

Back to the Gospel
The Reference Point for All True Progress

David Gooding

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the *King James Version*, or are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

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[The Gospel and Christian Individual Spirituality](#)

To you, my brothers and sisters, a very good morning. You'll have gathered that I do not look to be a preacher. That I cannot help; and I apologize sincerely for it. By the extraordinary generosity of the conveners of this conference, I am allowed the pleasure of addressing you on no less than three occasions, and I would like publicly to thank them for this pleasure that they have given me. Whether you will thank them is altogether a different matter!

The need to go back to the gospel

Emblazoned as a title over these three talks, I wish to write the clarion call 'Back to the gospel'. Perhaps that might seem strange to some of you to hear a convention preacher urging you to come back to the gospel. 'Surely,' some of you will say to me, 'the need nowadays is not to get God's people back to the gospel, but to get them to move forward into the deeper things of God.' I am sometimes told that the trouble with God's people in general is that so many of them never get any further forward than the gospel, so a call to come back to the gospel might seem to you, at first hearing, to be absurd.

Certainly I am not denying this need. I want to emphasize with all my heart our need, as the people of God, to follow the example of the Apostle Paul when he said,

Brethren, I count not myself yet to have apprehended: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:13-14)

As I urge you to get back to the gospel, nothing I shall say in the course of these talks is meant to reduce the power of this example of the beloved apostle. We should be stretching forward; we should be making progress. There is a goal to be aimed at; we shall suffer loss if we come short of it. Yet, while this is obviously so, very clearly marked in a number of the New Testament Epistles is the powerfully repeated message and exhortation that, however much progress we make, whether in our individual lives of spirituality, in the affairs of the church in public, or in the development of our evangelism and its strategies, from time to time, we must come back to the gospel just to make sure, if for no other reason, that our progress has been, and still is, in full accord with the gospel of our salvation.

Let me cite you some examples.

The example of the Galatians

When the dear Galatians, our early fellow Christians, first heard the gospel and received it, they were fired with such enthusiasm that if it would have done any good, and if it had been possible for them, they would have plucked out their very eyes to give them to the Apostle Paul (Gal 4:15). And in all their estimation, there was none like Paul, save above him Jesus Christ our Lord. And then, having begun in the Spirit, they went on, if you please, to make progress (so they would have called it) and were thinking to be perfected in the flesh (see 3:3). They were imbibing and accepting certain doctrines of various teachers who came among them. While they were represented as progress, these doctrines were utterly inconsistent with the gospel of their salvation and would have ruined their genuine spiritual progress.

The example of the Corinthians

Or, take the case of the Corinthians. A remarkable bunch of believers were the Corinthians; and I must moderate my language about them, because I have to meet them yet in glory. But, if there were two ways of doing a thing in the church—a right way and a wrong way—the Corinthians could be relied upon to do it the wrong way. More interesting to me is the way that the holy apostle corrects their supposed progress. It was not so much by quoting rule one thousand and seventy-six in the rulebook, though to be sure Paul isn't behind in laying down his commands as the apostle of the Lord. What interests me is the general argument many times repeated in that epistle: 'Oh, my dear brethren,' he says, 'your shocking behaviour! You can't do that.'

'Oh, why can't we do that?'

'Well, because *that* is in complete contradiction to the very gospel itself.'

He repeats his argument many times as, God willing, we shall see on Thursday morning.

The example of the Colossians

Or, there is the case of the Colossian believers. They were marvellous converts, fit to cheer the heart of any evangelist. They not only had received the word; it had become implanted. It had nurtured in them a tremendous growth and fruitfulness and, with it, a desire to make progress in the spiritual life, in true spirituality. Then they were suddenly beset with dangers. There came once more sundry preachers and advocates of marvellous sounding recipes for the development of the spiritual life. There was philosophy in the form of theosophy. There was observance of religious days and ceremonies. There were instructions for developing techniques to attain to marvellous visions, of angels and other things. There were forms of rigorous, ascetic discipline that, outwardly, were very impressive. These dear believers, in their very desire to go on and know God, stood at that moment in peril, lest they should embrace and follow recipes for the development of the spiritual life that would have ruined their spiritual life. And these recipes were utterly inconsistent with the gospel of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

Spirituality and the gospel

This then is the argument of my three talks. The clarion call for us all is that, however much progress we have made in this or that division of spiritual life, we need from time to time to come back to the gospel to see whether our progress is indeed consistent with its basic tenet. This morning, as I issue that call to us all, I have in mind in particular that area of spiritual life that is technically called *spirituality*. Let me try to explain what I mean by the term.

