abuse excuse*. This argues that particular mental states cause individuals to do that which is wrong or criminal and therefore they cannot be held responsible for their acts. The alleged cause is transformed into an exculpatory excuse: "too much abuse, alcohol, drugs, social pressure, wrong diet, stress, caused me to do this or that." But we know that some people become impaired deliberately in order to make their criminal or immoral intent stronger; or, they know that they will become violent when angry, so they work themselves up into an uncontrollable rage in order to excuse violence; or, they blame parents or a spouse or a sibling for stress which leads to a-social behavior.

Credence has been lent to such arguments by the introduction of expert psychological or psychiatric witnesses whose testimony often tends to blur the line between imperfect science and the moral imperatives of the law. We become adept at excusing aberrant behavior.

I am convinced that we must get back to the ideals of a moral order and personal responsibility. We cannot any longer go down the path of behavioral explanations which amount to excuses. Excusing moral failure simply increases the frequency of failure. Short of a legitimate diagnosis of madness or self-defense, it is time to hold one another to standards of personal responsibility. This is particularly true in the church. This conclusion is surely at the heart of questions which concern standards of Christian behavior. In striking ways obligatory morality has also been at the heart of our ancient tradition.

Let us cling tenaciously to the conviction that we are created by God as moral creatures and spiritual agents, as I said in my former letter to you. If we are created for freedom, then freedom and responsibility go together. We are created with awareness of a transcending moral supervision of the universe, of which God

is the author. Thus we are more than mere organisms which respond to stimuli. Rather, we are governed by an unconditional standard of value which the Bible identifies as the righteousness of God.

How do we restore the ideals of moral responsibility? As I wrote in my last letter, the heart, as the fount of action, must change. Imperfect love of truth, goodness, and justice leads us astray. If our heart is right with God, then his standards, his righteousness, will be the object of greatest desire and the controlling factor of life. This is the force of Jesus' teaching: *seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well* (Matthew 6:33).

Let us press on with this question: if we are committed to Christ, how should we live? This is what the Bible calls our sanctification. We will find that just as our new life in Christ begins in grace, so it continues and develops in grace. We do not begin in grace to end in law, as Paul reminds us in *Galatians*. The core of our life is not to be shaped by casuistry. It has a solid moral foundation and vital moral principles. To be in Christ is to have replicated in us the mode of life which was Christ's. And that entails our moral transformation. How is this described in the Scriptures? What are its norms, ideals and possibilities?

In the New Testament, sanctification is a two-sided coin: on the one side it signifies separation to God, and on the other the process of becoming Christlike -- of the Christian's being re-fashioned into the image of God. Both are attributed to Christ. In the case of the first, to Christ's obedience which makes ours possible; and, in the case of the second, the working out of *Christ in you the hope of glory*.

Christ in his incarnate life is the primary sign of the Spirit's presence and power in humanity. The theme of the Gospel of Luke is that Christ is the Man of the Spirit, (Luke 4:17-21). Pentecost is thus the consequent sign of the Spirit, which is Luke's follow-through in *Acts*. The fundamental issue of God-likeness is the duplication in the Christian of the Spirit-bearing humanity of Jesus Christ. This is Paul's meaning in *Romans* 5 that Christ is the new man for the new age, the last man, the second Adam.

Sanctification, holiness, and God-likeness are synonyms in biblical teaching. They define that which the image of God as expressed in character and behavior is intended to be.

The Old Testament and New Testament words for holiness are used to convey three interlocking ideas: first, God's highness or separateness from both untainted and tainted finitude; second, his moral perfection; and, third, that the thing or person God sanctified is thereby separated to God's use and fellowship; and, that such separation to God in the case of persons ought to reflect the moral quality of his own holiness: *as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct* (1 Peter 1:15, note also 2 Corinthians 7:1).

That God is transcendent and holy, and that humans are sinful needing cleansing, is beautifully portrayed in *Isaiah* chapter 6. The phrase *Holy One of Israel* (*Psalms* 71:22, 89:18) summarizes the common biblical understanding of God's transcendence and moral perfection, which translates into the separation of persons and things to his use. Examples are the Aaronic priests, the Nazarites and many objects used in the service of God in the Tabernacle and Temple (*Exodus* 19:6; *Numbers* 6:2; *Deuteronomy* 26:19; note parallels in the New Testament such as *Matthew* 23:17, 19).

The ethical side of sanctification relates to the sense of profaneness sinful human beings have. Holiness in God demands holiness in us. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit who unites the Christian to Christ, enables the forgiven sinner to resist sin, and renews sinful human nature in the image of God, thus enabling Christians to live in a manner which answers to goodness and charity.

The two sides of sanctification relate to the finality of Christ's Cross and the on-going transformation of life in light of the significance of Christ's Cross. The New Testament teaching is this: we *have been* sanctified (*1 Corinthians* 6:11; *Hebrews* 10:10) and *are being sanctified* (*Hebrews* 10:14). The *Hebrews* 10:5-10 passage is crucial: the writer is saying that Christ's obedience was submission to the Father's will in holiness under judgment, which obedience takes up ours into itself, making it not only possible but also actual. Thereafter, those who by Christ's one-for-all act of obedience *have been* sanctified (separated unto God in the sense of sinners justified by grace) are, as well, *being sanctified* developmentally.

The relation of sanctification to the Cross is intimate and crucial: the foundation of it is death, the death of being laid in the grave of the Lord Jesus (*Romans* 6:1-14) in order to rise to newness of life, as baptism signifies (not as mere symbol, but as faith's pledge to morally renewed personhood). In *2 Corinthians* 5:14 Paul declares not only that Christ died our death, but also that in that death the Christian died. Death to sin (*Romans* 6:11; *Titus* 2:14; 3:5-7), death to the world and carnal desire (*Galatians* 6:14) and death to the old self, refashioned into a new self but with a common identity (*Galatians* 2:19-20) are the theological foundation of sanctification for Paul upon which the whole edifice of Christian character is built.

Sanctification is uniquely the work of the Holy Spirit, spoken of initially as the *seal of the Spirit*. A seal in ancient times (as in the case of royal signet-ring imprint in wax or clay) was a mark of authority, of authenticity, of security and, often, of ownership. Those who are Christ's are sealed to the day of redemption, says Paul (*2 Corinthians* 1:20-22; 5:5; *Ephesians* 1:13-14; 4:30). Thus the seal of the Spirit is not an indelible mark on the body or in the psyche of a Christian. The seal is himself the Spirit. The seal is the personal presence of the Spirit in the heart as guarantor of on-going transformation and final glory.

Parallel to this, Paul says that the Holy Spirit *indwells* Christians. In addition to the foregoing texts, the following confirm this truth: Jesus' promise of

the Spirit's coming and presence (*John* 16:7-14). Peter's declaration on the Day of Pentecost that those who believe *will* receive the gift of the Spirit, and many other passages in Paul's writings (*Romans* 5:5; 8:9-11; *1 Corinthians* 3:16; 6:19; *2 Timothy* 1:14; *Titus* 3:5). The presence of the Spirit is described not merely in terms of divine energizing but in terms of coinherence - a mutually personal relationship in virtue of which the Spirit makes Christ a living reality within the life of Christians and enables fuller and fuller response to Christ and his ideals.

In this respect, the Holy Spirit not only indwells each individual Christian, he instructs and molds by quickening memory of God's grace (*John* 14:26) leading to new insights. Thus the goal of the Spirit's presence is not ecstasy, nor out-of-mind experiences, but duplication of the Spirit-bearing humanity of Christ in the life of each Christian. The goal is Christ-likeness. All signs and wonders in the New Testament move toward moral and spiritual renewal. In this respect, in the New Testament no Christian is encouraged to pray for the baptism of the Spirit, but every Christian is exhorted to be filled with the Spirit, which is related directly in Paul's writings to moral transformation or the fruit of the Spirit (*Galatians* 5:16-26; *Ephesians* 4:17-24).

Allow me to review the biblical foundations of morality upon which the life in Christ, as life in the Spirit is built. It is exceedingly important to grasp that the moral foundations of which I speak have nothing to do with legalism, or a legalistic footing for salvation. I am reminded of the ancient Christian teacher who said that we are justified by faith alone but the faith which justifies is not alone. James reminds us that faith without works is dead. What are the moral foundations of biblical teaching?

We must begin with the Law of Moses, not the ceremonial law from which Christ by his Cross frees us, but the moral law. The principles of God's moral law are reaffirmed in the New Testament. The famous Ten Words or Ten Commandments are recorded in *Exodus* 20:3-17. Let us consider their teaching.

First, *thou shalt have no other gods before me* means that there is but one true and living God. Other nations worshipped the Baal gods as forces of nature, especially in the fertility cults. This commandment says that the kind of God a person worships will dictate that person's conduct. Thus the worship of the true and living God who is holy demands holiness from us, not the justification of impurity in the name of religion.

Second, *thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image* means that worship must be pure. No object nor any representation by human beings can be a substitute for God. God's holiness points to his exclusiveness. The folly of idols is emphasized throughout the Scriptures, as in *Isaiah* 44. This includes the making of any means, such a forms of worship, an end in themselves or a substitute for God. We cannot substitute a thing or a ceremony or ritual for the person.

Third, *thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain* means that as God is holy we must not misuse his name for insincere or evil ends. Can we

invoke his name and then despise or injure one another? This commandment speaks of a false oath with the intent of inflicting evil on another person. It condemns being sanctimonious by using God's name frequently but acting falsely by breaking promises, pledges or contracts. The commandment also proscribes using God's name in bad language.

Fourth, remember the sabbath day to keep it holy means that this was the day of God's rest and the day he gave for rest. This does not call for imposition of sabbath observance on the Gentiles (note that this is not listed in *Acts* 15:20, 29); rather, the first Christians began celebrating the first day of the week as the Lord's Day, the resurrection day, as the mark of the new age that dawned with the resurrection and ascension of Christ (*Acts* 20:7; *1 Corinthians* 16:2; *Revelation* 1:10). This became the worship and family day.

Fifth, *honor thy father and thy mother* entails recognition of the sanctity of the home as the institution which God has created and blessed for human good. To honor means to prize highly as representatives of God. Blessings follow when society is in harmony with the divine order because that order is the foundation of national stability and prosperity. It speaks of reciprocal care and support: that of parents for children and later of children for aging parents.

Sixth, *thou shalt not kill* means no murder, including prohibition of blood revenge. This is based on the sanctity of life. It has in view illegal, impermissible violence due to personal hatred or malice.

Seventh, *thou shalt not commit adultery* is intended to guard the sanctity of personal relationships, especially that of marriage commitment. The commandment intends to proscribe sex outside of marriage and to reinforce love and fidelity within the marriage bond. Marriage is God's gift to the human race and is a universal sacred obligation.

Eighth, *thou shalt not steal* honors the sanctity of property and resources. This is one of the cornerstones of community life. Stealing follows from coveting or inner crookedness. Stealing also extends to dishonest practices in business, such as dishonest measure. It is particularly distasteful if one worships on Sunday and steals on Monday.

Ninth, *thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor* honors truth and the sanctity of another person's reputation. It addresses the kind of lying which directly affects one's fellow. In a positive sense it concerns protecting one's fellows against abuse such as idle rumors or disinformation which might cause him or her injury.

Tenth, *thou shalt not covet* urges us to transform greed by re-focusing thoughts and acts away from coveting. Coveting is a drug which creates the illusion that one cannot be happy without this or that. Because things are put in the place of God, coveting can lead to idolatry, gambling, theft, and adultery. It is often based on envy, which is a form of despising because we tend to think that

we are superior and that we really deserve what the other person has.

These Ten Words are indeed a key foundation stone of civilization. As an important example of how God's law pervades the Old Testament, let me cite the teaching of the prophet Amos. This is one of the earliest prophetic books of the Bible and antedates some of our own ancient philosophers. Amos identifies specific evils which reflect injunctions in the Ten Commandments. Amos preaches against cruelty and genocide, against oppression and exploitation, against unjust commercial practices, and against religious corruption. He declares that justice must give that which is one's due (5:7, 15, 24; 6:12) and one must seek the highest good (5:14, 15). Justice characterizes those acts and conditions which are right and equitable, he says, as measured by the righteousness of God. It is particularly odious to overlay injustice and dishonesty with a religious veneer.

Similarly, we find that God's holiness as reflected in the law of God is a prime theme of the New Testament. This clear from the teaching of Christ. He does not dismiss the law of God because the Pharisees have distorted its meaning and abused its use. Rather, he honors God's law as God's will revealed (*Mark* 10:17-22; 12:28-34). Our Lord speaks very strongly against vices which the law also condemns, and he relates their source to a corrupt, unredeemed heart. Note passages such as *Mark* 3:5; 7:14-21; 9:42-48; 11:15-17 as well as many other passages such as *Matthew* 15:19; 25:41-46. Christ condemns theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All of these can be brought under the headings of the Ten Commandments. Our Lord speaks of them as originating in our inner thoughts, as dispositions of the mind. Thus the cure we need is of the heart. To proscribe evil acts will not cure the evil desires of the heart.

Our Lord joins together love of God and love of neighbor. The prime imperative of which Jesus speaks is love as the fulfilling of the law. The Beatitudes of *Matthew* 5:1-11 reflect a penetrating insight. Lowliness of mind and meekness of the soul show the conditions under which spiritual transformation can come. When Jesus says *blessed are they that mourn*, he means loosening from earth and drawing to heaven which reflect the soul's seeking for God. The results are clear: mercifulness, purity of heart, and peace-making. This is the movement of the heart from the bondage of sin to the freedom of God's righteousness and the graces of Christ. There is loosening from earthly ties, turning toward God, embracing God's righteousness, and commitment to Christ's graces: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and soul and mind, and thy neighbor as thyself.*

When Jesus says *seek first* the Kingdom of God he is not mandating a law but calling for a commitment. The fountain of action is love of God with the whole heart. Disposition comes before action; principle before form. From the transformation of our inward being there follow realization of Kingdom ideals of love and self-sacrifice, not of self-assertion. This is why in the teaching of our Lord righteousness and meekness are combined. Righteousness becomes more than sheer moral rectitude, and more than an eye for an eye. It becomes inner

moral goodness based on love. From this follow the standards and actions of the Kingdom: stewardship (*Mark* 4:25); commitment of all for Christ (*Mark* 10:17-31; charity (*Luke* 18:22); humility (*Luke* 14:10-11); unwillingness to cause one to stumble (*Mark* 9:42); love for enemies (*Luke* 6:35); a forgiving spirit (*Matthew* 6:14-15); inner piety (*Matthew* 6:4); watchfulness and prayer (*Luke* 21:36).

From these and other passages of Scripture we can summarize that Christ taught us to aspire to purity of heart, humility, righteousness, mercifulness, kindness, peaceableness, and singlemindedness. The golden text of discipleship is this, *If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (*Matthew* 16:24; note also 10:38-39; *Luke* 14:27; 17:33; *John* 12:25-26).

The teaching of the apostle Paul parallels that of our Lord. He also declares the Law of God to be holy, just and good (*Romans* 7:12; *Galatians* 3:19; *1 Timothy* 1:8) and that our true problem of the law is the weakness of the flesh (*Romans* 8:3-4). He, too, affirms the essence of the law as being love of neighbor (*Romans* 13:8-10; *Galatians* 5:14). He says, *love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law*. In the *Romans* passage (13:8-10) he recounts and reaffirms the validity of the moral principles of the Ten Commandments. Lists of vices which we are to avoid and principles for us to live by are found in *1 Corinthians* 6:9-10; *Ephesians* 4:25-36; 5:3-13; 6:1-3; *Colossians* 3:5-18; and *1 Timothy* 1:8-10. The works of carnal impulse are common knowledge: sexual sins (fornication, impurity, wantonness); pagan practices (idolatry, witchcraft); sins of passion and sedition (enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, self-seeking, dissension, division, envy); sins of indulgence (drunkenness, carousing) and, he adds *the like* (*Galatians* 5:19-21). Paul states flatly that certain kinds of behavior are proscribed. In passing, it is important to note that Paul is well aware of the conditioning effects of evil behavior. The verb translated *do* (in *do such things*) means *went to practice* such things. Thus we find in Paul's epistles many instances of parallels to the proscriptions in the Ten Commandments. Paul combines the moral effect of the law with the moral elements of the Gospel.

Paul also emphasizes inwardness. In *1 Timothy* 1:5 he correlates morality and an informed conscience: the Christian acts out of love -- love which flows from a pure heart, a good conscience and faith unfeigned. This means from a cleansed or redeemed heart, from a well-instructed conscience, and from unhypocritical faith. In Christ the Christian becomes a new creation (*2 Corinthians* 5:17). It is in relation to such a heart and mind that he speaks of the law of Christ (*1 Corinthians* 9:21; *Galatians* 6:2); the mind of Christ (*1 Corinthians* 2:16); to live in accord with Christ (*Romans* 15:5; *Colossians* 2:8); and the constraining love of Christ (*Romans* 13:10; *James* 2:8).

Paul's teaching is built on the premise that nothing spiritual can happen in the Christian life apart from the presence of the Holy Spirit. This fulfills Christ's promise of the descent of the Spirit and his working in our lives.

The Holy Spirit convicts of sin and attracts to Christ and upon conversion, baptism and union with Christ, the Spirit permanently resides in each Christian. Christians become *a temple of the Holy Spirit within you* (1 Corinthians 6:19). Christians are not told to pray for the Spirit to 'indwell' them, or to 'seal' them, even to 'baptize' them. The Spirit's presence in each Christian is a reality from the day of commitment to Christ. In this chapter, Paul's point is not to question whether the Holy Spirit is present, but whether certain attitudes and behavior are consistent with the Spirit's presence.

Paul's purpose is to draw his readers to the crux of the matter: the presence of the Spirit is a call to virtue. The point at issue is character. Paul moves from statement to command, from declaration to obligation, from what is a matter of fact to what ought to be the case, namely, *be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18). What does this mean?

To begin with, in this passage Paul directly contrasts the filling of the Spirit with out-of-mind experience such as a debauched mind (note also 1 Corinthians 14:23). His answer follows (Ephesians 5:18-33): being filled with the Spirit involves moral transformation the result of which he elsewhere describes as the *fruit of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:16-25). Paul's exhortation to *walk by the Spirit* parallels the command to *be filled with the Spirit* and focuses upon moral renewal and characteristics which follow from renewal.

Paul does not propose unattainable moral ideals for which no motive force is furnished; rather, the moral life aspired to has furnished ethical motivation and enablement along with the ideal. It should be recalled that Greek philosophers such as Plato had indeed proposed noble ethical ideals, but the rational life appeared capable of doing little more than talking about them, as Athenagoras later said about the schools of the philosophers. Paul says that realization of the ideal is the *fruit of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:22). The collective noun *fruit* suggests a coherent ethical result which is more than individual or successive obedience to rules of a code. Paul is referring to a certain kind of character whose nature is such as to natively yield virtue.

It is a spiritual harvest which is appropriate to the new divine life within Christians. Paul outlines the many-sided characteristics of a virtuous life. Whether these fall into classes of virtues is not clear, but they include inner personal qualities -- qualities governing social relations and principles of conduct:

- a) Love, which does not seek its own selfish ends but the good of others.
- b) Joy, which is more profound than pleasure or happiness. It is based upon the conviction that one's life, as Christ's was, is deeply attuned to God's purposes.
- c) Peace means mental well-being, a peace founded upon the reality of forgiveness which is based upon Christ's atoning sacrifice (note Romans 5:1).

d) Patience means longsuffering, which is forbearance of one another just as God has been merciful to us.

e) Kindness, or gentleness, is inner goodness or rightness of heart which has due regard for the fragility of others' feelings.

f) Goodness identifies the kind side of an ideal character. It is righteousness tinged by grace which aims to reconcile another who is estranged.

g) Faithfulness means fidelity to others.

h) Gentleness, translated *meekness* means due regard for one's own weaknesses and propensities to failure before judging others.

i) Self-control or temperance translates a word which means mastery of impulses - in Paul's use, keeping behavior in balance with the Spirit's aid, with a view to life serving useful ends.

In Paul's teaching, Christian experience begins in grace by the work of the Spirit and it continues in grace by the work of the Spirit.

The high point of Paul's teaching as to the goal of the Spirit's presence in the life of each Christian is reached in *Romans* 8:11. In *Romans*, Paul has systematically moved to his conclusion through the successive stages of the rationale of salvation: universal condemnation for sin, including both Gentile and Jew (1:18 - 3:20); justification by faith on grounds of the atoning death of Christ (3:21 - 5:21); renewal through identification by faith-baptism with Christ's death and resurrection (chapters 6-7); and, finally, explication of the life in the Spirit who is the agent of renewal and hope (chapter 8), ending with the paean of praise (8:31-39). The key-feature climax of 8:11 is that the same Holy Spirit who quickened Jesus Christ to resurrection life, quickens Christians through his indwelling presence and agency. But this is not an action of the Spirit detached from Christ. Rather, the action of the Spirit is in regard to *Christ in you* (verse 10): The risen Christ is the content of the Christian life; the Holy Spirit is the sealing and enabling agent of that content. In Paul's theology this fulfills the promise of Jesus that when the Spirit came (following Pentecost) he would glorify Christ in them, not himself (*John* 16:14, note also 14:26 and 15:26).

The mission of the Holy Spirit is to duplicate in Christians the quality of life of the incarnate Lord. I said earlier that Christ is the Man of the Spirit. Luke teaches us that Christ is the primary sign of the Spirit. Pentecost is the consequent sign because Pentecost follows through with the re-fashioning of humanity into the image of the Spirit-bearing humanity of Jesus Christ. For Christians there can be no greater or fuller definition of what the fullness of the Spirit means: a God-indwelt person whose characteristics are identifiable as the fruit of the Spirit. Moral transformation into the image of Christ marks the fullness of the Spirit. Any thesis as to the Holy Spirit's function other than to glorify Christ by duplicating the qualities of his Spirit-bearing humanity in the life of the Christian

will prove to be mischievous.

Duplication of life in the Spirit in Christians follows from coinherence. The relationship between Christ and Christians, and among Christians themselves within the body of Christ, is personal, which means that it is coinhering: *thou* (Father) *in me*, and *I in thee ... I in them and thou in me* (John 17: 21, 23). What follows from this?

First, the inhibiting power of proscription and conscience. Some things are quite simply wrong and must be avoided (as Paul indicates in delineating the characteristics of carnality) and the motivation and power to avoid them follows from the the coinhering personal realities: *Just as I do not wish to shame my wife or my children by certain behavior because they coinhere in me (they are part of that which comprises my selfhood), so I do not wish to offend Christ who by his Spirit indwells me* (note Romans 8:10-11; 1 Corinthians 6:15, 17, 19).

Second, the persuasive and attracting power of Christ as our moral ideal draws Christians to the values and characteristics which he exhibited in his normative humanity. He is the Second Adam, the Last Man. Christ's Spirit-bearing humanity duplicated in us comprises what it means to abide in Christ. It means to bear the fruit of the Spirit.

The Lord's lamp in our lives is conscience. But conscience can be conditioned to be blind to good and to affirm evil. It can be weak (1 Corinthians 8:7), seared (1 Timothy 4:2), corrupted (Titus 1:15), evil (Hebrews 10:22). On the other hand a cleansed conscience can be sincere, clear, good (2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Timothy 1:5; 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3). This tells us that conscience gets its standards from outside itself and that it ought to respond to the standards of God's law and will as made known in Christ. What we allow ourselves to be conditioned by will determine how sensitive our consciences are to say no to evil and yes to good.

The pursuit of Christian virtue involves spiritual discipline and self-sacrificing dedication to good works, and rejection of sin. Though strict avoidance of sin is a key factor, this does not entail harsh legalism. The pursuit of virtue is energized by love and joy and beauty. Good works do not save, but they of necessity follow from salvation. Good works are not only inherently morally good (Ephesians 2:10; 1 Timothy 2:10); they are, as well, good in the sense of reflecting the grace and beauty of a good character. They are, quite literally, full of grace (1 Timothy 5:10, 25; 6:18; Titus 2:7, 14). They flow from a lovely, Christlike character .

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China Letter 11

LIVING IN HOPE

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

In my last letter I wrote about Christian virtue. As I have thought further about that matter, it occurs to me that we Christians must say a lot more about proper ideals for living and working than we have done in the recent past. Perhaps that is due to the harshness of the times, which entice some Christians to discouragement, even to despair. Remember that the New Testament epistles were written to people who lived in hard times. There is no hint of resignation on their part. A frequent phrase in the *Letter to the Hebrews* is *Let us ...* For example: *let us strive* (4:11); *let us hold fast our confession* (4:14); *let us with confidence draw near* (4:16); *let us leave the elementary form of faith and go on* (6:1); *let us lay aside every weight* (12:1).

Loss of hope is a form of unbelief. It was said of the children of Israel that they were unable to enter the promised land because of unbelief (*Hebrews* 3:19). Instead, we ought to *consider him*, our Lord, who endured hostility so that we not become weary and fainthearted (*Hebrews* 12:3). The urgent injunction follows: *therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet* (*Hebrews* 12:12-13).

When I wrote to you about vices and virtues I listed the traditional seven deadly vices, which list has been used widely by Christians for centuries as a teaching tool (pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, lust). But, on the other side, I should have emphasized the other marvelous teaching tool, the seven traditional virtues. These are, first, the four philosophical virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, justice; and, second, the three key theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. It is evident from what I said before that each of these has a prominent place in the Bible as part of the way of life. Here in this letter I want to stress hope as an absolutely necessary aspect of our daily walk as Christians. Hope is a public, identifying mark of the Christian life as well as being the inner bedrock foundation of faith and love.

Some years ago I read a comment by an eminent European psychiatrist that of all the people he had treated for personality disorders he had never found anyone who did not lack one or other of the three cardinal virtues of faith, hope and love. By faith he meant belief in the worthwhileness of life. By love he meant the sense of being loved and having the capacity to reciprocate love. By hope he meant a sense of moving effectively in life toward a goal. In short, by hope he meant meaningfulness. While there is much more that we as Christians can add to his definitions as I have already shown, we can learn from his clinical observations. Hope is a key feature of New Testament teaching. Indeed, the Apostle Paul had to warn the Thessalonian Christians who were upset that evil times might engulf them that they should encourage and build up one another, not sink into worry and despair (*1 Thessalonians* 5:11). Later Paul wrote again urging them not to become absorbed with the possibilities of disaster because of the Evil One, but to remember that they were called to salvation, comfort and hope (*2 Thessalonians* 2:13-17).

Hope is one of the foundation stones of life. Emotional flagging and sickness are often due to loss of hope. Bear in mind that the Lord allowed

discouragement to his people in the midst of which he promised to be their help (*Psalms* 42, 43, 46), but never despair. God commands his people to hope. He commands against despair. Remember the word of hope: *I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry; he drew me up out from the desolate pit* (*Psalms* 40:1-2).

Another writer has recounted his experience in a concentration camp during the Second World War where people were being mercilessly killed and there appeared to be no hope. He wrote of two men who contemplated suicide, but resisted. Why? Because, he said, they sensed that life was expecting something from them. The one had a child whom he loved dearly and hoped to see again. The other was a scientist who had books to finish which only he could write. In both cases these men sensed responsibility: to a loved one and to unfinished work. One cannot throw one's life away.

We know that there is a close connection between one's state of mind and one's health. I mean not only emotional health but also the total health of the body. Depression which leads to despair affects the well-being and immunity of the body. The prison camp writer to whom I refer saw people who had given up hope actually lie down and die. We cannot live without hope.

Christian hope is two-sided. There is hope in the sense of anticipating Christ's return, the final banishment of evil, and the heavenly home. But there is also hope in the basic, personal sense of living in hope from day to day until the Lord calls us into his own presence. Hope in Christ's return is not intended to frighten us in regard to the end times of which the Bible speaks, nor to immobilize us by fear, but to comfort us. Paul declares *therefore comfort one another with these words* (*1 Thessalonians* 4:18). This is a call to a positive outlook on life and is, as well, a call to stewardship of life and resources.

We need to see that the public expression and symbols of Christian faith are declarations of hope. This is true of both Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is initiation into the life of hope. The Lord's Supper comprises on-going nurture of a life of hope. This commitment to Christ and life of devotion in Christ is nourished by prayer.

During the past half-century there has been a remarkable turn to interest in Baptism. The real debate has never been how much water should be used, though it is now acknowledged that immersion in water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the pattern of the New Testament. The central question has been, Who should be baptized? and, When should that person be baptized? The Apostolic answer is clear: those who have confessed faith in Jesus Christ; and, immediately upon confession of their faith in Christ. This is the pattern of the Gospel preaching (*Acts* 2:38) and practice (*Acts* 8:35-40), to mention but two of many references.

Baptism is initiation into Christ and into the community of faith, and this means into the community of hope -- a community of a completely different

mind-set from that of the world. Faith-baptism signifies the following: Burial with Christ and participation in his resurrection (*Romans* 6:3-5; *Colossians* 2:12). Conversion and forgiveness of sins (*1 Corinthians* 6:11). The gift of the Spirit and renewal by the Spirit (*Titus* 3:5). Union with Christ and incorporation into the body of Christ (*Galatians* 3:27; *Ephesians* 4:4-6). The faith which is expressed in this public act includes renunciation of sin and the Devil, profession of faith in Christ, and commitment to the work of Christ's Kingdom. This entails renunciation of the works of darkness, escape from the fear of spirits, and deliverance from the despair of thinking that ultimately evil powers threaten our destiny. To renounce the Devil is to adhere to hope and all the working of the Kingdom of Light. When we become Christians we are enlisted in the community of hope in which we become co-workers with God. To confess faith is to adhere to Christ. To be baptized into Christ signifies, says Paul, that we have become Abraham's offspring. This means heirs *according to the promise* (*Galatians* 3:27-29). The words *according to the promise* mean to enter upon a life of hope. The promise has in part been fulfilled, and will yet be completely fulfilled.

Baptism signals entrance upon new life. It is invariably faith-baptism. The life-transforming and outlook-transforming power of the Gospel are inherent in its significance. Notice the linkage in apostolic preaching and practice: when the Gospel was preached and people were converted and baptized it was conversion and baptism to *the good news about the kingdom of God* (*Acts* 8:12). This meant newly regenerated people who now had a new outlook on life, work, stewardship and the future. With God they became shapers of the future. To become a co-worker with God is the most powerful root of the tree of hope. From that moment on life is never to no point. It is always to some point, a point which is found within the overarching purposes of God. We must see this initiation into Christ as, on the one hand, our being placed in the grave of the Lord Jesus, of death to sin in his death; but, on the other hand, as coming alive in his resurrection life, *a life which is lived to God* (*Romans* 6:7-11).

Similarly, the theme of hope is fundamental to the words with which Christ instituted the Lord's Supper (*Matthew* 26:26-29; *Mark* 14:22-25; *Luke* 22:15-20). The Lord's Supper is to be understood in a threefold temporal context:

First, in regard to the past one is to look back to Calvary as the price of redemption. Hope is built upon the foundation of forgiveness. God has dealt with the guilt and judgment of sin. The past has been taken care of. Sin is forgiven. The mind and conscience can be at rest. God's dealing with former transgression clears the way for a fresh start. Hope is grounded in forgiveness because forgiveness includes trust that God by his redemptive grace may be able to overcome the evil effects of our sinning, which we in most cases are powerless to do.

Second, as to the future one is to look forward to Christ's return. Such a hope is a purifying hope. Christian hope understands history to be linear. History starts with the creation of the world by God and will be consummated with the establishment of God's Kingdom. The promise of God's righteous judgment

finally being fulfilled against evil and evil-doers fuels faith and hope (*James 5:7-10*).

Third, as to the present one is to look around, within the church fellowship with loving regard for others in the body, and then to look beyond ourselves seeking ways to minister to a broken world. Hope joyfully recognizes tasks which must be done, work which must be accomplished, obligations which must be met, ministry which must be fulfilled, family which must be supported. Hope and vocation belong together. Hope includes not only visions of goals toward which we strive, but gives confidence that the goals can and ultimately will be reached; or, if we cannot achieve them, that the sense of purpose which nourished our striving has not been pointless but will be vindicated by God. In God's purposes the struggles of this life have meaning in an ultimate sense, either in this life or in the next, and if we cannot reach every goal now we know that God will ultimately vindicate committed stewardship.

The Lord's Supper is an interim memorial. It is 'until he comes.' While the life to come is already present in and among Christians, the Lord's Supper points to the final feast in the presence of God himself. In this respect the Lord's Supper is an expression of hope: we live to serve Christ whom we love in view of the final day when we shall all be with him. We live and work in hope of the glory of God. Paul sets forward the frame of reference and outlook of Christian experience in *Romans 5:1-5*:

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand,
and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.*

The reversal of modern materialist ideology is striking testimony to the truth and vitality of the Christian understanding of hope. But modern turning to hope is not being postulated on faith in God and confidence in his purposes but on a purely secular footing. It is striking that in unbelief some are attempting to become secular prophets in an attempt to preempt the Christian hope of the Kingdom of God as a purely secular venture. They have concluded that human beings cannot live without hope.

