

**Maintaining Assembly
Principles and Spiritual Vigour**
1 Timothy

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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Maintaining Assembly Principles & Spiritual Vigour

Let us turn in our Bibles to Paul's first Epistle to Timothy. We will read a selection of passages calculated to lead our hearts into profound thanksgiving and worship of the majestic glories of the God who loves us, and the immeasurable depths of his grace.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1:12–17)

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (2:1–7)

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (3:14–16)

For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. (4:10)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (5:21)

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen. (6:13–16)

May God give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, that our hearts may see afresh the glories of our God and our Saviour.

Introduction

We are met here, firstly, to honour our God and our Lord Jesus Christ; and secondly, to rejoice with the members of this particular assembly as they celebrate the years of God's goodness to them. You have heard just now that they began their public testimony for the Lord 125 years ago, and by his grace they have continued to this present time. All of us who are not members of this church rejoice with you in all that God has done for you in these many years. The potted history that we have just listened to moves my admiration for you. You have not insisted with unintelligent doggedness to remain as a church in one and the same place over all these years—to remain whether there were those who could profit from your witness or not, simply because you were determined to stay where you had originally been put. You had the God-given intelligence to look upon the fields to see where you could be the more effective for God. You moved not once, nor twice, nor three times, but four times, so that in the course of the years you might fulfil your ministry to saint and sinner the more effectively. You have set us a shining example to emulate and follow. We are glad to share your joy at this anniversary as we stand with you in your courage and your faith, in all the prospect of what God will yet do for you in the coming years until the Lord shall come.

I personally count it a great honour to be allowed to take part in this, your year of anniversary. I hope you will not think that I detract at all from your anniversary when I say that this year I'm celebrating an anniversary of my own. Not an ordinary anniversary either, but nothing short of a jubilee of fifty whole years. You scarce thought I was old enough, but I am! This year I celebrate this jubilee of fifty solid years since first I stepped on to the hallowed soil of Northern Ireland. It was in Christmas of 1948 and the January that followed that I first became acquainted with Northern Ireland and the believers who lived here. And I would like publicly to express in my jubilee year my profound thanks to you, my Christian friends, and to all my thousands of Christian friends throughout this province, for all the kindness and grace, and patience and care, and love that you have bestowed upon me. I thank you for the stimulus that your example has given me, in particular your zeal for the Lord. We cold Englishmen naturally admire your warm hearts and your burning zeal for the Lord, and particularly your zeal for the gospel and for the spreading of that gospel through missionary work around the world. Thank you, my dear brothers and sisters. I value your help and your kindness and your example, these fifty years.

A message from 1 Timothy

In that time I have observed that there is an unwritten rule—unwritten because it's not in Scripture—that no preacher should ever preach the same sermon twice, at least not to the same audience! There's something offensive in doing that, and it seems to be almost an invariable rule. I haven't yet found it in Scripture and I confess that, as I read the gospels, I get the impression that the Lord Jesus told the same parable on different occasions in slightly different words. But if it be a rule, there are some who get round it by preaching from a different verse every time they preach, but in the course of their remarks, saying very much the same thing as they said on other occasions! So these rules, though unwritten and apparently inflexible, can be got round!

I want to confess that when I first came to Northern Ireland and, by the great courage of the conveners of the Christmas conference where I was allowed to address the gathered throng, I dared to preach from 1 Timothy, written by Paul to his colleague. I suspect I've preached on it many times since. I want to preach on it again tonight. Those fifty years ago, I preached it with youthful, though rather raw, enthusiasm. I trust tonight that I preach with a little bit more maturity, gathered through the experience of years. But I want to preach on it because, in my jubilee year, I want to profess again my faith that in this epistle by Paul—and in his second to Timothy and the letter to Titus—we have the living words of the living God, as applicable and necessary to the health of the church today as they were when they were originally spoken and written through the Apostle Paul.