A description of spirituality

It would be better, I suppose, for me to describe it rather than define it. *Spirituality* is the soul's hunger after the living God. It is the longing of the human spirit expressed by the psalmist when he said, 'As the deer pants after the water brooks, so my soul longs after you O God' (see Ps 42:1). 'One thing have I desired of the LORD and that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD' (see 27:4).

Spirituality is the soul's hunger and thirst after God. It springs from the realization that God is more important than all else. God is more important than his universe, more important than his gifts. God himself is more important than even our work for God. Sometimes, in the hustle and bustle of our busy world, the fires of our spirituality burn low. God grant us in the brief hours of this convention that we might find time above all else for God so that, rising from our redeemed hearts there might come up to the blessed Saviour and Son of God, the longing of our hearts to know him and our discovery that he is more important and more wonderful and more beautiful than all else.

Spirituality, then, is the desire for deeper, more personal, more real relationship with God, involving the deepest of our heart's affections. It is the desire to know God, to behold his glory; granted that we see it now as in a mirror, yet with open face may we behold it. It is a desire to behold the beauty of God until our own characters are transformed, inch by inch, from glory to glory, to grow more like the blessed Lord Jesus. It is our hope for eternity that, when we see him, we shall be like him. But as the Apostle John so practically observed, every one that has this hope in him of being one day like the Saviour will not say, 'Well that's it, so I can wait until I see him, and it will all be done for me in a second. Why should I bother to be like him now?' No, no! The hope that one day, on seeing the blessed Saviour, I shall be like him, burns within me (if it is real) with the desire to purify myself now so that I shall be progressively more like him (see 1 John 3:3). Spirituality is not just to know God, not just to behold the glory of God and to be like him, but the longing of the spirit to be ever more closely united with the Lord and one with him: 'For he that dwells in love,' says the holy apostle, 'dwells in God, and God in him' (see 4:16).

This, then, is spirituality. Let this be the background and the foreground of what we shall be thinking about this morning.

Oneness with the divine persons

If we wish for a biblical description of spirituality, we shall not find a better one, surely, than the words of our Lord Jesus in the Gospel by John and chapter 17. Perhaps we may read it here together.

Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that you sent me. And the glory which you have given me I have given unto them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and you in me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that you sent me, and loved them, even as you loved me. Father, that which you have given me, I will that, where I am, they also may be with me; that they may behold my glory, which you have given me: for you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world knew you not, but I knew you; and these knew that you sent me; and I made known unto them your name, and will make it known; that the love wherewith you loved me may be in them, and I in them. (vv. 20–26)

In this passage of holy Scripture, given to us by our blessed Lord, we meet concepts so high and glorious that we should not dare to believe them, unless we heard them come from the mouth of our blessed Lord Jesus himself. They are wonderful things, my brother, my sister, that beggar the human imagination to grasp. What a wonderful thing it would have been if our salvation had simply amounted to the cancelling of all our debts and the forgiveness of our sins. That alone would have merited ten million ‘Hallelujahs!’, undying to eternity. Wonderful it would have been if, in addition to forgiveness, salvation had secured us some little collapsible seat round some murky little corner of the celestial courts, (except of course there are no murky corners, nor any collapsible seats). But who could cope with this? It is not just forgiveness, not just a place in God’s heaven, but oneness with the divine persons themselves! What a staggering concept, what awesome reality does Jesus Christ our Lord talk about to us in these simple words: a unity between us and the very persons of the Godhead, modelled on that glorious unity between the Father and the Son.

Within the Holy Trinity, each person is and remains distinct. As the theologians tell us, the Father is not the Son, nor is the Son the Father. So it is with the redeemed: we shall never be God. There will no blurring of our human personality, nor merging, in the Hindu sense, with the absolute. And yet, I should require more than the archangel’s voice to explain it (God save me from one extreme or the other), and yet there is a *oneness*. How can I hear it without being moved? He speaks of a oneness between you and me, my brother, and you, my sister, and all of us with the persons of the Godhead—a oneness in mind, in love, in purpose, in moral character. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ—sons and daughters of the living God, and one with him.

It is modelled on the relationship between Christ and his Father. It is oneness within the divine persons, first of all—the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son: ‘I pray . . . that they may all be one; . . . even as we are one; I in them, and you in me’ (vv. 20–23). This is the mutual inter-communion and inter-penetration of the persons of the deity. He is saying, ‘I wish them to be one like that, not merely among themselves, but one in us.’ Who can bear the weight of glory that such words express?