Modern Materialism denied freedom and an open-ended future but at the same time tried to set forward a secular kingdom on grounds of historical

inevitability and economic determinism. Freedom, they said, is a myth. There is no future except that the body will be dissolved into its chemical elements. This view has failed as an ideological model. Attempts are now being made to reformulate the social and economic ideal. As I develop this further, remember how distinctive Christian teaching is: to live in hope means that what we do today as co-workers with God will endure and will shape the future.

Today many Materialists, including Marxists, have retreated from metaphysical and historical determinism and are returning to the concept of a more open-ended universe. This is testimony that human beings find determinism intellectually unsatisfying and, for many, morally offensive.

A dramatic example of this transformation is the shift away from historical determinism by the German Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch. He has adopted a new, utopian vision of social justice coupled with openness to change and to the future. This is both a rejection of historical determinism and of existential despair. He has shifted from the view of the universe as comprising a fixed determinism to the view that the only indestructible thing in the universe is the unconditionally indeterminate. He now contends that the world is open, that objectively real possibility exists in it, and not simply determined necessity or mechanical determinism. We live, he says, surrounded by possibility, and the fulfillment of possibilities depends upon vision and choice. By this he means that utopia is contemporary with each of us and is everywhere present as the living option before humanity. Vision and hope are the torch to light the way. Reality is no longer conceived to be an engine pushing the train from behind. He even sees possibility to be the core of God's statement to Moses, *I will be what I will be*. He sees hope as the only antidote to modern ideological collapse and existential despair.

This is a remarkable shift by a modern Marxist. It is virtually a picking up of the message in the Bible of hope as a divine command. However, the message of the prophets was that God will do it and that we are co-workers with him, not the message of modern utopians that we will do it by our own unaided human effort. Christian hope is solidly grounded in the biblical command to hope in the Creator and Sustainer of all things who has indeed made us for freedom, not fatalism and despair.

Thus the coin of Christian hope is two-sided. On the one side is the message of hope in Christ's personal return and final kingdom. On the other side is the motto that we refuse to withdraw from life and stewardship in the face of sin and evil. We see our vocation to be based not on theories of the perfectibility of human nature through upward evolutionary momentum, but upon a healthy recognition of the universality of sin and the power of evil in the world, yet we retain supreme confidence in the final triumph of God's purposes and pledge ourselves to be co-workers with God. Christians do not side with Job in his darkest moments, *my days ... come to their end without hope*, (*Job 7:6*), though we too have borne the tragedies of life. Rather, as Job did later, we cast ourselves in faith upon the promises and purposes of God. The New Testament teaches us to

build life on hope, as the apostles Paul, Peter and the writer of *Hebrews* say: *we are saved by hope, Romans 8:24; we are born anew to a living hope, 1 Peter 1:3; and, we have hope as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, Hebrews 6:19.*

As one looks back upon the lives of the earliest Christians, it becomes clear that modern determinism and fatalism are an old story. This is what Christian faith displaced by introducing into human thought a completely new understanding of history.

Before the time of Christ the ancient Greeks understood history primarily as cycles of nature or as biography which becomes mythology. As to practical day to day understanding, they saw history chiefly as nature unfolding itself through an inherent divine principle. At the personal level they thought that the chief cause which moves events is the human drive, understood to be a divine urge, or divine madness: whom the gods would destroy they first make mad. They felt that the lives of heroes and villains demonstrated this understanding, as did some of our own forefathers. The endless succession of events entailed a dialectic of time - the cycle of rise and fall, of conflict, of polarization of opposites, the yin and the yang of our own past theories.

Some among them, like the Epicureans, maintained a doctrine of deterministic atomism which was behavioral and hedonist, without a sense of history. They rejected any controlling or interpreting principle except pleasure or gratification, or any activity by the gods. Chance and necessity are critical factors of life, for good or ill. The wise man prudently seeks pleasure while he may.

Others, such as the Stoics were also determinists, but they argued that there is an inherent cosmic principle of intelligibility in the universe, which we know as inexorable destiny or fate. The highest ideal of civilized life is that of the citizen of the world, which concept reflects the unity of their grand scheme of the immanent divine principle. The prudent man knows his place or role in the universe. Paul addressed both Epicureans and Stoics on Mars Hill in *Acts 17*. In this sermon he emphasized the purposes of God in contrast to their fatalism.

Roman thought concentrated upon the theory and functions of society as the expression of a divinely given and sanctioned order, an order which is reflected in the life-cycle of nature from season to season. History serves a practical social, political and, at times, ethical purpose as memory of events and of biography. History is the witness to human valor and folly. As biography, history shows how to turn disadvantage to advantage, but advantage (such as military victory) has within itself the seeds of its own destruction. History shows how men succeed but also how within the success there lurks the inevitability of failure. This is not a moral issue. Success or failure is its own justification in the order of things: what goes up must in the nature of things come down. This is the dialectic of time and the polarization of opposites.

Thus, the Roman Empire was seen to be a divine gift and arrangement, interpreted biographically and in terms of the seasonal life-cycle. The gods

represented forces at work in nature for or against humanity. Their goodwill must be preserved. Educated men and women of the Roman Empire frequently demythicized the gods into cosmic principles or immanent, impersonal forces which must be acknowledged and honored. Truth or falsity in religion was irrelevant to many intellectuals.

Consolidation of power in the hands of the Caesars was justified on grounds of need to conserve values in the face of threatening social and political chaos and was mythicized in the deification of the Emperor (the Imperial Cult). Does this not sound like some of our own ancient history? Enrollment of the Emperor among the gods served the purpose of acknowledging the divine source of the republican ideal which was conceived to be embodied in him. Citizens and others were intended to live the civilized life which he represented and embodied.

Early Christians strongly resisted this deification and identification while affirming their desire to be good citizens of the Empire. Early Christian historians were chroniclers desiring to exhibit the historical authenticity of their faith. History for them was not merely presentation of the historian's own art. What did they do which the Greeks and Romans had not done? It will be clear that Christian historiography and, therefore, eschatology is based upon the Old Testament doctrine of the creation of the world by God, the providence of God, and prophetic disclosure of the purposes of God in history. But history is understood to be linear, moving from a beginning at the creation to a divinely assigned ending.

Thus, the *Gospel of Luke* is an accurate and orderly account. It is written as an authentic record. This is Luke's intention in writing his Gospel and in writing the *Acts of the Apostles*. and is implicit in the writings of the early Church Fathers. The mood of early Christian writing is powerfully conserving of concrete historical data.

This historiography involves a two-fold perspective, namely, prefiguration and preparation in the Old Testament. Then fulfillment in the incarnate Lord, the Redeemer. Finally, consummation at his Second Coming to establish his Kingdom. Included are moral values which the lessons of history and biography convey. Inevitably Christianity implied a metaphysic, but it was a metaphysic which honored the created order as the handiwork of God, the personal Creator and Sustainer. Early Christian historiography stressed facticity (Ignatius, Athenagoras), Christians as heirs of promise which is being worked out in history (Barnabas), the purpose of the personal Creator not inexorable world fire (Justin Martyr), the personal redeemer as Instructor not an impersonal Logos as seminal reason (Clement of Alexandria), vigorous rejection of Gnostic anti-historicism (Irenaeus against Valentinus).

The early Christians instinctively dissociated themselves from the mythologizing tendency of ancient thought while continuing the quest for a metaphysical language which would adequately express the truth about the Incarnation of the Son of God. History is real, not an illusion. God's actions in

history are specific in time and place, they devolve upon the historical Jesus Christ, and they anticipate Christ's Second Coming as historical event not merely as a conception which will never become historical.

But Christians in the fourth century made a mistake. Following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, many Christians began to believe that the Kingdom of God had arrived on earth. When nations from the eastern side of the Roman Empire surrounded and sacked Rome in 410 A.D. many Christians thought that the end of the world had come. But they were wrong. It was at this time that Augustine, a Christian leader in North Africa, called upon Christians to re-think their understanding of history and of the place of Christians within society.

It was Augustine who, in light of the Christian doctrine of creation and divine providence, formulated the concept of time and history which remains to the present day. Augustine said that the first moment of creation is the first moment of time. God creates time. He said: if nothing were passing there would be no past time; if nothing were coming there would be no time to come; and, if nothing were there would be no present time. Thus time is the measure of motion and God is working providentially and purposefully throughout this movement of irreversible time. History is a one-way movement, from creation to consummation. We discern the significance of events and trends in light of the Biblical revelation; we do not impose our mythologies upon them.

Crucial to Augustine's insight is the understanding that no earthly kingdom is the final, divine kingdom. He discerns two societies, two kingdoms, two cities in the making. First, there is the city of human bondage, which is due to sin. Second, there is the City of God. In that final city God will reign in his own righteousness and the love of God will be its norm.

Thus history is a linear process which is based upon the doctrine of creation and providence. History does not reflect the caprice of the gods. It does not reflect fortune or fate. Nor is history the outworking of an inner, impersonal divine principle. History discloses the purposes of the Creator and at the end his judgment will take account of our freedom and responsibility. The Christian must therefore understand that all human societies are flawed and that he or she cannot pin hope on any earthly kingdom.

Again I ask: As Christians, what should our relationship be to our times? The answer can only be the sense of a divinely given vocation to live and work in hope. We cannot withdraw into a shell because of revulsion at what we see around us in society. We have a calling. It is this:

First, it is a call to spirituality and piety, which means virtuous living and complete integrity in our dealings with others.

Second, it is a call to an ethic of responsibility; that we will be responsible for our own behavior and will care for our brother and sister.

Third, it is a call to hard work. Given opportunity and just laws, Christians have always been productive. When, under God, we are productive and prosper, whether on the farm or in business, we must consider how to be good stewards of that which God gives us.

Fourth, it is a call to a simple life style. This means that we will live prudently, but also sacrificially, because we have a higher goal. This goal is that life and resources be used for Christ's glory and in the interests of his Kingdom.

Fifth, It is a call to life, to dedicated family life. This means that we will be confident to love and marry, to bear children, to care for them with great dedication and to instill in them confidence in God's purposes for their lives.

Sixth, it is a call to community life. We will honor the household of faith and love God's children as we would the members of an extended family. From this household of warmth and love we can then extend the hand of love and hope to those around us.

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China Letter 12

THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

Christians do not exist in isolation. They belong to Christ and, as well, they belong to one another. What does this mean for our modern life? It is time to consider our Lord's founding of the church. What did he command his followers to do, and why?

Is the church important for Christian faith? Why cannot an individual soul simply worship God in the privacy of his or her own thoughts? The answer is that Christians can neither mature nor minister in isolation. The church is essential to the nurture of Christian life and to our mission in the world. It is all wrapped up together in the purposeful word of Christ when he said, *I will build my church*. How ironic, then, that some Christians who profess to be ardent followers of Christ can neglect or ignore the church despite the central role it has in the teaching of the New Testament.

In Christ's saying *on this rock I will build my Church* (Matthew 16:18) the word rock refers not to the personal Peter (though one can readily acknowledge the intended pun on his name), but rather that the rock designates the bedrock of truth which he had confessed: *on this rock of revealed truth I will build my church*, i.e., the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The play on Peter's name means 'you have expressed revealed truth and your name is a metaphor for that truth,' but it is the confessed truth upon which the church will stand. Indeed, Peter is careful to make Christ, not himself, the cornerstone of faith

(*1 Peter 2:4-8*).

The church of the New Testament is not incidental to the Gospel and its role pervades New Testament reporting and teaching. Its reality and functions are frequently triune related. It is the assembly of God (*Acts 20:28*) or household of God (*1 Timothy 3:15*). It is the body of Christ (*1 Corinthians 12:27*, *Ephesians 1:23*) and the bride of Christ (*2 Corinthians 11:2*, *Ephesians 5:25-27*). It is the fellowship of the Spirit, sealed by him to the day of redemption (*1 Corinthians 6:19*, *Ephesians 1:13*) and equipped by the Spirit to serve Christ as his body (*1 Corinthians 12:4, 13*; *Galatians 5:16, 22-23, 25*). The church in the New Testament is a critically important part of Christ's work of redemption and therefore cannot be minimized or ignored. It is a travesty of New Testament teaching to claim that one is part of the New Testament church (meaning the 'Invisible Church') and therefore that one has no obligation to any assembly of Christians. This is a distortion of New Testament teaching.

So far as its founding is concerned, Christ loved the church and gave his life for the church (*Acts 20:28*, *Ephesians 5:25*). Christ's future coming and purposes devolve upon the church (*Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:26-27*). And, at present, it is his body - the instrument of his working in the world (*1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 29-31*; *Ephesians 4:7, 16*). In the Apostolic period there was nothing else -- indeed, there could be nothing else -- but the church of Jesus Christ. There were no special interest groups, only the church. There was not a Galilean Fisherman's Fellowship, nor a Sellers of Purple Christian League, nor a Tentmakers Christian Association, but only Christ's body here, there and everywhere, doing Christ's bidding as led and instructed by the apostles. Everyone, of whatever race or ethnic origin, rich or poor, bond or free, educated or uneducated, was part of the local body of Christ.

In light of the foregoing, allow me to further develop the importance of the church by showing you what its biblical foundations are. We can do this by showing how the church is linked to God's revealed purposes and his work of redemption, and to the essential functions of the Gospel.

First, the church is created by the Gospel. The Gospel of Christ created the Christian community. This follows from the giving, proclaiming and receiving of a revelation, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and distinguishes those who have received the message from those who have not. In this sense the Church is the called-out-assembly, the company of the committed. Christians are the community of forgiven sinners who have personally trusted Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Allegiance to Jesus Christ the Lord is the constitution of this assembly. The Lordship of Christ, that is, that he is God and Savior is the focus of everything that is Christian. This is embodied in the confession that *Jesus is Lord* (*Acts 2:36*, *Romans 10:9*, *Philippians 2:11*).

Public, identifiable discipleship and admission to the church are sealed by

the initiatory rite of baptism as the mark of the forgiveness of sins, the seal of faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Lord.

This pledge is renewed regularly by means of the Lord's Supper. Thereby we pledge loyalty to Christ in an act which memorializes his death and our dependence upon him. But, as well, we pledge loyalty to one another and together to share the Gospel with the world.

Second, the Church is constituted a new body by the Holy Spirit. Reception of the Spirit upon conversion separates Christians to Christ and to each other. The concept of the Body of Christ implies the formation of the community of the redeemed. Life in the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit do not signify granular individualism. They are social concepts, but the distinctive character of the community is itself not only a witness. It is also a magnet for misunderstanding and resentment by the world. By means of the Lord's Supper Christians proclaim the uniqueness of their fellowship, that they are in the world but not of the world. That they nevertheless are not enemies of mankind but lovers of humanity is a never to be resolved issue which must be dealt with by each generation of Christians within their own society.

Third, its mission constituted the Church to be a distinctive community. The core meaning and mission of the Christian faith is not that of a ritual performed and prayers spoken by devotees in a consecrated place, but devotion to the personal God in Christ which evokes action. The Gospel constituted Christians a distinctive community with the mandate to disseminate a message. And that message is the Word of God in Christ for the world. This supersedes ritualistic religion as practiced in the temples with a spiritual religion based on vital theological and moral principles. The 'People of God' are marked by their response to the Word of God, and their task is to preach and live that Gospel.

Fourth, the new person created the new community. Redemption has in view the new creation (2 *Corinthians* 5:17). Christian distinctiveness concerns first and foremost a moral quality of life. It is a call to the sanctified life. Through the Gospel a moral dynamic was released into the world. The ancient schools had many worthwhile, noble ethical ideals but failed to furnish the motive force needed to recreate fallen human nature.

Christian commitment entails moral renewal in personal ethics, in business integrity, in the marriage relationship, in parenting, in treatment of the aged, and in purity of worship. Christianity outlived, outdied and outsang the ancient world.

I add the testimony and appeal which Athenagoras made in his *Plea* to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, himself a philosopher, and to his son Commodus, at about 175 C.E. This shows the quality of life of the early Christians, the ideals by which they lived, which enhanced their role as citizens of the community:

Your Most Excellent Majesties...the whole Empire through your wisdom enjoys profound peace.

But you have not cared for us who are called Christians in this way. Although we do no wrong, but, as we shall show, are of all men most religiously and rightly disposed toward God and your Empire, you allow us to be harassed, plundered, and persecuted, the mob making war on us only because of our name...

And yet who of them (that is, the philosophers) have so purified their own hearts as to love their enemies instead of hating them?...

On the contrary, they ever persist in delving into some harm, making skill in oratory rather than proof by deeds their business. With us, on the contrary, you will find unlettered people, tradesmen and old women, who, though unable to express in words the advantages of our teaching, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds.

Fifth, the Christian hope created a new view of history. Against the fatalism of the Stoics and Epicureans, Christians witnessed to a purposeful view of life and history. Life is to be lived in relation to ends. The movement of history is tied to the purposes of God. History is not purposeless. It moves from Creation through Redemption to the Consummation of the final Kingdom following Christ's second coming. Christians are commanded not to despair but to live in hope.

This means that life can and should be lived purposefully. There is a point to what Christians plan and do and the ideals to which they aspire. The totality of all that is accomplished in life under the providence of God will not irrevocably collapse in the grave. There will be a final reckoning when God will be justified in his ways with humanity and his purposes in history. Christian hope displaced fatalism and despair.

As described in the New Testament, what is the nature of the church? To begin with, one should recognize that it is far more than an assembly or gathering of people. For example, our Lord refers to the gathering of things or people, such as sorting the good from the bad when fishing (*Matthew* 13:48) or of gathering tares in the final judicial winnowing (*Matthew* 13:30-31, 41). There is also the word synagogue and its verb, which means to come together. This is the sense in identifying the meeting of Jewish people for worship or instruction in their own place, but apart from *James* 2:2 it is not used of Christian assemblies.

The New Testament points to something unique about the church. This is locked up in the meaning of two key terms: the term church (*ecclesia*) and the term body (*soma*). Unless we grasp what these terms convey in the New Testament both individually and in relation to one another we will miss the truth of what the church is and what its functions and mission are.

At the time of the Apostles, in both general and specifically Christian use the term *ecclesia*, which we translate church, signifies an assembly of persons who duly constitute a civil entity, an organization, or a social compact. For example, in *Acts* 19:32, 39, 41 it signifies a properly convened meeting of the citizens of the city of Ephesus. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to note in this passage that Luke speaks not only of a duly constituted meeting of citizens as an

ecclesia but also that the Clerk of the city dismissed the irregular assembly (*ecclesia*) of citizens who had gathered in the stadium to protest the activities of Christians. The fact that reference is made to the confused assembly and, by implication, to that assembly as unlawful simply reinforces the prime sense of the term's use, which is the regular meeting of a duly constituted organization or body of people who properly belong to it. We have found one ancient inscription which uses the term in the sense of *ecclesia*-list, or voters list. Thus there were listed those who properly belonged to a community or organization and were entitled to vote in its business sessions.

It is also used of the community or nation of Israel in the Septuagint version of *Deuteronomy* 4:10, 23:3, whether they are assembled or not, and in *Acts* 7:38 and *Hebrews* 2:12.

The main use in the New Testament is to identify assemblies of Christians, in two senses. First, to identify the act of meeting and the fact of being in a meeting, as *when you meet*, or, *in the meeting* (*1 Corinthians* 11:18; note also 14:19, 34, 35). Second, to identify local assemblies or communities of Christians.

This second use is crucial. It is specific to local churches or communities of Christians.

But there is, apparently, a collective sense. For example, Paul made havoc of the church, *entering house after house* (*Acts* 8:3). Does this mean homes of individual members who belonged to one assembly, or does *ecclesia* here signify many house churches or conventicles? Note also *Matthew* 18:17.

What of the collective, universal or general use of the term church? This includes Jesus' promise, *I will build my church* (*Matthew* 16:18) and Paul's statement that he had *persecuted the church* (*1 Corinthians* 15:9, *Galatians* 1:13, *Philippians* 3:6); note also *1 Corinthians* 12:28, *1 Timothy* 3:15, and use by the writer of *Hebrews* 12:23). *Ephesians* 1:22-23 is a critical passage. Here Paul speaks of *the church which is his body*. This usage pinpoints the difficult issue of the sense in which the church as the body of Christ is local and the sense in which the term body is being used generally, collectively or universally. It is more than a linguistic matter, raising, as it does, the important metaphysical issue of the one and the many.

Specificity and the reality of a duly constituted organization are the significant aspects, whether *everywhere in every church* (*1 Corinthians* 4:17), or by name, such as the church at Jerusalem (*Acts* 8:1), the church at Cenchreae (*Romans* 16:1), the church of the Thessalonians (*1 Thessalonians* 1:1), the church in Nympha's house (*Colossians* 4:15), in Philemon's house (*Philemon* 2), in the house of Prisca and Aquilla (*Romans* 16:5), or in the plural form (*Acts* 15:41; *Romans* 16:16; *1 Corinthians* 7:17, 14:33, 16:19). The prime use of *ecclesia* is to identify organized specific local assemblies of Christians; it identifies both the reality and the activity: the *coming together of the assembly* (*1 Corinthians* 11:18).

Local specificity is no longer in question as the primary meaning of the term church. Whatever collective sense is imputed must take into account local church reality as the expression of what the term church in general may mean. Hence the term church should be thought of first and foremost in concrete terms. Any spiritualizing in the dogmatic sense of an invisible church is unthinkable for Paul. The church has its location, existence and being within definable geographical limits. The *ecclesia* is always described and ordered in terms of its particular, local form.

What about the other key term, *soma*, which we commonly translate body? This term has widely varied uses. Without multiplying references and instances, I will simply summarize: It is used of a dead human body or of a living human being; of the bodies of animals living or dead; of any corporeal substance (as in *Colossians* 2:17); or, as a metaphor for a number of persons who are united by a common bond.

In the New Testament its prime use is of the church as the body of Christ. To say that this use signifies a spiritual body does not advance our understanding very much. Note examples of the use of this term:

Paul says that *we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another (Romans 12:5)*. Retreat to mysticism as to the meaning of this is not helpful. Paul is saying that they each one, concretely in that local situation, belong to one another (a coinhering life) and that if he were there he too would be part of it. In a general sense all Christians belong to the common fellowship of Christians, but to define body only or primarily in the collective sense is to do a disservice to the text because all of the gifts he is speaking about in the passage call for local development and utilization.

Surely Paul's use of 'we' rhetorically signifies the local body. In *1 Corinthians* 10:16-17 he speaks of the bread which symbolizes Christ's body and goes on to say that just as the loaf is one so *we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*. This is not a mystical partaking, but the partaking by the body of Christians at Corinth, of which Paul would be a part as well, were he there among them. The generalization is useful and cohering, but the reality must be specific and concrete.

This is the sense in which the rhetorical 'we' must be understood. Baptism by the spirit, coincident with believer's baptism (*1 Corinthians* 12:13) is baptism into the body of the church concretely, not into a mystical body. Indeed, one is hard pressed to comprehend what a mystical body is. It is in the making of the collective concrete that Paul's use of the term body is to be best understood (note also *Ephesians* 1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12; 5:23, 30; *Colossians* 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15).

Unless the concept of the body of Christ is related to a specific local body we distort Paul's metaphor of the body in *1 Corinthians* 12 and miss his teaching about its concrete functions. At the end of his discussion Paul concludes (v.27),

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Translation of this text is difficult because Paul uses the anarthrous construction. It is technically not correct to translate *the body* because the definite article is not present in the Greek text, and it is disingenuous to translate it *a body* because the Greek does not have the indefinite article, though this is in part the thrust of the passage. Thus a translator must strike a balance between the two, which we normally do by rendering it *you are the body of Christ*. Paul is saying, *You at Corinth are a body. You should understand that you must function as a complete body, of which Christ is the head.* Otherwise we make nonsense of his metaphor. He does not mean that Corinth is an arm, or that Ephesus is a foot, or that Colossae is an ear. He means that at Corinth and at Ephesus and at Colossae there is a functioning body, of which in each case Christ is the head.

We can now draw this discussion of the New Testament concept of the church to a conclusion. It is this: *the term Church is defined in the New Testament in the sense of body.* It is *ecclesia* defined in the sense of *soma*. This is the genus and the species.

Negatively speaking, the term church in the New Testament does mean a duly constituted body politic, but not merely in the sense of a social convention. In those days the citizens of a city state who assembled in the stadium to constitutionally conduct business were an *ecclesia*, as were members of any fraternal organization, such as a professional or trade association or a burial society. In this respect today we could say that the members of a club or the Employees Association of a corporation who meet to decide matters which concern them each comprise an *ecclesia* in the sense in which it was used in the days of the Apostles. But such social and business compacts are merely social conventions -- they are organized and exist in the interests of a particular group for a time. They do not have a necessary status in reality.

Positively speaking, the church is more than a social convention, more than a body politic. It is a called-out-assembly in the sense of constituting a local body. This is not merely a social convenience with a constitutional foundation and purpose. It is an entity of coinhering life of which Christ is the head. I do not think that anyone is wise enough to sort through the metaphysical implications of this so far as the problem of the one and the many is concerned, but one must not minimize the reality of the local body in the interests of a theory of the invisible church. Historical, empirical concreteness is critical to an understanding of what the church in the New Testament is, local and universal.

The Church is Christ's body 'in that place'. Ancient sources show that *ecclesia* means the summoning of a duly constituted assembly (*ecclesiasmos*), probably in the hall of the *ecclesia* (*ecclesiaterion*) by those who are members of the *ecclesia* (*ecclesiastes*). Most important, they comprise a register, such as a register of members or voters (*ecclesiastikos pinatz*) who are publicly listed. Similarly, the church is a local assembly of believers, known, identified, who enjoy the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of their membership and calling.

The coinhering nature of life in the church as Christ's body is most beautifully presented in the New Testament in the figure of home and family. The church is the household of God (*1 Timothy* 3:15). Best of all, it is called the Household of Faith (*Galatians* 6:10). It is the family of God. Nothing in the New Testament comes closer to our ancient Chinese social tradition about the family than this. It speaks to us of our common brotherhood under the sovereign Fatherhood of God the Lord. It points to the importance of love, of respect (especially for our elders), of discipline, and of loyalty. It reinforces for us the vital place of good example and role models, of respect for wisdom and honor to those who lead, not out of fear but because they lead by love, by example and by persuasion. This is the answer to our ancient quest for men and women of integrity, for those who are upright and who will lead people into the paths of righteousness, peace, and prosperity as unselfish stewards of God's gifts. In short, the household of faith affirms the infinite worth to God and also to ourselves as a community of every individual man or woman, boy or girl.

What principles should inform and guide our church life and faith? I will list a few and comment on them briefly.

First, the principle of the gathered church fellowship. Biblically and historically we are heirs of the spiritual conventicle: the principle of a committed, believing people; of regenerate church membership; of the fellowshiping body; of the 'body of Christ in that place;' of the local fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ. The polity of the local, indigenous church includes: self-governance, self-support, self-propagation, and cooperation with churches of like faith and practice.

Self-governance should not result in sectarianism or antipathy toward other Christians or people of other religions, but willingness to stand under the teaching and strictures of the Apostolic faith, and to allow the mind of Christ to inform internal church life, church decisions, and inter-church relations. This should be with a view to exhibiting ideals of the Christian life and implementing the dominically mandated missionary task of the church.

Second, let us hold strongly to the authority of the canonical Scriptures. The Bible is the unique and indispensable authority in the church. The question then becomes: which biblical teachings and themes are listened to and put into practice, and to what extent do received traditions blunt the force of the Scriptures in the life of the church? The central message of the Bible concerns Jesus Christ the Son of God who came to be the Savior of the world through his death on the Cross and resurrection. It is the responsibility of every Christian to become biblically informed; to study and understand the teaching of the Bible and to replicate Christian virtues in life. The mood of every church must be to stand under the Scriptures, not to give the impression of being lords of Scripture.

Third, the important principle of freedom of conscience. This is the traditional 'soul liberty' of evangelical faith. It is the principle of voluntarism. The call is for personal faith in Christ and commitment to the local church fellowship.

An implicate of faith and corollary of freedom of conscience is rejection of the use of the power of the State in the interests of religion. And also, that we will support our ministries from the labor of our own hands.

A further entailment of freedom of conscience is societal pluralism; that is, freedom of conscience under just laws creates a plural society. For us freedom of conscience means that we allow to others even the right of unbelief. But social discontinuity does not imply social non-responsibility or irresponsibility; rather we advocate loyalty to a just society, and deep social concern for those around us who may be in need; not only for those who are within our own churches but world-wide.

The fourth important principle of our church life is the Lordship of Christ. We acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the incarnate Son of God and encourage faith in him as Savior and Lord of life. This entails public, identifiable discipleship which is at first expressed in Believers Baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper, and then in on-going commitment to fellowship and service in the local church. The core of Christian commitment is not only private worship and the development of piety and devotion, but piety which turns outward for cooperative witness and service.

We should correlate the functions of God's Word, the ministry of the Holy Spirit and faith in order to cultivate obedience to Christ and the guidance and nurture of the Holy Spirit in fellowship with other Christians in the local church. The congregational principle is not that of a coercive majority, but that the mind of Christ should pervade personal life and the life of the local church.

Fifth, we espouse the principle of the priesthood of believers. According to the Scriptures, every Christian is a believer-priest and is to be of service in the Kingdom of God. All Christians are commissioned to be witnesses for Christ. We believe that God raises up leaders from within church life who should then be trained and developed. Christians are called upon to recognize God-given gifts to some within the congregation and are then to educate and prepare them for vocational and lay ministry roles in the church and to the world.

Ordination is an act of the local church which recognizes ministry gifts in particular individuals and their call to ministry and, along with sister churches, thankfully recognizes and commissions them to ministry. Ordination does not confer special religious status or authority. Ordination is not achievement of status but is placement in ministry.

The sixth principle concerns vocation and lifestyle. Christian faith includes the belief that every legitimate vocation is God's gift and opportunity and may be dedicated to God as service for him to mankind. Every Christian ought to dedicate himself or herself to the fullest possible development, to diligence and honesty, to a prudent lifestyle, and to the enhancement of the conditions of life for people in one's own community. A Christian must provide for his or her own family and guide one's own family toward virtue, care for the needy, and

contribute in a self-sacrificing way toward the ministry of Christ's Gospel.

Finally, seventh, the fundamental task of every Christian and of every church is the mission of the Gospel. Our Lord has commissioned us to reflect his love by nurturing faith, comforting the grieving, helping the broken, and assisting the needy. Christ calls upon each of us to live godly lives which are committed to truth, love and righteousness. Christians are entrusted with a mandated mission which is to extend the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. This is mandated by the love of God. The goal of our mission is conversion of people everywhere to Christ, their baptism and call to a life of faith within the fellowship of the local church as the Household of Faith.

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China Letter 13

WORKERS TOGETHER

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

In my last letter I spoke of the church as the Household of Faith, but reserved for this letter matters which concern the institutional nature of the church and authentic leadership in the church. Christ said, *I will build my church*. What did the Apostles create during the first missionary years of church life, and how does that which Christians have done since then over the centuries compare with those New Testament principles and practices?

To begin with, it appears that some of the first Christians at Jerusalem had to get beyond their Jewish insularity, sometimes unwillingly, in order to grasp more fully the world-interest of the Great Commission as given by Christ. God had to teach Peter a lesson in the vision recorded in *Acts* chapter 10 not to call Gentiles unclean, but to recognize them as objects of divine grace. He seems to have forgotten this lesson because later Paul rebuked him for withdrawing from a meal at Antioch where Gentiles were present for fear of offending prejudiced Jews (*Galatians* 2:11-21). It is noteworthy that the Christian world mission did not begin at Jerusalem but from Antioch (*Acts* 13:1-3), away from the nationalism and ethnic prejudice which some Jewish Christian had not given up. The Council of *Acts* 15 was convened specifically regarding internationalizing the Christian mission without laying upon converts forms of religious legalism which the Jewish people themselves had not lived up to (*Acts* 15:6-21).

The church is the body of Christ in the world. I have already expounded this theme in my previous letter. But what has it been throughout history and what should it be in light of this truth? How should it be structured and led? Divisions in Christendom over these questions have been severe, and some of these divisions have been unnecessarily imported into our own land. I want to comment on some of these and then to indicate what key-feature biblical elements should guide our thinking and practices. Let us gain wisdom from history and insight

from the Holy Scriptures as to how best to structure and lead our churches.

Assuredly we should strive for unity of faith. We should listen carefully for the common faith -- for that which is truly apostolic, which means that it must be authentically biblical. There is ever a need for renewal and restoration to Christ-centered ideals and Christ-mandated ways. This applies to our understanding of the nature of the church, patterns of leadership in the church, and ministries of the church.