I say that against the background of the knowledge that one has acquired in the course of the years, of the many tides which have run against the bulwarks of this particular epistle. Certainly in the circles of academic theology there has been a very strong argument put forth for many years that these pastoral epistles, as they're called, were not written by Paul but by somebody else at a much later stage in the development of Christendom, perhaps at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second. When you enquire of these academic theologians what makes them think that this letter to Timothy was not written by Paul, but comes from a much later stage, they will point to the difference between what is being said in 1 Timothy and what you find in the earlier letters of Paul written to the churches which he founded. For example they say that 1 Corinthians is very different in emphasis from the emphasis of 1 Timothy. In Corinthians, the organization of the church is scarcely mentioned: in all the chapters of 1 and 2 Corinthians the word 'elder' or 'overseer' is never used. Instead, his letters to those churches picture a church which is vibrant with life, full of spontaneous activity. The emphasis lies not on organization but on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is obviously a church where there was much spiritual life, spontaneous and energetic, full of the first flush of the enjoyment of the gospel.

They say how different is 1 Timothy: there the gifts of the Spirit are scarcely mentioned. Their spontaneity seems to have gone. Now it's a question of rules and regulations—what the men may do and what the women may do, and elders and deacons, and other such things. They say that this is the mark of a much later age when the church had lost its first love, and the spontaneity and joy and wonder of the Holy Spirit's presence among them. And they've settled down to the dreariness of organized Christendom, the legality of which had crushed out almost all the spontaneity of spiritual life.

That's a big charge, and is grossly unfair. Let me take an analogy. You will have observed the romantic glow on the face of the courting couple and the newlyweds! They seem scarcely to be walking with both feet on earth, such is the glow and the wonder of this newfound relationship. That's natural, isn't it? You wouldn't quite expect it to show in the same way on the faces of those who have been married for fifty years! Life has intervened with all the practicalities, and the bringing up of children, and the anxieties of daily life, and all that kind of thing. But if some spontaneity seems to have disappeared, yet you would be ill advised to suppose that the marriage had gone sour or that the love and life of it had been crushed out by mere routine and legality. It wouldn't be true, would it? No, that's the natural course of events. We can't all of us all of the time live in the first flush of conversion, but our relationship

with the Lord will grow deeper as the years go by and, we trust, become the more mature but nonetheless real.

Of course, I'm not denying the obvious fact of history that eventually the Christian churches lost their first love. The very church in which Timothy was serving when he received this letter from Paul had lost its first love, and they were in danger of having their candlestick removed. And it is true that, as the centuries went by, the spontaneity and simplicity of the early churches and the presidency of the Holy Spirit in the control of the church were largely forgotten. As a substitute, the church developed all kinds of organization, modelled largely on the organizations of imperial Rome. Now you had a whole hierarchy of complex organization from laity to deacons, to priests, to bishops, to archbishops, to cardinals, to popes, and then finally to the emperor himself. And, yes, it is the fact of history what enormous repression resulted from that unfortunate organization.

Happily, God from time to time raised up those who protested and sought once more the simplicity of the New Testament churches, and the freedom and spontaneity which God originally gave to them. One thinks of those believers in North Africa and elsewhere who resisted the attempts to centralize Christianity with a worldwide headquarters, and to tie it in with the State and all those kind of things. One thinks of the Waldensians in the mountains of Italy and France, and one thinks of the churches of South Africa which paid dearly for their opposition to this kind of organization. We praise God for the coming of the reformation and the freedoms it regained. We praise God even more for those dear friends of ours who saw that the reformers had not gone far enough—that the true church of God must be a gathering of true born-again believers, and not a State institution of which all the members of the State are members whether converted or not. Believers who sought to press what Scripture teaches—the baptism of believers and not baptismal regeneration, which is the only method by which you can have a State church in which all the members of the State are members of the church.

Yes, we honour those tonight who stood for the simplicities of God's word, and the simplicities of the early church, to get back to the word of God and to the presidency of the Lord in the Holy Spirit in the churches. But that said, are we to listen to the suggestions that sometimes are made that if we, in our generation, give too much attention to epistles like 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, with all their admonitions as to how the churches should be run, we too might be in danger of losing the spontaneity of life within the church, and end up with a kind of legalism that cripples and becomes lifeless? How should we avoid such a thing? How can we follow the clear teaching of the word of God as to how an assembly should be run, and at the same time manage to maintain a vigorous, active life within the church?

