

**Fundamentals of the Gospel
For the Church Today**
Personal Concerns in Light of 1 Corinthians

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Fundamentals of the Gospel For the Church Today

You have asked me this afternoon to speak my mind, and not to say all the flattering things that you would like to hear, but other things that cause me some concern. Before that, allow me to tell you a little bit about myself, so that you can see my background and my slants and my biases—as the American phrase is, ‘where I’m coming from’.

Personal reflections

I was brought up in a Christian home, where I was taught Scripture from my childhood. I think I was in a Sunday school only once, because my father, God bless his memory, felt it his own personal responsibility to teach the members of his family the word of God. It was not always to my delight, I have to confess, but by the time I came to faith I knew large passages not only of the New Testament, but of the Old. As I have grown older, I have learnt to thank God for that heritage that I was given, even as a small child. These days I notice with compassion some of my younger brethren and sisters who, even though they come from Christian homes, have only a very slight knowledge of the New Testament, let alone the Old.

The thing that really made a mark on my life, I suppose, if one thing did more than another, was when I was around about the age of fourteen, when there came to our part of the world a teacher of the word who, young as I was, seemed to me to be somewhat different from other preachers.¹ The other preachers were good; they came and preached their sermons, and instructive and helpful they were. When this man preached, however, it was as though the word of God itself was speaking, and there was an authority, a warmth, and a wonder about it that struck me in those days as remarkable, and really got hold of my mind and my heart. The wonder of the word seemed to emerge from it and I needed no telling that this was the inspired word of God, because it glowed with the glory of the Lord.

That has marked me in my own life. I wish I was a preacher like that. Not only was it beneficial at the time, but when I went as a student to university it was that amongst many other things that became my sheet anchor in the face of the blasts of modernism, atheism, and scepticism that one meets in a university. I found myself saying from time to time, ‘I have no answer to what the learned professor says.’ I remember particularly the professor of Hebrew, when I was trying my best to learn some Hebrew. He came up with all his modernistic notions about the Old Testament, and most of them I’d never heard of before. I had no answer at that stage to his supposed problems. I do now; I know a lot of them are nonsense. But I had no answers then, and I used to find myself saying, ‘I don’t know what the answers to his questions are, but this I do know—if he holds that the Pentateuch is a hotchpotch of bits and pieces put together by some unintelligent fourth-formers, then he must be wrong, because the spiritual accuracy of the book of Leviticus is simply amazing.’ It was that, gentlemen, that kept me.

¹ This was Mr. Harry Lacey.

In later life, when life's difficulties, sorrows and pains began to beset me, and I was tempted to think that the whole of Christianity was nothing more than psychological self-deception, it was the objective wonder of the word of God that gave me that hold on reality. If I were ever to say, 'there's nothing in Christianity,' then how could I answer this wonderful accuracy of what is self-evidently the word of God? And I say that for your encouragement.

The man who so helped me was not an academic theologian. He didn't come anywhere near a BD or anything of the sort. He was a baker by profession, but eventually gave his whole time to the preaching of the word. It wasn't first and foremost the academic expositors who were my sheet anchor, though I praise God for them and for the enormous help that they have been; it was the men who in my youth made me hear, Samuel-like, the very voice of God speaking through his word.

I say that, my brethren, to encourage you in this modern day to give yourselves to that great task with all your might and main. As Paul said to Timothy,

Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Tim 4:13–16)

I thank God for those who, in doing what Paul told Timothy to do, saved me as a young believer. When I went up to university in the post-war years there was a visible trend in England that I have to say has not led to desirable fruit. I would be invited to go to preach, perhaps one hundred miles away, on a Saturday night. They were called *rallies*, but the name has differed over the two centuries in which I've lived. In the first century, they were called rallies, in the second they were called *squashes*. You would travel all these miles and find that the thing started at, say, 7:30 in the evening. There would be good singing – that's lovely; and then it would go on to all kinds of entertainment. 'What's my line?', for instance, borrowed generally from the BBC, rather poorly adapted. All kinds of events and question boxes and goodness knows what, and this would occupy from 7:30 round to 8:30. And then the chairman would say, 'We've got *dogsboddy* here tonight. We've invited him to come and speak to you. We'll give him ten minutes, and if he should speak too long I'm sitting behind him and I can pull his coat and get him down.' He didn't quite say, 'and then we can go on with the fun,' but he might as well.