There is clearly a dividing line between the life of the first Christians at Jerusalem and that which new situations demanded as Paul and others spread the Gospel from Palestine into the Roman world. For the first few years of the church's life at Jerusalem Christians were together under the leadership of the Apostles and elders. As new congregations were formed by Paul on his missionary journeys, new leadership roles had to be created. This is likely the meaning of *Ephesians* 4:11. What the evangelists did divided the situation of Apostles and prophets at Jerusalem from the situations of churches in far-flung places abroad in which Paul placed pastors and teachers or, in many cases, those whose ministry combined the pastoral and teaching roles. Thus, the pattern emerged that the normative character of Apostolic leadership and teaching (which we acknowledge in their Spirit-given deposit to us; namely, the Scriptures) related to the church world-wide, but that in the distant places bishops and deacons (*Philippians* 1:1) were appointed to lead the churches, consistent with authentic Apostolic teaching.

A remarkable thing happened along the way during the ensuing three centuries. Bishops, who had been leaders of small house groups, and later of large congregations of Christians, suddenly emerged on the scene as a dominant political as well as religious force. How did this happen? It has a direct relationship to the way in which the Roman Empire was governed.

Because of the vastness of the Roman Empire, local leaders ruled and local notables informed and managed public life and opinion, largely insulated by distance from direct control by Rome. In late antiquity, notably in the latter part of the fourth century of the Christian era, the nations on the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire began their march on Rome (which they sacked in 410 C.E.). As outside forces threatened communities and local authority became disorganized and detached from the populace, Christian bishops represented stability. As well, they were closer to the populace than the local nobility and educated classes. Bishops quickly became local power-brokers as well as religious leaders.

As so often happens in history, external threat had demanded centralization. From the time of Constantine on, the military was vastly increased, the tax burden soared and, meanwhile, Christianity had become the official religion of the Empire. Gradually, local Christian leadership became part of the tendency to coordinate the economy and interests of the population under one ideological banner, though less and less in relation to the educated middle and upper class persons who had previously ruled as local regents of power, especially

as the threat of fragmentation of the Empire worsened.

To give an example, Professors of Rhetoric locally represented the epitome of the culture and traditions which were passed on from generation to generation to aspiring youth from upper-class families. As a matter both of style and position this kept local nobility in power. As disintegration threatened, these prerogatives gradually shifted to local bishops and Christian lay leaders. As populists -- the Church was open to men and women alike, to rich and poor, to the educated and uneducated -- Christians quickly overtook the pagan middle classes which were already shaken economically and were too narrowly gauged culturally for broad public support. Christians had the people on their side and Christian heroes were simple, unadorned, spiritually minded types.

However, though they were professed lovers of the poor and disenfranchised, Church leaders quickly enjoyed the taste of power. Once charismatic, emergent power is acquired, succeeding emergent power is often deemed to be a threat to stability and order.

This is the era which begat the attitudes which have shaped subsequent Christendom. These include: First, the move to limit the congregation's role in the election of bishops (it should be remembered that in his letter to Corinth at the close of the Apostolic Age, Clement of Rome spoke of bishops as chosen *with the consent of the Church*.. Second, the emergence of a new intellectual elite devoted not to rhetoric, but to theology and theological questions. Third, the control of the charisms, which were neatly limited in power because of their inherently eruptive and unpredictable nature, by shepherding them into monastic communities where they could practice their inner light to heart's content without disrupting local church order. Fourth, the emergence of the local bishop as the sharer of power with the Emperor. Fifth, and critically important, the gathering of sacramental suzerainty into the hands of bishops: he who controls the sacraments has power over the souls of men and women who, otherwise, are at spiritual risk.

The transition from pagan culture and power to the culture and power centers of medieval Christendom is truly as remarkable as it was gradual. A new world order was created which solidified in the church a three-fold hierarchical structure of bishops, priests and deacons. Bear in mind that this meant: bishops as overseers of whole districts, priests (or pastors) in charge of local congregations, and deacons as assistants to the local clergy. The structure became not only hierarchical but also authoritarian in a political as well as religious sense.

As much as I question the legitimacy of hierarchy and its claims to authority, the attempt to create a Christian civilization during the medieval age was a remarkable achievement. It was remarkable in a number of respects: For its coherence and instinct for universality, which the modern ecumenical movement has never been able to replicate or instill. For its concept of the *Corpus Christianum*, the concept of a Christian civil society. That the state and the church should comprise complementary aspects of a civil society. As much as I believe religion and political power should not mix, the medieval ideal sought to

implement its own vision of the Kingdom of God on earth as a coherent, optionless society. Realm religion in Europe was thus born, which put a religious imprimatur upon ethnic and national identity.

Key characteristics of the medieval correlation of civil and religious power are instructive. While these are generalizations they epitomize the structure of the medieval church and its relations to civil society. As well, in relation to each generalization I have added a comment on recurring dissent by reform-minded Christian groups throughout Christian history.

First, there was insistence upon institutional, theological and social continuity. While Scripture was deemed to be important, in practice tradition and the Creeds were thought to have the more direct and immediately felt influence on daily life. True doctrine was stressed creedally more than through the experienced Gospel, except in cases of those devoted to the monastic ideal. Nevertheless, there remained a haunting aspiration for restoration of Christ's ideals and Apostolic teaching. Dissenters argued that the Bible is crucial for life. It is more important than tradition, and is crucial as the test of both theology and tradition. It is more important to follow the teachings of Christ and the Apostles than to submit to Councils and men.

Second, the medieval church idealized organizational coherence and stability. Unity must be universal, palpable and must be expressed in episcopal and hierarchical form. There must be the sense of established order with acknowledged authorized leadership. In contrast, there emerged the view that the principle of a believing people is the true definition of unity and universality. This was the 'salt of the earth' concept in face of political and religious corruption and civil upheaval. Such a view naturally implies social discontinuity; the separation of Christians from disbelieving society in a more radical way than withdrawal into monastic life. Its practice of relying upon emergent leadership and forms of voluntarism disparaged institutional and hierarchical authority. These were mistakenly thought to threaten the core concept of the unity of the church and the stability of society, when in fact dissenting Christians have usually been models of thrift, integrity and productivity. Such challenges to institutional authority go back at least to Tertullian and the Montanist movement, long before solidification of the early medieval ideal.

Third, the church's primary function became that of the authorized dispenser of the sacraments. The church was viewed as the 'Ark of Salvation,' outside of which it was said there is no salvation. The sacraments could be dispensed only by episcopally authorized clergy, or by laity in certain limited instances. The sacraments were viewed as the indispensable means of grace for restoration of the soul to God and for nurturing the soul. While faith was called for in principle, sacramental practice generated a form of Christianity which was ritualized and formal. Resistance to ritual viewed as being empty apart from faith took the form chiefly of proclamation of repentance and renewal by reform movements, with a strong emphasis upon personal faith. Faith must be shown through change of life, evidence of devotion, and altruism.

Fourth, the church fostered a policy of social inclusiveness and guarded its politically approved status. The concept of a sacral society transferred from Graeco-Roman pagan culture to Christendom. A sacral society is monolithic and optionless. The church became the 'church of the land.' It reflected and enhanced ideals of social, political and religious stability. Pluralism was regarded as a mortal political, social and religious danger as well as error. Reform movements were channeled through monastic orders which, nominally at least, acknowledged the importance of societal cohesion even while they aimed to renew the church from within. Divisions within the church were often serious, theologically, structurally and administratively, but common acceptance of episcopal authority, at least formally, was mandated. Political and religious power became counterbalancing forces in society, at times with distinct, even separate, systems of civil and criminal law.

Resistance to mandated coherence centered in the principle of the church as the gathered fellowship, the local koinonic conventicle, along with retention of the common unity of committed Christians in Christ. Diligent individual searching of the Scriptures was encouraged with a view to personal spiritual commitment, public discipleship and lay ministry. While such quests to discover the true meaning of discipleship and the true nature and task of the church may lead to sectarianism and division, one must recognize that the church constantly stands in need of reform. Renewal movements were common within the medieval church but the refusal of dissident groups to acknowledge episcopal authority evoked opprobrium and unjust persecution, even though they were usually peaceable, frugal and productive citizens of society.

Fifth, the Christian faith in its public form became cultural ritual for many. It became nominal religion, a rite of passage. Little spiritual discipline was exercised, except within the spiritual orders. Spirituality was externalized through creedal subscription, penances, gifts, endowments, payment of fees, ritual acts and holy days. On the other hand, renewal movements insisted upon visible, practical discipleship, with some evidence of life in the Spirit, love for Christ through helping the needy, and works of virtue and grace. Holiness must be morally evident not merely ritualized, the reform-minded said. One must be willing to bear the cost of discipleship. But as renewal movements became established they too frequently suffered from the same problems which generated their reform efforts.

Long before the onset of the medieval age in Europe, concerns were voiced that the Christian faith was becoming too formal, too ritualized, and lacking in evidence of personal faith and a transformed life.

The record of a fascinating controversy illustrates issues which I am addressing. A controversy developed in the years before and after 400 C.E. between Jerome and Vigilantius. While most of what we know derives from archives associated with Jerome, the data are intriguing because they bear on questions of what authentic Christianity is, especially in regard to its institutional

nature and public practices. The attacks mounted by each against the other were personally vitriolic, some of the differences were ideological (does he support my position?) and not a few concerned public relations image, especially Jerome's anxiety to protect his own image as he sought to collect money for his monastery at Bethlehem. Nevertheless, serious theological and ecclesiological issues were at stake which Jerome tried to blur, especially whether ritual religious exercises mask religious insincerity or shallowness, and the place of power and authority in the church.

Jerome's letters convey the gist of the matter (*Letters* 58 and 61). Following a lengthy visit to Jerome at Bethlehem, which Jerome recounts with pleasure, Vigilantius returned to Gaul and later began pamphleteering against Jerome and his religious practices (with the apparent support, it might be added, of the Bishop of Toulouse). These included: reverence for relics and their use in costly public worship and religious parades, late-night vigils with attendant scandals, the burning of tapers, claims for miracles which could result from ritual participation, and the collection and sending of alms to Bethlehem from communities which needed the money for their own poor. Finally, Vigilantius criticized the idealizing of monastic life and virginity. On these matters Vigilantius asked: if all become monks, who will minister in the churches and to the heathen; and, if all remain unmarried, what will happen to the human race? Jerome quickly responded that the stench of bilge-water had affected Vigilantius' brain, and that his name were better Dormitantius (Sleepyhead) than Vigilantius (Watchful)!

Thus, as religion became more ritualized and formal there were those inside and outside the established church who espoused forms of Christianity which called for deep personal commitment and public, identifiable discipleship. Toward the end of the medieval period Wyclif in England, who has been called the Morningstar of the Reformation, called for spiritual renewal within the church. As the power of the medieval church in Europe peaked, fully a century and a half before the Protestant Reformation, Wyclif wrote and preached that the faith of the gospel points out how one cannot be a disciple of Christ unless he love him more than any other. He adds that corrupt friars hated this way of evangelizing because in this understanding of the gospel they give up hope of temporal gain, and a devoted Christian layman has as much right to perform the sacraments as a corrupt priest.

This leads me to ask, who are ministers in the church? The proper answer is that every Christian is called to ministry. In the New Testament, the universal priesthood of believers is shown by the wide diversity of gifts and ministries present in the apostolic churches and exercised by the membership. But fundamentally, universality is grounded in the meaning of baptism and the concept of the body. Paul declares that oneness in Christ breaks down all old distinctions. Then, like the functioning parts of a body, each Christian is not only a part of the body, he and she are expected to fulfill the functions which are assigned to that part of the body under the headship of Christ.

At Jerusalem, the first Christian church was led by the twelve apostles (*Acts* 6:2. Quickly, seven men were appointed to assist the apostles. While the seven are not specifically called deacons, it is likely that this marks the inception of the diaconate (*Acts* 6:1-6). Along with the apostles were elders (*Acts* 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6; 16:4; 21:18) who together with the whole church (6:2; 15:22, 30) reached conclusions and made decisions. On his first missionary journey Paul appointed elders in each newly formed church (*Acts* 14:23). The term elder may reflect early Jewish orientation of the mission, prior to Paul's later turning to the Gentiles and his frequent use of the term bishop. There were prophets who at special times furnished insight (*Acts* 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10; *1 Timothy* 4:4).

We must grasp clearly what Paul means by elder and bishop; but first, I will list offices and functions which are mentioned only briefly before turning to the question of key leadership in the church.

Early Christian leaders referred to themselves as 'bond-servants' (slaves) of Jesus Christ (*Romans* 1:1). This term does not designate an office, only the stance of servanthood, though the term *diakonos* (which also designates the office of deacon) was used widely in the general sense of servanthood.

John Mark was an 'assistant' (*Acts* 13:5) on the first missionary journey, until he quit. Assistant means either travel companion and helper or, more likely, a discipling or teaching assistant to help with the evangelistic and church-planting task.

There were 'leaders' in the church. This general term refers to several offices (*Acts* 15:22; *Hebrews* 13:7, 17, 24) or to persons who were suitable candidates for specific office. At Lystra the term is used of Paul as the chief speaker of the evangelistic band by the newly won listeners and converts (*Acts* 14:12).

Two terms are used in the general sense of stewardship, or household management. The first is used, for example, in *Luke* 12:42; 16:1; and in *1 Corinthians* 4:2. Such a function is attributed to Christian ministers (*1 Corinthians* 4:1; *Titus* 1:7) and to Christians generally (*1 Peter* 4:10). The second suggests similar functions (*Matthew* 20:8; *Luke* 8:3; *Galatians* 4:2), although it is not used specifically of Christian service.

Finally, there were senior widows who fulfilled specific pastoral duties (*1 Timothy* 5:3-16). This extended, ignored passage offers instructive insights on the role of senior, wise and stable women in the caring and counseling ministries of churches.

It seems evident that bishops and elders and pastors, along with deacons, are the key officers of the newly established churches. The role and ministry of prophets appears to quickly subside in the *Acts of the Apostles*. I add the following generalizations, which suggest that perhaps one term more than another was preferred in a particular region.

1 Peter was probably written to churches in northern Asian Minor. In this letter the term used is elder with distinct pastoral, or overseer stress placed upon it (*1 Peter* 5:1-5).

In western Asia Minor, notably in the large Christian communities of the Ephesus area, the terms elder and bishop are used interchangeably. This is clear from *Acts* 20:17, 28. The same occurs in *1 Timothy* 3:1-7; 4:14; 5:17-20 and in *Titus* 1:5, 7. There is also the important reference in *Ephesians* 4:11, previously cited.

In Europe the pattern is similar. Paul emphasizes the role of apostles, prophets and teachers to the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians* 12:28). This appears to stress the founding role of the apostles and prophets and Paul's desire that teaching become the vocational ambition of the Corinthian Christians, not aspiration for exotic gifts. In *Philippians* 1:1 Paul addresses bishops and deacons, which may be regarded as the usual pattern of the churches, especially as the terms bishop, elder and pastor may be viewed as synonyms so far as ministerial functions are concerned -- which is the conclusion to which I move.

It is a truism to say that the twelve apostles are the foundation of the church (*1 Corinthians* 12:28; *Ephesians* 2:20, 3:5; *2 Peter* 3:2; *Jude* 17; *Revelation* 21:14). By this is meant that they, *The Twelve*, were chosen by Christ himself to implement the world mission of the Gospel. As his original followers who knew him personally, and were chosen for leadership by him, they are the authentic interpreters of who the historical Jesus Christ is and of his message. Thus the Scriptures of the New Testament are canonical in the sense that they are written by apostles or those directly associated with them.

In both the Septuagint of the Old Testament and in the New Testament the term apostle (*apostolos*) signifies an authorized messenger or representative. In this general sense any official emissary may be designated an apostle, but to take this as license to call any subsequent church official an apostle in the sense of The Twelve is perverse. The term 'Apostle' in the Christian church is properly restricted to The Twelve who have a unique relation to Christianity in general, past, present and future, even though it is used of men outside the apostolic circle, as in the case of Barnabas (*Acts* 14:14) and, apparently, of Sylvanus and Timothy (*1 Thessalonians* 2:6). The designation occurs once in *Matthew* (10:2), *Mark* (6:30), and in *John* (13:16 in the general sense), but more frequently in *Luke-Acts*. Luke is at pains to affirm the apostolic credentials of Paul (*Acts* 9:1-19; 22:1-21; 26:2-18; note *Romans* 1:1; *Galatians* 1:1, 11-17; *1 Timothy* 2:7).

Paul and Luke make clear that the Apostles sustain a unique, universal relation to the Church. They are the guardians of the truth about Christ and of the Gospel. There can be no other independent authorities. For this reason the distinction drawn between apostleship in the general sense of messenger, and apostleship in the specific sense of The Twelve is important.

Their status and authority is based upon a number of critical factors: They were called directly by Christ himself (*Luke* 6:13; note *Acts* 1:17) and had been his companions throughout his public ministry. They were best placed as to what the historical Jesus had said and done. They had seen the risen Christ (*Luke* 24:36; *Acts* 1:3). They were initiators of the mission Christ had entrusted to them and were directly and crucially involved in the controversies and decisions of the founding Christian assemblies: selecting leadership (*Acts* 14:23; 16:1-5); ratifying decisions (*Acts* 15:2, 13), and opening the mission to the Gentiles (*Acts* 10:1-17, 34-35).

Theirs was not the task of inventing dogma, but of conserving and communicating that which Christ had left to them. Their relationship, and only theirs, is universal to the Church. It is clear that the Apostles were not inventors of Church doctrine or law, but were mandated to stand under Christ's law and to transmit the Gospel authentically. Their relationship to us is through the Scriptures, which come to us through them and their immediate associates. The Scriptures therefore determine for us the nature and content of the Apostolic faith. They, not subsequent tradition, are binding upon us as followers of Christ.

As already cited, Paul laid claim to apostleship on grounds of Christ's individual call and commissioning. He, too, had met the risen Lord (*1 Corinthians* 15:7-8; *Galatians* 1:16). He, too, serves as a conduit for the Gospel (*1 Corinthians* 11:23; *2 Corinthians* 5:20; *Galatians* 1:12; 2:7-8). He, too, is given special insight into the mystery of Christ (*1 Corinthians* 4:1; *Ephesians* 3:1-6); namely, that the Gentiles also were to become members of the household of faith.

Apostolic authority is not blank successionist authority. It is the truth of the authentically conserved message -- the truth and power of the Gospel -- which lends credence to apostolic authority. It is not the authority of men, but of the Gospel. They, like Peter, at times needed correction, as in the case of his resistance to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the household of faith (*Acts* 10; *Galatians* 2:11-21).

Despite their unique position, the apostles did not exercise their authority in a despotic manner though they did serve as canons of the truth. Leadership was collegial. They, along with the elders and the assembly of Christians, prayerfully together sought the mind of Christ on vexing questions (*Acts* 15:6, 12, 22).

Since its inception there has been a tension in the church between claims to exotic gifts and the demands of order and propriety in the assemblies. Paul deals with what has become a representative form of the problem in his first letter to the church at Corinth (*1 Corinthians* 12-14). To grasp the full meaning of what Paul has to say, these chapters must be studied together as forming one systematically developed argument.

Paul begins (12:4-6) by establishing the Trinitarian basis of gifts: the distribution of gifts, the varieties of service and administration, and the varieties of working are all, respectively, a derivative of the Holy Spirit, the Son, and the

Father, that is, the one God who is author of the multiplicity of operations.

In each case (12:7) the gift is given *with a view to profiting*, that is, for the good of all, not merely the self-satisfaction of the bearer. He then (12:8-10) identifies three gifts: wise insight, utterance of knowledge and heroic faith. Then he adds that which may follow from heroic faith, in pairs: gifts of healing and miraculous powers, prophetic utterance and capacity to critically distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues and their interpretation.

Following his analogy of the body and the necessity that each person function harmoniously within the local body of Christ, in this case at Corinth (12:27), he lists the founding gifts to the church of leaders (apostles, prophets, teachers) and then quickly moves *down a scale of values* from the prime gift of teaching to: workers of miracles, gifts of healing, helps, administration, tongues. He finally reaches his goal, which is love as the more excellent way (12:31, followed by chapter 13) which is mandatory and *alone* is universal. In his downward defining scale Paul places last those things which the Corinthian Christians prized most and then moves to love, in which they are deficient.

The only possible answer to the rhetorical questions of *1 Corinthians* 12:29-30 is 'No.' It is simply *not* the case that apostleship, prophecy, teaching, wonder-working, gifts of healing, tongues, interpretation of tongues are universal, but love is.

Nevertheless, he says, they should aspire to the greater gifts (14:1) the greatest of which, beyond love, is teaching: 14:1 follows from 12:31. Then he discusses the primacy of teaching, effective communication and comprehension, and order in worship in chapter 14. His strictures against disorder in public worship are sharp, and his support of the basic principle that edification is the goal is strong (14:26). He concludes with a very sharp rebuke (14:36-40): Who do you think you are? Did the Gospel originate with you? Are you the norm of spirituality and of the gifts? What are you trying to prove? Or, should you not be following the teaching and tradition you have received? It is clear from *1 Clement*, written some forty years later from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth, that the church at Corinth had grasped the apostolic teaching inadequately.

The problems indicated and issues raised in these chapters recur in every century of the history of the church. Paul is dealing with the error of the pursuit of the exotic, the sin of spiritual pride, and the spiritual anarchy which results if every Christian who believes he or she has a charism is allowed to exercise it without consideration for the good of all. For Paul's additional comments on the right use of spiritual gifts note his exposition in *Romans* 12:3-9.

What is a gift (the Greek term is *charism*)? The most prevalent error is to separate gift from talent. This amounts to a denial of the doctrine of creation and providence. *Charisma* include all spiritual gifts and talents. The range of use in the New Testament is impressive.

Included are: Any act of service (*Romans* 12:6-7; *1 Peter* 4:7-11). Some favor or blessing, such as deliverance from peril (*2 Corinthians* 1:11). Sexual continence or celibacy as a way of life (*1 Corinthians* 7:7). A spiritual truth or truths (*Romans* 1:11). The abiding gifts and privileges of Israel (*Romans* 11:29). Salvation itself (*Romans* 5:15-17).

There is an intimate relation between a gift and a talent. In the context of his discussion of the gifts Paul speaks of improvisation, earnest desire for the greater gifts, and cultivation of gifts (*1 Corinthians* 12:31; 14:1, 26).

The gifts are diverse. There is great variety, which is related to ministry needs and opportunities.

Limitation is imposed. They are not all possessed by everyone. Note again, that the rhetorical questions which follow *1 Corinthians* 12:29 require a negative answer.

The giver is God. He is Lord of gifts. They are apportioned triune in relation to the divine purposes in ministry.

Gradation is involved, and there is a more excellent way (*1 Corinthians* 12:31). The Corinthian Christians should desire the greater gifts. They should aspire to that which is permanent, love, not that which is transitory (13:8-10). They should understand that *even if* (13:1) they can speak in tongues, have prophetic powers, work wonders, or suffer the pains of martyrdom and thereby earn martyrdom status, these things without love count for nothing and that these are not the greatest things to which to aspire.

I will now turn to the issue of key leadership in the church.

It is evident that the terms bishop and elder are used interchangeably in the New Testament, with only slight regional or cultural differences, and that this as well is the meaning of pastor or under-shepherd.

Bishops are the leaders of the church, along with deacons, which parallels *Philippians* 1:1. This appears to be the normal concept and practice.

Why did the moniscopacy emerge in the second and third centuries of the Christian era? It has to do with Christians coping with false teachers, dissemblers, schismatics and, especially, persecution *in the circumstances of their conventicles or house churches*. Rarely are the circumstances and psychology of persecuted groups of Christians addressed. Observe that building-less congregations (that is, Christians who meet from house to house) are often intensely person-centered, in relation to a strong and faithful leader, especially during times of persecution. Building-less Christians are very much personality oriented. Where congregations own or have available settled places for worship and activities personal loyalty to the leader is often less intense. All kinds of

rationalizations can be made to justify a person-centered pattern of leadership and adherence, including quite legitimate ones such as that leaders serve as guardians, even canons, of the faith and traditions of the group. Circumstances such as those of the early Christians evoked early impassioned pleas for loyalty to the bishop.

I can illustrate the confusion which occurred in the early period of the church's history as changes in the use of the New Testament terms occurred, especially as regards the meaning of the office of bishop and the office of elder. I cite the comments of John Chrysostom (c. 344 - 407 C.E.). Born and reared in Antioch, he was the eloquent and powerful Patriarch of Constantinople and an influential evangelistic preacher, expositor and church leader.

His comments on *Philippians* 1:1 are fascinating because they reflect knowledge of the changes that had occurred in the early church period as to church offices and the significance of the titles of the offices along with reluctance to contravene traditions which had developed since apostolic times.

In his *First Homily* he asks, what does Paul mean when he addresses fellow-bishops and deacons? How could there be several bishops in one city? His answer is that in the Apostolic era titles were interchangeable. A bishop could be called a deacon (in the sense of being Christ's servant). That Timothy was obviously a bishop, says Chrysostom, is evident from Paul's injunction that he not lay hands (ordain) hastily on anyone. Only a bishop can ordain, he argues, and presbyters (elders) would not have laid hands on a bishop. Thus, when Paul interchanges the words elder and bishop he is speaking in the general sense of servanthood, not in regard to the specific status and authority of each office,

So then, as I said, both the Presbyters were of old called Bishops and Deacons of Christ, and the Bishops Presbyters; and hence even now many Bishops write, 'To my fellow' Presbyter,' and 'To my fellow Deacon.' But otherwise the specific name is distinctly appropriated to each, the Bishop and the Presbyter.

Chrysostom is saying that since early Apostolic days tradition and practice have been consolidated and regularized into three orders: bishops, presbyters and deacons. This comprises stratification and, for some, an hierarchical structure, which was not present in New Testament times.

What is to be said about the nature and function of these offices in their New Testament contexts? What should be our practice in light of New Testament teaching? I turn to a discussion of bishop and elder, and the correlative term pastor, reserving for later comment the term deacon.

I conclude that the terms bishop and elder as used in the New Testament are synonyms. They are terms which essentially define the same office. In classical usage oversight (from which we get the term bishop) suggested a city under divine watch-care. In the Old Testament and the Septuagint, the term bishop identifies someone who is appointed to a roster or duty as an overseer,

officer, governor or leader. There is no discernible trace of any connection between Old Testament usage and the New Testament so far as office is concerned.

In *Hebrews* 12:15 *see to it* suggests communal duty. In 1 Peter 5:2 *exercising the oversight* is likely parallel to eldership in verse 1, but is disputed. Some render it in terms of function, *tend the flock of God that is your charge*. Others relate the function to a specific office, *tend the flock of God whose shepherds you are*. Oversight has more to do with attitude, with a caring spirit, than with office, though the latter sense is also present. It includes the idea of pastoral visitation (*James* 1:27) and care of converts (*see how they are*, or, as we say today, *check them out*, *Acts* 15:36).

The term bishop in *1 Timothy* 3:1 refers to an office to which one may aspire. It does not describe monarchical episcopacy, which appears to be a second and third century development and is characterized by a shift from missionary mood to institutional structure.

The stress in *1 Timothy* 3:1-7 is placed by Paul more on graces than on gifts. His premise is that the bishop should have certain theological and administrative qualifications but that, nevertheless, his office and ministry should not be undermined by character flaws. Exegesis and exposition of the passage yields five key areas of virtues and abilities:

First, a bishop should be spiritually mature. A bishop is to be above reproach (v.2), which means uncensurable or not liable to criticism, especially in regard to the qualities which follow in the passage. He must be temperate, which means sobriety; sensible, which means to exercise self-control; and hospitable, which means outgoing and welcoming.

Second, a bishop should be emotionally stable. Paul says, *the husband of one wife* (v.2). Literally the passage reads a *one-woman-man*. This does not mean that he must be married, nor that he is no polygamist (this is assumed), nor that he must not practice serial marriage (one at a time), nor that he is simply a faithful husband. It probably means once-married.

Third, a bishop should be theologically astute. A bishop must be apt to teach, that is, have a mental capacity to teach effectively.

Fourth, a bishop should have a proven character. In verse 3 Paul lists five qualities: no drunkard -- not wine-flustered; not violent -- no brawler, not splenetic, not volatile; gentle -- gracious, forbearing, considerate; not quarrelsome -- inoffensive, unsnappish; no lover of money -- not a money-grubber. In verse 6 he insists that candidates not be novices (a nestling, or young, uninstructed or untested Christian), and not a swaggerer. Paul adds in verse 7 that a bishop must be well regarded, that is, have a good reputation not only inside but also outside the church.

Fifth, a bishop should be an effective manager. Paul says that a bishop must manage his own house and children well, which does not mean autocracy but presidency of the home and management of family life by the power of leadership and persuasion.

What about the term elder? It is thought by many that use of the term elder (*presbuteros*) in the New Testament has a distinctly Jewish flavor, and has reference to honor which age and wisdom bring through maturity and rich experience. Classical use suggests that those regarded as elders were older (but not enfeebled by age or infirmity), probably beyond age fifty, who were given guardianship roles and responsibilities in the community.

Old Testament use suggests eldership to be a feature of the tribal system and the patriarchal clan, as the elders of the nation (*Exodus* 12:21-22) and the ruling nobility of the individual tribes (*2 Samuel* 19:11; note *Ruth* 4:2). During the Exile they were the guardians and representatives of the Jewish community and culture. In the period before and during the time of Christ they comprised a Council of Elders, the Sanhedrin. After the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and attempts to reconstitute Jewish religious and cultural life in Palestine at Jamnia in the last decade of the century, the title elder identified outstanding Jewish religious teachers and leaders.

In the New Testament the term elder is used of a representative (*Luke* 14:32) and of old men (*Titus* 2:2). In *1 Timothy* 4:14 the elders who laid hands upon Timothy are spoken of. Is this ordination? And do they constitute a presbyteriate, as some insist, or a body which confers ordination? Or, is the idea of an ordaining body a reading back of later practice?

Elders appear in the *Acts* narrative suddenly and without explanation. They are leaders in the Christian church at Jerusalem alongside the Apostles. They appear elsewhere as missionary activity establishes new congregations beyond Jerusalem. The missionary pattern was congregational and conciliar not monarchical in nature. The elders comprised the directorate of the local church which had a certain continuity with Jewish order. In *1 Timothy* 5:17 and 19 elder is a title of honor for a body of leaders who care for the church. In *Titus* 1:5-9 their role includes collegiality, leadership, teaching, and defense of sound doctrine.

It is evident from *Titus* 1:5, 7 that the terms elder and bishop are interchangeable and that the qualifications listed by Paul in this passage parallel those for bishops in *1 Timothy* 3:1-7. The details as to how they functioned in leading the churches are not available to us, but it can be said with a strong degree of certainty that it was not formally hierarchical and authoritarian. Leaders emerged as knowledgeable, spirit-filled persons who were recognized for their gifts by the congregations and, having been nurtured in faith and stature by a heritage of leaders, were elected by the congregations to leadership roles and were respected in those roles.

I ought also to mention the term shepherd, which is the metaphor for pastor as the under-shepherd of the flock.

In the Old Testament God is the true shepherd of his people, and they are his flock (*Psalms* 23; *Jeremiah* 3:15).

In the New Testament Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd (*Matthew* 9:36; *John* 10:1-18). As Christ is the Chief Shepherd, those who serve in the church as bishops or elders are undershepherds. This is the major point of *1 Peter* 5:1-5 where shepherd, bishop and elder are identified (note the shepherd function described by Jesus to Peter in *John* 21:16). As in the case of bishop and the ministry of oversight, the term pastor at first probably referred to an activity of designated church leaders more than it defined an office or person.

Thus, as indicated in *Philippians* 1:1, as the church grew it needed a staff of Christian ministers, which were identified in the plural as bishops and deacons. This pattern, which Paul identifies in his address to the Christian assembly at Philippi, has been effective in the past as a format for missionary thrust and to nurture Christians: *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons* .

I sum up the matter in this way: we as evangelical Christians should honor the conviction of our evangelical heritage that the offices of bishop and elder, and consequently that of pastor or undershepherd, are identical in the New Testament. Variations of use depending upon cultural distinctiveness are possible, but parallels are more likely. Plurality of holders of office in any one church was neither here nor there in ancient times, nor need it be now. Nor are bishops to be viewed primarily as 'overseers of religious business' in the sense chiefly of religious administration. Differentiation of status between bishop and elder and the emergence of the moniscopacy as the standard form in the district and in the local church are later developments. Very much depends upon one's definition of the church, local and general. There is no reason on grounds of New Testament practice to think other than that a pastor is the, or a, presbyter or bishop of the church, and that such ministers can be one or several, understood to be ministering in the church in its primary sense as the local church .