The living God

It seems to me that the answer to that question lies on virtually every page of this epistle and is well summed up in the middle section when Paul is describing how we ought to behave in the household of God:

which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (3:15)

Catch with me that very important adjective. The household of God, says Paul, 'is the church of the *living* God.' Oh, thank God for that reality. Behind the churches of God's people stand not just a collection of rules nor codes of practice. At the heart of that dwelling place that is the church of God, stands the living God, that living, divine, infinite, majestic and awe-inspiring power, and a personality not just a code of rules. If we would behave ourselves well in the church of God, then it seems to me obvious that our first and fundamental and constant need is this, that we should become ever more acquainted with that glorious living person, the living God who dwells at its heart and centre. I think it was for this reason that Paul admitted that he constantly, day after day, bowed his knees in the presence of God on behalf of his converts, and prayed for the believers that God would give them the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of God. You see, my brethren, knowing God is in part knowing the words that stand upon the page of holy Scripture. We cannot know those words too well or too many. But is there something beyond it?

These Ephesian believers to whom Paul wrote had received the Holy Spirit when they trusted Christ. There was no doubt about it. Yet after they trusted Christ, Paul constantly prayed that they might be given by God:

a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. (Eph 1:17–20)

Hearts enlightened

I was reading a very interesting book the other day, written by a scientist. His theme was light—physical light, moral light, spiritual light. In his book he gave the testimony of certain eye surgeons, to the effect that sometimes when they have performed an operation on the eyes of somebody hitherto blind, and restored the mechanism of eyesight so that the light can come into them, and in that sense they see, yet often that is not enough. As well as the sight of the eyes, the mind has to learn to see. They quoted the example of a man long blind. When they had successfully operated on his eyes and they thought he could see, the surgeon waved his hands in front of the man's face and said, 'What do you see?'

'I don't see anything.'

'But, surely you must do.'

'No,' he said. 'I see a sort of a difference of light and shade, but that's all I see.'

'No,' said the surgeon, 'it's my hand I'm putting in front of your eyes.'

'Oh, is that what it is. I didn't know.'

The brain hadn't learnt to see what the eyes were seeing. The innermost heart of the man, the mind, had to be taught.

My dear brothers and sisters, if our assemblies are going to maintain that delightful spontaneity and vigour of spiritual life, we too surely shall need to pray with Paul that the eyes of our hearts be enlightened, and given a spirit of wisdom and revelation indeed, in the

knowledge of him, so that our very hearts may see what the words that we read are trying to tell us, and that God becomes a reality to us. 'He's the living God,' says Paul.

In the Old Testament, when Solomon was allowed to build the house of God in Jerusalem, God had it decorated, and supplied with all kinds of furniture and installations. In the holy place, there was the ark of God, with the cherubim on top of the ark. And then God had two great olivewood cherubim standing behind the ark with their wings outstretched, one wing from that wall and to the middle, another wing from the middle to the opposite wall. The cherubim are called in Scripture the 'living ones', and when those cherubim looked out, so to speak, on the walls of the house of God, they saw the walls decorated with flowers and palm trees, and other cherubim. Everywhere you went inside that house shouted to you in its symbolic decorative language, 'This is the house of the living God. There's a living presence in this house.' Although the great prophet Elijah never went near that house as far as we know, he lived in the reality of these things and was in the habit of opening his address to rebellious monarchs with the words, 'As the Lord lives before whom I stand.' Yes, what shall save us from losing the spontaneity and vigour of spiritual life as we faithfully seek to carry out the directions for the running of the church? I suggest it starts here with the vigorous, personal, and then collective experience of the reality of the living God in our midst. Let me take one example for the moment because, if we have caught sight of the living God and God is pleased to reveal the reality of his character to us, it will affect the way we teach in the church.