Gentlemen, if I had been brought up in that kind of atmosphere, you would have lost me completely. If Christianity is such a bitter pill for young people to swallow that you have to offer it with liberal coatings of the sugar of second-rate entertainment, then I shouldn't have wanted it; I could get better myself elsewhere. I'd have said, 'I don't want Christianity either, if that's what God is like.' I believe in a God so stupendously marvellous and his word so wonderfully glorious that it is an insult to represent it as a bitter pill that has to be liberally sugared with the world's entertainment before it can be even contemplated by young people.

The word of God says, and all of us would agree, that 'all Scripture is breathed out by God'. All my fellow believers, of course, believe that with all their hearts, but your gracious

invitation encourages me to speak freely. I sometimes feel that we have lost our nerve over the next bit: 'and profitable for teaching' (2 Tim 3:16).

Of course, we have to grade the teaching to the spiritual situation of our congregation. Even the inspired writers of the New Testament had to moderate what they were going to teach at times. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews said, 'I've got things to say about the high priesthood of Melchizedek, but I can't say them now.' Why couldn't he say them? Because they were not spiritually grown enough (see Heb 5:11–14). That was a pity, because it is precisely what those dear believers needed at that time. Facing persecution, they desperately needed to know about Melchizedek and his ministry of intercession. It was a cruel thing if their stunted spiritual growth and continued babyhood made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to understand the typology of the Old Testament.

Yes, I am aware, therefore, that we have to consider the spiritual state of those to whom we minister. But, having said that, if you can't make Chronicles, or Kings, or Samuel, or Judges and Joshua interesting, because they are the voice of the living God, let's pack up Christianity and go home. If God's word is such a bore now, what will it be to have to spend a whole eternity listening to him speaking? That would be frightful, wouldn't it? Excuse me if I speak more liberally than I should.

Some personal experiences

I'm pleased to observe, as I travel round this world, that the word of God still has its ancient power. Countries differ, of course, and conditions in each country. What works in one country doesn't necessarily work in another situation. As I have visited many different countries in the service of the Lord over these last ten years, for me there have been two highlights.

In one country, there were four missionaries, and later another two, who, with the help of recent converts, have planted twenty-five assemblies plus in twenty years. They have done it by evangelistic Bible studies, very often in the homes of unconverted people, or believers will open their homes and invite the neighbours in. These people wouldn't come to your gospel meeting, if you had one, but they are prepared to invite the preacher in and give him, say, six Thursdays or five Wednesdays. Of course, when that is the situation there are no preliminaries, no choirs, songs, or anything else by way of getting people in the right mood. It's straight into a forty-minute biblical study, but they tell me that if you start in the Gospel of John you probably won't get any further that night than the first verse. God is the great communicator.

And then, after a forty-minute straight talk from the Bible, there comes the coffee and the cakes. And after that, two hours of cut and thrust questions, so that the gospel meeting turns out to be two and a half hours long. If they're not angry after six weeks, and don't refuse to come again, they generally get converted. Twenty-five assemblies in twenty years, through a handful of believers.

Of course, the care of those assemblies is an enormous burden for the missionaries. Mainly four of them, two men and their two wives, do what they can to train the believers and guide them in the ways of God. They teach them baptism and about the Lord's Supper, to get them ready to take part in these things. But then they have to leave them, because they can't be with

all of them every day. If they don't continue on, they sink; but the marvel is that they do go on, because God is still alive and these people have actually found the Lord.

They're not without their teething problems. Some of them are small assemblies of forty, some are large with over one hundred. In some areas they come from psychologically broken people, and in other places they are more steady, but it has been marvellous to see the work of God go on. It appeals to my heart, and that's why I told you my background. In order to get an ear, they are not obliged to employ the kind of entertainment and music that you would associate with psychedelic discos in our country. It's not because they are not modern countries, or that their youth is not modern. Their youth is as modern as any country in the world.

Some of the morals nowadays would shock you. I have a friend who was in student work for some years. One of the things he told me, with alarm and distress, was that in their church they held a party on a Saturday afternoon for all the young people. The dress was complete undress—they all went naked, men and women. When my friend protested to the minister's wife, she mocked him and said, 'You haven't got over your inhibitions yet.' The youth of Europe is modern, but the plain word of God, preached and studied vigorously, still works.