What of the office of deacon?

The term deacon derives from the verb *to serve* and the noun *servant* which were common in ancient Greek. They simply signify service or one who serves. In Christian usage the terms identify both general service and the specific office of deacon.

We usually assume that the seven who were appointed to serve (at tables, i.e., social service) in *Acts* 6:2 were the first deacons because the verb to serve is used; nevertheless, they are not specifically called deacons. If this passage does not record the creation of the office, then deacons appear full-blown on the pages of the New Testament just as elders do in the early days of the church in *Acts*

without reference to the creation of the office.

General use in the New Testament of the root term is frequent. It includes loving service (*Acts* 11:29, *1 Corinthians* 16:15; *Ephesians* 4:11-12) inspired by the Spirit (*2 Corinthians* 3:8). A secular ruler is God's servant against wrongdoing (*Romans* 13:4). It embraces the concept of service in the widest sense (*Matthew* 20:26), such as a waiter at a meal (*John* 2:5, 9). Luke employs it as a general term for Paul's ministry in all its aspects (*Acts* 20:24; 21:19).

The office of deacon is identified in *Philippians* 1:1 and *1 Timothy* 3:8-13. Most commentators assume that Paul is referring to male office-holders, but it is not at all certain that the women referred to in *1 Timothy* 3:11 are the wives of deacons. They may very well have been deaconesses (the noun *diakonos* had a common gender). The verb is used of women (*Romans* 16:1) as it is of men and if it is assumed that the seven of *Romans* 6 are deacons then an identical case can be made that the term identifies a woman deacon in *Romans* 16:1

What are the qualifications for the office of deacon and functions of the office? *1 Timothy* 3:8-13 is the key passage. The parallels between these qualifications and those enumerated for the office of bishop are striking:

First, deacons should be spiritually mature. In verse 8 Paul says that they must be serious, that is, high-minded, dignified, but not austere; not double-tongued, that is, integrity of speech, no tale-bearing; not addicted, that is, controlled appetites, not lax; not greedy, that is, not avaricious, trustworthy in regard to that which is not their own.

Second, deacons should be theologically astute. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (v.9). This means persons of genuine faith who have keen spiritual discernment, that is, who are well-instructed in the faith. In verse 13 Paul speaks of boldness, which means confidence to exhort spiritually. In what? He adds *in the faith*, which means one in whom faith and understanding combine so that the faith can be transmitted to others. Clearly these standards entail doctrinal competence as well as personal commitment.

Third, deacons should have proven character. In verse 10 Paul says that deacons must first be tested, that is, approved after scrutiny (this, I believe, implies congregational scrutiny and approval). They are to be blameless, i.e., irreproachable.

Fourth, emotional stability. As in the case of bishops, Paul again insists that a deacon be a 'one woman man,' i.e., once married (if married), verse 12. In verse 13 he adds that a deacon must have a good standing which is, as one alternative suggests, esteemed godliness.

Fifth, deacons should be effective managers. In verse 12 Paul, as in the case of bishops, says that a deacon must be able to manage his children and household well (one of the grounds for insisting that deacons are only males).

Also, as another alternative, the phrase *good standing* in verse 13 may suggest an honorable standing as a leader and manager of business and human affairs.

Some modern Christians have depreciated the office of deacon to that of 'waiters at tables,' that is, performing administrative duties or social service ministries. This is misguided so far as New Testament teaching is concerned. It is a mistake to divide their spiritual role from their practical ministries. The preceding exegesis of *1 Timothy* 3:8-13 regarding the office of deacon makes clear that they are to have a theological role in the life of the church.

Recent studies of the 'material care' thesis call into question depreciation of the office. Only a minority of classical uses of the term deacon carry the meaning of humble and benevolent service. These are not foundational to a proper understanding of the term and its uses in ancient times. 'Deacon' activity focused on the concept of 'courier,' that is, carrying a message or object, or carrying out an action on behalf of another. While the status of the messenger is subordinate to the sending authority, it may be very high. In classical usage the association with divine messages is very strong.

What does the New Testament teach about the mission and primary functions of the Church? These are given by Christ in the Commission to his disciples (*Matthew* 28:19):

*Go therefore
and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

This command is not merely an invitation to religious contemplation nor to cultic mysteries by a seeker who is pursuing his own inner self. The Christian Gospel concerns something divinely accomplished and applied and apostolically attested to which Christians give witness. Christianity does not exist to seek new divine disclosure nor religious tea-tasting but to proclaim the good news of that which God has already done in Jesus Christ: *You shall be my witnesses*, said Jesus (*Acts* 1:8).

Given the New Testament definition of the church as the Household of Faith and the Body of Christ, what are its primary functions? I suggest that you consider carefully the following five key ones:

First, worship. The foremost ministry of the church is to worship and praise the triune God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of life, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The first Christians, along with the Apostles, devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and prayers (*Acts* 2:42).

At Antioch, as the Christians worshipped the Lord they commissioned Paul and Barnabas for the first Christian mission (*Acts* 13:2). Paul saw his life as a libation poured out to gain converts to faith (*Philippians* 2:17). This reflects Paul's

deeply felt sense of the consecration which took place at Antioch. He speaks of being *a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.* (Romans 15:16).

In the New Testament church worship fuels the fire of love to reach out to the world for Christ. There is no greater power for evangelism than cohesive worship - not merely the religious exercises of an isolated individual, even in a congregation, but the power of spiritual life which is registered by the presence of the Holy Spirit in an assembly of Christians where the love of Christ is palpable.

Long ago Augustine recounts the conversion of Victorinus, a famous Roman orator, the record of whose conversion deeply impressed Augustine as he struggled with his own decision to become a Christian. Because of his fame, leaders in the church suggested that Victorinus might wish to make his profession privately. But he insisted on the usual public profession, which involved standing on a small dais before the whole congregation to attest to his faith. Augustine writes (*Confessions*, 8.2) that as he did so *there ran a soft whisper through all the mouths of the rejoicing multitude, Victorinus, Victorinus ... He pronounced aloud the true faith with an excellent boldness, and every man would gladly have plucked him to them into their very heart: yea, greedily did they snatch him in, by loving of him, and rejoicing for him. These were the hands by which they snatched him.*

Christian worship that is orderly, quiet, joyful, deeply devotional and self-giving to God creates a unique mood. The corporate life of the congregation expresses and conveys the grace and power of God (*Acts* 4:31). The warmth of the Holy Spirit touches each person present. As it is ministered, the word of God probes each life. A sense of expectancy opens hearts to the grace of Christ. Without this common life in the Spirit -- this reality of the body of Christ -- an assembly of people, even of Christian people, is not a church: *while they worshipped ... the Lord said* (*Acts* 13:2).

Second, fellowship. Fellowship is the life-blood of the body of Christ. It is not merely transient human affection; rather, it flows from the very heart of God. Fellowship is based upon unfailing commitment. It reflects the love which binds together Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the unity of the Godhead. John declares that the message concerning the incarnate Lord is *that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ* (*1 John* 1:3, note also *1 Corinthians* 1:9).

The church cannot exist as the body of Christ without fellowship. Fellowship is person affirming and person conserving. The love feast which the early Christians observed, usually followed by the Lord's Supper, reflects the close fellowship they enjoyed and upon which they laid great store. The church at Jerusalem was amazed to learn of Paul's conversion. When Paul arrived, they welcomed him with *the right hand of fellowship* (*Galatians* 2:9). A major function of the Holy Spirit is to create fellowship (*2 Corinthians* 13:14).

Fellowship is the social foundation of the unity of the body and the mortar which binds Christians together in the household of faith. Fellowship creates intimacy and the trust without which a congregation is merely a cluster of discrete individuals.

Fellowship serves to create the instinct for common purpose in ministry. It is inclusive. It draws those who are present, including those who are on the way to Christian faith, into the inner life of the body. Individuals are rarely won to Christian faith unless they are first won to Christian people. That fellowship is fueled by love which, like the fingers of the heart which reached out to Victorinus, is the expression of the entire body of Christians present. Victorinus was known to them by name. Their love had gotten its hooks into him and had drawn him to themselves and to Christ.

Third, teaching. The Apostles and apostolic men and women were very careful to instruct new converts in the Christian faith. Indeed, much of the New Testament was written as instruction. Leaders in the church were required by Paul to know the *sure word* of the faith, and to *be able to give instruction in sound doctrine* (Titus 1:9). He sent Timothy to Corinth in order to *remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church* (1 Corinthians 4:17).

In 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul indicates that the essence of the Gospel is *according to the Scriptures*. The Apostles acknowledged the authority of the canonical Scriptures and their authoritative word concerning Christ was to become Scripture. Thus, in the early generations of the church what is known as the Rule of Faith, the Rule of Life, the Rule of our Tradition, were those truths which were already acknowledged as Scripture (the Old Testament) and the teaching of the Apostles whose writings later comprise the New Testament canon. Christians were taught to say 'this is the pattern of saving faith,' 'this is consistent with the Lord's teaching,' and could quickly identify teaching that was not authentically apostolic.

Similarly, in all ages of the Christian faith, churches should become canonical centers devoted to a canonical curriculum. That teaching concerns preparation for Christ as recorded in the Old Testament, and fulfillment of the messianic promises in Christ as recorded in the New Testament. No church can fulfill its mandate unless it is a teaching church. The teaching ministry of the church ought not to focus merely upon what are deemed to be practical homilies considered relevant to current issues of life. Teaching ought to be comprehensively educating in order to develop in communicants a Christian life which is well founded upon the Scriptures.

Fourth, loving concern. Among the first appointees to office were those we believe to have been deacons (Acts 6:1-6) who were appointed to coordinate help to widows. Epaphras was called a faithful minister of Christ to the Colossian Christians (Colossians 1:7). Peter urged Christians to *employ* gifts for the sake of one another; to render *service* as God's strength supplies (1 Peter 4:10-11). These terms convey the same sense as the words *serve* and *duty* in Acts 6:2-3.

Class barriers were gradually broken down, as in the touching example of Onesiphorus who helped Paul despite his being a prisoner and therefore a social outcast (2 *Timothy* 1:16-18). The Christians at Philippi sent Epaphroditus at some personal risk with help for Paul while he was in prison (*Philippians* 2:25, 30).

The worship of God and compassionate ministry are closely linked in the New Testament. Thus the 'collection' for the saints in *1 Corinthians* 16:1 is synonymous with the 'service' of 2 *Corinthians* 9:12 and the 'worshipping' of *Acts* 13:2. Mutual recognition and evidence of love through practical help in Christ's name broke down old social and racial prejudices.

Fifth, evangelism. No church today cannot suppose that the evangelistic opportunity and responsibility of Apostolic days no longer exists, either in relation to generational change in the church or in relation to non-Christian society. A healthy church ministers to the families of its own community with a view to calling them to personal faith in Christ and public, identifiable discipleship; but also, it must reach beyond itself to the world at large.

These comments about the mission and functions of the church surely make clear that it is the total life of the Christian community which best makes an impact on seekers after God, but the call to commitment must be public and unceasing. There is something marvelous in witnessing new life born into faith.

In an important sense evangelism is the final act in a series. It is the task of picking the fruit which God has nourished to harvest using the many gifts and ministries of the Christian community. In most cases individuals are won to faith in Jesus Christ in the course of being won to fellowship with Christians within the body of Christ. Thus the church in the New Testament is Christ-centered and Christians in the New Testament are church-centered.

The churches of the New Testament were open to new people. It was easy to feel welcome. They were a remarkable mixture of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. At first, Paul spoke in the synagogues where many responsive persons attended to his teaching (*Acts* 13:43). As he turned to the Gentiles, Paul quickly found many who were responsive to the Gospel. At Philippi it was a river-side place of prayer which Lydia the business-woman, already a seeker after God, often visited (*Acts* 16:13-14). At Athens he found both Jews and Gentiles who sought after God (*Acts* 17:17), some of whom believed in Christ (*Acts* 17:34). At Corinth he found Aquila, a devout Jew, and Titius Justus, a devout Gentile, and led them into the Christian way (*Acts* 18:2, 7).

Wherever Paul won people to Christ he established churches, which were often small groups of Christians who met together in homes as well as in public places. They had an open, welcoming character. Paul's efforts resulted in the formation of enthusiastic congregations which then grew rapidly because of their spirituality, warmth and openness to newcomers: *the people held them in high honor. And more and more believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both*

men and women (Acts 5:13-14). As the churches were strengthened in faith by diligent teaching *they increased in numbers daily* (Acts 16:5). This mood of devotion to Christ and love for one another, not any particular method, were the primary factors in their growth. Effective evangelism follows from devout worship, person-affirming fellowship, effective teaching, and loving care. Converts found a new identity among Christians, who valued them each individually, affirmed them and taught them a new way of life. The first Christians found out quickly how important encouraging seekers after God is in the missionary task. People respond to love as bees do to honey. Where there is love the number of 'those who are on the way' to personal faith in and commitment to Christ will grow.

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China Letter 14

HERITAGE OF WISDOM

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

The vision of our meeting a few days ago remains vivid in my mind. We sat on the grassy slope overlooking the village, under the giant willow tree. The hills folded away in the misty distance. As the gentle wind stirred the yellow flowers of the fields below us the rays of the sun glancing from their petals called attention to their beauty as examples of the Creator's magnificent handiwork. How beautiful it was. But most of all, I recall our conversation that we as Christians should love one another. Why then do Christians add to the suffering of those who have already suffered for Christ?

I have written to you about the church, its nature and leadership, but I must now write to you about the inner life of the church as the Household of Faith. I'm speaking of ourselves -- all of us. The past years have been a trial by fire, as the Apostle Peter remarked to the first Christians who suffered for their faith. Peter speaks of rejoicing in suffering (1 Peter 1:6-7). He says, *now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ*. While we are called upon in the Scriptures to suffer for the sake of Christ, surely Christians ought not to multiply suffering by unkindness to one another? Is there not even within our own Chinese heritage -- before ever we came to know Christ -- teaching on humility, deference and respect for one another which ought to put us Christians to shame?

Let me speak as an elder to whom our tradition gives a place of honor. Not, mind you, to claim authority merely because of age, but wisdom which God grants as advancing years allow for reflection. *Wisdom builds her house*, says the wise man in *The Proverbs* (14:1), *but folly with her own hands tears it down*. Can it be that we who are called Christians will now be so foolish as to spend our time tearing down rather than building up?

We are heirs to blessings which have come to us through the sacrifices of others. Our fathers and grandfathers learned of Christ from missionaries who came to our shores many moons ago. Some of these happily sensed with great appreciation the ancient Chinese cultural heritage which is ours and have sought to conserve that which is best along with the new life we have found in Christ. Why then do we fall into the trap of importing alien divisions and strife which our own culture long ago rejected as injurious? Why are we Christians so unthinking?

Allow me to cite an early Christian parallel, which aptly illustrates my point.

The earliest Christian letter which we have outside the New Testament is the letter written by Clement, an elder of the church at Rome, on behalf of his own congregation to the church at Corinth, at about 95 A.D. I mentioned Clement's letter to you in my earlier letters on the church.

In Apostolic times many of the assemblies of Christians experienced unjust, painful persecution, just as some of us have. But a factious spirit had again risen at Corinth, which the Apostle Paul had rebuked several years earlier in his letters to Corinth (*1 Corinthians* and *2 Corinthians*). Clement calls this *unholy rivalry*. Clement follows Paul in saying that factiousness is a very serious matter. Some of them claimed to be more spiritual than others. This shattered the unity of the congregation. Some individuals drew followers to themselves and divided the Christian community. They sought to further their own factious interests not by preaching and teaching the truth of the Gospel but by fostering envy against leaders who already had suffered for the cause of Christ. It is remarkable how parallel this was to the divisions Paul warned against in his two letters to Corinth only a generation earlier and how closely this parallels our own situation today.

We have a graphic example of these things from that same period of early Christian life. In the year 64 A.D. Nero the Roman Emperor launched a cruel persecution of Christians at Rome. Though the account of this was written by Tacitus the Roman Senator about fifty years after the event, it is a reliable reporting. Tacitus' adult life spanned the end of the first century A.D. and the early part of the second century A.D. In his history of the years which embrace the period during which our Lord and the Apostles lived, Tacitus writes about virtue and vice in public life and pleads that great men can indeed exist even under bad emperors. He contrasts the behavior of those who love self-display and practice corruption (both religious and political) and extravagant spending with those who live prudently and modestly.

The cruelties inflicted on Christians by the Emperor Nero in 64 A.D. are indescribable. In order to counter an ugly rumor that a great fire had been set in Rome on his own orders, Nero sought to blame Christians, who were in fact blameless. Christians were accused of hating humanity. Some were wrapped in the skins of animals and were then torn to pieces by dogs. Others were fastened to

crosses, doused with oil, then set afire to serve as candles to light a circus Nero staged for his cronies who crowded into his gardens. So cruel were these acts that even the crowds, who normally loved spectacles, began criticizing Nero. It may well be that the Apostles Paul and Peter suffered death during these persecutions, which then spread to the provinces.

Most striking is Tacitus' comment that the crowds sensed that Christians were being mercilessly destroyed less as adherents of a strange, new religion than to gratify the cruelty of an evil man, Nero.

Surely because of envy Christians themselves should not add to the suffering of another Christian. It is one thing to suffer many different trials for Christ, as Peter says. But it is quite another thing to suffer simply to gratify the cruel whims of another person, especially of a fellow Christian.

Unholy rivalry is a prime source of evil. Among them, just as among us, one can trace the persecution of the righteous to jealous hatred which distorted claims to goodness and spirituality sometimes inspire. This appears to have happened at Rome with regard to both Peter and Paul. Clement speaks of heroes nearest to their own time who by reason of rivalry and envy, as the greatest and most righteous pillars of the church, were persecuted and were put to death. While this rivalry and contention could have come from non-Christian sources, the martyrdom of Peter and Paul may very well have been triggered by animosity among Christians. Have we not witnessed the same in our time? Have we not seen our own brothers and sisters suffer not only from the madness of a cultural revolution which sought to extinguish every vestige of personal distinctiveness but also from the envy, strife and sedition which Christians practice? Is not the word of Scripture which Clement cites fulfilled among us (*Deuteronomy 32:15*), *my beloved ate and drank and grew fat and started to kick*? Rivalry, envy and unholy schism are responsible for fratricide. Why should the world believe us if we persecute one another?

When will we learn from the wisdom of our fathers -- a wisdom which ought not to be forgotten but enhanced by spiritual insight. Over two thousand years ago Sun Tzu wrote that invincibility depends upon one's self; the enemy's vulnerability on him. If we desire spiritual victory -- the victory of Christ's Gospel among our people -- then why do we not give heed to this ancient Chinese wisdom? Sun Tzu goes on to say that in communicating ground, unite with your allies. What a marvelous piece of wisdom this is!

Consider for a moment. What struggle are we engaged in? With whom and with what? Can we imagine that our Master, Jesus Christ the Lord, has mandated that the final victory over sin and evil in the world will come through our battling one another? And if our Christ has said that *he that is not against us is for us* then surely those who confess the Lordship of Christ are fundamentally allies of our common cause. This is the meaning of *invincibility depends on one's self*. If I fight my brother and sister then I fight the body which makes me a true self -- the Body of Christ. Let us forsake the desolate ground of unholy rivalry.

Let us put on the armor of light.

Let our heritage of suffering lead toward a proper end. Indeed, the great Apostle identifies two kinds of suffering. The first is suffering for Christ, the second is suffering with Christ. Why have we selfishly claimed the honor of the first but have forgotten the meaning of the second?

Some among us have indeed been persecuted for the Cross of Christ, as Paul says (*Galatians* 6:12). Paul reminds us that all who desire to live a godly life will suffer persecution (*2 Timothy* 3:12). But our suffering should not become the occasion to add to the suffering of others. This follows from a peculiar form of pride. Rather, we should go on to comprehend Paul's second understanding of suffering, which is redemptive suffering with Christ (*Romans* 8:17). Paul could not have said it more powerfully: there is a suffering which is like that of Christ's cross. This means bearing the evil that comes to us in such a manner that it does not corrupt us into anger and envy but becomes the fuel to feed the fire of forgiveness, the kind of bearing of suffering which can say, *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*. This is what it means to partake of Christ's sufferings (*1 Peter* 4:13). The fellowship of this suffering (*Philippians* 3:10) follows from being conformable to Christ's death. By the manner of their suffering the followers of Christ make their greatest witness. But jealous hatred will inevitably destroy us from within. In the face of his impending martyrdom in 155 A.D. Polycarp, who as a young man had met the Apostle John, wrote to the Christians at Philippi. He urged that they should stand firm in the faith, follow the example of the Lord, love the brotherhood, cherish one another, honor fellow companions in the truth of the Gospel, and in the gentleness of the Lord prefer one another. It is remarkable that in the face of martyrdom the true lesson of suffering is gentleness to one another, not adding yet additional suffering to the burden others have already borne.

At Athens less than one hundred years after the death of the last apostle of Christ, the converted philosopher Athenagoras warned that the making of subtle moral distinctions from within the pride of self-righteousness leads inevitably to harm. He spoke of the evil mysteries of sophistry. His plea was written to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius on behalf of Christians who were being persecuted. He said that Christians do not engage in endless arguments which seek to justify unacceptable behavior. Their goal in life is not to hone skills in oratory, but to show the proof of profession by deeds. He adds, *with us one finds unlettered people, tradesmen and old women who, though unable to express in words the advantages of our teaching, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds*.

How can we justify harm coming to another Christian because of a misguided sense of our own self-righteousness?

This my dear En Guang and Xiao Qing is the substance of the matter: if anyone does not have charity, he or she is nothing. Let that be your mandate. You then become Christ's letter of recommendation (*2 Corinthians* 3:1-3), because the

truth of the Gospel has been written on your hearts.

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China Letter 15

THE UNSHAKEABLE KINGDOM

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

Every Christian has his or her feet planted firmly in two kingdoms. No Christian can hop through life on only one foot. We have to walk step by step, with both feet, because each of us is inevitably part of two kingdoms.

In what sense are we now part of two kingdoms and, at the same time, in what sense are we part of one of the two kingdoms which the Bible teaches is both present and is yet to come?

The writer of Hebrews speaks of this at some length. Though we are part of an earthly nation, we seek a homeland, a better country (11:14, 16) because the earthly commonwealth of this life is not a lasting city (13:14). We seek a city which is to come. At the same time we are already part of the new kingdom, *therefore let us be grateful, says the writer, for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken* (12:28).

The Bible teaches us that we have a citizenship here upon earth and, as well, we have a citizenship in heaven (*Philippians* 3:20).

Jesus taught us to *render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's* (*Matthew* 22:21).

Paul declares that all civil authority ultimately is of God (*Romans* 13:1-7). God's intention is that rulers rule justly. Magistrates, he says, are God's servants for our good (verse 4).

Peter urges Christians to be subject to the civil authority, whether it be the Emperor of the Roman Empire at the time or the governors of the provinces. Their proper role is to maintain law and order and to punish wrong doers. But in the *Book of Revelation* that same Empire is pictured as evil and subject to divine wrath (*Revelation* 17-18).

What is the Christian to do? Note that Paul himself appealed to Caesar when he was unjustly attacked and imprisoned at Jerusalem (*Acts* 25:11). Paul appealed to fundamental principles of justice which ought to characterize every civilized society. For example, parallel to the early period of our own cultural and legal development, Plato at Athens proposed principles of justice for his society. For justice to prevail, he said, the rulers must be wise, the populace must be temperate, and the keepers of the peace must be courageous.

The meaning of Paul's comments in *Romans* 13:1-7 is analogous. The powers of the state ought to be dedicated to the maintenance of justice. Thus, Paul and Peter, following our Lord, teach us that temporal power is derived from God and that Christian obedience includes commitment to the commonwealth. When, as stated in the *Book of Revelation* authorities in the state abuse power then not only will Christians suffer, but all the people will suffer.

Over the centuries, Christians have learned that the church is not the Kingdom of God, though it is part of that Kingdom and that, therefore, Christians must not allow themselves to become cultic expressions of the state ethos, which has sometimes been expressed when rulers declare themselves to be cultic symbols of the nation.

The temptation to do this has not always been resisted by Christians in former generations. I pointed out to you earlier that during the Middle Ages in Europe the church virtually became the state: It had a coherent structure with a man at Rome who claimed to be its single head. It had an effective administration. It controlled all learning and communication. It made the civil power dependent upon it. It had its own courts. And, its pyramidal structure gave the impression of rationality and stability.

In principle Christians are not imperialists, nor may they aspire to become imperialists. This was the mistake of many Christians in the fourth century of the Christian era, following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 C.E. Christians made the mistake of identifying the Kingdom of God with the church. As deeply moving as the faith of many was at that time, they were wrong to suppose that with the dawning of the Constantinian Age the Kingdom of God had arrived.

Some believed that the Roman Empire and the Christian Emperor were God's instruments and that peace and prosperity would inevitably follow from public acknowledgment of the true and living God. They formulated theories that mankind has progressed through ordered, successive ages or stages toward maturity. They saw themselves to be in a strategic phase of this historical unfolding as the beginning of the final Kingdom of God. When Rome fell in 410 C.E. their concept of a divinely ordered earthly Kingdom collapsed as well. Then, as I said to you before, Augustine began writing his great work, the *City of God*, in which he said that no earthly kingdom is the City of God. Earthly kingdoms are inevitably flawed by pride and error. Rather, he said, we look for God himself to establish his Kingdom in the future.

He went on to say that our present life and societies are mixtures of good and bad. These exist side by side, pragmatically. The genius of the two cities is love of two different kinds: the earthly kind is not really true love but is self-interest and egoism; the heavenly kind is the love of God, the source and inspiration of all that is good. We should be instructed to hope in the providence of God for the final rest of the soul and humanity's goal, which is the City of God.

Even in those early times there were indeed Christians who objected to identifying the church with the state, let alone identifying the Kingdom of God with the state. Those who, like ourselves, insisted upon the principles of personal faith and voluntary membership, and who urged democratization of the church structure, properly saw the state as a secular entity and the church as a voluntary association of believing, committed people. The principles of commitment and voluntarism signified that they understood the church to exist for religious purposes and not acquisition of political power.

If, as is now widely agreed, it is best to separate the power of the state from the church, what should for Christians be the relationship between the state and the Kingdom of God? This is where implications of the final Christian vision should intrude upon our awareness. The Gospel is about the Kingdom of God, Jesus declared (*Mark* 1:15). The Bible tells us that at the end *the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever* (*Revelation* 11:15). Thus, if the Gospel is about the Kingdom of God we ought to allow for, and become part of, the testimony which calls upon rulers to rule justly. Our testimony -- indeed, our very life-style and demeanor -- should challenge secular rulers and their associates to adhere to the principles of justice and equity for all. This is Paul's point when he says that rulers are here, subject to God's authority, as a terror to bad conduct, and that if the ruler is just we will receive his approval (*Romans* 13:3). Christian witness serves in part as God's vehicle to attest to truth and to sharpen the consciences of secular rulers as to what is just. Christians announce God's Lordship and his final judgment of all men, as Paul did in his address on Mars Hill in *Acts* 17. Christians say this: Moral cynicism is misguided. It is simply not true that anyone can get away with anything in this life without fear of final judgment and retribution. In this respect, Christians can make an invaluable contribution to the well-being of the whole of society.

Thus Christians who are nourished and nurtured by biblical teaching live in hope. We cannot sink into depression and despair. God commands his people to live in hope and to join hands with him as his co-workers.

In our time we have lived through a great deal of wickedness and many atrocities. These have demonstrated yet again that we do not have within us seeds of the divine nature which simply need watering and nurture. Some sociologists have urged us to recover the concept of the radical evil which is at home in every human heart. A British historian, Herbert Butterfield, has said in our time that history uncovers the universality of sin. Others are grappling philosophically with how to account for surd evil in the world, while still others are advocating that we press forward the search for a chemical which will straighten out the human brain and deflect humans from practicing evil.

Psychological analyses of the human condition abound and many of them make depressing reading: That human beings are profoundly ambivalent with a dreadful combat going on internally between a life instinct and a death instinct. That we are inescapably burdened with guilt and need relief which explaining

guilt away cannot furnish. That we are natively afflicted by oppressive anxiety. That human beings are shot through with hypocrisy, a hypocrisy which postulates a sham self as the real self. That we are irrationally egocentric and narcissistic, and that our entire outlook is skewed by incessant self-love. That we -- or at least too many of us -- are simply power-mad, made worse by tendencies to violence and the wish to manipulate, dominate, or oppress others.

These perspectives, and many more, may be cited from among modern assessments of the human condition. It is enough to make one wish he could go into a dark room, lock the door and throw away the key! But that is not allowed to the Christian. We live, as I have said, with our feet in two kingdoms. Hope is not only offered to the Christian, it is commanded by God. Despair is not an option. We live in hope because the Lord God almighty is still on his throne. We can therefore live and work in hope; and, we can acknowledge with thankfulness whatever good God conserves in the world.

We live in hope because we are forgiven. Forgiveness means that God has taken care of our past and the evil consequences of our deeds so that we can forgive ourselves as well as be forgiven. This sets us on the path of hope. It means that our present life, commitments and work are to some point because we are co-workers with God. Hope assures us that God will vindicate his own work not only in us, but through us.

We live in hope because we believe that evil will be finally vanquished, that wicked men and women will be punished by God, and that inequities will be done away with. Hence, says James, *be patient, therefore, brethren until the coming of the Lord*; and, he adds, *be steadfast* (5:1-11).

Therefore we reject fatalism, despair and fortune. We do not deify chance, which is fatal to both intellectual integrity and moral responsibility. We know that while the Creator has fashioned a world which is unique and unpredictable its functions include acts of the will, not merely erratic or arbitrary cosmic forces. We therefore commit ourselves to vocation, the vocation of working together with God in the interests of his Kingdom.

In what sense is the Kingdom of God both present and yet to come? This centers upon the biblical themes of the incarnation of Christ and the final consummation of all things in Christ. Christ is the hinge of history. The Old Testament promises looked to his coming at his incarnation. The New Testament looks to the final consummation of the Old Testament promises, not all of which were fulfilled at Christ's birth and during the years of his earthly life. These two aspects are part of one redemptive work. The Kingdom has been realized redemptively through the Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection. It will yet be fully realized when the ascended Lord returns personally to establish his Kingdom. The last days are here already in the saving work of Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit (*Joel 2:28; Ezekiel 36:27; Acts 2:16-17*); and, the last days are yet to come. They constitute the age to come (*Mark 10:25, 30*; note also *Matthew 12:32; Luke 20:34-35; Ephesians 1:21*).

At present we live between the ages, and we live with our feet in two kingdoms. As well, we recognize that the spiritual Kingdom of Christ is the harbinger, the foretaste, of Christ's final, earthly Kingdom of which the Holy Spirit now present and active among Christ's people is the warranty.

Let me summarize and conclude on the matter of the Kingdom. John the Baptist announced the Kingdom (*Matthew* 3:2) which message Jesus extended (*Matthew* 4:17). It was a warning of judgment and a call to repentance.

Note the following: (a) In Jesus' teaching the kingdom (as salvation) is present (*Matthew* 12:28; 13:11, 26-17) and is made evident by his teaching and miracles (*Matthew* 11:2-6). (b) It is a gradual development (*Mark* 4:26-32). (c) Finally it is a future reality (*Matthew* 13:11, 16-17; 25:1). The difference between the proleptic sense of the kingdom as already present and spiritual, as against the kingdom as future in relation to promises confused the disciples (*Acts* 1:4, 6). Most evangelical Christians have understood the nature of the kingdom in spiritual terms and have argued for freedom within a religiously and socially plural society under civil law.

Utopians in every century since Apostolic times have envisioned a man-made kingdom which they have called the Kingdom of God. Sometimes they have defined the Kingdom of God as humanity's state of nature and have sought to create primitive society in some remote place.

The question is fundamentally this: is the kingdom of God both a present spiritual reality and an historical political reality in the future?

On grounds of ordinary language use and common principles of interpretation there is no reason for evacuating kingdom promises of their literal meaning -- whatever one's view of the promises and their historical fulfillment may be. But there are pitfalls to avoid. We must avoid the doctrine that once we have brought in the Kingdom Christ will return. It is his to establish. We must also avoid the doctrine that the church and the church age are the Kingdom historically unfolding. The church is not the Kingdom. In the past this has led to Christian imperialism. As well, we must avoid the error of thinking that conditions in the world are so bad, and that they will worsen even more as the age advances, that therefore we should withdraw into isolation to wait Christ's return.

No difference can be drawn between use of the phrases 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' (compare *Matthew* 4:17 with *Mark* 1:15; *Matthew* 13:11 with *Mark* 4:11 and *Luke* 8:10. The kingdom will embrace not only spiritual renewal but the renewal of the earth under Christ's kingly reign and the healing of the nations (*Isaiah* 2:1-4; 11; 49). The final kingdom is in the future and is earthly (*Matthew* 8:11-12; 13:39-43; 25:31-34).

