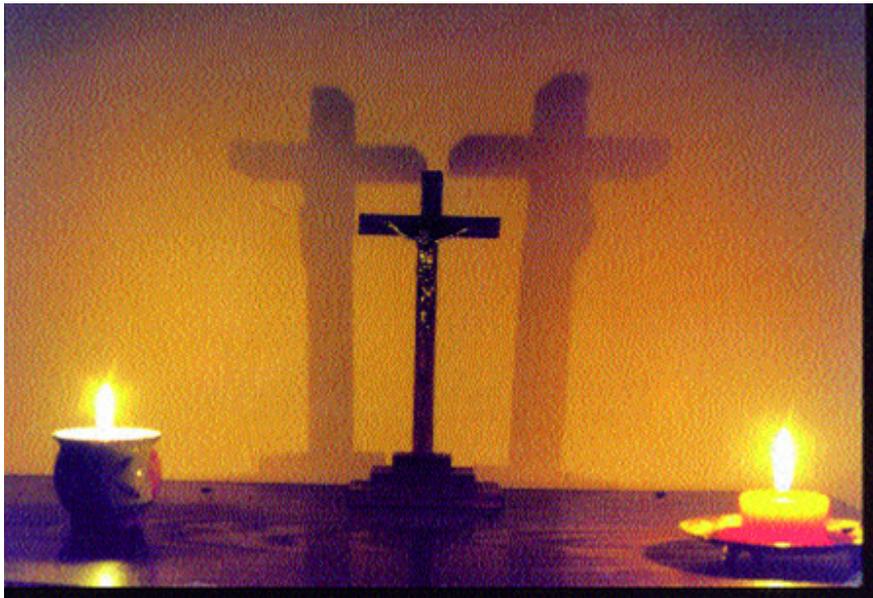


ALTERNATIVE
CHRISTIANITY



by

Martin Mosse

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M. B. M.,
September 1998.

CHAPTER 1

ON THE NEED TO SLOW DOWN

“The world is perishing for lack of the knowledge of God and the Church is famishing for want of His presence.” – A. W. Tozer.

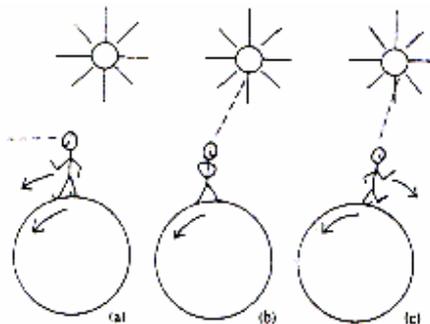
“It seems to me that today we always want to be moving on; we cannot stand still. So many things claim our attention that we are perpetually on the go. We cannot stop for a moment. But he who is spiritual knows how to stand still. He can stand before God in worship while God makes known to him His will.” – Watchman Nee.

We live in an age in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to hear the voice of God. Amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life the call of God to humanity is heard less and less.

We are a generation in a hurry. Like our expanding universe, we seem to run away from God at speeds which are ever increasing. The faster we go, the harder it becomes to hear God’s voice. As he said of his Old Testament people,

“The more I called Israel, the further they went from me.” (Hosea 11:2 NIV)

This condition afflicts not just “the world” - those outside the church - but also the church itself, and even that section of the church which rejoices in the title “evangelical”, to which I myself belong. We have the traditions and trappings of godliness - our “orthodox” theology, our gospel services, our prayer meetings and our Bible studies - but God himself we all too easily miss. Our “challenges” are to more zeal, more activity, not more saintliness. We mistake traditional evangelical practice for the presence of God - which has been enjoyed throughout history by his attentive children in all sectors of the church - and are tragically unaware of our loss. I want in this booklet to look at ways in which we can rediscover the presence of God, primarily by looking at the concept of communication, and then by applying our findings to the practice of evangelical Christianity. I shall try to avoid matters of doctrine and academic theology wherever possible. My central thesis will be that the church, no less than the world, needs to SLOW DOWN and LISTEN to God until once more we hear him speaking, and only then to go forward; and that this principle should apply in our devotions and worship, in our witness and in our everyday life.



Imagine a man standing on the earth as it rotates. In the natural case (Figure (a)) he has his back to God and both the rotation of the earth and his own motion upon it carry him away from God. If he comes to faith in Christ, he repents, i.e. turns about and changes direction (Figure (b)). Now he can see God, but the world on which he is still standing goes on carrying him as fast as it can the wrong way. He has a real struggle to maintain his position and keep his eyes on his Saviour. However as he goes on gazing even fitfully at God something miraculous happens (Figure (c)): the world loses its grip on him. He begins to stop spinning, stand still and slowly, very slowly step forward along the Way.

This is what we experience when we begin to *spend time* with God: The pace of our life slows down. A semblance of order begins to appear as our priorities change. A sense of purpose forms as we learn his will and follow it point by point. We start to become the “real people” we were created to be.