In the second place, it is oneness by the dwelling of the Father and the Son *in us*. ‘I pray,’ he says, ‘that they may be one, even as we are one’. It is in this sense: ‘I in them and you in me’. You may recall the buzz that went round the Upper Room when it began to dawn, however dimly, on the apostolic minds that across the table there sat, not just a carpenter, not

just a rabbi, but more than a teacher; across the table in that Upper Room sat God himself! 'Don't you understand?' said our blessed Lord to Philip. 'You asked me to show you the Father. Don't you understand it? He that has seen me has seen the Father. How else do you account for the works I do? And the words I say, I speak and do them not from myself; the Father is in me' (see John 14:8–11).

That is marvellous, but how will the biggest theologian that was ever invented begin to explain this mystery? God in Christ, yes. But God in Christ in *me*?

And then our blessed Lord goes on to talk about the need that this oneness shall be constantly and evermore perfected. It is not yet perfected. He says, 'I have already given them the glory, which you gave me that they might be one' (see v. 22). But as yet our hearts have not opened as fully as they could, have they? Our hearts are veritably closed rosebuds. They need to be opened so that this wonderful oneness between us and the Saviour will be expanded and developed, so that the world shall come to see, not what spankingly good Christians we are (they'll be a long while seeing that), but that they might come to see that God has loved us even as he loved his Son. How wealthy I should appear to you if you began to catch the faintest glimmer of this: that God loves me. Do you know it? You can't see it very well. God has loved me, as he has loved his Son.

Nor is that enough for Christ. 'Father I will,' he says, 'that those whom you have given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, the glory I had with you before the world was, for you loved me then' (see 17:5). And now words must fail us and become cheap little empty tin cans as we try to express the reality. What shall it be, my brother and sister, when at last we see him?

Face to face with Christ my Saviour,
Face to face—what will it be
When with rapture I behold Him,
Jesus Christ who died for me?¹

What shall it be when I behold him and see his face; to see that which is the chief purpose for which we were created? There will be no higher glory; there will be no higher occupation, though ten thousand occupations there will be, than to see that face. To see that face was the purpose of our making.

Until that day comes, the work of the deeper deepening of our spirituality proceeds. Before we turn to other things mark how, according to Jesus Christ our Lord, our spirituality is to be deepened. 'This,' he says, 'is the process. I have made known to them your name and will make it known' (see 17:26). Our spirituality is deepened by the blessed Saviour himself making known to us the name of God and what God is really like in his character. It is done by his making known that name, as he did publicly at Calvary, and through his burial and resurrection. He does his work by his Spirit in the depths and undergrowth of our minds and hearts. Cutting through the tangles of misunderstandings, he heals wounds that cause us to doubt the love of God when life's trials and tribulations come until, like Job, we might be tempted to think that God himself is unfair and cruel and has forgotten us, and has forgotten

¹ Carrie Ellis Breck (1855-1934), 'Face to Face with Christ my Saviour' (1898).

to be merciful. It is by the declaring of the name of God that the blessed Saviour makes known the Father and fills our hearts with love that learns to trust, and brings us ever nearer to the consummation of that unity with God.

This, then, is spirituality, according to our blessed Lord.

An increasing interest in spirituality

Why do we need constantly to get back to this glorious gospel? We need to for its own sake; this is life's chief business. Oh, my dear sister, my brother, if you have caught the faintest glimpse of this potential glory, you will not rest with humdrum pedestrian spiritual experience. You will say with Paul, 'I follow after, that I might apprehend that for which I was apprehended of Jesus Christ' (see Phil 3:12). It will become life's chief business for you. It maybe won't be your chief work; that could be looking after the children and changing the nappies and cooking the vegetables and writing with the old pen (but nobody does that these days; it's more about writing with computers). Whatever it is you do, that thing may be your work, but this will be your chief business: that Christ should use every detail of life, by his grace, to reveal the Father's name. It is a tough course. I tell you now God is love, but God can be tough. You serve no sentimental namby-pamby God. There are scarcely any sorrows that God is not prepared to take us through, if only they will serve to make us more like Christ and to enjoy God better, ultimately.

This is life's chief business, but then we have to face our modern world. Here for us, as for the Colossians, there lurk dangers; dangers in fact associated with the quest for spirituality, strange as that may sound. But then the spirituality taught us by holy Scripture is not simply a phenomenon known only to Christianity. There are other spiritualities in this world. Almost every serious religion has its forms of spirituality. If I read the modern situation aright, there is rising through the fluctuations of human experience a surging tide of spirituality around this world. And not all of it is good. That there is such a tide, witness just one small detail, namely the twenty-five volume series of books on world spirituality edited by McGinn and Meyendorff and published in 1986. You will find some evangelicals contributing to that series. We need therefore to be wise to discern between what is good and healthy and of God, and what is not of God and is not good and is not healthy. And how shall we do that except we come back to the gospel?