God as King

In chapter 1, in order to correct certain faults in the teaching of the church at Ephesus, Paul eventually comes round to talking to them of God as King.

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever.
Amen. (1:17)

God as King. But did I hear somebody say that in the church we've nothing to do with God as King? 'We're in the church, we're not in the kingdom. It is nowhere said in Scripture that our blessed Lord Jesus is King of the church. Mr Preacher, you ought to know that, in your supposed fifty years. You ought to have observed that Christ is described as the Lord of the church, not the King of the church. 'King' is for Jews. It's the Lordship of Christ for believers in the church.' That may be, but we're not outside the kingdom of God, are we? Is God not King to us? Certainly, we're under his kingly rule. Listen to Paul talking to the Corinthians.

But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. (1 Cor 4:19-20)

Surely, in the church, we are meant to experience God as King and his kingly rule. And the question arises, 'What is the rule of God like as King?' How does he run the church? As I said, it will affect the teaching in the church.

God's law

In chapter 1, Paul points out that they had a difficulty in the teaching that was going on in the church.

Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. (1:6–7)

They want to teach the law. Now, the commentators disagree as to which law he means. It's obvious that Paul doesn't approve—in this sense, teaching the law is not right. So what does he mean by teaching the law? Some say that he must be talking about a lot of silly manmade laws: he can't be talking about the law of God, surely. But surely it is right to teach the law of God. Certainly we should never teach anything that comes below the standards of our majestic King, who is here described as eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God. Nothing should be taught that would derogate from his glory and his majesty and his holiness.

Paul himself would teach the law, but the position is this. 'The law,' says Paul in his epistles, 'is holy and just, and good' (see Rom 7:12). There is nothing wrong with the law, and indeed it is God's intention that the righteous requirement of the law should be fulfilled in us (see Rom 8:4). The question is how? How does the great King of the ages whose law it is, get that law obeyed and fulfilled in the hearts of his subjects? We need to get that straight. Our concept of God as King and what kind of a king he is, and how he governs, will affect the way we teach in the church. It's possible to teach assembly truth as though it were law—a set of rules and regulations which, however uncomfortable, have to be grimly followed and woe betide you if you don't. That's how the old Pharisees used to teach their law. It wasn't very successful, and it turned very few of them into holy men and women. It turned many of them into proud folks, thinking they'd kept all the rules. No, we're not supposed to teach assembly truth as law.

How would you preach it? I'd say I want to preach it as a veritable gospel! It's surely the best news you ever heard: it's part of the gospel. Take the question of the exercise of gifts in the church. How does it ever become possible? Well, Paul explains it in 1 Corinthians 12. He says that it was when you trusted Christ, Christ himself baptized you in the Holy Spirit, and made you to drink of the Holy Spirit, with the result that he formed you into the body of Christ, each one of you with a gift (see 1 Cor 12:13). It's part of the saving work of Christ that forms us into the body of Christ. This is glorious stuff. It's the glorious gift of salvation, formed by Christ through the medium of his Holy Spirit, forming us into one body and giving us gifts to exercise. Marvellous. That's assembly truth. It is not just law, it is positively gospel. How does God as King get people to obey his law? We know that law by itself can't save. We're clear on that, aren't we? 'For by works of the law no human being will be justified' (Rom 3:20). But then we discover the very root of the gospel and the secret of the success of the gospel—'it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes' (Rom 1:16). That is how the gospel proceeds, not by our doing the works of the law but by the hearing of faith.

It's true that the law cannot justify and cannot sanctify. We learn that from Romans 6–8. Paul, giving his own experience, has to admit, 'Oh, wretched man that I am. There is God's holy law. I want to keep it, I delight in it, I do my very best to keep it. I grit my teeth and

determine to keep it, and yet I can't keep it' (see Rom 7:18–24). Now, that's the truth: the law cannot justify and cannot sanctify. Well, then, what is the secret of getting believers to fulfil the law of God? Says Paul, 'Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (Rom 6:14). The secret of sanctification is not just gritting my teeth to determine to keep God's law. May God help me to keep it. But true sanctification is that gracious union with Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit within us, that we do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit (Rom 8:4)—dead with Christ, buried with Christ, risen with Christ, and led by his Holy Spirit. This is the secret, and we see it evidenced in the life of the man who wrote this letter, as now he looks back on his own years of experience, in particular on his conversion.