Consider another image, this time from the parables of Jesus. Here is a wandering sheep lost out on the mountains, far away from the Shepherd and the rest of the flock. What advice do we offer it? Perhaps the best advice we can give is, “Stop wandering further and further away. Stay right where you are. The Shepherd who loves you and cares for you is as a *matter of certainty* coming to find you. *Wait for him* and in due course you will hear his voice.”

The point is the same. If we are out of communion with God we must stop running away from him, slow down, get down on our knees and spend time before him in prayer, waiting for him until we hear his voice.

I sometimes think that if there is one thing that God is wishing to say to his people in these hectic times, it must be this:

“Slow down. Slow down! Slow down!! Slow down!!!

SLOW DOWN!!!!”

CHAPTER 2

ON COMMUNICATION

“The man who would know God must give time to him” – A. W. Tozer.

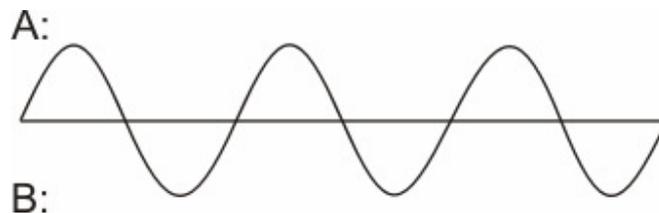
In the first chapter we noted the urgent need for modern man - and especially modern evangelical man - to learn to slow down and spend time with God if ever he is to encounter him. I want now to describe the nature of that encounter in terms of the concept of communication.

The activity of communication in its simplest form involves just two parties. At any given time one of these will be talking and the other listening, after which the roles may be reversed. If so, what the second speaker then says will have been to some extent affected by what he has just heard. When this happens we call it a conversation.

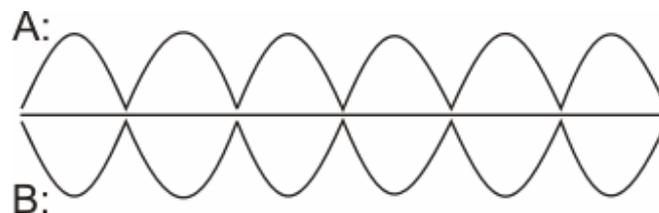
The supreme Communicator is of course God, and a record of some of his communication may be found in the Bible. Occasionally we perhaps catch glimpses of communication within the persons of the Godhead (eg Genesis 1:26, Isaiah 6:8 and perhaps Hosea 11), but more often we read of his word to man. Through creation he addresses all people generally (Romans 1:20). More specifically on particular occasions he speaks through intermediaries whom we call prophets (2 Peter 1:21). Supremely God makes his personal revelation of himself in Jesus, the Living Word (John 1:1-14, compare Hebrews 1:1-2a). And finally he speaks directly to the hearts of his children through his Holy Spirit.

Since man is made in the image of God, some of these activities of talking and listening may also take place between man and man.

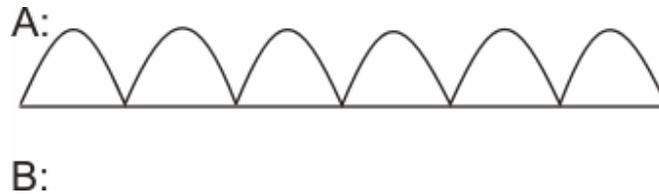
A simple, normal dialogue in which the thread of conversation passes easily between two parties A and B may be represented by a wave diagram as follows:



When A is talking and B is listening the curve is shown above the line. When B talks and A listens the curve is below the line. On the other hand no sensible conversation can look like this



when both parties are talking at the same time, and neither listening to the other; or like this



when B doesn't get a word in edgewise. How many marriages could be represented in these ways!

In conversation between man and God it is always God who takes the initiative. We see this illustrated in the call of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 which (without the narrative) may be summarised as:

God: Samuel, Samuel.
Samuel: Speak, for your servant is listening.
God: I am going to punish the house of Eli.

It follows that if communication between man and God is broken (other than for reasons beyond man's control such as ill health or depression), it must be because man has either failed to speak to God or - perhaps more often - failed to listen.

Adherents of Christianity fall into two camps: those who believe God speaks personally today and those who don't. Jesus taught that his sheep would follow him because they would know his voice (John 10:4).