Some Christians in this century have failed to grasp the truth of the reality and the importance of the kingdom in the world since the days of Jesus and the

apostles. We must live in the hope of Christ's return without being apocalyptic. It is a mistake to emphasize the future Kingdom while ignoring God's work day by day. Kingdom theology must embrace Jesus' teaching about the kingdom in two respects: the spiritual kingdom which becomes manifest through the preaching of the Gospel, conversion and discipleship; and the future historical earthly dominion of Christ which he will establish upon his return.

The theme which I want to emphasize to you most is this: guard your mind and your heart with regard to the Christian hope. Absorption with details of the end times can become an obsession and can lead to speculations which amount to predictions. I have heard many of these during my lifetime. That they prove to be mistaken is, of course, justification to avoid such excesses. More important is this: the focus of the New Testament on these things is for purposes of comfort not nerve-wracking speculation which, as well, tends to remove us from the responsibilities of day-to-day life and the evangelistic mission of the church. The call to discipleship is a call to hope, but also to patient, suffering service. To the extent that our interest in events of the end times compels seriousness about life and stewardship in view of the judgment seat of Christ it is an important component of Christian understanding and a vital spiritual datum. The New Testament Gospel has indeed an eschatological thrust but this must be distinguished from the apocalypticism of the first century. Paul's eschatology in *1* and *2 Thessalonians* is intended as an antidote to a form of apocalypticism which was disturbing faith and emotional balance, and was distorting the meaning of expectancy. Conversion, spiritual renewal, moral transformation, and dedicated service are the key features of New Testament eschatology. This is Paul's main point in both of his epistles to the Thessalonian Christians.

Nevertheless, the Christian hope embraces more than moral and spiritual values. It is more than an eschatology realized in our own times as some have argued. The eschaton is more than the renewal of faith from generation to generation of converts as others have said. Nor is the eschaton merely an extension of the post-resurrection exuberance of the first Christians. The Christian hope concerns events which are historical in the sense that they not only embrace the existential, experienced reality of the Gospel, but also point prophetically to a series of events which mark the end of the age and are associated with Christ's return.

Nor is Christ's return merely symbolic of a new world order, which concept translates the existential realities of the *kerugma* into political, economic and social reality. Undoubtedly a kingdom age is envisioned, but that kingdom is associated with Christ *in the context of his return*. The political, economic and social transformation which such a kingdom may involve are not in themselves the return of Christ, as some today seem to suggest. These changes are characteristics of the kingdom which Christ himself will install upon his return. That is the meaning of *parousia*. The cause comes before the effect.

The incarnation of Christ, his teaching and miracles, his death and resurrection are indeed signs of the kingdom, along with the descent of the Spirit

at Pentecost and the quickening of new life in Christian converts from that generation to this. In that sense the eschaton has arrived. But there is a future fulfillment on a world scale which will transpire at the appearing of Christ; thus, the two aspects of the kingdom, initial and final, are associated with the two 'appearings' of Christ (*Hebrews* 9:26, 28; note *Acts* 3:21). The second coming will be as visible as the first, but it will be in glory not humility (*Matthew* 24:30; 25:31;). It will be personal (*Matthew* 26:64; *Acts* 1:11; 3:21-21), and it will be unforeseen, unpredictable and astonishing (*Matthew* 24:32-44, hence the injunction *watch therefore*, v. 42; 25:13; *1 Thessalonians* 5:2, 6).

We live between the times of the eschaton; between the first part which concerns the historical redemptive act of Jesus Christ and the last part which will be the historic kingdom. Both are freighted with spiritual significance but both are concretely historical. They are part of the final redemptive act which has both come to pass and will yet be fulfilled (*Hebrews* 1:2; *Mark* 10:30). That future kingdom which Christ will establish will confirm and extend his act of redemption and triumph. During the 'till he come' period, Christians who die, die in the Lord. Upon death they are with Christ (*Luke* 23:43; *2 Corinthians* 5:8; *Philippians* 1:23).

Toward the time of his return, Christ said that there would occur a culmination of evil. The 'desolating abomination' (*Matthew* 24:15), also identified as the lawless one (*2 Thessalonians* 2:3) and the beast (*Revelation* 13:5, 16-17) who will captivate the world, demands total religious commitment to himself, and will dominate the world politically and economically. The tribulation which the Johannine writer describes in *Revelation* 12 appears to refer both to the church which suffers throughout her history and to the final climactic surge of evil.

Christ himself will intervene in these events. He will destroy the evil one (*2 Thessalonians* 2:8) upon his personal arrival (*parousia*, *1 Corinthians* 15:23-24), at the revelation of his power and glory (*apokalupsis*, *2 Thessalonians* 1:7), at his appearing (*epiphaneia*, *2 Thessalonians* 2:7-12; *1 Timothy* 6:14).

This constitutes the great comfort for Christians (*Titus* 2:13). Upon his return the dead in Christ shall rise first (*1 Thessalonians* 4:16-18), a promise which is grounded in the fact of Christ's own resurrection (*1 Corinthians* 15:20). Then Christ will establish his theocratic reign on earth which will fulfill the redemptive work already present in the hearts of his people (*1 Corinthians* 15:24-28).

In light of these truths let us take the exhortations of *Hebrews* to heart. The heroes of faith from our past surround us and should be examples and an encouragement to us (*Hebrews* 12:1). Therefore *let us lay aside every weight* (12:2), *let us lift the drooping hands, strengthen weak knees and make straight paths for our feet* (12:12). This is surely a call to the spiritual renewal, the moral transformation and dedicated ministry of which I spoke.

The writer of *Hebrews* sums this up at the end of that chapter (12:28) in

the words *let us offer to God acceptable worship*. Earlier, when I wrote to you about the functions of the church I said that the first and foremost function is worship. The writer of *Hebrews* is here explicit as to what this means. It is *worshipful service*. In the face of persecution and pressures to fall back on faith's commitment, he not only urges that we lay aside every weight (an exhortation); he also says engage in worshipful service (a prescription for loss of hope).

Notice something that is critically important. The word for worship which he employs does not mean worship in the purely ritual sense of prayers and offerings. It includes the concept of service -- not merely the service of religious ritual, but the service of dedicated ministry in Christ's name.

Sainthood in both the Old Testament and the New Testament entails more than mere contemplation of the divine. How different this is from non-Christian worship. Worship, contemplation, and prayer in the Bible are set in the context of the mighty acts of God in history and his invitation that we become a part of that working. In the Bible vision always ensues in an interpretive message which demands obedient response and is a call to action. In the Bible seeing God is the hope of the redeemed but hearing and obeying God is the ground of fellowship. Such obedience is the life-blood of hope.

In *Acts* 7:7 work and worship are joined, and Paul had this in mind when he testified before a tribunal (*Acts* 24:14; 27:23). Paul's service was not merely temple ritual but a life expended in missionary activity. *Worshipful service* is the sense in *2 Timothy* 1:3 where Paul says he serves God with a clear conscience. In *Hebrews* 9:14 the writer says that our consciences are purged (we are morally transformed) so that we may serve the living God. In God's presence worshipful service will be the blessedness of the saints (*Revelation* 7:15; 22:3). Let us take to heart the biblical summation and exhortation in *Hebrews* 12:28,

*Therefore let us be grateful
for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken
and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship,
with reverence and awe;
for our God is a consuming fire.*

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China Letter 16

TRIUMPH OVER DEATH

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

In his song of triumph Paul said, *Where, O death, is thy sting*. This note of victory can only be sounded within the assurance of resurrection of which the resurrection of Christ is the first fruits. But the truth of this reminds us that outside of resurrection hope in Christ there remains the dirge which haunts human awareness. Death is final. Death is awful.

Therefore it was for no small reason that Paul preached to the Athenians *Jesus and the resurrection* (Acts 17:16-34). Several generations of Christians later, the converted Athenian philosopher Athenagoras, of whom I have written to you before, similarly focused on the cruciality of the resurrection. In his essay *The Resurrection of the Dead*, which was written about 175 C.E. and was addressed to people who held views identical to those in Paul's audience, Athenagoras said that we are not concerned merely with bodies but with the entire person. There must be some appropriate end proposed for this life, he declared. Reconstitution involves both body and soul of the same living being.

Like its ancient counterpart, modern Materialism leads to despair. The well known modern materialist Bertrand Russell has declared that the world is purposeless and void of meaning. Human beings are the product of causes which have no prevision of their meaning. We are simply the products of the accidental collocation of atoms, he said. At death these disperse and we are no more. We are destined to extinction. Hence no heroism or inspiration can preserve individual life beyond the grave. And, he went on, only on the foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. This is the view which Paul refutes in *1 Corinthians* 15.

A striking feature of the modern mood has been to shift sentiment from despair to the only comfort which a naturalistic outlook can offer. This urges that we should accept the wisdom of nature. Death is a natural phenomenon. Accept it not only in a spirit of resignation but with the feeling that each one of us is part of a whole -- of the way things are -- and that our own death contributes to the rationale of the whole.

But modern people do not like even to think about death let alone talk about it. Naturalism has ever sought to be classically hedonist, comfortable and cheerful, with little of the *angst* generated by the old nihilism and pessimism. They say that since there is no soul, what exists is a functioning body. Since death is final, enjoy the positive reinforcements of life while you may. But there is no point in fearing death, and certainly not of fearing a mythical future judgment. Modern discussions of value concern social decorum, law and order, and whether there are justifiable limits to personal freedom, but questions about any fundamental distinction between right and wrong, moral responsibility, and post-death moral accountability are no longer part of the modern exchange of ideas.

Modern attitudes to death replicate Epicurus' advice to Menoeceus: *Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us*. It is not the death that is painful but the anticipation of it. If there is no spiritual self which continues to exist then *nothing to us* has dramatic metaphysical significance which matches the terms of modern dialogue. Epicurus concludes: *So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more*.

Blessedness in life, says Epicurus, depends solely upon learning what to choose and what to avoid for the health of the body and to keep the soul free from disturbance. This is the golden text of contemporary naturalistic hedonism, and it is virtually an exact copy of the hedonism of the Epicureans whom Paul addressed on Mars Hill.

The mystical tradition has little appeal for moderns except as a haunting memory of unconvincing speculation about life after death and the occasional jolt that reports of post-death experiences make, of which one should be skeptical.

I raise the question: Is the soul immortal? Is there an existence beyond discrete personhood in space and time? Or, is the life to come a release from time-bound bodily existence, as Plato and other Idealists have suggested, and absorption into impersonal infinity?

Biblical teaching suggests to some an inherent tension between understanding death as part of the natural order and death as the moral issue of sin. On the natural order side the argument is that but for death the planet would quickly be inundated by forms of life such as insects. On the moral side, biblical teaching indicates that while death may be regarded now as intrinsic to human nature (argued from texts such as *John* 12:24; *1 Corinthians* 15:36; and *1 Timothy* 6:16), a different transition to the next life was probably divinely intended and that death as we know it has penal overtones (*Genesis* 2:17; *Romans* 5:12, 17; 6:23). Death is the last enemy (*1 Corinthians* 15:26, 55). Even death which is considered to be altruistic submission for a cause reflects horror of it and of its judgmental aspect (*John* 15:13; *Philippians* 2:17; *2 Timothy* 4:6). Death is a sign of God's judgment. Its inevitability overshadows and dominates our lives. Death is never an angel of light; is never our brother, as one Christian theologian has written.

The meaning of death in Christian teaching focuses upon the metaphysical reality of persons within a creationist perspective. God is understood to be personal and to have created human beings for fellowship with himself. It is of the essence of Christian teaching that personal identity be conserved both in this life and in the next, but in both cases in a bodily life.

Thus views which see life under divine reign as restricted to historical existence, or as part of a process which is moving toward trans-personal reality or absorption in infinity, or that simply deny the possibility of future self-conscious existence are unacceptable. To this may be added an instinctive revulsion from the idea that the 'other side' is populated by ghostly apparitions. Whatever that life is, it must be a form of bodily life for that is the only way discrete personal existence is described in the Scriptures (*1 Corinthians* 15:35-38). The focus of resurrection in the New Testament is upon regeneration and renewal of both body and spirit, not merely resuscitation of mortal remains.

The doctrine of Hades, which appears to imply an intermediate shadowy existence raises difficult questions about which the Scriptures say little. Biblical

data include Samuel who made a 'ghostly' appearance (*1 Samuel* 28:13-14), the condition of the rich man (*Luke* 16:19) and the spirits in prison (*1 Peter* 3:19-20). The continuity of personal identity is clear as is the implication of bodily life. Paul is adamant that being 'unclothed' (disembodied) is an undesirable state; rather, one is 'further clothed' (*2 Corinthians* 5:4). That such a transition is regarded by some as the resurrection is firmly rejected by Paul in *1 Corinthians* 15, as we shall see.

The Bible teaches us that physical death and spiritual death are each a separation: of the soul from the body in the case of the former, and of the soul from God in the case of the latter. Apart from redeeming grace, the exclusionary force of God's holiness is inherent in the sting of death (*2 Thessalonians* 1:9).

Modern societies have groped toward a legal definition of death once radical procedures for keeping bodies in a persistent vegetative state became possible. For Christians human life entails more than body functions. Personal existence is only conceivable when the brain allows the possibility of consciousness, hence spontaneously breathing vegetative states are now widely regarded as the equivalent of death as in the case of brain-dead persons.

What, then, about resurrection? Resurrection in the New Testament should not be confused with or confined to resuscitation or re-animation as in the case of Lazarus, who presumably died later in life. In the New Testament *we shall be changed* corresponds to the *spiritual body* (*1 Corinthians* 15:44, 51), the mortality which will be swallowed up by life (*2 Corinthians* 5:4).

In the Old Testament there are three stories of rescue from deaths that had occurred: the son of the widow of Zarephath (*1 Kings* 17:17-24) raised by Elijah, the Shunammite woman's son (*2 Kings* 4:8-37) raised by Elisha, and the reviving of the man being hastily buried whose body touched the bones of Elisha (*2 Kings* 13:20-21). Inferences concerning the life to come or passage into the next life include: *Job* 14:14; 19:25-27; *Psalms* 17:15; 73:24-25; and *Psalms* 139:7-12 which, along with *Isaiah* 66:24, *Jeremiah* 31:30 and *Ezekiel* 18 introduce the concept of direct personal responsibility in this life and the next.

Two key passages in the Old Testament are specific as to resurrection, namely, *Isaiah* 26:19 and *Daniel* 12:2-3. The latter reads: *And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*

Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees directly concerned their denial of the resurrection (*Matthew* 22:23-33, *Mark* 12:18, *Luke* 20:27), which Paul uses to his advantage by exploiting the issue which divided the Sadducees and the Pharisees (*Acts* 23:6-10).

The core of Jesus' teaching is that God is *not God of the dead, but of the*

living. Denial of the resurrection involves error as to the teaching of the Scriptures as well as about the power of God (*Mark* 12:24-27). To this can be added his statements about his own resurrection and power in glory (*Matthew* 10:33, 19:28, 24:30, 25:31), along with parallel passages in *Mark* and *Luke*.

This truth is apparent through a wide range of Jesus' direct statements, inferences, and actions: The parables of the tares and of the net (*Matthew* 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50. Verse 43 resonates with *Daniel* 12:3). The last judgment (*Matthew* 25:31-46). The accusing men of Ninevah at the last judgment (*Matthew* 12:41, *Luke* 11:32). His power to raise the dead (*Matthew* 11:4-6, *Luke* 7:22-23). The raising of Jairus' child (*Mark* 5:22, 41; *Luke* 8:42, 54), the widow of Nain's son (*Luke* 7:11-17), and Lazarus (*John* 11).

Rational belief in life after death (as against the possibility of the resurrection of the body) has concentrated on two issues:

First, as Plato conceived it, the inner rational or spiritual principle of human life has the character of being able to transcend and survive temporal and finite existence. This spirituality is evident in human capacity to devote oneself to moral and transcendental ideals. Finite existence is thus propaedeutic and developmental in relation to a final coherence which will abstract what is worth conserving from the failures and ambiguities of finite existence. This is in part the appeal which Athenagoras made, which I cited earlier in this letter.

Second, and parallel to the foregoing, is the view that it makes nonsense of existence (the key element of nihilism?) to suppose that after long development toward coherent spiritual life it should be extinguished at the point of likely fulfillment. This is particularly attractive to those who understand God to be inherent in the cosmic process and that the process is teleological. In that regard, reinterpretation of the resurrection of Christ moves toward the concept of fulfillment in us of a resurrection style of life or frame of mind which the concept of his resurrection symbolizes.

Three questions are critical: Is resurrection more than life after death? Was Christ's resurrection historical in the sense of having been a reportable event? Will the resurrection of those who are Christ's be like his?

First, let us consider the strategic nature of Christ's resurrection. Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead as a central tenet of faith, which is stated in the Apostles' Creed, is grounded in the fact of Christ's resurrection. The fact of Christ's resurrection and the character of it are fundamental to Christian hope. Paul declares that if Jesus Christ is not raised from the dead then preaching and faith are in vain (*1 Corinthians* 15:14). In the New Testament, Christ's resurrection is not merely existence-oriented, it is event-oriented. Christ's resurrection ensures the bodily resurrection of those who are in Christ (*1 Corinthians* 6:14, 15:23). In what sense is Christ's resurrection the pattern or prototype of the resurrection of believers?

Mark 16 records that the stone was rolled away, the statement of the young man who was sitting in the tomb, and that the women remained astonished and silent. Regrettably, the original ending of *Mark* (after verse 8) appears to have been lost. *Matthew* 28 records that the two Marys came to the tomb, the earthquake, the angel who rolled away the stone and his appearance, the reaction of the guards and the meeting in Galilee. His account seems to extend detail from where *Mark* leaves off at 16:8. *Luke* 24 records that those who came to the tomb (are these the women who are unnamed until verse 10?) found the stone rolled away, and the story of the two whom Jesus met on the road to Emmaus. Luke's account is a more didactic recalling of Jesus' words and begins the process of interpreting the resurrection, which Luke extends in *Acts*.

There appear to be three main emphases in the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels: the visit of the women to the grave which they found empty, the meeting with Jesus in Galilee, and the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Jerusalem. This has suggested to some scholars a three-fold early tradition regarding the resurrection: Galilean, Jerusalemite and Pauline.

In *John* the presence of Christ and the promise of his resurrection abrogate death (*John* 5:21, 26; 10:17-38) of which the raising of Lazarus is the central symbol. Christ is the resurrection and the life (11:25). John records the encounter with Mary Magdalene and, in the context of the Galilean meeting with his disciples, the challenge to Peter that thenceforth his assignment from the risen Christ is to tend the sheep. The Johannine presentation joins Christ the life-giver with Christ the propitiation for sin (*1 John* 1:1-2; 2:2).

Two key foci are characteristic of all the accounts and they complement each other: the empty tomb and the appearances. These are presented as solidly embedded in space and time. They are not phantasmal or mere vision, but concern reportable events.

Paul claims to have seen the risen Christ (*1 Corinthians* 9:1, 15:8). The resurrection is central to his theology. Christ is Lord of both the living and the dead (*Romans* 14:9). He is the exalted Lord (*Philippians* 2:9) who is at the right hand of God (*Romans* 8:34, *Ephesians* 1:20, *Colossians* 3:1) in the heavenly places (*2 Corinthians* 12:2, *Ephesians* 1:3) over whom death has no more dominion (*Romans* 6:9). Christ, as the second Adam, the last Man, inaugurates the new humanity and the new age by the power of an indestructible life (*1 Corinthians* 15:45, *Hebrews* 7:16).

Theologically, the resurrection of Christ focuses the entire meaning of the Incarnation and Work of Christ in a single reality and symbol as the vindication of God's saving purposes and the hinge of history.

What is the nature of this event? In the New Testament narrative it is clearly embedded in history and is stated to be historical. Jesus actually died. His body was laid in the tomb. The disciples were distraught and were ready to disband. They were certain that all they had banked on during the previous three

years was lost. But the empty tomb and the appearances of Christ to them changed all that. There is at bottom a harmony as well as consistency of narrative in the several accounts. The event is reported factually and interpreted, but it is not explained.

As a metaphysical question the resurrection of Christ cannot be explained by natural causes or verified by us empirically. However, the historical record should be accepted in the same way other history is recorded and accepted. The empty tomb and the appearances signify the power of the new eternal life which transformed the body which Joseph laid in the grave on the dark evening of that Friday into the immortal form which was no longer affected by the limits of time and space as we experience them. But it is precisely the empirical side which Jesus stressed when he challenged Thomas and the others, *Put your finger here, and see my hands (John 20:26-29)*. The seeing is tactile. The believing concerns not merely an event to faith but an event in time and space which, as authentically recounted, becomes the foundation for faith in others.

We struggle to grasp the nature of the different kinds of bodies about which Paul speaks (in particular, physical and spiritual, in *1 Corinthians 15:46*). Discrete human existence entails bodily life, but the bodily resurrection will be in a different, higher mode of reality than that which we know in our mortal bodies.

First, Christ's resurrection body was no longer bound by material or spatial limitations. It appears to have been able, as we would say, to function in more than one dimension. *Matthew 28:2, 6* suggest that he passed through a sealed tomb, and *John 20:19, 26* through closed doors. The latter texts, along with *Luke 24:15, 29-30 (Jesus stood among them)* suggest arrival without physical movement. Yet he walked, conversed, stayed and ate among them.

Second, for the most part his appearances are mentioned but not his disappearances, as in *Luke 24:31*. This points to a state of invisibility and therefore of immateriality. The verb *ophthe* means visible or came into visibility in nine occurrences (*Luke 24:34; Acts 9:17, 13:31, 26:16; 1 Corinthians 15:5-8; 1 Timothy 3:16*). When placed alongside *Luke 24:44 (while I was with you)* their specific, itemized nature indicates that during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension he was generally not visible to human eyes, nor did he regularly stay and eat with them (which *Acts 10:41* and *1:4* do not demand, except as episodic). Dr. Murray Harris, a British evangelical New Testament scholar has pointed this out.

Third, a corollary of the preceding is the ability of Christ in his resurrection body to materialize and be localized at will. That which was essentially immaterial became tangible. He could be seen by human eyes, his wounds seen, his body touched (*Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:39-40; John 20:20, 27, 29; Acts 1:9*). The verb to see (*idete, see my hands and my feet*) means to comprehend or grasp by touching and points to the empirical nature of the encounter. His eating of food was evidently for reasons of proof of his reality to his disciples (*Acts 10:41*). There is nevertheless an abjuring against mere physical

contact (*John* 20:17), apparently reinforced by the radiant glory of the resurrection body which suggests essential detachment from earthbound existence. One may note the Eastern Orthodox Church custom of celebrating the transition of the soul from its wandering to its heavenly home on the fortieth day after death as a striking allusion.

Fourth, the relation between the state of Christ's body before the resurrection and his mode of existence after the resurrection suggests the transcending of the laws of nature as we know them. Personal identity remains intact (*Mark* 16:6; *Luke* 24:39). That which was laid in the grave is risen. Yet they did not always recognize him. Why? We do not know. Perhaps because under the conditions of ordinary experience following his death, which they had witnessed, he could not be expected to be present and they, on the other hand, were overwhelmed by sadness and disoriented as to their next step. But this is conjecture.

Christ's resurrection body is no mere re-animation but is entrance upon a spiritual mode of existence; the existence which Paul identifies as necessitating a *spiritual body*. Christ's reality was not spirit in the sense of being phantasmal, but of a transformed body, a deathless state (*Romans* 6:9). His resurrection body is a form of corporeality in which the spirit is supreme. As I said above, the power of the new eternal life transformed the body which Joseph laid in the grave into the immortal form which was no longer affected by the limits of time and space as we experience them. In these respects, it was metaphysically different from the raisings from the dead, such as that of Lazarus. It was a glorified body, not merely the resuscitation of a mortal body.

Paul is certain of our resurrection on grounds of the reality of Christ's resurrection. Two key Pauline passages focus on the reality of the resurrection and the nature of the resurrection body: *1 Corinthians* 15 and *2 Corinthians* 4:16 - 5:10.

In *1 Corinthians* 15 Paul responds to either the denial or the re-definition of the meaning of resurrection at one or more of several levels (15:12, 16). These possibly embrace the following errors: First, that resurrection is an impossible concept because, as the Epicureans argue, the soul dissolves with the body (what is to rise?, 15:35); or, as the Platonists argued, it is an inconceivable concept because the body wastes away and only the soul is immortal. On the other side, there appear to have been those who announced a realized resurrection: either that the kingdom has already been fulfilled (*Philippians* 3:12) or that the resurrection is a thing of the past having occurred at baptism as the sign of one's having risen with Christ (*Romans* 6:4-5).

Paul counters denial and deconstruction by affirming that the resurrection will yet occur in the future and is certain (15:22), that it is based on the historical facticity and reality of Christ's resurrection (15:23), and that it will be bodily (15:38). Thus Paul affirms the somatic character of the certain future resurrection.

The form of Paul's argument is two-fold: it concerns 'that-ness' and 'how-ness.'

'That-ness' concerns facticity (15:1-11), which point is made by stating that something is the case (*hoti*, 15:4, 12). Christ has risen. The Christian's faith and the point of all Christian endeavor depend upon the reality of Christ's resurrection (15:29-34), the ground of certainty that the dead in Christ will rise (15:12-28).

'How-ness' follows from the rhetorical question (*pos*) in 15:35. Paul discusses the nature of the resurrection body in 15:35-50. The answer to 'how?' is that God gives an appropriate body. The answer to 'what?' is that the body will be appropriate to its environment. In 15:51-57 he says that those who are alive at Christ's return will be 'changed' (transformed) in a manner similar to those who have already died (15:51).

The resurrection body entails transformation: Negatively put, *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable* (15:50). Positively put, *we shall all be changed* (15:51). It is embodiment, but of a different form (15:36-41). The difference is shown in the contrast between Adam (a physical body, 15:42, 45) and Christ (a spiritual body, 15:44, 45). The latter statement raises the critical issue as to whether the resurrection body will be like Christ's.

To the rhetorical question *How can the dead be raised? With what kind of body?* (15:35), Paul replies: death is one step toward life, an analogy of which is the death of the seed as the step to (and way by which one enters upon?) new life. God gives to the planted seed (the body which dies) the body he has prepared, which lives (15:38).

The natures of bodies vary according to the functions they fulfill in the differing conditions of the environments they are designed for (15:39-40). This diversity and adaptation are created by God. Thus it is not irrational to think of a resurrection body as well as an earthly body. There can be more than one kind of body, says Paul. Differences in the natural order furnish an insight as to the differences between a physical and a spiritual body in the resurrection; namely, that which is perishable as against the imperishable (15:48). Thus Adam and Christ head two differing kinds of existence and metaphysics: the perishable and the imperishable. Paul's argument seems to imply that we shall not only arise in Christ but like Christ in the sense that the resurrection body will be spiritual as Christ's was.

In 2 *Corinthians* 4:16 - 5:10, Paul repeats his emphasis upon the indestructibility of the inner spiritual reality versus the transience of the empirical order (4:16-18). Things in sight are temporary.

What then of the body? What follows is difficult to untangle, in part because Paul switches metaphors and the grammar is notoriously difficult to grasp. I'm not at all certain that I have fully grasped Paul's meaning, but let me

try.

To begin with (5:1), he compares the earthly body to a terrestrial house as the spirit's residence, tent-like, frail and impermanent, with a house not made with hands, derived from God, which is strong and permanent. It may be that the term *oikodome* here should be rendered *structure*, not in the sense of something that has earthly physical mass (two other occurrences could in this sense be parallel, *1 Corinthians* 3:9 and *Ephesians* 2:21), but is nevertheless a body. For Paul, disembodiment is an abhorrent idea (5:3).

Paul then switches from the metaphor of a tent or dwelling to clothing (5:4b-5). We are not willing, he says, to take off this clothing but would rather put on other clothing so that the mortal may be consumed by life; or, should that be understood as *absorbed into life*? That is, not to be dissipated or merely dissolved into the elements, but be transformed into the glory of the immortal body. He concludes that to be at home in this body we are away from the Lord, but that we would rather break off from the body and be at home with the Lord (the aorist tense suggests a quitting, or breaking off, a 'fleeing the coop,' from one to the other).

This passage is exceedingly difficult to interpret.

The contrast in verse 1 is clear: the desirability of a well-built, permanent structure as against the earthly, transient tent. When Paul says *we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens*, does he mean that a better structure already exists in the heavens, which one scholar has suggested are the many dwelling-places of *John* 14:2? Does such an understanding undermine Paul's insistence that the resurrection is still future? Or, is Paul saying that in the interval between death and the resurrection there is a body prepared in the heavens to move into?

In verses 2 and 4, the only places in the New Testament where Paul uses the double compound *ependusasthai* (to put on over), Paul appears to say that he longed to put on the resurrection body over his earthly body as an additional garment, i.e., to be alive at the time of Christ's return, but the final meaning may be that he simply longs for the permanent body which has been prepared, eternal in the heavens. He thus has in mind the transition which apparently inevitable death will bring rather than the possibility of Christ's return during his lifetime.

Paul is reinforcing the conviction that in any event a heavenly garment or shelter awaits immediately upon death, even though those who are alive at the time of Christ's return will be translated. The result will be the same, except for the passage of death. Spiritual embodiment will be extraordinarily better than the present earthly state. New vestment, life, transformation, new corporeality all belong together. Passage at death is beyond the limitations of space and time, perhaps with no consciousness of 'from this to that.'

The presence of the Holy Spirit in believers is the portent and guarantee of

that immortality to come (5:5). Thus the Christian looks neither for riddance of the body nor for pre-death translation, but for the translation which coincides with death. The dying Christian passes into being *further clothed* and *at home with the Lord*.

Allow me to summarize. Concerning the terms employed by the apostolic writers in the Gospels about Christ's resurrection and by Paul and expositors of Paul about the resurrection body of believers, I note the following:

1. Transformation, evident in the reported invisibility and immateriality of Christ's body, yet his appearances and localization (*ophthe*).
2. Christ's appearances represent an incursion from a spiritual, invisible world.
3. The resurrection of Christ entails for Christians a spiritual mode of existence at their own resurrection (*1 Corinthians* 15:45), that of pure spirit, or life-giving spirit.
4. Spiritual body means corporeity under control of the Spirit, a spiritualizing of matter, a materializing of spirit. The truth of the matter is that words fail us. Definitions become circular. All we can say is that Paul speaks of a form of corporeality in which spirit is supreme (corporeality controlled by the spirit), that is, a heavenly form of embodiment.
5. At bottom, the resurrection means that the heavenly life will be a spiritual corporeality in which personal identity is conserved and is recognizable. Jesus said, *It is I, be not afraid*. Paul declares (*2 Corinthians* 5:6-10),

*So we are always of good courage;
we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the
Lord,
for we walk by faith, not by sight.
We are of good courage,
and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.
So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.
For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so that each one may receive good or evil,
according to what he has done in the body.*

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China Letter 17

THE LIFE TO COME

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

I constantly have to remind myself that I am to take life seriously because

God takes it seriously. We can trace the haunting theme of responsibility throughout the Scriptures. Over and over again we are reminded that God will judge every man and woman righteously: *He will render to every man according to his works (Romans 2:7)*. Paul goes on to say that to those who seek glory and honor and immortality God will give eternal life, but to those who are factious and obey wickedness there will be wrath and fury.

Moral obligations which are reflected in the sense of duty are laid upon us all. But responsibility carries obligation to accountability. As moral creatures, human beings are held responsible by God on the basis of the moral law which God has placed in the human heart (*Romans 2:14-15*). Moral accountability consists of obligation to pursue good as good and obligation to eschew evil as evil, in view of final scrutiny and judgment. Accountability is to the righteousness of God. This is the ground of the judgments of God against evil and evil-doers built into the very nature of the creation (*Romans 1:32, 2:5-6*).

This is indeed sobering. We are reminded that as forgiven sinners, sanctified and justified through Christ, we must flee the sins God condemns and for which he will finally judge human beings (*1 Corinthians 6:9-11*). Paul declares that we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive good or evil, according to that which each has done in the body (*2 Corinthians 5:10*).

In the *Book of Revelation* 20:11 there is presented a melancholy scene. Before the Great White Throne are brought the *rest of the dead* (20:5) who had not risen with the redeemed, great and small, to be *judged by what they had done*, as recorded, and that those not found in another book, the Book of Life, are cast into the Lake of Fire.

Jesus Christ, the loving redeemer has become the fearsome judge from whose presence all flee but cannot hide (20:11). Sometimes God the Father is identified as the final judge (*Romans 2:1-11, 14:10; Hebrews 12:23*) and sometimes Jesus Christ himself (*Acts 10:42, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 2 Timothy 4:8*).