I have seen a similar movement of the Holy Spirit of God in the second place that I have been invited to from time to time. Some of those who have been converted have given themselves full-time to the work, and fifteen to twenty of them will go for a week of study. All morning until late afternoon, and all evening until twelve o'clock, vigorously studying the word.

When I was there recently a man came to me. He was the manager of a large company; a Roman Catholic who had got converted. He was telling me of certain tapes that I had given him, 'David, I've spent two hundred hours listening to those tapes'—and it's not just listening for the sake of being entertained. He and his fellow-believers develop them and add their own studies to it, and go into the homes of the unconverted. It's marvellous to see the word of God thus thriving in those countries. It still works: it is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). When their young people get converted, they take that as normal, because they've never known anything else.

I was in a large European city about three years ago, where there are a few American missionaries and some locals. They work with this kind of method; study groups among the unconverted in various forms and phases. The leaders were at one of these study weeks, about twenty of them, working morning, noon and night. One of the young gentlemen invited me to dinner. He was a PhD scientist in one of the big firms. He had come to the Lord a year or two ago. The missionary had now moved on further, so he was in charge of the evangelistic Bible study. One of the reasons for asking me to dinner was to say, 'Last week, the people asked me this question and that question and the other question. I didn't know what to say to them. What is the answer to that?' It was marvellous to see the zeal in such a recent convert, but he doesn't know anything different. For him, Christianity is hearing the word of God, discovering God and finding salvation. The wonder of it is that he launched straight into evangelistic studies with his own neighbours. That's normal. It's what they know Christianity to be. One farmer I stayed with, I noticed that three nights a week he was out at such studies amongst his neighbours. These things I find exceedingly encouraging.

As I have said, the methods do not necessarily work in exactly the same way in every country, because of the different cultures and so forth and so on. But to my mind at least, they stand as witness that God is not yet dead. These assemblies are forging ahead and that is an interesting thing. However, assemblies in other countries have not found the way so easy. Yes, when they have conferences, they would perhaps get twelve hundred people over the two or three days, particularly in the evenings. But they haven't seen the growth of new assemblies, even though they have tried to be faithful to God's word and pioneer in the gospel.

The church at Corinth and the fundamentals of the gospel

Having said that, I must come to what my main concern is to share with you this afternoon. I base my remarks on what I perceive to be Paul's thesis in his first letter to the Corinthians.

The Corinthians, as you know, were a reliable church. If there was a right way of doing something and a wrong way, they could be relied upon to do it the wrong way, so they were highly reliable. I must be careful what I say about them. I've got to meet them in Glory one of these days, so let me moderate my language about them, but they were, as you know, in all sorts of difficulties and troubles.

When Paul wrote to them he wasn't afraid, of course, to lay down an apostolic command or an apostolic prohibition now and again. But the main method he had of correcting the wrongs in the church at Corinth was to bring them back to the fundamental principles of the gospel. I mean that in its broadest term. It's not merely, 'Look here, come back to church principles.' What he brings them back to is *the fundamentals of the gospel*.

1. Christ was crucified for us

Listen to the man. 'Oh, my dear Corinthians, you can't go on doing that stupid thing, calling yourself by names after different men, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and the rest of them. You can't do it because it conflicts with the very first principle of the gospel. Was Paul crucified for you, by any chance?' (see 1 Cor 1:13). Of course not.

'Were you baptized in the name of Paul?' No, of course not. 'Well if Paul wasn't crucified for you, and if you were not baptized in the name of Paul, why do you call yourself after the name of Paul? It's inconsistent at the very basis of the gospel—*Christ was crucified for us*' (see v. 23).

2. Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us

Listen to him again in chapter 5. 'My brethren, you have to take this whole situation in hand. This frightful immorality that has broken out among you is of such a kind not tolerated even among the pagan Greeks' (see v. 1). Greeks took some shocking, generally. You would have to tell a Greek that fornication was wrong, for he wouldn't have known that naturally. But here was the church allowing a case of immorality, such as would shock the pagan Greeks.

'You'll have to deal with it. You can't let it go on,' said Paul, 'because it would undermine the very basic principles of the gospel—"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth"' (5:7-8). 'You cannot have the

redemption of Passover without the obligation of holiness. If you allow it, you are corrupting and debasing and misrepresenting the very gospel—“*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*” (v. 7).