We evangelicals are often taught to 'listen' to God in Bible study and 'talk' to him in prayer. All too frequently, no more than this is asked of us. This is a tragedy, and is in great measure responsible for the spiritual poverty in our churches today. The saints throughout the ages have always known better. They have been distinguished by their regular practice of spending hours alone with God listening to him in silent prayer. This attitude of quiet, *listening* prayer was known in the Old Testament as "waiting on God" (modern translations often use variants of this such as "resting" or "hoping" in God), and its importance can be gauged from even a few of the many references to it:

"For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation." (Psalm 62:1 RSV)

"They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31 RSV)

"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD."
(Lamentations 3:25-26 RSV)

By spending time with God in this way prayer itself becomes a two-way interaction as we begin to experience the living God at levels previously unknown to us. The reader who wishes to embark on such a course under the encouragement of an experienced master is well referred to the

thirty one daily lessons offered by Andrew Murray in his classic *Waiting on God*, written over eighty years ago but still readily available and as vital as ever. I would simply add here that for most people by far the hardest part is getting started (rather like entering a cold swimming pool); in time, however, the habit becomes addictive.

“Watch and pray!”

CHAPTER 3

LISTENING TO GOD

*“Father of Jesus, love’s reward,
What rapture will it be,
Prostrate before thy throne to lie,
And gaze and gaze on thee.”*

– F. W. Faber.

“If you do not understand my silence you will not understand my words.”

– Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria.

In the previous chapters we have seen the crucial importance of spending time in God’s presence and listening to him in silent prayer. This is in order to ‘slow down’ the pace of our lives until it meets that of his. What may we expect when we try?

Almost certainly, any attempt to empty our heads of our own thoughts so as to concentrate on God will meet with vigorous resistance from both within and without. Every kind of distraction - be it the noise of traffic outside, the children downstairs, the telephone, an itchy foot, thoughts about today’s work or tomorrow’s shopping list - will attempt to divert us from our goal. So we

- (1) Choose a time when we are least likely to be disturbed.
- (2) Seek the quietest place available, go in and shut the door (Matthew 6:6).
(On a nice day we may prefer a secluded spot outdoors, or go for a walk; if home offers no quiet you could try the local library; some have even been known to pray in church!)
- (3) Arm ourselves with a Bible and a notebook or paper and pencil.
- (4) Find the most comfortable position in which we can easily relax; this may be on our knees, in a chair, on top of a bed or prostrate on the floor (there are scriptural precedents for most of these).

Most of us will want to begin with whatever forms of prayer and worship we are already happiest with, say, studying the Bible, reading a short passage from a devotional book, singing (but not in the library!), thanksgiving, intercession and so on; and this is right. Then when we are ready we move - or try to move - into quietness. (Here I can report only my own paths; the reader must find out by sheer experience how God speaks to him or her.)

Diverting thoughts will come, and keep on coming. If I wish to remember them, I write them into my notebook and so clear my head. It may indeed be no more ‘spiritual’ than an item for the shopping list or a reminder to do something like write a letter or make a phone call.

What has happened? By pausing before God we have begun to organise our life, so removing some of the chaos that reigned before. This may not be what we came for and it requires no supernatural explanation. But we have started; and we have started to slow down. When we rise and go about our day we have at least an agenda. The moral here is that true 'spirituality' as it affects us is probably very different from our initial concept of it. How many times did Jesus put his finger on something very down to earth when asked an ethereal, 'spiritual' question? Is not something similar implied by the command to 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness', when 'all these [everyday, material, secular] things' would be 'added unto' us (Matthew 6:33)?

This whole topic of personal organisation has been admirably handled in Gordon MacDonald's modern classic, *Ordering Your Private World* (Moody 1984 / Highland 1987), which I warmly commend to the reader.

As we continue on our way, other types of thought may greet us. There may be, say, the desire to pray for someone, or to look up a passage of scripture. We may become aware of areas in our personal lives or relationships which are unworthy of God and need to be put right (Matthew 5:23-24). And we know that

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit..." (Romans 8:26-27 RSV)

I find it helpful to keep a loose leaf notebook with a number of 'lists' in it. For example, I have one list of topics on which I need guidance, and another of problems where I am asking for help. The entries are brief - a line or two - and cryptic (in case I lose it; other people are identified only by their initials). If a positive answer is received, I enter it in ink and rule through with a line so that the entry is still legible. If a negative answer is received, I do the same in pencil, to be rubbed out if a later "Yes" comes to replace it. To date in 8 years I have recorded 209 "Yes"s, 27 "No"s, with 55 pending. (I got the germ of this idea from the back of Corrie ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*.)

In the same notebook I keep a diary of 'Praises', where I record the special blessings that have occurred in the course of the day. Over a period of a year or two this becomes very heartening, not to say exciting, reading.

More recently I have adopted the practice, recommended by MacDonald among others, of keeping a journal of my spiritual pilgrimage. This too is of enormous benefit by encouraging me to sit down, take time and think seriously about what God is saying to me, expressing as clearly as I can understand it what he says to me and I to him. An excellent introduction to journalling may be found in *Keeping a Spiritual Journal*, edited by Edward England (Highland, 1988).