'You want to teach law in the church at Ephesus?' says Paul in dismay. He himself had tried all those years to follow the law and to make himself acceptable to God, and to make himself into a holy man. He abysmally failed. What is more, he tells us that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent opponent. He had persecuted the church of God: in his religious zeal, he had stood over young men and women as believers and had them tortured until they cursed God and cursed the name of Jesus Christ. You say, 'However did the King change him?' How would you change a man like Saul of Tarsus and make him into a holy saint of God in whom the righteousness of the Lord could really be fulfilled? Paul tells us, in that glad message,

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1:15–16)

In times past when armies rebelled against their general, the general would teach the army a lesson. He would muster the troops and he'd ask them to number one to ten, down the ranks. And every tenth one that stood forward, he would command to be shot. It's what they called 'decimating the army'. They did it to put all the others in the right frame of mind. And here was Saul of Tarsus, what an enemy of God, what a persistent rebel, what a defiant blasphemer and torturer. How would God deal with him? How would you have dealt with him had you been King, eternal, immortal, and omnipotent in power? Squashed him out with your little finger, wouldn't you? Not God. How would he convert him? Says Paul,

the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (1:14)

What, the very Christ Jesus whom he'd been persecuting? Would he have mercy? Would he put up with it and have mercy on him still? That is the very heart of the gospel. Says Paul, 'He had mercy on me and forgave my sin. And did he then promise to put me in some back seat in heaven? Certainly not. He had mercy on me, and daring to count me faithful and daring to trust me, he put me into his service.'

Would you have done that? I don't think I would. 'What, Paul? Well, I'm glad to hear he's converted. We'll give him ten years to see whether he's genuine. And then we might consider allowing him to take an infants class in the Sunday school, maybe.' But to take Saul of Tarsus,

get him converted and put him into the ministry, you would need a lot of faith. 'Yes,' says Paul, 'you would need a lot of faith, and you see the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.' The result turned him into one of God's choicest saints, and he never lost the sense of that initial love for Christ who had so redeemed him. My dear brethren and sisters, it is the gospel of God's grace that justifies us, and the gospel of God's grace that sanctifies us and shows us the right way in which God will achieve the fulfilling of his law in us individually and in the church. God forbid that we should ever lose that sense of our love for Christ and of the grace of God, and of the mercy of God, lest we should feel ourselves people that keep rules and are therefore superior to everybody else. God forbid it.

This church at Ephesus suffered a sad result, didn't they? Eventually they became skilled at discerning error and ex-communicating transgressors from the church, for that they are commended. But they lost their first love—their very correctness squeezed out their love for Christ, their first love of salvation and conversion (see Rev 2:2–4). So may the Lord help us ever more deeply to discover the God of grace, not only in our distant past conversion, but in our present and ever deepening experience. So that not losing our love for the Lord, we gladly bow to the kingship of God, and delight to do his will, for his commandments are not grievous. His commandments are not some stern, irritable law. His commandments are veritable gospel.

The gospel in a multi-cultural society

We have been thinking together on the secret of how to value and obey the directions given us in the pastoral epistles for the running of the church, and taking seriously God's law and his commandments, and yet not falling into the trap of becoming rigidly legalistic and thus crushing spontaneity and vigour in the church. We suggested that the secret is based in this: that the church is the church of the living God, and at its centre is not just a code of laws or rules but the living person of God. Our aim should therefore be to get to know God ever more deeply, and pray that we may be given the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him so that our mind and heart might be enlightened, and that we might know the purpose of his calling, his inheritance in the saints, and the power he has towards us. We must remember what the Christian doctrine is based upon: the word of the King is a word of salvation, not law as such—which can neither justify nor sanctify—but the grace of God and the mercy of God that teaches us to 'renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age' (Titus 2:12).