3. The blood of the new covenant

Says Paul, ‘You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons’ (10:21). It would conflict with the very basis of the gospel, because that is disloyalty to God himself: a case of idolatry of the worst order.

‘You’ll have to alter the way you’re conducting the Breaking of Bread,’ says he, ‘because it’s impossible for anybody to eat the Lord’s Supper when it has become so beclouded and overshadowed by all other kinds of things that its significance is completely lost. You’ll have to change it.’

Why bother about the Lord’s Supper? Because it is the very basic covenant document of the church—‘*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*’ (11:25).

4. Spiritual gifts

‘And you’ve got some very curious practices when it comes to the gifts,’ says Paul. ‘Hopelessly out of proportion and ill motivated. You’ll have to change that too because the way you’re going on conflicts with the very basic motivation of the Christian faith, which is love, and you’re using the gifts in a way that conflicts with love—I will show you a still more excellent way’ (see 12:31; ch. 13).

5. Resurrection

And finally he says to them, ‘Now you’ve got some very strange ideas circulating in Corinth. I hear that some of you are saying that there is no resurrection. Has it not dawned on you that if there is no resurrection there is no gospel? If there’s no resurrection, Christ isn’t risen; and if Christ isn’t risen you’re still in your sins and there’s nothing in the gospel whatsoever’ (see 15:12–19).

‘You can’t go on allowing this kind of false teaching in your church. It conflicts with the gospel—“*Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*” (v. 20).

Fluffing the gospel

The more I have thought about that over these recent years, the more important it has appeared to me to be. From time to time, my dear brethren, we need to look again at the way we behave in our churches, to make sure that what we are doing and preaching does not conflict with the basic principles of the gospel. So, before I come down to particulars, let me say something general here.

Not to speak unkindly, but as I travel round the world it perturbs me to see what appears to me as a fluffing of the gospel itself. I refer to the way now in which many evangelical churches and organizations are beginning to think it is perfectly all right to cooperate with the Roman Catholic Church or with the Orthodox Church in evangelical campaigns, and in other

situations as well, on the grounds, for instance, that there are increasing numbers of believers among Roman Catholics in these days. That is true, of course, and praise God for it. But Roman Catholicism itself has not changed. It uses the same terms, but our danger is that it doesn't mean what we mean by those terms.

For over a year, most weeks I met with a particular group to study the word, the majority of whom were Catholics, 'Catholic charismatics'. A Christian friend of mine asked me to come and have a Bible study with them, so I said yes, of course I would. Over the weeks I found that they never used, or didn't like to use, the term 'justification by faith'. They talked about 'sanctifying grace'. So I went to a Catholic bookshop and got a book on sanctifying grace. This was the 'New Catholicism'. As I began to read it, it was like C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*. Marvellous stuff, or so it seemed. It said that sanctifying grace is nothing other than a personal relationship with the Lord, like salvation is a personal relationship with the Lord: Christ living in you, that is salvation. 'Of course,' they said, 'if you sin, that breaks the fellowship, but you can have it restored by confession.'

I thought it could have been written by John Stott himself, until I got to the chapter entitled, 'What happens when we die?' It began as follows. 'When we come to die, few of us, if any, will feel that we've ever done anything worthy of being damned.'

I said to myself, 'What's that? "None of us has done anything worthy of being damned"?' What on earth is Romans 3 about, that says, 'so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God and subject to his judgment' (see v. 19).

'We've never done anything worthy of being damned,' said the book. Not on their terms, because baptism is said to put away the stain of Adam's sin, and if you've never committed a mortal sin you haven't done anything worthy of being damned. Only some peccadillos, smaller sins, and God will accept repentance of those.

The next thing was, 'None of us will feel fit to enter the presence of God at once. In fact, when we first see God, we shall shrink away in absolute terror and be glad to go to purgatory.'

Exit faith, of course. And if you ask how that can be so in the minds of people writing this book, advocating that salvation is by grace, then you must understand that by *grace* they don't mean what you mean. They mean that, having been regenerated by baptism, you have washed away Adam's sin, and are now in the running to go to heaven. But it all depends how much you improve. It's the grace of Christ that helps you to improve. Whether you ever get into heaven or not will depend upon how much you have improved by the time you come to die, and you can't know that until the final judgment. The likelihood is that you will not have improved enough, and therefore you'll have to go to purgatory. Of course, if you should eventually improve enough to be admitted into heaven, you'll say it was by God's grace, because he gave you the strength to do what was necessary to get the improvement. But it's likely you'll have to spend a long time in purgatory before the process is complete.