Hence at the beginning or end of every day I have a wide range of channels open to me for processing my thoughts and so refreshing my mind before God. This allows my thinking and my life to take on a new 'shape' of their own: in Paul's phrase I am being transformed by the renewing of my mind (Romans 12:2).

Again, there are many Christians to whom God speaks quite differently. Some will find helpful Joyce Huggett's beautiful *Prayer Journal*, published by Marshall-Pickering, which offers a ready made structure for recording different types of prayer thoughts.

Others I know find that sometimes during the day God brings a particular individual to mind, and that often if they make contact right away, they find an immediate need which they can meet. To others he speaks in dreams as so often in scripture.

* * * * *

When words have ceased, there is God, and there are we. As the psalmist put it,

“Be still then, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

What follows is for you to find out for yourself. Try it.

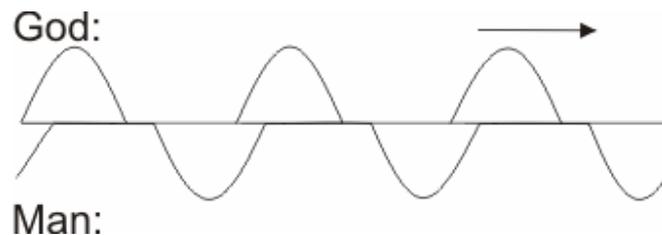
CHAPTER 4

RESTORING THE RELATIONSHIP

What happens when disorder creeps into our spiritual lives? When we become out of tune with God? When our attempts to serve him fail like flat jokes? When we teach or preach only what we think God *ought* to be saying, being unable to report what he really *is* saying? When God may not seem dead but does seem to be totally silent? When the romance has disappeared from our love affair with Jesus Christ? When we conclude that spiritual sparkle never was part of God's permanent plan for us, and after all we "mustn't trust our feelings" or "seek experiences"?

All of these problems are symptoms of the same thing. We are out of phase with God. For whatever reason, there is a failure of communication between him and us. We may not be embracing open sin. We may not have lost interest or the desire to serve God. But we are out of step.

Consider again our wave diagram. The situation we are facing can be depicted like this:



The desire to communicate is there on both sides, and yet communication isn't happening. The solution now becomes apparent: if we, the lower wave train, slow down and wait long enough, the waves of God will in due course catch up with us where we are. When this happens the picture will again be one of a single continuous curve which denotes two-way communication between ourselves and God. The problem is resolved.

In practice this boils down yet once more to seeking God, spending time waiting on him as the Bible directs. (For some this may involve fasting; for others perhaps a retreat. Where sin is recognised there will obviously have to be repentance in the sure expectation of forgiveness through Jesus' blood.) I apologise to any readers who like Naaman hoped there might be a different way out, but there is no alternative way back to God which does not involve seeking him with all your heart. Look up Jeremiah 29:13, 1 Chronicles 16:11 and 28:9, Psalm 27:8, Isaiah 55:6, Zephaniah 2:3 and Matthew 6:33 and 7:7 as a beginning if you have any doubts. *Christians who have a Bible and a pair of knees should need no further instruction!* Jesus Christ did not die simply to give his followers a change in their legal standing before God, but a change in their experience of him as well:

“And our *fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:3 NIV)

When waiting upon God in our prayer life is not enough, we may have to wait on him over a period of time in our exterior “life life”: rein in some of our less essential activities, pause and begin to tie up some of our loose ends. We may need to introduce order where there is disorder, clear the backlog of unanswered letters and unpaid bills, straighten out our neglected relationships and do those things which we have silenced our inner voice by putting off. Then we should come back to God in prayer and seek him afresh.

How God will meet any individual I dare not guess. For one it may be through the reading or preaching of the Word. For another, through an experience of worship. Another may be overwhelmed by the Spirit of God through the laying on of hands. Others may find themselves to be simply swimming in the love of God as they pray alone. “Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” But one thing they will all have in common: all shall know that they have met the living God.

I have another picture for describing this process. Imagine a bicycle chain moving over its sprocket wheel. Over the years the chain has stretched so that it no longer fits. As it goes round, friction and tension mount until there is a painful jarring and then suddenly a lurch as the whole chain slips one cog and for the time being normality and smooth running are restored. I find this to be particularly true of fasting. The discipline may be hard but it does seem very effective in lifting people out of a rut to a new level where God’s goodness and power can be experienced afresh and in greater measure.

In another context a holiday can do something similar for us when we are stressed at work. The sabbath rest likewise was provided in the Old Testament to do the same thing for the Jews.