Science and spirituality

One new element in these days that has not been present, perhaps for centuries, is the contribution of science to spirituality. There are a growing number of scientists, as you know, who have come to the realization that reason by itself can never explain the whole of the universe around us. They tell us that it can in fact be rationally demonstrated that reason cannot explain the whole of the universe.

So what to do? As Professor Paul Davies puts it, the fact that we find ourselves on this planet with minds is an extraordinary thing. We have minds that can understand a great deal of how the universe works. How can it be an accident, and where did it all come from? An increasing number of scientists say there must be an intelligence behind this universe.

Marvellous that they get so far, isn't it? But then some of them hasten to say something else, (though not all of them, thank God). Some of them like Professor Davies (sparkling and glorious scientist he is) say that whatever it is behind the universe it's not the God of the Bible for sure, or the God of Jesus Christ.

How could you then get beyond it all to the outside realities, if reason can't take you there? Davies in Britain (and Australia) and your Rudy Rucker here in the States, will tell you that it is now respectable to scientists to talk about the possibility of coming to know ultimate reality through mysticism. You may take the great leap out of reason into mysticism and come to know the great reality that is out there. Call it 'the absolute', 'the One', 'Mind'; call it what you will, anything of course other than the God of the Bible and Jesus Christ. When this kind of science grows into a swell and permeates our schools, and children are no longer taught sheer atheism through atheistic evolution, but are taught that the mystical road is appropriate and respectable even for scientists, and that this is the way through to ultimate reality and that all religions point to it (except for the unique claims of Jesus Christ, of course), then you will have a pressure for which our young people need to be prepared.

Neoplatonic mysticism

There is another element in it all, and here I shall have to introduce you to names that may well sound barbarous. Do forgive me; it will make sense in the end. Here is a thumbnail sketch and a very rapid tour of a little ancient history. It is important to know our history, so that we may understand our present. And there is a special reward at the end of the conference if you listen to this bit.

First I take you back to an ancient Greek philosopher who lived in the third century AD. His name was Plotinus. He was a Greek founder (or co-founder) of the philosophy known as Neoplatonism. Like other Greeks, he thought long and hard about what lay behind our universe. Being a pagan, he didn't call it God so much as he called it *the One*, to distinguish that from the multiplicity of phenomena that we see all around us. So, what could you know about the One? He developed a way of approach called 'the negative way'. You start from below with things that are obviously not candidates for being likened to God: mud, for instance, and stones. 'Well, God isn't like that, obviously. No, of course not.'

Well, move a bit higher to animals.

'Well, no, God can't be like them, because we are better than animals, and God must be better than us.'

Right, well come up then. Is he like us?

'Well he could be, but then obviously not in a lot of respects.'

And so you work yourself up as high as you can go. When you've reached the highest, says Plotinus, you come to discover this: that God cannot be described or known. Reason lands us in complete ignorance. So said the Greek Neoplatonist Plotinus. The modern scientists are beginning to say the same thing.

If God can't be described or known, what are we to do then? Plotinus said, 'What you cannot know by reason, you can know by ecstatic vision, for when you admit your ignorance, you can find the veil ripped aside and, in ecstasy of vision, you may behold the One and be

united with him, so observer and observed are one.' He claimed to have had that experience six or seven times in life. This then is the road to mysticism.

You say, 'Why bother us with that funny bit of knowledge?'

Well, because of the work of another good man, who rejoiced in the name Dionysius the Areopagite (or, as we now call him, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite). That's a mouthful, isn't it? Dionysius, so-called, was a professed Christian. He wrote a work about the names of God and how God had revealed his name to us, as he did to Moses at the burning bush, and as he did in Jesus Christ our Lord. It was what he called 'the descending way', the positive way, for God to make himself known. He said that was very good, but unfortunately it wasn't good enough, because knowing everything you can know about Jesus Christ left questions about God unanswered. So he now wanted another way to find out about God. And what way was that? This professed Christian took over the philosophy of the aforesaid Plotinus – the negative way: ascending upwards until, by reason, you come to absolute pitch darkness, and you find God cannot be known at all. But then, oh yes, you can have an ecstatic vision and see this great light and be merged with it. When you see this great light, there's nothing you can say about it; it is utterly indescribable; it has no name. There is no Father, Son or Holy Spirit. You know that it's there, but you can say nothing about it and you cannot comprehend it. And this, Dionysius said, was the acme of Christian spirituality.