That is not *salvation by grace* as the Bible means it, and I am perturbed by the way evangelicals in many countries are imagining that somehow Rome has become almost evangelical overnight. To hear great gospel campaigns and others calling upon unconverted folks to come and renew their baptismal vows seems to me to be dangerous language. It presupposes that in their childhood baptism they were born again, and what they must do is

to come and renew the promises of their sponsors. If we're not careful, we shall fluff the gospel.

Behaving consistently with our beliefs

You may remember Paul in Galatians telling us that he had to rebuke Peter when he acted inconsistently with what he really believed. By his behaviour Peter gave the impression that he did not believe that salvation was absolutely by grace, when he wasn't prepared to eat with Gentile believers because they were not circumcised. Peter was guilty of hypocrisy. Not by pretending to be what he wasn't, but by pretending not to believe what he did believe. He didn't walk one hundred percent consistently with the gospel, and Paul had to rebuke him for it.

We need to do that, don't we? Who wouldn't be glad that the Bible is being read by millions of people who never would have been read it before, but the Bible Societies have consented to publish Bibles with the Apocrypha added. I happen to be a Septuagintalist, and one of my concerns is the text of the Old Testament, and the whole question of what books should be included in the Bible arises ultimately from the Septuagint. That is the crux of the whole business. Surely it is not a small thing to give into the public's hand a Bible containing books that our Lord would never have acknowledged to be the word of God? Books that tell the public that they can say, 'Well I've done the best I can, and I'm sorry if I've come short.' At least one book in the Apocrypha preaches the rightness of purgatory. The gospel is at stake, and the question of what the word of God is. Septuagint scholars with whom I have to work at university level will argue that it's no good going back to the old Hebrew Scriptures, for when the Holy Spirit had the Septuagint translated into Greek, that was the Holy Spirit revising and reinterpreting the Old Testament. The Church took it over, and as the centuries go along the Church reinterprets it, and today's interpretation is tomorrow's Bible. That's how it always was, and how it always will be, so they tell me.

But that isn't what you or I believe, is it? In standing for what the Bible is, we're standing for the very basics of the gospel, are we not?

What should we call ourselves, then?

Now a few other minor murmurings. Please don't class me with the *murmurers* in the wilderness who assaulted the ears of Moses. I'm hoping to get into the promised land, so please have patience with me.

Take the first section of Corinthians, where Paul forbids the believers to take the names of Peter, Paul or Apollos. I know that the matter goes much deeper than mere labels, but even at that superficial level, why does it ban the taking of labels?

Why mustn't I say, 'I am of Peter'?

Paul says that it contradicts the gospel. To be frank with you, gentlemen, I have been perturbed in this last twenty years about the sprouting forth of denominational labels in assemblies. Groups of believers who formerly have been content to be Christian churches are now labelling themselves 'Christian Brethren'. Since I don't belong to that, you'll allow me to

speaking freely, I hope, without hurting any of your feelings. I can't really understand why you should wish to call yourselves Christian Brethren, thus demarcating yourselves and showing the world that you're different from me, for instance. I know I'm an Englishman, but there you are. Why must we introduce another label into all the confusion of Christendom? I fancy perhaps that here I'm unduly critical; I shall need your levelling judgment. But I fear that behind it is a process towards *federation*.

I was at a missionary conference a year or two ago with a friend of mine. A gentleman, knowing where we came from, told us that he was coming to Ireland very soon.

We said, 'What for?'

He said, 'I'm a representative on the World Council of Churches Committee for Evangelism.'

My gracious friend said, 'You don't come to represent me.'

There have been moves in Europe, and indeed in the whole world, to have *pan-brethren* conferences. That is, a kind of jamboree of Christian Brethren churches. It is a lovely thing for Christians to get together, isn't it?

I was in Czechoslovakia before the Iron Curtain came down, and when my brethren got used to me and felt some confidence they confessed their worries to me. They had been invited out, their expenses paid, to some such conference, where nations were asked to send delegates to this convention of the Christian Brethren. To their alarm, they found that it was some kind of international organization with all the skeletons of a denomination. They trembled for what might happen to them when they got home and the communist government found out that what they thought were *independent* churches, were in fact linked to a Western organization.