By way of further illustration consider how you can restore harmony to a relationship with another individual which is stretched during a heated argument. Suppose that instead of yielding to the temptation to clout your opponent with the first thing that comes into your head, thereby exacerbating the contest (usually at the expense of a part - your antagonist’s part - of the truth), you pause for a moment, listening to what she says. As you pause, you reflect that you are a disciple of Christ, you think about what you have just been told and its validity, about who said it and only then come up with an answer. Several things are likely to happen:

- (1) You may address her in love.
- (2) You may say something you are less likely to regret.
- (3) You may well return the “soft answer” that “turneth away wrath.” (Proverbs 15:1 AV)
- (4) *You* may be listened to.
- (5) You may receive a similar reply.
- (6) You may listen to the reply.
- (7) Both of you may learn something that is genuinely true.
- (8) Both of you will then have begun once more to communicate with each other.

Why all this? Because by waiting - not this time on God, but on your friend - you have allowed the top and bottom halves of the curve to slide into place again. The problem - failure of communication, being out of step with each other - was essentially the same, and the solution is the same.

Again, when you are seeking a rapprochement with an estranged friend, you may have found it wise to wait for his response rather than repeat your own initiative. By letting time pass until he is ready to react, even though you seem to yourself weak and vulnerable in the interim, you give the pair of you the best chance of moving back into phase. So it is when we are seeking restoration with God. Once the decision to turn and seek him has been made, we should stick by it come what may, even though the whole endeavour threatens to be a fruitless disaster. This is faith. By coming through such an experience we shall know him. If instead we give up hope and seek alternative, second- best paths - be they extra-zealous evangelism, increased attendance at meetings, further “decisions” or other spiritual activities (all of which have their place) - we shall lose our goal. To protect yourself from your own lack of trust in God is not a recipe for finding him.

“For whoever wants to save his life [or soul] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” (Matthew 16:25 NIV)

“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:8 RSV)

Are you in phase?

CHAPTER 5

PERSONAL EVANGELISM

“Everyone should be quick to listen.” (James 1:19 NIV)

In previous chapters we have looked at the nature of communication as it relates God to man. I wish now to consider the practice of communication - in particular of the Gospel - between man and man.

The thesis offered is this: In order to present Jesus Christ to someone who does not know him, you will normally have to take several distinct steps. Each step may convey information, arouse interest, express love or sympathy and so on. After each step we must WAIT until we get a response before proceeding further. In the terms of our original wave drawing from Chapter 2, there must be continuity of the curve both above and below the line. That is to say, it is essential to respect the right of your friend to reject your witness, or to take time to ponder it before proceeding.

Consider Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that first Easter evening (Luke 24:13-35). After engaging them in conversation he explains to them “what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself” (v.27). Having done so, he does not immediately reveal his identity, but “made as if to go on” (v.28). Only when they “urged him strongly” (v.29) does he agree to stay for a meal and so disclose himself. He waited for their response.

The response may never come. Or God may use someone else instead of you. What matters is that you say what God gives you to say, no more and no less. A good personal evangelist or counsellor is not primarily someone who knows how to explain or preach; she is before that one who knows how to *listen* - to the Holy Spirit and to the counsellee, not just to what she says out loud, but also to what her heart is saying in silence. See how often in the gospels Jesus penetrates through the superficial problems that people first present to him to the real unspoken ones that lie beneath the surface. See how when talking with the Samaritan lady at the well (John 4) he opens the conversation at the point of contact (drawing water, vv.7-15), then exposes her real problem (multiplicity of husbands, vv.16-18), answers her religious speculation (vv.19-25), and only then when *she* reaches the point (v.25) identifies himself as the Christ (v.26). *In each case* he secures a positive response from the woman before going on to the next step.

You can tell if you are a good listener. When you are talking with someone, does what they say make any difference to how you reply? Or are you simply waiting until they have finished so that you can deliver yourself of whatever is already in your head? In communicating the Gospel do you always say the same thing to everyone, or do you seek first to identify their personal hurts, hangups and problems in order to see how particularly Christ can meet each of these? If you are a non-listener, you could well be leaving behind you a very long trail of disasters. Believe me, *this happens*.

One of our greatest weapons is SURPRISE. Do we always have to be predictable? Jesus never was. There are some Christians who at the first mention of evolution or religion in the workplace will always dive in at once until everyone else knows in advance precisely what to expect - and switches off. By doing so they deprive themselves of priceless opportunities to LISTEN to their colleagues and so learn precisely where and how the Spirit is at work. Remember that Jesus himself only did what first he saw the Father doing (John 5:19). We ignore his example to our own loss, to the loss of others, and perhaps to the loss of the kingdom. Why not *surprise* people by listening to them first? Or by showing first and foremost that we have a genuine interest in *them*? There are more ways to take a city than by frontal assault!

(This whole question of listening has been brilliantly covered in Michael Mitton's admirable little booklet, *The Wisdom to Listen* (Grove Pastoral Series No. 5, 1981).)