So then our concept of God will determine how and in what spirit we teach God's word amongst his people. It will also, says chapter 2, affect the way we look upon the world. For this too is a solemn responsibility given us by the Holy Spirit of God and our risen Lord, that we have to represent God to the world. That was no easy thing for the believers at Ephesus. They lived in a multicultural, multi-ethnic society with all their different cultural practices and behaviours, with all the multitude of different religions and all the possibilities for civil strife amongst the various ethnic groups. So how should the Christians rightly interpret God to the people who lived around them? 'There is one God,' says Paul, 'and there is one mediator between God and men' (2:5). And sometimes when you preach that gospel, people of different

religions take offence. 'Who do those Christians think they are? Our religion is as good as theirs.' Yes, my brothers and sisters, and if life goes on in the United Kingdom as it's going now, within a few more years, you may find it to be an offence against the law to stand up and say, 'There's only one Saviour.' Because the UK is becoming multi-ethnic and to say that there is only one Saviour is liable to offend certain other religious groups.

One message, one mediator

How do we rightly represent God in a multi-ethnic situation? Well, there's a simple answer to that. We preach there's only one God. That isn't offensive culturally, is it? There's only one law of mathematics that I've ever heard of: in arithmetic, for instance, two and two makes four in most parts of the world! There are some rules that are applicable to everyone. There's only one sun that our world goes around. Why should I, as an Englishman, be offended if somebody says that their moon is the only moon? I'd say, 'Well, it's our moon as well!' Yes, there is only one God. There's only one mediator. That's not arrogant either. Thank God there's only one. Do you know why there's only one? There could only be one sacrifice good enough. You don't need any more. He has paid the price of sin. If somebody paid off your mortgage for you, you wouldn't say, 'I object to that. I like everybody to have to pay their own way.' No, you would say, 'If he's paid it, I don't have to.' Thank the Lord for that. There is only one mediator who gave himself a ransom for all, and the ransom was big enough that you don't need any more payment or any more sacrifices. Isn't that a glorious message? That oughtn't to be offensive to anybody.

We are to pray for all people, whatever their political colour. We are to pray for all governments, whether they be democracies or autocracies, like imperial Rome was. (Nero, the Roman emperor alive when Paul wrote this, was no saint.) We are to pray for all that are in authority of whatever kind. Why must we do that? Paul tells us that this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, because God's attitude to them is what? He will have all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. And if that's God's attitude to men and women, we must also show it. We must not be guilty of party spirit. We must, in our conduct, show that we represent the God whose desire is that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

All means all

But just here, if we are going to represent God rightly, we shall have to do a little deeper thinking; for there are some godly men and women who nonetheless are persuaded that we should not take these statements just at their face value. There's one God who desires that all should be saved. But they say, 'Be careful how you understand that.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's a sense in which he doesn't want everyone to be saved.'

'Really? How's that?'

'Well, before the creation was made, God decided in his sovereign will that, all being sinners, he would save some and they would be saved, irresistibly saved in fact. And he decided to bypass others, and they would never be saved.'

‘But if that were true, God *doesn't* want all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. So what is Paul saying?’

‘You have to be careful how you understand “all”. It is all without distinction, but not all without exception. It means he will have all kinds of people to be saved—from every class, colour and nation—some of each, but not every single man and woman.’

According to this teaching, there are many that God never did intend to save. He didn't choose them and they can't be saved unless he gives them the faith to be saved with, and he's already decided never to give them that faith. If that were true, my brothers and sisters, it would seriously affect our attitude to the world of men and women at large. What is the truth of it? Does it really mean that God wants all kinds of men and women to be saved, but not every man and woman, boy and girl to be saved? How shall we understand it? Our concept of God not only affects the way we teach in the church, it will affect our attitude to the world and how we preach the gospel in the world. How shall we decide it?