My dear brethren, I mention it to you as a worry that I have. In my part of the world where I live, I'm surrounded by brethren on the left hand and on the right. My good brethren on the right hand, sometimes their conscience would not allow them to have me to preach—and they're probably sensible men for that reason. 'When you go on the continent or to Russia,' they say, 'do you go outside our assemblies?' They think in denominational terms: there is a group of assemblies that are *theirs*.

How would you decide that question in Germany? I wonder whether any of you know who are 'your brethren' in Germany among all the believers there? Which assemblies in Germany are the Christian Brethren? The ones that are still in the *Bünde*, or the *frien bunden*? The ones that have come out of the *Bünde*, or the really doubly-free *frien bunden*, which are two stages further removed out of the *Bünde*? Which are the Christian Brethren? If you want to force them into further division, ask them to declare which sort of group they belong to!

My earnest desire before the Lord would be to see these kinds of things healed. All federation of churches divides God's people. *Ponder that remark*. It has always been true. If you create a federation, you will divide assemblies between those that will join you and those that won't. Would it not have been better not to enforce federation, but to encourage fellowship and bring God's people together to get over those hang-ups that so very often keep them apart?

Discipline in the church

On the question of church discipline, we must have it, surely? Since St Augustine and others, and then by the magisterial reformers, the idea became popular that we're forbidden to excommunicate anybody from the church. According to the magisterial reformers, the church is the place where the sacraments are duly ordered, but it could contain believers and unbelievers. The argument used to be, 'That's what our Lord said in the parable of the Weeds' (Matt 13:24–30). You mustn't try and root out unbelievers, lest you root out the genuine wheat as well. It was made an excuse for having a church composed of believers and unbelievers. Of course, nowadays most people see that it was false exegesis. Our Lord was not speaking of the church in that parable. The field was the world; the angels who came to separate out the weeds were not the elders of the local church, but the angels at the final judgment. The thing had nothing to do with the church.

As Paul lays down in chapter 5, there must be godly discipline in the church. Why? Well, so that the man who has offended might be brought to repentance and his spirit saved (v. 5). That's the object of discipline, isn't it? But for the sake of the gospel too. If you allowed such behaviour to go unjudged in the church, you might as well pack up preaching the gospel in Corinth, for no Greek would listen to you, so shocked would he be by that kind of conduct. I'm not supposing that any such lurid thing is true of any assembly anywhere that I know of.

The Lord's Supper

Who may participate?

In some countries and in some places nowadays, I do notice a tendency to have the Lord's Supper and invite anybody who's there to participate, leaving it to themselves to decide. That's lovely, if you're sure they're believers. I believe with all my heart that we are to receive all believers as the Lord has received us, but not unbelievers to the Lord's Supper.

Not so long ago I was in an assembly where such an invitation was given. At lunch there were some present who had been there and had taken the emblems. They told us they weren't saved, not believers in our sense at all. My brethren, it might be the tiniest little aberration and exception to a general rule, but it's done enough in so many places that it worries me, lest we are going back to what has become prevalent with many Christian groups over the years. People come and take the emblems and apparently belong to the church, but they are not converted. The theory is that you join the church and somehow that's a help to you to get converted.

Surely we know what that kind of thing has led to, at least we do in our country. As one person put it to me, 'when the minister preaches, you don't know who he's preaching to; whether he's preaching to the unconverted outside the church or inside the church, or who's who.' You wouldn't just baptize anybody who came and asked to be baptized, would you? Wouldn't you first find out whether they were believers, lest we give people the wrong impression, that taking the Christian sacraments is somehow a way of being saved? This too is important.

What is its significance?

Paul mentions the Lord's Supper in chapter 11. There too, the Corinthians had to be corrected. However you use the terminology—and I know people disagree about it these days—what was actually happening in Corinth was that, before the Breaking of Bread, they were having a *fellowship meal*. Lovely in itself, but now the fellowship meal had become so abused, and used as an ordinary secular meal almost, that the significance of the fellowship was gone. It was quite impossible for people with their stuffed stomachs, half-drunk some of them, to concentrate on the significance of the Breaking of Bread itself. 'You mustn't do that,' says Paul.