It is always very sad when we see would-be personal evangelists who instead of listening to their victim simply contradict everything he says on the grounds that if he isn't a Christian, everything he believes must be wrong (especially if the evangelist doesn't understand it). This is simply unbiblical. Consider how St. Paul on the Areopagus at Athens did everything he could to establish common ground between himself and those pagan gentiles, even quoting their own literature to them, before setting out the distinctiveness of the Faith (Acts 17:22-31). I believe we should be agreeing with our friends wherever possible, seeking to identify a bridge of common ground, rather than trampling on and insulting their most cherished ideals which they have laid bare before us. "Blessed are the PEACEMAKERS"!

Again, in some evangelistic quarters there are practices which are ethically scandalous. Sometimes these relate to methods of raising finances, sometimes to the use of undue emotional pressure, sometimes to personality cults and also often to appalling breaches of confidentiality. Usually these stem from a belief that we as individuals are indispensable to God in his world plan, and that our contribution is so important that a few cut corners won't matter. If we think so, we are wrong, very wrong, and risk being set aside in favour of others with a little humility.

Cowboy evangelists who go in with all guns blazing, convinced that any means and any attitudes are acceptable in the advancement of the kingdom, would do well to remember Our Lord's words to those of his day who behaved similarly:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte [convert], and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Matthew 23:15 RSV)

Where have we derived this strange heresy that our own evangelistic contribution is somehow of more importance than our personal holiness and loving walk with God?

For the ultimate weapon, against which all our other 'methods' stand or fall, is LOVE. The love which makes us increasingly into whole, "real people", is the only force which will ultimately

bring others into the kingdom. Without it we wield the sword of the Spirit IN VAIN and our attempts to win converts, successful or not, will cut and severely *damage* those human souls for whom Christ died. As Francis Schaeffer put it, “Truth without love is a lie”. Only when people realise that first and foremost we LOVE them are they likely to be interested in what we have to say. And *then* we have begun to communicate.

CHAPTER 6

ON PATIENCE

“Not only that, but we even rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience, patience character, and character hope.” (Romans 5:3-4)

“Although [Jesus] was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” (Hebrews 5:8 NIV)

We have in previous chapters seen the need to slow down the pace of our lives by spending time in silence before God. We look now at one of the principal benefits to be gained from this, and that is patience.

This much underrated Christian virtue has two sides to it. The first is the ability to SUFFER or endure, traditionally translated “longsuffering” (e.g. Galatians 5:22 AV), which is produced in the Christian soul primarily by having to suffer. The second is the ability to WAIT for God’s time, and this I believe grows as we “wait upon God” as already described. Further, waiting on God in our prayer life enables us practically to wait on him in our (active) “life life” as described in Chapter 4. We learn how to pass time.

Why is this so important? Because patience is an essential attribute of God himself. It is the patience of God which is the secret of his power. Because he is prepared to wait and to go on waiting until precisely the right time to act, he acts with economy and to greatest effect. Jesus taught this in the parable of the weeds in the field (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43), in which we see the Father waiting until the maximum harvest can be reaped before sending in the reapers; to do so prematurely would lose some people who as it is are saved. The same explanation is given in 2 Peter 3:9 of the ‘delay’ in Our Lord’s return:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (NIV)

This quality is exhibited in the very human story of Esther. When her people are on the brink of being legally massacred by Haman, she bravely undertakes to get King Xerxes to reverse his edict. Risking death she enters his presence and is asked what she wants. But instead of answering immediately, she invites the king to a banquet (5:4). When he comes she again defers her request until a second banquet the next day (5:7-8). Not until then does she make her petition for the safety of her people, which is granted (chapter 7), but only after an intervening act of (unnamed) Providence the previous night. Esther, it is implied, knew how to wait for God’s time.

And here the connection between the two aspects of patience comes to light. For in the interim, God’s people - anywhere - may be called to suffer, spiritually if not physically. Hence arises the cry “How long?”, common both to the Psalmists (e.g. 6:3, 13:1-2 etc) and to the risen martyrs in Revelation (6:9-10).

Jesus too had to wait for God's time. He always knew he had "a baptism to be baptised with" (Luke 12:50) yet he waited thirty years before beginning his public ministry. Once started, he rejected at first his mother's plea for a miracle at the wedding at Cana, saying "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). Twice he escapes arrest for the same reason (John 7:30, 8:20), thereby declining to join battle with the enemy except on his Father's chosen ground. But at his final Passover (John 12:23-28) and in Gethsemane (Mark 14:41) his hour came, and the rest of the New Testament (as Hebrews 5:8-10) rings with praises of the total victory won by his perfect obedience.