For myself, I find it easier to listen to God himself speaking and acting. I take as one of my chief signposts the words of God recorded at the end of Romans 10. You will remember the passage: Paul is discussing the issue of why Israel is not saved. He preached his heart out in many a city to the Israelites, expounded their prophets, taught them about the Lord Jesus and his sacrifice. When he'd finished preaching, these very people who you might have expected to get saved—Jews brought up on the Bible—the majority refused to believe. How would you account for it? Is it that God never intended to save them, and that's why they didn't believe? Well, listen to God himself. At the end of that chapter, he is described through the words of Isaiah, speaking to these folks that have rejected and are rejecting the gospel. Listen to what he's saying to them:

All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people. (Rom 10:21)

What a magnificent gesture that is by the living God. Facing his children who have grown up and rebelled against him, as Isaiah says—and a nation which took his darling Son and nailed him to the cross. A nation that, when they heard the gospel of God's mercy in spite of their crucifixion of the Saviour, turned their backs and argued and refused to believe and be saved. What is God's attitude to them? ‘All day long,’ says he, ‘I have held out my hands.’ What kind of a gesture is that?

I've seen parents do it. When a little toddler is learning to walk and he's not quite sure whether he can make the distance, Mum gets down to his level and holds out her hands, encouraging the infant to come, and nearly touching him. He's only got a step, a centimetre, and Mum's hands will grab him. Mum wants him to come, and because she wants him to come, she stretches out her hands. The infant's got to take that step: he's got to learn to walk and the infant's got the desire to do it. Mum is holding out her hands, by that very gesture pleading with him to come.

So it is with God Almighty. Did you ever hear such a gospel! God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, faced with rebellious men and women, he's not only given his Son and sent his Spirit and preached the gospel a thousand times to them, but now he stands all day long. Is there no end to the patience of God? ‘All day long,’ says he, ‘I have held out my hands.’

Tell me, my brothers and sisters, what is the truth about God? Did he want them to come? Would he have them to be saved? Or is all this a charade? There are some who say that God has two sets of counsels. There are his open counsels that everybody can see and, according to his open counsel, he wants people to come. But there's another set of counsels that he took behind the scenes, his hidden counsels. And, according to them, he doesn't want them to come. For he's chosen to bypass them so that, even as he stands there publicly appearing to want them to come, behind the scenes, he knows they can't come unless he gives them the faith to come with. And he's not prepared to give them the faith to come with, because he decided long before they were even born that he was going to pass them by and let them perish in their sins. Do you believe it, that God is double-faced? He will stand pretending he wants people to come and, all the while, he has decided to pass them by and doesn't want them to come?

My brothers and sisters, I know that I touch a very vexed topic. From time to time, these things resurrect themselves in the history of Ireland as they do in other parts of the world. The great and famous archbishop Ussher was a marvellous scholar, author of the 103 articles of the Church of Ireland, more evangelical than the 39 articles of the Church of England! We owe a lot to him but yet, man of the reformation that he was, he was an extreme follower, if not of John Calvin, then of Theodore Bezer who followed Calvin, and taught that God's salvation was not for everybody. We have to make up our minds. Difficult a subject as it may be, we must judge it by how it reflects upon the character of God. As you see him there, with hands outstretched all day long, he surely isn't being hypocritical. No, God stands, bidding people to come because he genuinely wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

As we finish, let's think again how superbly our blessed Lord expressed the heart of the Father. For if God would have all men and women to be saved, so did Christ give himself a ransom for all. It is not true to say that Christ only paid enough so that certain ones could be redeemed, and he paid nothing for the others—so that they've never had a chance of being redeemed. No, if God would have all to be saved, Christ gave himself a ransom for all, that all could be saved. And we who owe our salvation, and shall owe it to all eternity, to the God who would have all to be saved, us included, let us learn to magnify his grace and his truth as we preach to the world. He will have all to be saved if only they would be. God help us in our conduct and our prayers for the world, to express God's attitude correctly—without party spirit or politics or ethnic prejudice or anything else—and do our best to see that God's love for them will be successful, and that men and women will be saved.

So may God bless his word for his name's sake.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has 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.