Judgment will be on terms of the righteousness of God (*Genesis 18:25; Romans 3:3-4*) to disclose why their names are not in the Book of Life and why they should be banished from God's presence.

Judged by what they had done refers to works (*Romans 2:1-11*). These have spurned the light God placed in their hearts and minds (*Romans 1:20*), rejected truth (*Romans 2:8*), and chosen wickedness, whether they lived under the revealed law of God in the Old Testament or not (*Romans 2:12*). Greater light entails greater responsibility.

But the future judgment is already in place now (*John 3:18*) from which the believer in Christ may pass into the assurance of life (*John 5:24*). That acquittal has already taken place (*Romans 5:1, 8:33-34, 1 John 4:17*) means that those who are in Christ have no fear of the final judgment.

The strongest case made against final judgment is the universalist appeal, either that it is ungodlike and a contravention of God's love which is, finally, irresistible and will accomplish its purpose, or that by election and decree Christ, the elect, brings all of humanity with him. Nevertheless, as much as one might feel attracted to the universalist appeal it cannot be sustained from the teachings of Christ nor from other parts of the Scriptures.

Universal love is said to best represent the essential nature of God. So declared one writer early in this century, which became a pillar of Liberal Theology. Judgment, it was said, does not reflect the nature of God but our primitive instinct for revenge. To judge except as a means to good is itself an evil.

Exponents of this view had already in a prior way assumed that Hell was a passé concept, not fit for moderns to consider. The list of those who opted for divine love as radical love ending in universalism is long. Six key texts were used to reinforce the biblical form of the argument: *John* 12:32, *Acts* 3:21, *Romans* 5:18, *1 Corinthians* 15:22-28, *Ephesians* 1:10, and *Philippians* 2:9-11. God's universal benevolence was invoked (*1 Timothy* 2:4, *2 Peter* 3:9). The cosmic scope of Christ's redeeming work was called upon to reinforce universalist doctrine (*2 Corinthians* 5:19, *Colossians* 1:20, *Titus* 2:11, *Hebrews* 2:9, *1 John* 2:2).

Nevertheless, beyond the judgment many of these texts imply and the fact that the cosmic saving worth of Christ's work states a benevolent reality upon which is grounded a universal and beseeching offer which may be rejected, is the stark warning and contrast of the two paths (*Matthew* 7:13-14, 25:46; *Romans* 2:7-8; *2 Thessalonians* 1:6-9; *Hebrews* 2:3; *2 Peter* 2:9, 3:9).

Universalism based on the doctrine of the love of God fails to take account of that love as holy love, and that in creating freedom God gave to humans the power to say 'no' to him and to suffer the consequences. The central question remains: can one say no to God?

The new universalism appears, as someone has said, *to doom all humanity to salvation*, that all are elect in Jesus Christ and pre-determined to salvation. For these, God's grace is irresistible. All humanity is included in Jesus Christ the primal man. Christ is both the reprobate and the elect. A reconciliation has been achieved, it is being offered for appropriation by faith, but in the end God will be glorified in his sovereign grace to save all. The final decision is God's not man's. Christ has already suffered the damnation; there is no more to suffer. No limit can be placed upon God's illimitable and invincible grace.

The difficulty with this doctrine is that it cannot cope with Jesus' teaching on the two paths, nor with the reality of the freedom to say 'no' along with the responsibility which follows for the decision.

Nor is a doctrine of conditional immortality, of the annihilation of that which is not salvable, consistent with the scope of biblical teaching. This concept

argues that God will preserve only that which is worth preserving and will annihilate the rest, or that apart from divine providence and grace it will fade away into non-existence.

Finally, there is not found in the Scriptures warrant for a doctrine of purgatory, probation, second chance, or of retribution which at the end is remedial; that is, a pedagogic cleansing process, a judicial suffering which leads to repentance.

I have previously set forward for you a rationale for the punishment of evil as the means by which God maintains the standards of his own righteousness without inhibiting the freedom of vocation he has given to human beings. Freedom and punishment are correlatives.

This is the frame of reference into which one must put the awful doctrine of Hell. The terms are many: the darkness (*Matthew* 8:12, 25:30), eternal fire (*Matthew* 25:41), eternal punishment (*Matthew* 25:46), the day of wrath (*Romans* 2:5), eternal destruction and exclusion (2 *Thessalonians* 1:9), the pit or abyss (*Revelation* 9:2, 11), the second death (*Revelation* 2:11; 21:8), the lake of fire (*Revelation* 20:15).

What condition is this? Is it not only absence of all good as many suggest but, as well, unredeemable dislike of good as one Christian writer has said. Is it misery of banishment from God's presence and comfortless remorse? Is it total self-centeredness, isolation and a-sympathy and, therefore, the hell of egocentric spiritual torment? Or, as another writer has suggested, is it inescapable Godlessness wrapped up in an inescapable memory of a rejected God-relationship?

In the Scriptures Hell is a place as well as a condition. The Old Testament term *Sheol* and the New Testament term *Hades* (in the Septuagint the equivalent for *Sheol*) suggests an intermediate state (*Luke* 16:23, *Revelation* 20:13-14) which, along with Satan will be destroyed once Gehenna becomes the destiny of the lost (the Lake of Fire, *Revelation* 20:14-15, note also *Matthew* 5:29-30, 23:33).

The sin is fixed and the guilt is endless (*Revelation* 22:11). Biblical teaching speaks not of eternal damnation for fleeting sin, but of God's dealing with a set condition of radical, irredeemable evil. Punishment confirms the abiding nature of the kind of world God purposed to create -- that of grace, freedom and responsibility. The terms for everlasting or eternal punishment (*aion*, *aionos*) contextually refer to that which is unending; for example, in regard to the nature of God (*Romans* 16:26, 1 *Timothy* 1:17). Other Scriptures exclude hope (*Matthew* 12:31-32, *Mark* 9:43, 48). To deny that eternity does not mean endlessness (e.g., that it means *in eternity*) is to play with the words of Scripture, whatever one may think of that concept. The terms *aion* and *aionos* cannot mean anything less than eternal.

Scrutiny and judgment are inescapable. To ignore punishment cheapens morality and the holiness of God. Only the fearfulness of final judgment can account for the sense of crisis which pervades Paul's preaching and that of other New Testament evangelists. Judgment is an impetus to evangelism. It creates an enormous pressure upon the Christian conscience to preach the Gospel (2 *Corinthians* 2:14-17, 4:1-6, 5:11-15). In the words of a theologian of the past, we are to preach *as dying men to dying men*.

Human destiny rests finally with the love and holiness of God. Only he can - and he will - decide the levels of responsibility entailed in human response to his revelation or failure to worship and serve the Creator who has revealed himself in nature and conscience (*Acts* 10:34-35; *Romans* 1:18-20; 2:5-11, 15-16).

What awaits the Christian in the life to come? The concept of heaven in the Scriptures is related more to being in the presence of God than to being in a specific place designated by that name within the final Kingdom. This is where the souls of the redeemed go upon death, awaiting the resurrection and the resurrection body.

Fundamental to all of the stirring descriptions of heaven is the concept of a renewed heaven and earth (*Isaiah* 65:17; 66:22; *Romans* 8:21-22; 2 *Peter* 3:13; *Revelation* 21:1, 5). Descriptions are many and varied: A Messianic banquet, *Matthew* 8:11. A new world, *Matthew* 19:28. A secure city, *Hebrews* 11:10. A homeland, *Hebrews* 11:14. An ideal, unshakeable Kingdom, *Hebrews* 12:22-24, 28. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb, *Revelation* 19:9.

These descriptions relate to a central theme of the Scriptures: that the final Kingdom is restoration of all things to God through Christ who had originally created them and reconciles them through the blood of his Cross (*Colossians* 1:16, 20). Christ will subdue every enemy, including death, and then hand the Kingdom, restored and glorified, to the Father (*1 Corinthians* 15:24-28). Thus the final Kingdom embraces not only the spiritual reconciliation of redeemed humanity but, as well, the physical restoration of a world injured by sin and evil.

Commentators have noted that humanity originally was placed in a garden, but that the final state is a city, the City of God (*Hebrews* 12:22, *Revelation* 21:2, 10). Why? The idealization of the New Jerusalem represents the new heavens and new earth. In view is humanity redeemed and the environment restored, a new world whose light is the presence of God himself (*Revelation* 21:5, 23).

Of what do the Scriptures speak when Paul refers to *the things that God has prepared for those who love him* (*1 Corinthians* 2:9)? Some of the biblical notations and pictures follow:

A prepared place with Christ, *John* 14:2-3.

Eternal life, *Matthew* 25:46; the new creation, 2 *Corinthians* 5:17.

Holiness, *Revelation* 21:27.

Freedom from death, sorrow, suffering and sin, *Revelation* 21:4.

Songs of Redemption, *Revelation* 14:3.

An eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, *2 Corinthians* 4:17.

Mutual recognition and fullness of knowledge, *1 Corinthians* 13:8-12.

Service and worship, *Revelation* 19:1, 7:14, 22:3.

Inseparable communion with God: *Romans* 8:38-39, *Revelation* 21:3-5.

The communion of saints, *Hebrews* 12:23.

Beyond these there are many other beautiful symbols and representations in the *Book of Revelation*: The tree of life in the paradise of God, 2:7. The crown of life, 2:10. The gifts of manna, the white stone and the new name, 2:17; 19:8. The morning star to those who suffered, 2:28. The white garments and the fine linen, 3:5. Becoming pillars in the temple of God, 3:12. A share in the Messianic reign, 3:21. All fear and want removed, 7:15-17. And, the final vision of the river of the water of life, 22:1-5.

Heaven is the dwelling place of God and of the redeemed. Contemplation of that final Sabbath Rest (*Hebrews* 4:1) strengthens faith and teaches patience. It is the vision which generates hope, illumines understanding and stimulates faithful ministry. The apostle Paul says in *2 Corinthians* 4:16-18,

*So we do not lose heart.
Though our outer nature is wasting away,
our inner nature is being renewed every day.
For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us
an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,
because we look not to the things that are seen
but to the things that are unseen;
for the things that are seen are transient,
but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

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China Letter 18

GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANTS

From Grandfather Mai to his dear friends En Guang and Xiao Qing:

How can I adequately describe my visit to Beijing and some of the sights nearby? As you know, for a long time I have wished to visit our capital city. What links to our past! The vastness and grandeur of the Forbidden City overwhelmed me. I can scarcely imagine the luxury in which our rulers lived over the centuries while so many of the populace suffered privation.

The next day I rode on the bus which travels from Beijing to the Great Wall. I still cannot believe that such a thing could ever have been built and that it actually was built, even though I literally walked along the top of it. It is an enormous tribute to the vitality of an ancient economy. As a measure designed to enhance the security of our people it reminded me of how insecure we are in a rapidly changing world.

My long-anticipated visit set me to thinking about stewardship and, in particular, about our Christian stewardship. The proper word is accountability. As I said in my last letter, God will hold us accountable for stewardship of life and of resources. Our Lord put his own injunction to us into the nobleman's mouth in a parable when he said *occupy till I come*, (Luke 19:3).

What is our Christian vocation *till he come*? In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) our Lord warns us that we are accountable for the talents -- including life and resources -- and that anyone who does not maximize their value will lose even that with which he or she began.

For me, Christ's most forceful word is in *Luke 12:42*. Here, again, Jesus is speaking of accountability in view of his own return. With regard to the stewardship of his servants while the master is away (that is, Christ himself), he says, *blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing*. The phrase *so doing* has stuck in my mind. It means to be doing that which one is delegated and assigned to be doing -- and to keep on faithfully doing it -- until the

Master himself returns.

Our Lord said that he came to bring freedom: *if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36)*. What does this mean? We know that freedom is a function or capacity of spiritual beings, such as we are, under God's creative hand. This means that we are created by God as self-conscious spiritual realities -- what we mean by persons -- who are capable of purposeful actions which are morally qualified. We reject freedom-denying determinism, of whatever form; while at the same time we treasure a world created by God to be scientifically dependable.

On the other hand, liberty is freedom from fate, necessity or arbitrary control. There are many different kinds of liberty. The march of the human race throughout history has been a march to the land of freedom. We are thankful to God for the many new ways in which our society has provided opportunity for us to engage in legitimate enterprise. But, let us remember that opportunity places upon us the duties of stewardship, and stewardship inevitably entails accountability.

True liberty is not the right to do anything one wishes. The Christian prizes his or her liberty as God's gift and aims to enhance freedom through the moral utilization of the elements of the scientifically dependable world. Hence, increase of control of one's actions in relation to spiritual ideals and ends leads to increase of freedom. These ideals reflect the will of God for the maximizing of good in the world.

In the New Testament, liberty in Christ is a crucial issue. Salvation by grace is salvation to liberty . But the freedom of grace is not a licence to sin. It is a call to spiritual liberty which is bounded by the ideals of Christ. Paul says, *you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another (Galatians 5:13; note 5:13-25 and Romans 6)*.

Three major points follow from these New Testament truths:

First, true liberty excludes the practice of those things which are distinctly sinful. In *I Corinthians 5-6*, Paul rebukes the church for tolerating certain abuses of liberty. There follows a paradox: utilizing freedom in order to sin is a form of bondage but the life of freedom is the moral life circumscribed and motivated by ideals.

Second, in exercising true liberty one must avoid the practice of those things which tend to enslave. This acknowledges the principle of the conditioned response and, as well, it highlights the principle that we are responsible even for the ways in which we willingly condition ourselves or knowingly allow ourselves to be conditioned. The Christian principle is, *all things are lawful to me but I will not be enslaved by anything (I Corinthians 6:12)*.

Third, true liberty takes into account the effects of actions upon others. This is why Paul follows the statement *all things are lawful to me* with the statement *but not all things are helpful* (*1 Corinthians* 6:12; 10:23). In that passage he is saying that, of course, a Christian may eat meat bought in the marketplace which has previously been offered to an idol because an idol has no reality, but he or she will refrain from eating such meat if eating it offends a young Christian who has scruples about doing so.

For Christians, liberty is a primary value (*2 Corinthians* 3:17). Thus, it may be said that a key purpose of the Creator is to create free, good persons who manifest life as temples of the Holy Spirit (*1 Corinthians* 3:16-17). Paul identifies this as divine calling not only in the sense of God's call to salvation, but also to become worthy of that calling (*Ephesians* 4:1; *1 Peter* 2:9). This vocation is to be the Lord's servant in the world and to the world, as well as to Christ, whatever one's occupation. In practical, day-to-day terms, this implies an ethic of work. For the Christian, however, work is not seen to be drudgery (though some imposed labor may indeed be drudgery) but as contributing to the well-being of others through careful utilization of the earth's resources. The Scriptures abound with references to the values of useful work. Jesus learned carpentry. Several of his disciples were fishermen. Paul was a tentmaker. Lydia traded in fine cloth. Philemon was probably a businessman.

Important principles follow from such biblical teaching: First, as much as lies within our power, each Christian and each Christian family should strive to be self-reliant (*2 Thessalonians* 3:6; note also *1 Corinthians* 16:2 and *Ephesians* 4:28).. This means not merely to avoid becoming a drain on others, but to produce more than their own needs so that they can share the abundance with others. Second, Christians should strive for excellence. When we do good work and produce dependable products they bless and enhance the lives of others. Third, we Christians ought to strive to improve life in our world. We ought to do our part in helping to better the lot of others around us (*1 Corinthians* 10:24).

But I come back to the question of stewardship. Remember that given a level playing field, and given our values of diligence, integrity, prudence, and thrift, Christians are invariably upwardly mobile. The economic changes in our country are creating unprecedented opportunities for economic growth and betterment of individuals and families. We Chinese have always been diligent and successful entrepreneurs. We have been hard workers and have been prudent risk-takers in business.

Remember that productivity is reinforced powerfully by the ethical teaching of the Bible. To be productive means more than merely avoiding dishonesty or exploitation of others (*Amos* 2:7; 5:12; *Micah* 2:2). It means targeting prosperity as a goal for others as well as for oneself as the natural by-product of personal initiative: *the plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance* (*Proverbs* 21:5).

For the Christian worker, business person, or professional person life is

filled with moral choices, including commitment to justice, fairness, honesty and kindness. Priorities are a crucial issue in our prosperous times with unbounded opportunities in business, technology, and the helping professions. Does the drive to succeed concern solely acquisition of property, making a great deal of money, or controlling a business empire? Or does the Christian who ventures into business or into professional life see his or her contribution to the well-being of society alongside his or her loving commitment to marriage, family, friends, and the ongoing work of the kingdom of God as the first priority? The opportunities which beckon toward prosperity in our time furnish an unprecedented opportunity for Christians to exercise stewardship that is both altruistic and mission-minded. Let it be true of each one of us in the day of Christ that he will say, *well done, good and faithful servant*.

The ancient world of the Bible and the ancient world of our own culture were richly furnished with ideas, including attractive ethical ideals. But the Christian Gospel does not offer merely abstract ideals. It offers also the power by means of which Christ's ideals actually can be realized. That is our vocation in life and is the meaning of the duplication in us of Christ's normative humanity as life in the Spirit. The fact that the world is still evil-infected and that Christians are still sin-prone reinforces to each of us the importance of our re-dedication to the ideals of Christ's Kingdom. One ancient writer correctly said, *Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world*. Christian values really belong to another world. Nevertheless, they are solidly a part of this world because we live and work in the world and ought to reflect those values day by day. These ideals are *the law of Christ* (Galatians 6:2). Let us strive to realize this law in our own lives, in our relationships with one another, and in our dealings with all people around us.

I send warm Christian greetings to you both and hope that my letters have strengthened your faith, and have served to make you diligent students of the Scriptures. I look forward to opportunity in the future to sit down and discuss many of these things face to face. May the peace of God be with you. Serve Christ faithfully. Love and honor your brothers and sisters in the Lord.

--End--

MERIT

Samuel J. Mikolaski

Written in 1977 for the proposed *Tyndale Family Bible Encyclopaedia*

It is not clear to me what Tyndale Publishers (IVP), Wheaton, Ill., did with this project.

Merit is man's right to reward from God, whether of salvation or recompense, due to the quality of man's actions. The backgrounds to Christianity include the development of the principle of merit in post-exilic Judaism, especially as represented by Pharisaic piety which is criticized by our Lord in the Gospels. By a careful accounting of one's obedience to the moral and ceremonial law one could claim the reward of acceptance by God. Rejection of the Judaistic formulae was logically entailed in the early Christian Gospel which places salvation squarely upon free divine grace in Christ (Eph 2:8-9). The issue was dealt with by the early church in Acts 15 (note verses 10-11), and this is the main thrust of Paul's writings, especially in Romans and Galatians.

The major texts adduced for a biblical basis for the doctrine are: Ex 23:20-22, Deut 5:28-33; Mt 5:3-12, 6:4, 6:19-20, 7:21. However, no Christian church advocates a doctrine of merit apart from grace. At issue between Christians is the way grace and works are related especially as regards the role of the Church and sacraments in salvation.

Despite early Christian rejection of merit due to the clarity and firmness of apostolic teaching, doctrines of merit quickly entered the Christian tradition from the second century on. Merit-deserving works included alms, fasting and celibacy. The question of post-baptismal sins, especially in relation to those who lapsed from faith due to persecution, became a burning question. What worthy penance should be required for restoration of the lapsed? The most poignant issue was martyrdom. It was seen by some as the greatest act of merit, which by its very nature as self-sacrifice wins a place with God. Expression of such views occurs earlier than the great North American theologian Tertullian who died in approximately 220 A.D., but it was he who first formulated a doctrine of merit. Successors to Tertullian such as Cyprian, and still later Jerome, further developed the doctrine, especially the latter's correlation of merit with the rigours of monastic life. The great church father Augustine reaffirmed the doctrine of grace against merit; nevertheless, he allows for meritorious acts as gifts of grace.

During the early and late Middle Ages doctrines of merit were finely tuned, alongside the development of sacramental doctrine in the Church, especially the doctrine of penance. There developed a distinction between condign merit, where we merit for a good work justly because we already share in the merits of Christ; and congruous merit, where we merit a reward because while in a state of grace we do good. In the former case God is obligated to reward man because of His free promise; in the latter He rewards out of friendship. Discussion also centred upon the distinction between the ethical and religious value of human acts.

Carefully worked out balances between divine grace and penitent acts were

developed. Theological and religious reaction were finally stirred on a massive scale at the Reformation against the system of penances and indulgences. The latter were formalised earlier by the Bull of Pope Clement VII in 1343 A.D. This decree epitomizes popular and clerical medieval ideas about merit. The superlative merit of the righteousness and blood of Christ could not, it was said, remain idle. The Pope wished that men have access to this infinite treasure which was entrusted to the Holy Father for dispensing. To this heap of treasure were added the merits of the Virgin Mary and also the merits of all the elect of every age, from the first man to the last. By definition this becomes an infinite storehouse of merit, which could be tapped by the Church for every man through the sacraments, more especially through the procurement of indulgences. An indulgence was a remission from penalty in purgatory upon payment of a price, to draw on the storehouse of merit. The Church developed a scale of fees for the rich and the poor.

It is evident from the foregoing that carefully worked out balances become prominent wherever merit is stressed and free grace is obscured. It is to the credit of the proReformation movements such as those of Wycliffe, Hus and the Unity of Brethren, as well as of the Reformers and the Anabaptist groups, that they re-established the doctrine of salvation solely upon grace and the work of Christ, with the only appropriate human response being faith.

There is much less tendency today to stress merit, whether in Catholic or in Protestant theology. Evangelicals have sometimes erred in emphasis by implying that the motivation for Christian faithfulness is reward *ii*, the life to come, albeit not salvation as reward, but reward for stewardship. While such is implied in passages like 1 Cor 3:10-15, the overriding motive for Christian service is the love of Christ as well as the conviction that God is the author of all good in the world and that we delight to serve Him not as reward seekers but as co-workers.

THE ORIGIN OF SIN AND THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN

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“Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they may have found their rest in Thee.” These famous words written by St. Augustine declare the glory, the mystery, and the contradiction that is man. Man was made for God, yet he is a sinner alienated from God and under the wrath of God. How can this be?

EVIL AND SIN

The problem of human sin is part of the larger problem of evil in the universe. Sin is the worst form of evil because it involves the corruption of man's inner nature. Primarily, sin is not something that happens to man, it is something that happens within man. On the one hand Christianity has rejected the idea that evil is eternal or that evil and sin are necessary elements of the world order. On the other hand, it has fought with equal vigour any denial (of the reality of evil, i.e., the notion that evil and sin are not really what they appear to be and that in the ideal world everything will be shown to have, been intrinsically good. Christianity, as founded upon the Biblical revelation, declares that only the good is eternally and ultimately real, but that evil and sin are realities within the universe to be cured not by thinking them away but by a victorious divine act. This act is the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE PRIMAL FALL

Where did evil and sin come from? The complexity and mystery of this problem is clear when we remember that God is great and good and that therefore this world as He created it must have been good.

Whatever, we say, we must not avoid the clear statements, of scripture and the clear implications of our own experience that sin originated in the personal rebellion of a created will against God its Creator. We dare not place its origin in matter, nor in any demand for a logically necessary contrast for the good, else: we empty human moral responsibility of meaning. Attempts have been made to put the Fall into some other world or state than this by saying that it is a “timeless act” But clearly this is meaningless. An act that is timeless is no act. Nor can we think of evil being due to the separateness of the individual soul from the world-soul (had evil been timeless it would have been a necessary phase, of the development, to a higher form of life.

We must, rather, leave the Fall in history as an historical event otherwise we fail to do justice either to the logic of our own situation as morally responsible creatures or to the testimony of Scripture. If we look squarely at what we know of God, the world, and man, whatever else the Fall may have been it must have been an event in time. I have, been unable to find any statement or argument that

makes' better sense than the suggestions of Scripture that certain angels rebelled and fell, becoming 'devils under the leadership of Satan (John 8:44, 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6; Revelation 12:7-17).

THE FALL OF MAN

What does this say of man? The account of man's creation and probation is too well known to bear repeating here, but you will do well to refresh your mind by reading Genesis chapter three. What is this important passage saying?

It says that man is the creature of God, created, nourished, and sustained by Him. God placed him in this world to 'tend and master it, and to develop his own personality in the freedom of fellowship with God. During this time of man's spiritual and moral development he acted in contradiction to the will of God, allying himself with the powers of revolt against God. This is the fall of man. It is an act of rebellion by a finite will against God the Creator and Lord of the world. That this is true in an experiential way of every man who senses his own status as "fallen" and "rebellious" is true; but the Biblical account reaches back showing the origin of this condition at a point in time. It says that this is due not to any necessity of the way God has made the world, but to a rebellious will.

MAN AS SINNER

The pollution of man by his sin is individual and racial invading both what man does and what he is. Man is a sinner by practice. He acts out of conformity with, and positively against, the will of God. (1 Ki. 8:46; Rom. 3:1-19, 23; Gal. 3:22; 1 John 1:8-10). Man is also a sinner by nature. He is, in other words, the kind of person who willfully sets his own will against God the Lord (Ps. 51:5; John 3:6; 1 Cor. 2:7-16; 15:21-22). These teachings of Scripture suggest three things about man's sinnership.

First, they declare man's guilt before God. As sinner he is the object of God's righteous wrath. No more solemn words about man's plight are found in Scripture than St. Paul's grand conclusion that the law of God discovers the fact of sin, unveils the heinousness of sin, and discloses the judgment of sin (Rom. 3:19). All the world is guilty before God, and when we see truly our guilt we cry out for deliverance. -

Second, Scripture declares, what is patently a fact of experience, that the whole man is infected by sin. This is what the total depravity of man means and a striking picture of his moral condition is painted with dark colours by Isaiah when he addressed Israel (Is. 1:5-64-6). By the doctrine of total depravity we do not say that man is as bad as he might be, but that the whole of man (i.e., every part of his nature) has been touched by sin, and, unless lifted by the love and grace of God man will fall into total corruption and finally into perdition.

Third, the Bible declares the solidarity of the race in its sin. From Adam to the present, all men are part of a race that is sinful. Centuries ago Pelagius tried to say that each child born was born untouched by the sin of the race, and that it sins because of the bad example of those amongst whom it grows up. Augustine

contradicted Pelagius and confirmed the 'Biblical faith of the church that there is a spiritual and moral as well as physical solidarity of the race so that, as sinful, men cannot rise above their own level. How is this nature transmitted?, This is a mystery, but a fact nonetheless. The moral solidarity of the race in its sin is a fundamental- fact of experience and of the Biblical revelation (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corl 2). The exact nature of this characteristic eludes us, but let us be sure of this, that we sin because we are that kind of person. In this we are bound to the race as a whole.

THE RESULTS OF SIN

A long and doleful list of the consequences of sin to men individually and to the race generally could be compiled. This state is further aggravated by the plight of man under the judgment of God's law. Learn well the consequences of sin in life and before the bar of God's judgment and you will prize more the glories of God's mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. Here is a brief list to ponder to which you will doubtless have other points to add:

1. As a sinner, man is cut off from the life and fellowship of God. This is the meaning of his spiritual deadness. Human personality to be 'alive' must develop in contact with other persons. We rest, finally, for our life in God. Curiously, in his sin man is hostile to God his Maker (Ps. 2; 14:1; Eph. 2:1-3, 13).
2. Man is in varying degrees sub-personal and unfree. He is in the bondage of his own making. 'We choose our sins, but indulgence soon makes us their enslaved victims, This is the mystery of determinism and free-will. Christ came to make us free and true freedom is doing the will of God (John 8:32-36); Rom. 6:16-23).
3. Sin darkens the mind and dulls the moral sensibilities. It is the function of God's grace to lighten us in our darkness leading us out into the truth as it is in Jesus Christ (Is. 9:2; Lu. 2:32; 2 Cor. 4:6).
4. In his sin man progressively degenerates morally and spiritually. Unregenerate man seems to have an endless capacity for maximizing and extending the forces of evil in the world (Eph. 4:17-24). He is the victim of his own selfishness and egocentricity with the consequent breakdown of his personality, and the breakdown of proper interpersonal relations for which he was created (2 Tim. 2:24-25; 3:1-7).
5. Sin ends in physical and spiritual' death which is eternal separation from God. For man death is never purely natural, it is filled with fear and foreboding. he thought of death carries with it penal overtones (Rom 5:12, 21; 6:23).

The redeeming, work of God is directed towards the world as a whole to rescue it from the evil with which it has become infected, and towards mankind to save from their sins. Both are accomplished gloriously and completely, through Christ's atoning work upon the Cross. In Him the power of evil has been shattered, forgiveness won, and eternal life opened to those who believe upon His

name. No word of the Gospel is filled with greater joy than Paul's rejoinder to the Philippian jailer, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE MODERN CHRISTIAN

A study guide prepared by Dr. Samuel J. Mikolaski
for the
Division of Christian Studies
of the
The Baptist Union of Western Canada
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[Dr. Mikolaski developed and implemented the concept of the Division of Christian Studies for Christian Discipleship Training among the churches of the Baptist Union of Western Canada.]

OUTLINE

- Lesson I The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament
- Lesson II The Holy Spirit and the Life of Christ
- Lesson III The Holy Spirit and Pentecost
- Lesson IV The Presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian
- Lesson V The Holy Spirit and Unusual Phenomena
- Lesson VI The Life in the Spirit and the Fullness of the Spirit

TEXTBOOKS

John R. W. Stott, *Men Made New*, 1966

J. Oswald Sanders, *The Holy Spirit and His Gifts*, 1970

Read the book by Stott beginning with Lesson IV; then read the book by Sanders as you proceed to complete the course. Relate appropriate sections in the textbooks to the themes of the lessons.

INTRODUCTION

In this course we shall study some important aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit. We shall begin with the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the OT period and take special note of promises of a New Age to come with the advent of the Messiah. With the birth of Christ the New Age dawned. This is the age of the Man of the Spirit, in which Jesus Christ our Lord is the sign and pattern of the New Man for the New Age. The purpose of Christ's advent was to redeem and restore sinful humanity to God's fellowship. The Gospel which the Apostles preached declares that when men and women believe, in the Lord Jesus Christ, that faith is triggered by the Spirit and they receive the Holy Spirit when they receive Christ. We shall then study the ways in which the Holy Spirit is related to

the life of the Christian.

This is a crucial theme of NT teaching, and it has always been vital to evangelical life. In every generation there are those who argue that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is lost: and must be recovered. This is substantially untrue. Among God's people there has been consistently from generation to generation a keen devotional and theological interest in the work of the Spirit. The literature on the subject is very large. However, it is true that amongst some churches and denominations, a renewal of interest in the work of the Spirit is timely. Those who today are excited by a new interest in the Spirit should acknowledge the rich fellowship of the saints which they have discovered, not created. Those who are reluctant to study the biblical teaching and to develop a warm spiritual life in fellowship with Christ should recognize that God has called us not to fear but to the joy of personal fellowship with Himself through Christ and the Spirit and to the power of the Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life.

LESSON I

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament Experience and Promise of the Holy Spirit

Aim of the Lesson

In this lesson we aim to identify the Holy Spirit, to study some of the major ways in which the Spirit was at work in the Old Testament period, and to note promises of the new Messianic Age in relation to the endowment of redeemed human beings with the Spirit,

I THE TERM "SPIRIT"

In both the OT (Hebrew language) and NT (Greek language) the terms for "spirit" denote wind, breath; and, derivatively, life, spiritual reality. Spirit is in contrast to matter. More particularly, spirit is personhood: that which is spiritual, or of a spiritual nature, or is personal, in contrast to that which is of a carnal or purely behavioural nature. Thus spirit, personhood, freedom, intelligence, mind, are closely allied.

God is spirit (John 4:24). Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each fully God, fully spirit, and fully personal. The Holy Spirit is the third, co-equal person of the Trinity, eternal, holy and glorious, and is to be worshipped (Matt 28:19). Christians are called into fellowship with the triune life of God as the supreme goal of the Spirit's working.

Sometimes we say that it is through the Holy Spirit that God is present and active

in the world. More than this, the Holy Spirit is God active in us. He is the agent of conviction, conversion, regeneration, sanctification, and the fulfillment of Christ's image in us. He is active in the world, in the Church, and in the Christian.

To think of the Spirit primarily abstractly, or as power, or simply as divine power, is to firmly establish the basis for misconstruing major emphases of the biblical teaching. It is of the utmost importance to recognize the full personhood of the Spirit in Scripture (John 16:4-15). Only when we think of the Spirit's being fully personal and of our relation to God through Him as fully personal and interpersonal can we hope to make sense of the Gospel.

II ACTIVITIES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE OT

Five major functions of the HS in the OT period are indicated. Study these carefully. Look up other Scripture references. You may find functions which are not listed here.