Picture a man trying to overturn a large boulder, most of which lies buried beneath the ground. He digs down until he thinks he has reached its bottom, then pushes hard on his spade. If he has misjudged, and the rock actually goes much deeper, he breaks his spade or, more seriously, himself. If on the other hand he does his preparation more thoroughly so that he reaches the rock's true bottom, his effort to dislodge it is more likely to be successful. Patience is the spadework. If we try to do some great endeavour for God while being insufficiently prepared and before God's time has come, we will fail and possibly suffer personal damage. If we wait on him in our prayer life and in our "life life", obeying his commands meanwhile, we will grow as Christians until we are ready to do that to which he has called us.

All the time that we are learning patience God is at work. Each of us begins life like a blank key. As through the frictions of life God chips away at us, he fashions each of us to be a unique individual, the only person on this planet capable of opening the particular door which he has in mind for us. If in rebellion we kick against the pricks, the process becomes both more lengthy and more painful, and we risk missing his best plan. If we accept his hand with patience, obedience and surrender, we acquire both character and *depth* of character, which is the distinguishing mark of "real people". One day when he is ready, he will with his own hand place us in the keyhole and the door will open, releasing the floodgates of his Spirit on a needy world. Abraham, Joseph and Moses all learned the hard way the dangers of a false start. Can we afford not to be patient?

CHAPTER 7

ON TEACHERS

“Nor are you to be called ‘teacher’, for you have one teacher, the Christ.” (Matthew 23:10 NIV)

“As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you.”
(1 John 2:27 NIV)

“It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers...” (Ephesians 4:11 NIV)

“It is scarcely possible in most places to get anyone to attend a meeting where the only attraction is God.” – A. W. Tozer.

We have a paradox. Jesus who forbade his disciples to be called teachers appointed such a calling within his church. Why? What is the underlying truth?

In both passages the concept of *service* is to hand. Paul’s apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are there “to prepare God’s people for works of service” and by implication to be servants themselves. Jesus in St Matthew continues, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (The whole of Matthew 23:8-12 should be read.) Jesus is not forbidding the activity of teaching, but rather any exaltation - especially self-exaltation - of the teacher which might cause him to receive any credit for his ministry which is the sole right of Jesus himself.

“For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants...” (1 Corinthians 3:4-5 NIV)

Today in many parts of the evangelical church there is a strong emphasis on teaching. People will travel in their thousands to hear the Word expounded by prominent speakers, often for days at a time. The better known preachers can be guaranteed to fill a hall anywhere they go at the very mention of their name. The importance of good teaching is universally accepted. The unimportance of the teacher is not. It is sad.

It is not always the preachers who are entirely to blame. We should consider the posters, the publicity techniques so frequently adopted by host churches: “Come and hear the famous man of God / preacher / international speaker / author / missionary leader...”. How far is this justified?

*“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your *servants* for Jesus’ sake.”* (2 Corinthians 4:5 NIV)

Nevertheless what we are left with all too often today is a personality cult, and it is very hard indeed for the subjects of such treatment not to become affected by it themselves. It is also a slur on

the Name of Christ in the eyes of those outside the Church who may be more sensitive to these things than we are. Instead we should recall the dictum of that great servant of God Charles Simeon of Cambridge, which is as true today as it was 150 years ago: that the first three qualities required of a preacher are “1. Humility. 2. Humility. 3. Humility”. *Such a man will challenge hell.*

The true teacher is called to walk a tightrope. Like John the Baptist he must decrease in importance if Christ is to increase (John 3:30). Would-be teachers should therefore heed the warning of James:

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1 NIV).

School teachers tend to fall into two categories: those who simply teach their subject to their pupils, and those who teach them to *think about* their subject. Between these two there is a qualitative difference, just as there is between giving a hungry man a fish and giving him a fishing rod. So in the Church there are two kinds of teacher: those who bring their listeners closer to God and those who - for all their dynamism or charisma - actually make him more distant, by implicitly setting themselves up as mediators of God’s truth, and thereby diminishing or removing altogether their hearers’ capacity to think critically about what they are being taught. The difference may be one of humility. Only the pure in heart will ever see God and only such will ever declare him aright. Even Charles Simeon quoted above wept with repentance when his natural forcefulness of character betrayed him into pride and self-assertion.

Hear the words of Jesus:

“Take heed what you hear.” (Mark 4:24 RSV)

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher.” (Luke 6:40 RSV)

If you allow yourself to be tied to one particular teacher, then for as long as you are his pupil you can never come any closer to God than he is. His opinions will become yours and you will have no independent means of verifying them, except perhaps recourse to another teacher. You will read the Scriptures through his eyes and become to that extent incapable of receiving any direct illumination from the Spirit, because you have made someone else your arbiter. If you always rely on someone else’s understanding you will lose the ability to develop our own.

How often do we hear in argument X’s opinion on baptism, spiritual gifts or the Second Coming put forward to settle the matter in such a way as to preclude there being any other authority or even another tenable view. We do people no service by denying them the right to think.