Distractions and deviations

Allow me a minor gripe, and then a bigger one. Nowadays, in many places that I go to, music is played while the emblems are going round. I'm no great musician, but I love music—simple music that I can understand. However, if you play me a hymn when I'm trying to concentrate on the Lord and the emblems and their significance, I shall generally know your hymn and the words will fill my mind so much that I'm automatically following them and can't for the life of me concentrate on what I'm doing. I can't think, and you must be aware, gentlemen, that there are others like me sometimes in your congregation.

Four or five months ago, I was in another country far from here. They not only had music while the emblems were going round, on the balcony they had drums such as I would expect to hear in a student whatnot at a university. I don't know how on earth the drummers could concentrate on what they were doing. I know that I couldn't, for the noise blew me off course completely. My brethren, that's not a small matter, surely? But I come to the bigger concern, and that is the way in which the Lord's Supper in some places is being turned into a five-or ten-minute conclusion to an otherwise general message. There are no rules and regulations in holy Scripture as to the length of the breaking of bread, but it is important.

God's values

The second gripe is this. It's the notion that we must not concentrate on the Lord's Supper so much, because it's so very gloomy. It is true that sometimes people have concentrated on the psychological effect of the cross, and that isn't healthy, is it? Rome with her crucifixes has concentrated on the psychological effect of the physical sufferings, but the New Testament is very sparing with the account of the physical sufferings of Christ. It's not the physical suffering so much as it is the moral and spiritual issues that were at stake at Calvary. If we find those moral and spiritual issues gloomy and advise our young people not to concentrate on them too much, then we are unfitting them for heaven.

The resurrection will tell us of the triumphant life of Christ; but it is not the resurrection, it is Calvary that shows us what God's values are, upon which the very joys of heaven are founded. The gems of heaven, the pearls and the gold, are not imitation—they're not paste diamonds. They are real diamonds; spiritual ones, of course. What does their value depend on? Their value depends on the values that God maintained when Jesus Christ, his Son, died for our sins at Calvary. It will be a sad thing in assemblies if the Breaking of Bread comes to be a minor little appendage, fraught with all kinds of spiritual decline.

I was in another church some time ago. They were a young church, feeling their way. Yes, they had done valiant things, and I was asked to go and help them. They were trying to come more and more towards the New Testament pattern of things, so I went along, and the first session was the Breaking of Bread. The second session was a general preaching meeting. The first session was very poorly attended and the second had a large congregation. The young man and one of his fellow elders were asking me on the way home what I thought of it all.

I said, 'I've only been with you one day, but I did notice the difference in numbers in the second meeting. I suppose a large number of those were strangers and outsiders.'

'No, no, they were members of the church.'

I said, 'What do you mean, members of the church? They weren't at the Breaking of Bread.'

'We have a lot of members in our church who don't come to the Breaking of Bread.'

I said, 'How long are you going to allow that to go on?'

The new covenant and evidence of genuine repentance

Central to the Lord's Supper is the fact that our Lord took the cup, and said, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20). And in Hebrews, it says: 'And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds"' (10:15-16). When we come to the Breaking of Bread, we come to meet the King, to hear rehearsed again the terms of the new covenant he has made with us, and lay hold of the marvellous promise, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more' (v. 17).

At Pentecost Peter told the crowd that they would have to be publicly baptized in the name of Jesus. He wasn't preaching baptism somehow as a sacramental means of forgiveness. A few weeks before, they had stood publicly crying for the murder of Jesus Christ. Now that they said they repented, God was not prepared to take their say-so for it unless they showed works worthy of repentance (see Matt 3:8); by their life and attitude they showed that they had indeed repented. You will 'save yourselves from this crooked generation,' said Peter (Acts 2:40). 'You can't still stand with the murderers of the Lord Jesus and simultaneously say that you have repented of his murder.' God won't take your say-so for it.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (vv. 41-42)

Attendance was summoned by the King himself to observe his new covenant and his process of keeping and writing his laws on our hearts. Attendance is the outward evidence that we have genuinely repented, and believers who say that they have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as King and Lord and have repented, but can't be bothered to turn up at the Lord's Supper, where is the evidence of repentance in that? If any of that is true, gentlemen, it means that we have to insist on the exceeding importance of the Breaking of Bread and not allow it to become just a little appendage, added on while the music plays and the drums go, before the next meeting.

But I have gone on too long, and probably abused your kindness in asking me to come. The Lord grant us all wisdom in our day and generation that we may be faithful shepherds of his people and faithful teachers of his word.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.