1. Divine Power

The Spirit is God active in the world. His presence is invasive not pervasive. He does what He wills. In other words, the Spirit is not like static electricity everywhere present, but personally present and active. Note: Is. 30:1; 31:3; 32:15-20; 42:1-5; Zech. 4:6; Ps. 148:8.

In this respect, the Spirit indicates, first, God's dominion in His world, that God takes the initiative in His world, and that what He does is not by sheer power but is done righteously. It is divine power morally qualified.

2. Creator

The Spirit is the agent of Creation, Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6. Note the connection between "word", "breath", and "speech".. God sustains all of creation by the Spirit, Job 33:4, 34:14, Ps. 104:29-30.

3. Life-Giver

The Spirit gives life to every creature, including man. This is the sense of the "breath-of-life" which was imparted to humanity at the creation, Gen. 1:24--31, 2:7; John 6:63.

4. Enabler

The HS enabled, or energized men and women at special times for special tasks. Because they were empowered by the Spirit they were able to do what God purposed. Included are: Gideon the Soldier, Judges 6:34; Othniel the Leader, Judges 3:10; Bezaleel the Craftsman, Ex. 35:30-35; Elisha the Prophet, 2 Kings

2:1-15; Balaam the misguided Seer, Nu. 24:2; and Hosea, the Man of the Spirit, Hosea 9:7.

5. Revealer

The Spirit was the agent of revelation and inspiration who gave the Word of God to men. This included proclamation of God's truth and predictive prophecy as well: 1 Sam. 16:13; 2 Sam. 23:1-5; 2 Chron. 24:20; 2 Pet. 1:21; Acts 1:16.

6. Renewer of Spiritual Life

The Holy Spirit convicts of sin and renews men and women through confession, forgiveness and renewal to live in new ways: Psalm 51:10-13; Psalm 139.

III THE OT PROMISE OF A NEW AGE

Man was created in the image of God. The Spirit breathed into man the breath-of-lives. When man fell, he fell into a disharmonious state. He became alienated from God and from the personal presence of the Spirit. He became, as Paul puts it, dead in trespasses and sins, Eph. 2:1-2.

The promise of redemption through the Messiah included a promise for the endowment of humanity by the Spirit in the New Age. The Spirit-bearing humanity of the Messiah was to be the pattern of that new humanity, Isaiah 7:14, 11:2-9, 32:15-17, 44:3, 61:1-2, Ez. 36:26-27, 37:1-6, Joel 2:28-29.

God promised that He would be present among His people in a new way, that the Kingdom would include the restoration of the broken created order, that His Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh, that He would give His people a new heart and a new spirit, new vision and new power, and that all of this centred upon King-Messiah, the coming Redeemer.

Discussion

1. List and comment on additional passages which indicate the activity of the Holy Spirit in the OT.
2. To what extent is the working of the Holy Spirit in relation to people in the OT personal?
3. List several additional passages which speak of the Messiah and the Kingdom as the Age of the Spirit's activity.

LESSON II

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE LIFE OF CHRIST

The New Man for the New Age.

Aim of this Lesson

To show that the primary sign of the Spirit in the NT is not Pentecost but the life of our Lord. The consequent sign is Pentecost. That is, the pattern of the Man of the Spirit is the Spirit-bearing humanity of our Lord. This is what Pentecost aims to fulfill in Christians.

I OUR LORD AS THE BEARER OF THE SPIRIT

It is universally assumed by students of Scripture that some unique idea, other than and as an advance upon the teaching of the OT on the HS, controls the teaching of the NT. That unique element is the Spirit-bearing humanity of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The promised permanent endowment of the Messiah by the Spirit (Numbers 11:29; Is. 11:2; 42: 1-4) is fulfilled in the entire life of Christ. The whole pattern of His life discloses this truth. The NT writers have this pattern consciously in mind as they write the Gospels and the Epistles.

Jesus came not only to teach about the Spirit, but as the Bearer of the Spirit. He is the actual, historical person who manifests in His own life that which we are to become, through union with Him in His body, the Church.

In the NT Christ Teaches us about the Spirit, Bears the Spirit, Promises the Spirit to His own, and Gives the Spirit.

II CHRIST IS THE MAN OF THE SPIRIT

Note key features of Christ's life, and the parallel drawn between His Spirit-bearing humanity and the Spirit in the believer's life:

1. He was begotten of the Spirit of the Virgin Mary. Christians are born again (from above) by the Holy Spirit at their conversion, John 3: 1-15, 1 Peter 1: 23.
2. He was baptized in the Spirit at the Jordan River. The descent of the Spirit occurred to identify Him as the Son of God, not to make Him to be the Son of God, Matt. 3:16, Mark 1:10-11. The Christian is baptized in the Spirit at his conversion and baptism, Acts 2:38, 1 Cor. 12:13. In the NT, conversion, baptism and the reception of the Spirit were seen to be one event. In the NT Baptism is, in effect, each Christian's Pentecost.
3. He triumphed over the Tempter by the power of the Spirit, Mark 1:12. In this He won the victory over sin where the first Adam fell, and He now takes us up into His own victory in the life triumphant over sin.

4. He lived a life in the Spirit. He literally embodied the Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, and Spirit-empowered life, Luke 4: 1, 14. We are to live in the same way, Rom. 8:11.

5. He ministered and taught in the Spirit, Luke 4:18. Our witness and ministry are to be in the power of the Spirit, Acts 1:5, 8; indeed, the whole book of Acts has this truth as its central theme.

6. He was raised from the dead to glorious resurrection life, as we are also, Rom. 1:1-4, 6:1-11, 8:11.

Our Lord is the actual model, the analogue, the instance, of the life in the Spirit, which we are to be. Who else had more of the Spirit? Why should we not long to be transformed into His image ?

*Through the Holy Spirit
it is the purpose of the risen Lord
to reproduce in Christians
the way of life which had been His on earth.*

III CHRIST IS THE GIVER OF THE SPIRIT

John the Baptist anticipated the gift of the Spirit through Christ, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16-17.

In three crucial passages our Lord promises the Spirit to His followers: John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-14.

In these passages there is an important new departure: for the first time full-blown personal language is unambiguously used of the Spirit. The Spirit is "He" not "it". This is the pattern of understanding for the New Age.

The Spirit is called the Paraclete, which simply means a Counsellor or Helper. His task is not to magnify Himself, but Christ. Where the 1-IS is, there Christ. is exalted, not claims to the experience of the Spirit, John 10-14.

Note:

There is much more to be said about the Holy Spirit in the Gospels, but the foregoing points to the Christ-centred approach of all four Gospel accounts. As well, much could be said about the passages in which our Lord's sayings about the HS occur.

Discussion:

Develop more fully the concept of the Spirit-filled humanity of our Lord. How is this shown in the Gospel accounts? Some of the ways include:

His communion with the Father

His life of prayer

The works He did by the Spirit

His wisdom, courage, rebuke of sin

His triumph over the evil one

Develop these and others, with appropriate Scriptures noted.

LESSON III

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PENTECOST

The Holy Spirit, the Gospel and the Church

Aim of this lesson

The aim of this lesson is to show that Pentecost marks fulfillment of the OT promise and the promise of Christ about the Spirit's coming upon the first disciples. At this time the Church is created by the Holy Spirit as the Body of Christ. The descent of the Spirit is marked by certain distinctive signs. The Holy Spirit also has an important ministry to the world.

Carefully read and outline Acts 2.

I PENTECOST AS FULFILLMENT, Acts 2:1-21.

The narrative in Acts outlines the command and promise of Christ to His first followers, Acts 1:4,

- a) Remain at Jerusalem
- b) For the promise of the Father
 - which you heard from me
 - John baptized with water
 - but before many days
- c) You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit
- d) You shall receive power
- e) When the Holy Spirit is come upon you
- f) You shall be witnesses: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth.

This promise actually pre-dates the Resurrection: John 14, 15, 16; Luke 24:49. Note that Luke itemizes and dates three separate historical events: the

Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Descent of the Spirit. Thus the HS is distinct from Christ, and is fully personal. The events are consistent with the trinitarian structure of the NT.

From Pentecost onwards, the change in the first disciples is decisive. If Acts 2 does not give us the reason for this, then we have no knowledge of what caused the dramatic transformation of the disciples, the power of their new life, and the creation of the Church.

The word "Pentecost" means "fifty" and refers to the Feast of Pentecost of the Jews, which was fifty days after the beginning of the Passover (the Feast during which our Lord was crucified). At this time the Holy Spirit came upon the assembled disciples (it was a corporate experience) as the fulfillment of promise, both OT promise (Numbers 11:29; Joel 2:28-30) and Christ's promise (John 14, 15, 16; Acts 1:4).

To be baptized with the Holy Spirit was not an OT concept (note the closest prophetic analogy in Micah. 3:8). The event marked the onset of a New Age, a new reality, which is related to Christ, the Gospel and the Church.

II THE MEANING OF PENTECOST

Four major considerations need to be borne in mind, as the ways the first Christians saw Pentecost:

1. They believed that the crucified, risen, ascended Lord had sent to them the Spirit from the Father, as He had promised, Acts 2:32-36.
2. They saw themselves as a corporate body, as the Body of Christ. The Spirit was the source of their fellowship (koinonia) with one another, Acts 2:42. Amongst the Christians themselves the earliest group was called THE FELLOWSHIP (Acts 2:42). The Holy Spirit baptized them into a new corporate reality, the one loaf, the one Spirit-bearing body, the Church, the fellowship of believing people, I Cor. 10:16-17, 12:13-14. THE FELLOWSHIP was the creation of the Spirit. That is what they were baptized into, and that is the thrust of the apostolic Gospel in Acts 2:38-39.
3. New converts became Christians by conversion and baptism into this Spirit-bearing body as the fellowship of the Spirit, Acts 2: 38-39, 1 Cor. 12:13. Conversion, Baptism and Baptism in the Spirit were seen to be one event (we wrongly tend to divide them). The criterion of the Gospel is Acts 2:38: if you repent and believe, you shall (not might, or subsequently hope to) receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
4. The most significant mark of the HS in their lives was the permanent change in the disciples at Pentecost and following. The signs such as tongues inaugurated the New Age, but they quickly fade away after the first part of the Book of Acts.

The proof of the foregoing is two-fold: First, exegetically it is indisputable that the Holy Spirit was received by converts upon their receiving the Gospel. Second, the remainder of the NT stresses the transformed life (the Fruit of the Spirit) as the marks of the reception and presence of the Spirit. It might be added that this is the pattern of the life of Christ.

Notice that they were all filled with the HS. Luke intends to say that by this event they were lifted to life at, a new, supernatural level: the level of the Spirit-bearing and Spirit-filled humanity of the Incarnate Lord. Thus, John the Baptist's word that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit, Jesus' teaching regarding the new birth, Paul's teaching about the new creation, and Peter's word about being born anew, are all congruent.

The results of the Spirit's descent were startling: they received new power to produce a Christ-like character. Second, they received new illumination or understanding (Acts 15:28 -- "it seemed good to the HS and to us"). Thereafter they felt that their lives and witness were in God's hands.

Note: three exceptions are noted to this basic apostolic pattern in Acts. These are:

- a) The Samaritans (Acts 8:12-17), where Peter and John laid hands on them after their baptism so that they received the gift of the Spirit.
- b) The disciples of John (Acts 19:1-7), where Paul similarly laid hands on them after their baptism.
- c) Cornelius and his household, (Acts 10:44) where there was no laying on of hands, and baptism immediately followed their faith and the manifest descent of the Spirit.

We should note that God is free to do His own work in His own way. These exceptions do not become the standard or practice of the NT Church. These cases seem to be special signs, or historical junctures, to seal the coming of the Gospel to groups whom the Jewish Christians might be skeptical about. They are signs, like Pentecost, to inaugurate the New Age; but the standard of the New Age is Acts 2: 38-39. The norm of Pentecost is not the exceptional signs, as significant as these were, but the reality of life transformed and endowed with the Spirit just as our Lord was endowed with the Spirit.

III THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE WORLD

It is usually forgotten that Pentecostal fulfillment of our Lord's promise entailed also a special ministry of the Spirit to the world, John 16:8-11.

Most Christians believe that this truth is vital to the task of evangelism, but few Christians, including pastors and evangelists, have developed the meaning of the Holy Spirit's relation to the world.

His work is to convict, or convince the world of its sinful state. The word suggests cross-examination for the purpose of convincing or refuting an opponent. Here it means to compel a man to convict himself in the court of his own conscience. The Holy Spirit convicts of three things:

a) "Of sin, because they believe not on me". This is to vindicate Jesus to the world. There continues to be a strange fascination with Jesus in the world's literature and music. Consider: Jesus Christ Superstar.

b) "Of righteousness, because I go to the Father". Christ's righteousness is vindicated by His Ascension and Exaltation. He represents an heavenly, not earth-bound, standard.

c) "Of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged". The judgment of the power of evil by means of the Cross heralds and assures the final judgment.

What are the modes of the Holy Spirit's working in the world? Through what channels or aspects of experience does He work? Our theology at this point is very thin, except that we all say the HS is indeed at work. How is He at work?

I suggest that he works chiefly through those values which relate to our moral nature, as creatures created in the image of God. Allow me to list some of these in the form of contrasts or antitheses. The Holy Spirit works in the contrast and difference between:

Good and Evil
Right and Wrong Truth and Error Freedom and Bondage Beauty and Ugliness
Harmony and Chaos Fulfillment and Frustration
Life and Death
Love and Hate
Joy and Anguish

If we believe that God through His Spirit is Lord of Creation, then no good originates apart from Him.

Discussion

1. On one page, summarize your understanding of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost in relation to today's preaching of the Gospel and reception of the Spirit. Discuss your summary with others, if you are working in a group.

2. How is the HS at work in the world? Enlarge on this theme.

LESSON IV

THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE CHRISTIAN

Aim of this lesson

To discuss the marks of the Spirit in the life of the Christian.

I SANCTIFICATION

This traditional word means 'to set apart for God's use' and thereafter it means "holy" in the sense of partaking of God's holiness.

Sanctification is the act of the Holy Spirit who unites a believing person to Jesus Christ, renews the Christian's nature in the image of God, and enables him or her to live a life of faith and good works.

Sanctification has two aspects:

- a) Once-for-all, unrepeatable, final. That is, we are sanctified once-for-all when we are united to Christ by faith, I Cor. 6:11, Heb. 10:10.
- b) Continuing, progressive, growing. That is, we grow in Christ following our commitment, which is to say we are being sanctified, Heb. 10:14.

Both of these aspects are true of every Christian.

II THE MARKS OF THE SPIRIT

Study the following important topics. They are three ways in which every Christian's being endowed with the Spirit is described in the NT.

1. The Baptism of the Spirit

At conversion every Christian is baptized, or endowed with, the Spirit, and is made thereby a part of the body of Christ. Christians are never urged to pray for, or to long for, the baptism of the Spirit because they already are baptized with the Spirit, Acts 2:38-39, Titus 3:5.

I Cor. 12:13 reads: "We were all brought into one body in baptism, in the one Spirit"; or, "In one Spirit we were all baptized to one body, and one Spirit was poured upon us all." Believer's baptism is the counterpart in the experience of the Christian of the Spirit's having been sent to the Church at Pentecost. Conversion-Baptism is the believer's Pentecost. To be joined to Christ by faith is to receive the Holy Spirit and is the Baptism in the Spirit.

There is no agony in the NT about the Baptism in the Spirit because it was the universal experience of Christians to receive the Spirit when they received Christ as Saviour.

2. The Seal of the Spirit.

The seal of the Spirit is not an indelible mark on the soul, but the presence of the Spirit in each Christian's life. The HS is the seal. His being present in us is the seal, Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor. 5:5. This is the inner witness of the Spirit. His presence is the "earnest", or down-payment, or advance, in relation to the glorious final state in heaven. The figure of a seal suggests authentication, security, ownership, 2 Cor. 1:20-22.

3. The Indwelling of the Spirit.

In yet another, analogous concept, the HS is said to indwell every believer, Rom. 5:5; 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:14. He attests to Christ and to our relation with Christ.

How can one person indwell another? Here is where the unique personal language of the NT about the HS is crucially important. To think of the Spirit only as power falls short of the NT truth. Only persons "indwell" one another. We are personal as the sum total of personal relationships, or "indwellings". Those who are nearest and dearest to us "indwell" us, in the sense that they are so much a part of our life that our personhood has its reality through that inter-personal relationship. The presence of the HS in us is as real and as unconscious as that: we cannot be Christians without the Holy Spirit's indwelling of us, any more than we can be persons without others being a vital part of our life.

III THE ORIENTATION OF THE SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is oriented not to magnify Himself, but Jesus Christ the Lord, John 16:13-14. The test of the true Spirit's presence in us is the Spirit's confession of Jesus Christ, 1 John 4:1-6.

Jesus Christ is content Christian's life; the Holy Spirit is the power of that content. Lionel Thornton has written: "Both Christ and the Spirit dwell in the soul, but not in the same way. Christ is the indwelling content of the Christian life ... the Spirit is the quickening cause; and the indwelling of Christ is the effect of the quickening," (*The Incarnate Lord* 1938, p. 322).

Where the Holy Spirit is, there Jesus Christ is magnified.

Discussion

1. Consider the certainty of the Spirit's presence in the life of every Christian. In what ways is this shown to be true in the NT.
2. Learn to distinguish the Baptism of the Spirit and the Filling of the Spirit.

LESSON V

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND UNUSUAL PHENOMENA

Aim of this lesson

To study the speaking in tongues associated with Pentecost and elsewhere in Acts, the phenomena at Corinth, and the question of healing, and to conclude on where the major emphasis of the NT for the Christian is on these questions.

TONGUES

I NT DATA

Read, outline, and carefully make notes on the following passages. These are the major passages on the subject of tongues, but there are other passages which carry implications for these questions. Also, we are not raising the question of the implications in the OT of unusual phenomena and ecstatic states for NT teaching. Use a good commentary, if possible, such as the one-volume New Bible Commentary.

Acts 2:4, 6, 8, 11 (note the entire chapter).

Acts 10:46 (11:15, 16).

1 Cor, 12, 13, 14.

II OBSERVATIONS ON THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

A. The Manner of Their Importance

1. Examination of these passages, and others, shows that the gifts of the Spirit are for the blessing and ministry of the Church as a whole, not for the gratification or personal fulfillment of the individual. Claims to "achievement" or hankerings for personal "fulfillment", or attempts at "freeing up the self", are not NT emphases.

2. The gifts of the Spirit have nothing to do with importuning or wheedling God, or "tarrying". Sovereignty in their disposition is God's. It is as He wills, not as we plead, 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:7.

B. The Structure of Spiritual Gifts

3. Diversity: In 1 Cor. 12:27-28 Paul lists nine gifts. They are not universal amongst Christians. The only possible answer to the rhetorical questions in 12:29-30 is a resounding No ! That is Paul's point. According to the apostle, it is not true that every Christian ought to speak in tongues.

4. Gradation: Some gifts are more important than others. Paul lists last those gifts which the Corinthians prized most (tongues and the interpretation of tongues).

That tongues are less important than other gifts is the whole point of the three chapters, 1 Cor. 12, 13, 14.

5. Balance: Pre-occupation with tongues is criticized by Paul in I Cor. 12:12-17. The body is not just an eye nor an ear. Neither is it just a tongue. The tongue is to serve the body, not vice-versa.

C. Pentecost and Corinth

6. I take tongues in Acts to mean ordinary languages for communicating the Gospel. No "interpretation" of tongues occurs. There is no trace of tongues being a permanent gift to the apostles. It was a miracle of speaking not just of hearing, I believe. Whether there were in addition outbursts of enthusiasm, or glossalalia, in Acts (e. g. possibly 10:46) is not certain. At Pentecost what was spoken was intelligible in the ordinary way. Tongues fade out after the early chapters of Acts.

7. In I Cor. 12-14 Paul distinguishes speaking intelligibly and the tongues-speaking which is in question. Interpretation is needed; indeed, is mandatory. Thus the glossalalia at Corinth seem to have been ecstatic utterances. Paul's description of them justifies this view. He says that the mind is empty and he questions the point or value of such experiences, 14:9, 11, 14.

8. Historical question: What connection is there between tongues in Acts and tongues at Corinth? The answer is uncertain, but it is unlikely that Pentecost is the decisive influence at Corinth. Note that while the Acts events occurred years before the Corinthian events, the Corinthian epistle was written years before the book of Acts. What the lines of influence were is uncertain. It is possible that an indirect relationship between the events of Acts and Corinthians may be the case (though Paul is not mentioned as being present at Pentecost), but it is also likely that the common ecstatic and enthusiastic elements of contemporary non-Christian religious life were significantly influential among the new Christians at Corinth, or were a residual influence from their pre-conversion experience.

D. Tongues at Corinth

9. 1 Corinthians was written to a church in a state of faction. This includes not only divisions (ch. 1-4), moral disorders (ch. 5-7), social and ecclesiastical disorders (ch. 8-11), but also disorders due to misunderstandings about the place of spiritual gifts in the Church (ch. 12-14). At Corinth tongues were a disorder, requiring urgent correction.

10. It is impossible to grasp the thrust of Paul's argument without studying 1 Cor. 12, 13, 14 together. When this is done, the following emerges as the main thread of the argument:

a) The gifts are the prerogative of the HS (12:1-11). The test of the origin of a gift

is whether it promotes the glory of Christ, 12:3. What the Corinthians prized most, Paul lists last.

b) The unity of the Body and the unity of the Church are crucially important, 12:12-31. Diversity not uniformity, balance not distortion are the keys. While higher gifts may be coveted, the more excellent way is to covet the ethical virtue of love, 12:31.

c) Beyond all gifts and all abilities, love is the greatest and is universal, ch. 13. Other gifts are not to be regarded as universal.

d) If one is to estimate the relative merits of the gifts, then prophecy (preaching) is far superior to tongues, 14:1-25. Paul argues this on grounds of intelligibility and edification. Aim, he says, to communicate the Gospel, 14:24-25.

e) Regulate all gifts for decency and order, 14:26-36.

f) Conclusion (12:37-40): Desire to communicate the Gospel; however, don't forbid tongues absolutely (which also means don't encourage them); and above all, see that there is decency and order in public worship.

E. The Dangers of Flashy Gifts

11. Paul warns that while glossolalia may have some private, psychological value, intelligible communication and edifying others through teaching are more important, I Cor. 14:6-19. Also, disorder and confusion are undesirable, 14:23.

12. Paul discourages Christians from ecstatic experiences, or the hounded mind, 14:2-4. Elsewhere he distinctly contrasts the hounded mind with the filling of the Spirit, Eph. 5:18.

13. Paul is writing to Christians who had virtually alienated themselves from him. He writes therefore so as not to alienate them further. In other words, he handles them with kid gloves. The manner, or mode, of his letter varies. It cannot be read on one level of factual assertion. Sometimes he satirizes, at times he overstates and at other times he understates. For example, 14:5-6, 18-19 are probably satire. To distinguish literary genre in 1 Cor. 12-14 is essential to their understanding. These chapters cannot be exegeted on a common level of factual assertion. One must struggle with the intention of the apostle.

14. The meaning of "interpretation" (14:28) is hard to establish, but here it does not mean translation, as from one language to another. Rather, it is the same word as is used for interpretation of the pagan oracles (which also were spoken ecstatically). It means to convert what is unintelligible into what is intelligible. In Paul it probably means to read out of the rush of feelings the experience of the speaker; that is, to have empathy with him and to read out the significance of his

deep emotion. It is to make accessible to the understanding of others the feelings of the one in the ecstatic state.

15. The reference to childhood (1 Cor. 14:20; 13:9-11) and its relationship to tongues is important. The implication is of a child's development from struggles to expression to comprehensible language. Paul is saying that, far from glossalalia being a mark of maturity, they are the opposite. They are characteristic of spiritual nonage. They are inhibition breakers. Inevitably when a Christian matures, he moves to a deeper and broader spiritual level than that of the glossalalia. The truth of this assertion can be extensively documented. Tongues may be a breakthrough of expression-inhibition, but they are not the mark of maturity or superiority. Like all inhibition-breakers, they are also dangerous, is Paul's point.

16. Paul's reference to deliverance from pagan religion, which includes specific reference to dumb idols which we know were claimed to communicate through ecstatic oracles (12:1-2) in contrast to the Spirit who magnifies Christ (12:3), suggests that the glossalalia at Corinth may have had a distinct pagan as well as Christian background to them.

III OBSERVATIONS ON THE MARKS OF THE SPIRIT

Four important points need to be made:

1. It is dangerous simply to compare one experience with another, or to compare one person's experiences with another's. We need standards for comparison other than claims to experience. This is the point of 1 Cor. 12:3.
2. We are urged to test the spirits. Clearly, demonic powers can initiate flashy gifts and powers, 1 Tim. 4:1. It is altogether certain that some modern tongues-speaking is not of the Holy Spirit. How does one know? In two ways, in the following two points:
3. The major criterion is the Word of God and the centrality of Christ in what is claimed, 1 John 4:1-3.
4. The universal virtue is love (1 Cor. 13) and the superior gift is to teach and to edify others (1 Cor. 14). In other words, Paul urges his readers not to seek experiences but to communicate Christ by quality of life and testimony of lips.

Summary of Discussion on Tongues

There is a difference between tongues as a miracle of communication in Acts 2 and tongues as glossalalia or ecstatic utterances in 1 Cor. 14.

Various arguments have been put forward by proponents of modern glossalalia. The most important value claimed is that tongues enable one to communicate with

God in a form other than English (or one's native language), whether at a conscious or marginally conscious level (see Morton T. Kelsey, *Tongue Speaking*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1964). It is important to resist the unbiblical claim that the Holy Spirit has not been received if tongues have not been uttered. That they may be of private value is conceded, but biblically they are not intended to be universal or general.

Paul allows for glossalalia but does not encourage them, and then only under strict, controlled conditions. Glossalalia are not language, but torrents of feeling. Fundamentally they are inhibition-breakers for some people to break through emotional barriers of pent up feelings, or hang-ups to expression. Like childhood's babblings (1 Cor. 13:11) they are attempts at communication, says Paul, but true communication which is intelligible and can edify, rather than which is self-serving, is far better (12:3-4). Like all far-out experiences that bomb the mind, they can be dangerous. At Corinth they may very well have to do as much with the mystery religions as with Christian faith, Paul intimates.

Criteria of experience cannot be experience alone, but the Word of God as it witnesses to Jesus Christ. The true mark of the Spirit is the fruit of the Spirit, which is a Christ-like character. Therefore Paul urges upon the Corinthian readers to consider the ethical virtues and edification as the superior signs of the Spirit's presence in their lives.

Discussion on Tongues

1. Is all modern tongues-speaking from the Holy Spirit?
2. Are those who do not speak in tongues not filled with the HS?
3. Outline claims for blessing from those who claim to speak in tongues and outline problems individuals, families and churches also face from the modern movement.
4. Discuss the relation between spiritual maturity and the speaking in tongues. Must one speak in tongues to be spiritual or spiritually mature?

HEALING

I NT DATA

The data on this topic in the NT is large. We shall make observations on the more obvious and important passages. Very quickly you will discover, however, that such a study will carry much farther afield in the Scriptures. The data are selected in relation to the ministry and teaching of certain key people in the NT.

1. The Ministry of Our Lord

Our Lord's commission to His disciples to preach and teach included a healing ministry. A question for some interpreters is whether the miraculous signs which

attended the arrival and announcement of the Kingdom in our Lord's ministry, including healing, are to continue today. Also, the question is raised whether the commission to heal was associated with specific tours of ministry in Palestine. Note Matt. 10:5-8, Mark 3: 13-15, Luke 6:13-18, 9:1-2, John 14:12-13.

Our Lord's ministry was one of compassion as well as of teaching. His miracles were clearly signs to authenticate His messiahship and to announce the Kingdom. It should be noted that there were many thousands of people in Palestine, and millions in the world at that time, whom our Lord did not heal. His works were related to the spiritual task of reconciliation and forgiveness, Matt. 9:1-8. Physical healing in isolation was not His mission nor the thrust of the Commission.

2. Philip, Acts 8:5-8

He was an evangelist, not a healer. The healings were signs in relation to preaching the Gospel. The healing was immediate, complete and demonstrable.

3. Peter

In Acts 3:1-11 the medical analysis (written by Luke the Physician) is accurate and the healing was verifiable. The Gospel was preached, 3:12-26, for which the healing was a corroborating sign. The credit for it was disclaimed by Peter.

In Acts 5:14-16 the shadow incident was not pre-arranged, nor is it approved (it may be recorded as an indication of the people's superstition and of the supervening power of the Gospel). The incident is spontaneous and unplanned. All were healed, and the healing was verifiable.

Acts 9:32-43 reinforces the point that the healing of Aeneas is tied to the preaching of the Gospel. The raising of Dorcas is remarkable for the simple, direct, unostentatious way in which it was done.

Note that healing was not regarded as universal or a universal right by Peter. He also speaks of suffering "according to the will of God for you," I Peter 3:17.

4. Paul

In Acts 14:8 at Lystra the impotent man suffered from a congenital deformity. Only here is the faith of the healed person mentioned. Paul rejects their adulation and worship. The healing was clearly a sign for the onset of the Gospel in a new area. It was a spontaneous act, not a continuing gift.

Other events include: The deliverance of the possessed slave girl, as Paul addressed the spirit directly in the name of Jesus, Acts 16:16-18. The healing and deliverance from spirits of many in one place, which others tried falsely to imitate, Acts 19:11-20. Again there seems to be a divine accommodation to

human superstition in order to penetrate an area where demonic forces had long held sway. The key was the triumph of the Gospel through such signs, 19:20. Paul also restored Eutychus from the unfortunate accident, Acts 20:7-12. He healed the father of Publius, and others as well, on the island of Malta. Here, too, signs accompanied the first preaching of the Gospel, or where the powers of darkness had long been in control.

Notice that only Paul in the NT mentions healing as a gift, and then never in the singular but in the plural as gifts of healing. His healings were predominantly concerned with unbelievers, not as a ministry to Christians. Also, there are references to illness and pain which are accepted, not healed. These include: Trophimus, whom Paul left sick at Miletus, 2 Tim. 4:20; Epaphroditus who was sick and at death's door, Phil. 2:25-30, and Timothy whom Paul urges to drink wine medicinally, I Tim. 5:23. Then there is the problematical Pauline thorn in the flesh. Whether this was a disease, a physical incapacity or a psychological deficiency we do not know. For all of these possibilities, however, the divine answer for removal or healing in Paul's case was *No!*, 2 Cor. 12:7.

5. James, 5:13-20

This passage probably refers not to disease, but to weakness due to illness, with the stress being on the emotional flagging or spiritual enervation of the patient. He has lost heart, even to pray. (Is this depression?) This is the meaning to be derived from the use of the Greek words *astheneo* and *kamnona* for the condition described in James 5:14-15. The word "afflicted" in v. 13 is the general word for buffeting and trouble. The person's faith is so low that he cannot pray for himself. This is a ministry of healing through loving concern and support.

II OBSERVATIONS ON HEALING IN THE NT AND TODAY

1. In the NT healing is not reserved for, nor guaranteed to, Christians on any basis including a special faith for healing. Rather, most healings in the NT are of unbelievers and are signs to vindicate the truth and power of the Gospel, and as signs at the beginning of the apostolic world mission in relation to the powers of darkness.
2. There is no "gift" of healing in the NT; but only gifts of healing, as in I Cor. 12:9, 30. It would appear that each separate healing is a gift, but no one fulfilled the function, as some claim today, of being a "Healer".
3. I Peter 2:2.1 is a metaphor of redemption and salvation. Of course healing is in the atonement, but so is everything else. There is no warrant biblically for claiming physical healing with certainty in the case of any or all illness. One may certainly claim healing of the inner spirit, and the two might go together.
4. It is an error to claim healing as a natural right, or to claim that the Christian

can be preserved from any illness or disaster whatever. The Bible teaches that we live in a fallen, evil-infected world. Experience attests to this truth. We all suffer the effects of sin and evil in the world, including evils not of our own making and guilt. Modern healers also get sick and they, too, die

5. While some illness is due to sin, not all illness is due to one's own personal sinning. To affirm otherwise is a pernicious and cruel doctrine. Jesus specifically condemned such a view, John 9:1-3. Paul had to live with his "thorn in the flesh". Are we to say that Jesus was wrong, and that Paul was unspiritual? We are called upon to live and react redemptively in an evil-infected world.

6. There is no warrant for thinking that all illness is due to demon activity or possession. I have heard men try to exorcise "demon cancer" or "demon ulcer," etc. Some illnesses may be due to the demonic, but most certainly not all nor the majority of illnesses.

7. The healing campaigns I have witnessed have been a travesty of all that is Christian; nevertheless, I believe in the supernatural and that God can and often does dramatically as well as providentially heal the sick. But there is no parallel for "healing meetings" in the NT. The ones I have attended were money-making operations. Nevertheless, I know of godly men and women, pastors and laymen, who, like myself, have prayed for the sick.