I believe there may actually be more safety in seeking out a multiplicity of godly teachers and learning what God is saying through each. The Spirit will confirm his words through different

people; problem areas will be seen to be such.

There is a parallel here with commentaries. The excessive use of any single commentary, *especially* if it is a good one, can bias the mind just as much as undue devotion to a single teacher. Reference to several commentaries is more likely to result in a balance.

A good teacher - like a good pastor - will try to do himself out of a job. He will try to bring those whom he seeks to serve so much closer to God that they will no longer need his instruction, however much they enjoy and reciprocate his love. Then they will be more attuned to learn from God himself, and equally, more ready to learn from other teachers, to whom God has given other truths. Finally:

“Prove [test] all things; hold fast that which is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:21 AV)

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32 NIV)

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:6 NIV)

CHAPTER 8

ON SELF-DECEPTION

“The farther we push into the sanctuary the greater becomes the danger of self deception.” – A. W. Tozer.

“God’s ‘vessel unto honour’ is the man who has waited for the Spirit to teach him, and who has not been ashamed meanwhile to admit he does not know.” – Watchman Nee.

“The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.” (1 Corinthians 8:2 NIV)

Hands up anyone who has ever heard a sermon on this verse! What is Paul the apostle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ doing preaching intellectual nihilism? Why do these words come from the same pen that wrote the epistle to the Romans, and what do they mean to us today? What have they to say to us who have been entrusted in the Bible with the “lively oracles” of God? Let us look outside the Bible for the beginnings of an answer.

The story is told how Socrates, whose name is still proverbial for wisdom, was designated by the oracle of Delphi as the wisest man in the world. Baffled by this, since (in his own ironically modest account) he knew that he had no wisdom, Socrates searched high and low for someone less ignorant than himself. In vain: rival candidates for the title, while being no wiser than himself, mistakenly believed that they were so, thereby marking themselves out as fools. Socrates concluded the meaning of the oracle to be that, while the others were no less ignorant than himself, he alone was aware of his ignorance.

He was of course jesting - though on trial for his life - but the point is a fair one and may cast some light on St. Paul. *Have we any idea of the extent of our own ignorance?* As we daily go about our Master’s business, confident of the truth of what we say, does intellectual or spiritual humility ever come our way?

Have we any concept of the magnitude of those areas where we know nothing at all? What certainty do we have, in those grey areas where good men differ, that the dogmatism with which we cling to our own private opinions is really justified by the scanty texts we adduce in their support? Can we be sure that pride has not obscured truth? We are called to *humility*.

This is especially true when meeting Christians of other persuasions. If our understanding of the Gospel or of the Bible makes us feel superior to other Christians, we understand wrong. (“Though I memorise the entire Bible by heart, and have not love, I am nothing”!) Our cherished “purity of doctrine” is going to be flawed. Truth cannot coexist with pride, any more than righteousness can.

(One might add that much of the internecine strife that has taken place between the differing churches throughout history might have been avoided if the simple principle had been adhered to that Thou Shalt Only Criticise Thine Own Tradition.)

Returning to Delphi, let us recall the inscription prominently carved on the temple of Apollo, “Know thyself ”. This priceless teaching, though largely omitted from the interests of modern philosophy, nevertheless lies close to the heart of most of the major world religions, and we do well to heed it. Hear again St. Paul:

“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

(Romans 12:3 NIV)

Peter at the Last Supper boasted of his loyalty to Jesus. As events proved, Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. “And he went outside and wept bitterly.” (Luke 22:62 NIV)

Let us take this a stage further. Do we have any idea, not just of our own ignorance, but of our *infinite capacity to be wrong*? It is possible for any of us to believe that black is white and white black. This form of self-deception is the work of the father of lies who still has his way wherever pride offers him an entrance. Until we recognise this we can pose a real menace to those around us. Some main line evangelicals can become so dogmatic about their own personal interpretations of scripture that they reject not only other types of Christian, but even fellow evangelicals. This does wonders for the body of Christ! Within the charismatic movement also there are immature Christians who are unaware that they have not yet learned to distinguish the voice of God from that of their own psyche. As a result they behave as though every thought or impulse that passes into their mind were a word from God to be declared immediately to all and sundry, with no need for validation. This too can cause chaos. Such ill-disciplined and self-centred use of the charismata is addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 (note especially verse 20,

“Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” (NIV))

Similarly we need to be very, very circumspect before taking upon our lips that oft-repeated phrase, “The Lord told me”. To do so when in fact the Lord has said no such thing is to break the commandment not to take his Name in vain just as surely as did the false prophets condemned in Ezekiel 13 and Jeremiah 23. We do well to be cautious.

Let Paul conclude by illuminating himself:

“If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

(Galatians 6:3 NIV)

“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise.” (1 Corinthians 3:18 NIV)

“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

(1 Corinthians 10:12 RSV)

Spiritual adults know their limitations. Do you?