8. There is the problem of verifiable and unverifiable maladies and healings, and of psychosomatic illnesses (which may be very real). In the NT those identified as healed were demonstrably sick, or crippled, or were dead. The healing meetings I have attended majored on unverifiable maladies, while the cripples and the blind sat on the sidelines vainly hoping to be called. To raise such false hopes is cruel and a fraud.

9. We become sick, we linger, we die, because we are finite, fallen creatures who are part of an evil-infected world. We often live, eat, play, drive, etc., foolishly and recklessly and suffer the consequences just as the unconverted must. We are susceptible to infection, senility and catastrophe. We are susceptible to the rings of evil that spread out from the evil acts of others, even though we were not part of those acts. We are vulnerable. But God has promised to be with us, to sustain us, to heal us as He wills, but finally to claim us as His own. There can be a spiritual sanctity to suffering for the Christian. Consider Job. Note: 2 Cor. 1:3-7; 12:7-10.

Summary of Discussion on Healing

Healing is a part of Christian ministry, I believe. It must include the whole man and not be only an open sesame for escaping the inconvenience or tragedy of physical malady.

Christians and the Christian fellowship should be a healing community where our

needs are known, we are loved, prayed for and sustained. This is the context of true healing.

It may be that at times we assemble to pray for special cases. Let these be individual, spontaneous, person-caring ministries. In that context God may work His own miracles of grace, often in ways which remain ultimately hidden from us.

The following is abstracted from *The Fraternal*, the quarterly journal of ministers of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for April 1967. The writer is the Rev. Harry Weston, a Free Church Chaplain, on "Jesus as the Great Physician and Our Own Ministry":

... I wish to convey my belief that every good thing within the Church is due to the indwelling of Jesus with His People. . It was another G. P. who one day called me into a house saying, 'You are a minister of Jesus Christ -- this job is yours, not mine'.

I think many of you have been similarly called upon to supplement the doctor's work, and even to do in the Name of Christ things that were impossible for him to do. You have exercised a healing ministry, by prayer more often than by applied psychology. I wish I could forget that blessed word, for it can lead me to think more of techniques than of persons. Our ministry of healing is rooted in theology, in the very Gospel we are called to proclaim, in the good will of God as it is seen in Jesus.

The Church is intended to provide the conditions in which miracles can happen, do happen, are expected to happen, in accordance with the sovereign will of God, who has never abdicated from the throne of the universe. What are those conditions? You will probably expect me here to embark upon a discussion of faith, and that might be a reasonable deduction from some of the sayings of Jesus, and the writings of the apostles. I would say rather that all these conditions are grouped around the word love. This is the Lord's New Commandment, and is described by Paul as the most excellent of the gifts of the spirit. *Love is greater than any of the gifts of the spirit* -- prophecy, knowledge, faith, sacrificial giving, and even the martyr-spirit. The best of these other gifts, and all of them together, will avail nothing without love....

If we loved more we should pray more. Prayer is the expression of loving trust in God. Intercessory prayer is an expression -- one expression -- of our love for our fellows in their need. More of this might bring added conviction to our preaching, for many people are sick in spirit for lack of love and as assurance, and their spiritual sickness spills over into mind and body, so that this is a very sick society. People in the grip of evil, anxiety, illness should find their need met in the warm love which Jesus radiates through His church.

Discussion on Healing

1. Discuss the relations between our Lord's commissioning of His disciples and our own commission to preach, teach, heal.
2. Is there a "gift" of healing in the NT? How are the gifts of healing to be understood? Should there be professional Christian Healers?
3. Are illness, catastrophe, and suffering invariably due to sin, and continuing illness due to lack of faith?

4. Develop some points in your discussion on how the Christian and the Church can exercise the ministry of healing, in cooperation also with doctors and nurses.

LESSON VI

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT AND THE FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Aim of this lesson

To sum up the relation of the Holy Spirit to the believer's life in order to understand what it means to walk in the Spirit and to be filled with the Spirit.

I NT DATA

Study carefully Romans ch. 6, and 8:1-17.

II THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE NEW CREATION

The Christian is made a new creation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a new birth, a birth from above, John 3:1-13, 1 Peter 1:23, 2 Peter 1:4, and is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Synonyms of the new birth include: conversion, repentance, faith, trust, sanctification, justification.

As shown in Lessons III and IV, every Christian is endowed with the Spirit at conversion. The NT knows no such thing as a Christian without the Spirit.

However, there is not only the work and presence of the Spirit in every Christian, but every Christian is invited to respond daily to the leading of the Spirit and to be filled with the Spirit. Not all Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit. There are some aspects of the Spirit's working in us which are conditional upon the quality and response of our life. Note three groups of NT ideas on the Spirit and the believer,,

First, those things which the HS does at our conversion, and the ways He is related to us, which are true of every believing person and for which we are not urged to pray. They include:

- The Baptism of the Spirit
- The Seal of the Spirit
- Receiving the Spirit
- The Indwelling of the Spirit

Second, warnings against:

- Lying to the Spirit, Acts 5:3
- Grieving the Spirit, Eph. 4:30
- Quenching the Spirit, I Thess. 5:19

Third, the things we are urged to pray for, to seek, to pursue:

Walk in the Spirit
Be led by the Spirit
Be filled with the Spirit
Bear the fruit of the Spirit
Be instructed by the Spirit

Nowhere are Christians urged to be baptized with the Spirit, nor to pray for this; but they are urged to be filled with the Spirit. To call these two things the same thing does not make it so, but only engenders confusion. The baptism of, or endowment with, the Spirit occurs at conversion. The filling of the Spirit often occurs then and may recur frequently in one's spiritual growth to aspire after,

III THE PATTERN OF THE SPIRIT-FILLED CHRISTIAN

The only man who was ever fully filled with the Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ. He is the perfect example of the Spirit-bearing man. His life is the analogue, or the pattern, for our own Spirit-bearing humanity. This is why the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the NT is supremely Christ-centred; so much so, that in passages like Romans 8, Christ and the Spirit are almost identified with each other, though each remains distinctly personal.

Thus in I Cor. 6:9-20, several interlocking themes predominate. Forgiveness, sanctification and justification are all of a piece, and are all the work of the one Spirit in each Christian, v. 11. To be joined to Christ and to be the Temple of the Spirit are equally one reality, v. 15, 19-20. To experience life transforming power is inevitably the consequence of union with Christ and is also the work of the Spirit, v. 10, 16, 17, 19. As noted earlier, Christ is the content of the believer's life, Gal. 4:19; the Holy Spirit is the power of that content, Rom. 8:1-2. His goal for us is that Christ's way of life upon earth should be fulfilled in us. There is no higher standard, fuller life, or greater blessing.

IV PAUL ON THE LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Two passages ought to be studied with great care. They are Romans 6, and 8:1-11.

1. Resurrection Life

To begin with, the new life is entered upon through death and resurrection, which is experienced in the NT in believer's baptism, Rom. 6:1-5.

Union with Christ in His death means that Christ died my death for sin and in that death I died, 2 Cor. 5:14-15; thus, I rise to new life, a life no longer to myself but to Christ who died and rose for me.

This is why believer's baptism in the NT has nothing to do with denominational rivalry, and why the question of mode is settled in NT theology. Rom. 6:3-6 declares that in baptism we are buried into Christ's death and raised to new life. Now we can grasp the full force of NT teaching and practice: at conversion believers professed faith in Christ, they were baptized, and in that profession and union with Christ in His death and resurrection they were also endowed with the HS. It was seen as one climactic event. Baptism was the Christian's Pentecost. It meant (not just represented) death to sin, death to the world, death to the old self, and the new life in Christ, Titus 2:14, Gal. 1:4, 2:19-20, 6:14. Faith-Baptism marked entrance upon the new life and endowment with the Spirit. This is the norm of the apostolic Gospel.

2. The Life in the Spirit

Paul reinforces and expands this theme in Romans 8:1-17. The pinnacle is verse 11, which should be carefully noted in relation to 6:1-5.

He opens chapter 8 with a concrete reference to the new life of the Christian being related to Christ and to the Spirit. The old life was the life in the flesh. "Flesh" here means the entire nature and direction of life alienated from God, which is against God. The ultimate result of the life in the flesh is condemnation. To be justified through Christ and the imputation of His righteousness to us (Romans 3:21-28) gives the Christian not only a new standing before God, but also a new life: we are now "in Christ Jesus"; the principle of our life is no longer predominantly the drives of the old nature but the new power, which is "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus", 8:1, 9. In other words, every Christian is in Christ and also partakes of the Holy Spirit. The new life has freed us from the bondage of the old life, 8:2-4.

Let us now move to the climax, in 8:11. This is the key concept on the nature of the new life in the Spirit. Paul says that the Spirit is related to the Christian in the same way as the Spirit is related to the life of the risen Lord. The same Father who raised up Christ from the dead will quicken our bodies by the same Spirit who dwells in us. To "quicken our bodies" means to give new resurrection life to the Christian. That is what Paul means when he taught earlier (ch. 6) that we are joined to Christ in His death and resurrection by baptism.

What God did for Christ, He does for us, because we share the same indwelling Spirit. The promise is complete. Christ the Spirit-bearing man, the new head of a new redeemed race of men, is the pattern of the life in the Spirit which Christians have become. Paul goes on to point out that as sons of God, we no longer need live in uncertainty and fear (v. 15), that we are joint-heirs with Christ, and that if we share His sufferings now we do so in anticipation of sharing also His glory, v. 17.

According to Paul, the Holy Spirit is an integral part of the life of every Christian. The purpose of the Spirit is to confirm in us the life of the risen Lord. It is resurrection life. The New Humanity for the New Age has arrived. Christians become the new humanity in Christ and in the Spirit.

3. The Fruit of the Spirit

We are now able to pick up again an important thread. Paul stressed to the Corinthians (1 Cor, 12, 13, 14), that the true marks of the Spirit are not exotic phenomena, but the ethical virtues and edifying ministries.

By ethical virtues, I mean the power of a transformed life, or the graces of a Christ-like life. Thus when we come to Paul's discussion on the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) we view the glorious peaks of Christian maturity. Here are the true indicators of the Spirit's presence and work. Very quickly one sees that the list is an exposition of the Spirit-bearing humanity of our Lord. The fruit of the Spirit in Paul's teaching is the norm of the Spirit's presence. It is Christ-centred.

Please note that Paul uses the collective word "fruit", not the plural word "fruits". They are part of one growth. Just as it is silly to contemplate an apple without a stem, but with pulp; without skin, but with a core; so each item in Paul's list is needful to the fruit as a whole.

What are they? The fruit of the Spirit comprises:

- love
- joy
- peace
- patience
- kindness
- goodness
- faithfulness
- gentleness
- selfcontrol

Study these. Enlarge on their meaning. Note also, that the same theme of union with Christ in His death and resurrection is again stressed by Paul.: "and those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires", Gal. 5:22-24.

4. The Fullness of the Spirit

Every Christian is endowed with the Spirit, but not every Christian is filled with the Spirit. Paul exhorts us to be filled with the Spirit, Eph. 5:1.8. Note that the filling of the Spirit is distinctly contrasted by Paul in this verse with excess or a bombed mind.

The fullness of the Spirit involves the total response of the Christian to the life in

Christ so that the Christian's life is empowered and led by the Spirit. It is the life in which Christ is all in all to us. His Lordship is complete.

Think in terms of personal relations, not of impersonal forces. It is "who" not "what". If we think in terms of abstract power, we fail to reach the NT meaning. Our relationship to Christ is deeply personal, and in the context of that personal relationship the ministry of the Spirit is also personal. How? The best analogy I offer to you, is that of human relationships. If I am truly in love and full of someone, that is far different from saying I am full of something. Our life is made up of others to whom we respond, and the depth of the relationship depends upon the quality and range of the mutual response. So it is with Christ. The fullness of the Spirit depends upon the quality and range of my personal response to Christ and to the Spirit's leading daily.

Note passages in Acts where the filling of the Spirit is mentioned: Acts 2 (Pentecost); 4:8; 4:31; 6:3; 7:55; 9:17; 11: 24; 13:9, 52.

On defining the fullness of the Spirit, work backwards. Work from the results to the cause, from the effects to the principle. Remember that the two permanent effects of the Spirit's endowment in Acts are the new power of transformed life and new insight. Remember that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, etc. Remember therefore that where there is no fruit, no power of new life, there is no fullness of the Spirit. The criterion of the Spirit's fullness is not fundamentally experience, but a result. The result of the Spirit's filling must be that heavenly character and power of the new man, Christ Jesus in us.

Join together the study of Eph. 5:18, Gal. 5:22-24, and John 15. In the Ephesians passage Paul stresses the volitional aspect: we are commanded. This does depend upon obedience. Our Lord in John points out that we can do nothing unless we abide in him and he in us. From Acts we note that this included the corporate life of Christians. The filling of the Spirit is not an isolated experience intended for my own gratification. It is related to abiding in Christ and in one another and to the ministry of the Gospel, as the Acts passages show.

In the course of their living and serving, the disciples were filled with the Spirit. It was by the power of the Spirit that they preached, opened new fields, confronted demonic forces, were guided on their journeys. The fullness of the Spirit has more to do with service than we have tended to allow for.

Often, if not inevitably, our devotional life is punctuated by deep commitment to Christ. Certainly one is overwhelmed to contemplate the love and grace of God. Thus the emotional aspects of our spirituality are recognized: joy, tears, concern, thankfulness. These are appropriate attendant feelings, but they are not the goal. One can be emotional, though not Spirit-filled. On the other hand, the power of God can work through us, and only later do we recognize the moving of the Spirit.

"Walk in the Spirit," Gal. 5:16

Summary on the Fullness of the Spirit

In John 1.4, 15, 16 our Lord promised that the Spirit would instruct us and guide us in His truth. With the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, the two most notable features of the first Christians' lives were: new power to live a transformed life (the ethical virtues of the NT), and new insight to know the mind and will of God.

The Holy Spirit wishes to mould our lives to be more Christ-like. Regular habits of prayer, devotion, and Bible study are essential. The prayerless life is dry, cold, unfruitful. A life filled with love, rather than bitterness or hostility is a prerequisite to the Spirit's effective work in us. Loving concern for others, rather than self-centredness; being available and usable by God in His service is the NT pattern for the fullness of the Spirit. To seek an experience of the filling of the Spirit is unlike the NT pattern. That would be like pursuing pleasure.

The more vigorously you chase it, the more elusive it is. The fullness of the Spirit is fundamentally power to live and power to serve in the warm fellowship of the Son of God and of His Spirit.

When commenting on Eph. 5:18, the revered John Mackay, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, said (*God's Order*, 1953, p. 181-183):

But there is at the core of the Christian tradition, and very especially in the greatest of Christian documents which is the subject of this study, the pattern of a disciplined ardour, purer and stronger than any crusading devotion which the annals of history record. Christians 'filled with the Spirit' with a holy inebriation, were 'to address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all their heart, and, always and for everything, giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father' (Eph. 5:19, 20). The picture here given of Spirit-filled men and women, walking in the light, copying God, learning Christ, is that of brotherly enthusiasts. Enthusiasm and brotherliness, how difficult to find them together! And more difficult still, to hold them together: For enthusiasm tends to make people individualistic; they are so eager to forge ahead that they get out of step and break ranks. Their very ardour makes them subject to whims and they are natural enemies of the established, conventional order with its chilly proprieties. It is for that reason that in the course of the Church's history, ecclesiastics and enthusiasts have often been the human antitheses of one another. The official Church has often forced out of its membership individuals and groups regarded as unruly because they challenged established customs. 'Glory to the Church and damnation to enthusiasts,' was the motto engraven on a bell hung in the belfry of a new church in Cambridge, England, as a protest against the ministry of the famous university preacher, Charles Simeon. How can religious ardour be channeled? How can co-operation and unity be achieved between Christian enthusiasts and Christians of a more staid and conversative type? In a word, how can we wed ardour and order?

...

The solution of this most difficult problem is for the Church to recover as a theological doctrine and as a spiritual reality, what Paul means by the Holy Spirit. For to the work of

the Holy Spirit are attributed both spiritual ardour and spiritual order. Enthusiasm must be brotherly; brotherliness must be enthusiastic. Christian fraternity and missionary passion, both are needed and neither is complete without the other. Christians as brotherly enthusiasts are heirs of the great Biblical and classical tradition of their holy faith. They will not be alien at times to the rhapsodic ecstasy caused by a soaring vision or a glimpse into the heavenlies. The ideas they cherish and the experiences they enjoy and the high hopes of their calling will make them break forth into singing in 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,' blessing God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ His Son. Dedicated to do the will of God for the coming of the new divine order, theirs will be 'a permanent intoxication of vital ardour.' They will watch and wait, believing that the time draws near, that 'the season's near its grain.' Yet for all their ardour, or rather because of its enlightened and intensely spiritual character, they will live in the midst of the secular order and play their part in it; they will be relevant to their time and take their place in life's several spheres and vocations. Realizing that they have been baptized into one Spirit, they will work together and be patient with one another; aware that their warfare is not merely 'with flesh and blood,' they will arm themselves and keep themselves armed for spiritual combat.

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THE SAVING CROSS

By Dr. Samuel J. Mikolaski, Professor of Theology

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Christianity Today, VII.14, April 12, 1963

The world can be smugly tolerant of the virtues of Christianity as well as of the vices of Christians but it cannot tolerate the New Testament message of the Cross. The Cross exposes the blackness of the human heart and the perverseness of the will, but at the same time it is the sacrificial act of God for our salvation. The Cross says: God alone saves and only in His own way. In the face of Calvary men cannot erect their own righteousness they must fall prostrate acknowledging that God by the Cross is both just and the justifier of him who believes in Christ (Rom. 3:26).

But, why the Cross? It seems such an unlikely thing. It is unlovely and apparently irrational and impotent as the means to salvation. Why the Cross when the world is not opposed in principle to the conception of the divine and it willingly concedes the importance of the religious quest? As the Stoics of old, men today find it easy to accommodate new gods to old ideas or to bring old gods up to date.

The offence of the Cross is its claim to finality. The Cross was no accident of history. Neither was it peripheral to the divine purpose. It was not simply an expression of human resentment, nor was it the regrettable climax to a saving life. The Cross was not a divine expedient nor afterthought because God was caught off guard. Calvary was and continues to be central to the divine purpose. Of the Cross the Christian Gospel says "This and not that is God's Word; this and not some other is God's Way." Without the Cross we fail to comprehend the meaning of Christ's life and work. He "must needs" die. He was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of Gods." In the Cross we join the will of God and the historical events (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; Acts 2:23). Only in this way can we save ourselves from the madness of determinism or the notion that history is a series of meaningless, kaleidoscopic happenings. God planning and working his plan from eternity as Creator and Redeemer is the key to the meaning of the world.

The Death of Christ for our sins is the supreme expression of the love of God for us. It is not a bare historical event that we view, because such a thing does not exist for us. Event and interpretation go together. The Christian Gospel is the apostolic interpretation given by the Holy Spirit that in Jesus Christ God conde-

scended to our estate. However, his coming has to do with more than a condescension to suffering amongst us and with us. The Passion was more than the proof of love and more than the demonstration of how to suffer injustice. Such notions square with neither the vicarious element of the apostolic message nor with the connection made by the Apostles and our Lord between His death and the forgiveness of sins.

More than a symbol, the Cross was the climactic divine *act* for the world's salvation. *Something* was done. It was no mere gesture. It accomplished something that was not the case before. The Cross Dealt with evil and sin. To put the matter pointedly, we grasp the meaning of the Cross when we see the love in which it originated on the one hand and the sin with which it dealt on the other. Paul declares that "God commended his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Calvary has in view the sin of the world as real, heinous, and culpable. All theological systems can be characterized by their doctrines of sin. Sin is individual and its consequences and responsibilities are solidaric in the life of the race. God cannot view sin lightly. The judgment of sin in the Biblical revelation is real and terrifying. The Bible knows nothing of a verbal solution to the problem of sin and guilt. Because of their sinning "the wrath of God cometh upon the children of disobedience" (Col. 3:6, note also Rom. 1:17,18,32; 2:9). The divine judgment is vindictive and retributive; vindictive in the sense of vindicating the righteousness of God and retributive in the sense of visiting the evil-doer with the just deserts of his deeds. The law of God and the judgments of God are the possibilities of freedom. The relations between God and man in Scripture always are viewed as personal, but they can be personal only if they are moral. That is what law, grace, and atonement mean for us and the eternal holy God.

Having its origin in the love of God for sinners, the Cross deals with the judgment of sins where Christ bears them away in his own body (I Pet. 2:24). This is why the Death of Christ stands out so prominently in Scripture and this is the meaning of the blood of Christ. The four gospels all look to Calvary as the climax of our Lord's life and work, and, to the New Testament writers the unity of the Old and New Testaments rests heavily upon the Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53. The central theological truth of the New Testament is that there is an immediate and direct connection between the Death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins. All doctrines that by-pass atonement finally break their teeth on this fundamental, irreducible biblical truth. The Cross of Christ registers for us the truth not of love against wrath, nor of love without wrath, nor of love eclipsing wrath, but of love doing its perfect work in the judgment-death of sin that Christ the Saviour died.

The connection between the Death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins can be documented voluminously from the New Testament (note: Mt. 26:28; Mk. 10:45; Acts 5:29-32,; 10:39-43; Heb. 9:14,26,28; 10:12). But nothing stands out more prominently than the brief, direct, and authoritative word of Paul in I Cor. 15:3: *Christ died for our sins*. Every word bears pondering.

1. It is "*Christ*" who died. Thereby the Apostle rejects any bifurcation of the

historical Jesus from the eternal Christ. The one Lord Jesus Christ was made the sacrifice for sin.

2. He “*died*” for our sins. That His life cannot have saved us apart from His Death is the thrust of the New Testament. He died our death and in that death we died (2 Cor. 5:14).

3. He died “*for*” our sins. Thus the vicarious aspect of our Lord’s work is forever established. “For” means both “in the interests of” and “in the place of.” If His death has any relation whatever to our sin then substitution is involved. Redid for us what we were incapable of doing for ourselves. The Death of the Cross was judicial in relation to the penalty of sin and vicarious in relation to its regenerating power in our lives. It is true that we may do something for one another and that Christ may do something for us without involving substitution. But, how can this be true of Christ’s death as related specifically to the guilt of our sins? (Note: Mt. 20:28; Rom. 5:8, 10).

4. He died for “*our*” sins. It is for men as individuals and for men as a race that Christ died (I John 2:2).

5. It was for our “*sins*” that He died. When sin is seen to be sin against God, the relevance of Christ’s Cross to the need of humanity will be apparent. God accomplished a once-for-all atonement as the ground of the new relations between himself and the world (Rom. 5:2). We stand on redemption ground. God has done something in Christ that we by faith receive.

Just as a poet or artist must along with his artistry generate a capacity in men to appreciate his work, God does not do a work out of the world but within it. The Cross is tailor-made to human need. It is marvelously relevant to the peril of sinful men. God has loved and God has given. Our part is to believe and to have the forgiveness of sins that He has won for us.

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SAMUEL J. MIKOLASKI

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acknowledging that by the Cross God is both just and the justifier of him who believes in Christ (Rom. 3:26).

But, why the Cross? It seems such an unlikely thing. It is unlovely and apparently irrational and impotent as the means to salvation. The world is not opposed in principle to the conception of the divine, and it willingly concedes the importance of the religious quest. As the Stoics of old, men today find it easy to accommodate new gods to old ideas or to bring old gods up to date. Why the Cross?

The offence of the Cross is its claim to finality. The Cross was no accident of history. Neither was it marginal to the divine purpose. It was not simply an expression of human resentment, nor was it the regrettable climax to a saving life. The Cross was not a divine expedient, nor an afterthought by a deity caught off guard. Calvary was and continues to be central to the divine purpose. Of the Cross the Gospel says, "This and not that is God's Word; this and not some other is God's Way."

Without the Cross we fail to comprehend the meaning of Christ's life and work. He "must needs" die. He was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God." In the Cross we join the will of God and unite ourselves to the saving historical events. (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; Acts 2:23). Only in this way can we save ourselves from the madness of determinism or the notion that history is a series of meaningless, kaleidoscopic happenings. God decreeing his plan from eternity and working it as Creator and Redeemer is the key to the meaning of the world.

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More than a symbol, the Cross was in fact the climactic divine act for the world's salvation. It was no mere gesture. *Something* was done, something that was not the case before. The Cross dealt with evil and sin. To put the matter pointedly, we grasp the meaning of the Cross only when we see the love in which it originated on the one hand and the sin with which it dealt on the other. Paul declares that "God commended his *love* toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ *died* for us" (Rom. 5:8).

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cf. also Rom. 1:17, 18, 32; 2:9). The divine judgment is vindicative and retributive: vindicative in the sense of vindicating the righteousness of God and retributive in the sense of visiting the evil-doer with the just deserts of his deeds.

HIS DEATH AND OUR LIFE

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A CLASSIC PASSAGE

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4. He died for "our" sins. It is for men as individuals and for men as a race that Christ died (I John 2:2).
5. It was for our "sins" that He died. When sin is seen to be sin against God, the relevance of Christ's cross to the need of humanity will be apparent. God accomplished a once-for-all atonement as the ground of the new relations between himself and the world (Rom. 5:2). We stand on redemption ground. God has *done* something in Christ that we by faith receive.

Just as a poet or artist must along with his artistry generate a capacity in men to appreciate his work, God does not do a work out of the world but within it. The Cross is tailor-made to human need. It is marvelously relevant to the peril of sinful men. God has loved and God has given. Our part is to believe and have the forgiveness of sins that he has won for us.

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WHO IS JESUS OF NAZARETH?

Samuel J. Mikolaski

Canadian Baptist, October 1979

and

Irish Baptist, December 1979

Christianity is supremely Christ-centred. Who is Jesus Christ?

One of the earliest pieces of Christian shorthand is the use of the word for "fish" in Greek to declare the faith of Christians in Christ. The Greek word for fish is I-CH-TH-U-S. The five letters were each made to stand for an important word in the formula as follows: JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, THE SAVIOUR.

The idea for this anagram almost certainly goes back to the gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, and his call of Peter and Andrew to follow him and become fishers of men. Tertullian, the famous third century church father, calls Christians "little fishes." Ever after, the symbol of the fish has identified Christians and Christian faith.

JESUS CHRIST, GOD AND SAVIOUR. That is an enormous and exclusive claim. Nevertheless, it is the heart of Christian faith. Around this truth cluster a host of terms that Christians commonly use. For example *Son of God* (that he was truly of God); *Son of Man* (that he was truly of Man); *Incarnate Lord* (that God became Man at Bethlehem). This is the first and foremost miracle. Everything that is Christian hangs on it.

It is the greatest scandal of Christianity because the claim is exclusive. If God has indeed come to man in Christ then there is no other Saviour and no other way to life. This, indeed, is the faith and message of the New Testament (Acts 4:12; 10:43; 1 Timothy 2:5-7). But it is also a claim of great joy and power. God has, in fact come in Christ to save mankind. The good news is for all men. Whoever believes the gospel (i.e., the good news) will be saved. How can we hold back the good news of salvation from any man, anywhere? Thus, the declaration of faith in Christ the Lord is as well a pronouncement of a mission to evangelize the world.

The New Testament data as to the nature of Christ are comprehensive. As well as being powerfully confessional, they are deeply theological. They invariably link the redemptive character of his work to his nature.

The New Testament teaching about Christ may be summarized in a three-fold way: *First*, at the inmost principle of his being Jesus Christ is true God, from whom he came as the eternal, not temporal, Son (John 1:1; 17:5; Philippians 2:6; Colossians 2:9). *Second*, the eternal Son took to himself flesh and became true man. He is the eternal, second person of the holy trinity who took human flesh at Bethlehem (John 1:14, 18; Philippians 2:7-8; Hebrews 2:14). As to his nature he is true God and true man (John 3:13; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:3). *Third*,

the purpose of the incarnation is redemption, reconciliation and Christ's triumph over the power of evil (Mark 10:45; John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Galatians 4:4).

What kept the early church to this bedrock of faith up through the formation of the great Nicene Creed of the fourth century was this conviction: salvation can be solely the prerogative of God to achieve and provide. Unless God is truly manifest in Christ then we do not have salvation in him.

Thus, the old heretical alternatives of subordinating the Son, or of calling him the adopted Son of God, are no less heretical now than in ancient times. The view (such as Jehovah's Witnesses hold) that Jesus is divine but not of the deity of the Father

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[Editor's boxed insert]

The one whom God has sent speaks God's words, because God gives him the fullness of his Spirit. The Father loves: his Son and has put everything in his power. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. John 3:34ff TEV

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is false. So also is the prevalent modern form of adoptionist theory which says that Jesus was a "divinely energized" man but not the eternal Son. Salvation is of God alone. That is the importance of the nature of Christ in relation to his saving work for us.

Consider some of the New Testament teaching that goes into such a confession of faith.

The New Testament writers call him *God* (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8, 10). Without this confession; the faith of the apostles would be incredible. He is called the Son of God. This means divine prerogatives (Matthew 11:27; 16:16; Mark 12:35-37; 14:61-64; Luke 1:35; John 1:34).

The terms "father" and "son" indicate not simply a temporal or earthly relationship, but an eternal relationship. "Son of God" is certainly a claim to deity, and "only begotten son" refers to Christ's pre-incarnate dignity and privilege (Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15-18). A clear distinction is drawn between Christ's eternal being and Abraham's finite beginning (John 8:58). The phrase "and the word was God" (John 1:1); means nothing less than that Christ as the word of God is identified with the essential nature of God.

Important in this respect are the New Testament titles assigned to Christ, as many New Testament scholars have shown anew in our day. "*Christ*" is the Greek term for the Hebrew word "*messiah*," which means God's anointed one. It derives from the Old Testament expectation that a royal descendent of the line of David, anointed by the Holy Spirit, would establish the kingdom of God on earth (Mark 8:29; Acts 2:34-36; 3:20). This Jesus came to do (Luke 4:18-21).

However, the New Testament use of the term goes beyond its, previous uses. In the New Testament it joins Christ's divine nature to his passion as, the Son of Man, the suffering, servant written of, by Isaiah. God's anointed one comes to reign through the suffering of the cross. He rules in our hearts as the redeemer of men. This is what Jesus' followers could not at first understand.

The confession "Jesus is Lord" was one of the earliest of Christian statements, of faith (Acts 10:36; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11; 1 Peter 3:15)., Christ's Lordship is especially associated with the triumph of the resurrection and the post-resurrection appearances (Luke 24:34; John. 20:2, 13, 18,28; 21:7). It was a statement central to apostolic preaching (Acts 2:36; Ephesians 4:5; Hebrews 7:14).

The title *Lord* in the earliest Christian, proclamation attests to faith in Jesus Christ's divinity, in his instrumentality in creation, in his redemptive work, in his triumph over death and the, powers of evil, in his triumphal ascension to heaven, , and in his final, return in power and glory.

A further key title is *Saviour* (Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23). This conveys the central purpose of Christ's coming. His redeeming work, despite the complex ways in which it is presented in scripture, concentrates upon a simple and direct idea, namely, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). Each word of this sentence is freighted with important meaning.

The complex unity of what redemption is in scripture is due to the many metaphors and images which the followers of our Lord employ to present the significance of his suffering on the cross, his burial, resurrection, and ascension.

When the New Testament declares that "Christ died for our sins" it means chiefly that all the Old Testament sacrifices, which prefigured the cross, are summed up and terminated in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

That is what the suffering servant of the Lord does. A key link in the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament is the truth that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is the Son of Man who comes to seek and save the lost of Mark 10:45. That is the force of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40.

Careful examination of the New Testament yields a wide range of fascinating perspectives on the work of Christ. These include: *sacrifice* (Lamb of God, forgiveness, vicarious suffering, purification, cleansing); *atonement* (propitiation, expiation, blood); *redemption* (ransom, substitution, representation); *mediation* (reconciliation, covenant) *triumph* (victory over evil).

Christ's coming to the world and his sacrifice for our sins derive from the love of God. Let us understand that the cross does not win or buy the love of God. Neither is it merely a disclosure of the love of God, though it certainly does that. It is more. The cross originates in the love of God and it deals, as well, with the world's evil and, with human sin. The cross and resurrection are God's gracious and loving act of condescension, in Christ by which sin is atoned for, evil is absorbed and overcome, men are reconciled to God, and, the day of ultimate restoration of all things is assured (Romans 8:19-25; Ephesians 1:7-10; Colossians 1:20).

God's love reaches out to each of us in Christ. As important as it is to say "Christ died for our sins," it is best to confess that "Jesus died for me." Have you confessed him as your saviour and Lord? No blessing is greater for modern, sophisticated humanity than that we each one should humbly know, the joy and peace of being a forgiven sinner, and then share that faith with others.