You say, 'Why bother about him either?'

It's because, I have to tell you, the writings of that man were received into Christendom. They form the basis of the spirituality of the great Eastern Orthodox Churches up to this present time, and they who preach the gospel in those parts should take notice.²

'It cannot be of God,' you say.

Of course it can't. Did Jesus Christ use this supposed negative way of coming up to complete ignorance? Does Christ purpose to bring us to a stage when we see some great light, and it has no name? Oh, what a sad contradiction of the gospel it is. We heard our blessed Lord say that the way to spirituality is this: 'I will declare your name.' My brother, my sister, you will never, to all eternity, get beyond Jesus Christ, nor see anything more of God than you see revealed in the word of God and God's blessed Son.

'Why should we trouble about that either? We live in the West.'

The writings of Dionysius were brought to the West, of course. A famous Englishman wrote a book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, where he holds out this old pagan way of knowing God under the guise of it being Christian. When you next read books on spirituality written by evangelicals, just check how far they quote *The Cloud of Unknowing* as though it were some good help towards spirituality, when all the time it involves desecration and dishonour to the name of our blessed Lord Jesus.

² For a further discussion of the connection to the Orthodox Church, see David Gooding's talk on 'Syncretism' in the series: [Christian Answers to Pagan Philosophies and Religions](#). And for a more thorough discussion of Neoplatonism, see Chapter 2 in David Gooding and John Lennox's book [Finding Ultimate Reality](#).

The Bible's insistence on rational revelation

Finally, we need to be aware of these things because there is a marked tendency these days, even in some evangelical quarters, to go in for spirituality of the non-rational kind. It is highly dangerous. All visions given to God's people in Scripture were accompanied by rational words, or the explanation given rationally afterwards. You may expect irrational, un-rational, non-rational spirituality of a Hindu or of a pagan Greek; it is not the spirituality offered to us by our blessed Lord who is the Word of God. He communicates both to our minds and to our hearts but ever communicates according to his nature by declaring the very name of God. In all our spirituality, God see to it that we are constantly rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

[The Gospel and the Freedom the Lord Introduces](#)

Yesterday, we were considering together the individual's spirituality; and we considered how important it is, however much progress we may have made in that direction, from time to time, and constantly, to return to the gospel to make sure that our advances in spirituality are in fact in accord with the gospel and are not in any way compromising its truth. In particular, that will mean constantly coming back to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. *He* is the key to all spirituality. We shall never get behind or beyond him to any other vision of God. The exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Colossians still rings in our ears. If you would go forward in spirituality, the secret is to come back to Christ: 'As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him' and not outside him (see 2:6).

Tomorrow, God willing, we shall consider life in the church and our activities in the church, and the attitudes that we express in our fellowship with one another and with the Lord in the church. And there too we shall see the urgent exhortation of the apostles that we govern our activities in the church, control them and, if need be, critique them by the foundational principles of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This morning, however, with God's help, I would like us to consider this same theme: 'Back to the gospel' but in the area of our Christian freedom. For that purpose, let us read briefly in the New Testament, first of all in the Epistle to the Galatians, and hear the word of the Lord.

With freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage. (5:1)

And secondly, these verses from 2 Peter 2:

For, uttering great swelling words of vanity, they entice in the lusts of the flesh, by lasciviousness, those who are just escaping from them that live in error; promising them liberty, while they themselves are bondservants of corruption; for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he also brought into bondage. (vv. 18–19)

And God give us good understanding of his word.

The freedom Christ brings

It seems to me, and I hope you agree with me, that one of the chief glories of the gospel of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ is the multi-splendoured freedom into which that gospel introduces

us. Record it in your heart again this morning with thanksgiving to God and rejoice! Freedom from the chains of the guilt of past sins; the very word for forgiveness, in Greek, meaning release from the terrible chain of guilt that bound us to our past. We have freedom and boldness, upon forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord, freedom of direct access unto the Father and glorious encouragement with boldness to draw near and pass through the veil into the holiest of all and lay our hands by the throne of God. We have freedom to come to God without any intermediary, save only our blessed Lord Jesus. Freedom from the domination by sin is promised, and the promise is continually being fulfilled, with a glorious and stimulating encouragement: 'Sin shall not have dominion over you [and keep you down]: for you are not under law, but under grace' (Rom 6:14). We have freedom from the fear of death, seeing our blessed Lord Jesus died 'that through dying, he might destroy him that had the power of death and deliver them who, all their living time, were subject to bondage through fear of death' (see Heb 2:14–15).

Just let me pause at that moment to make myself clear. Sometimes we preachers are too rash in our tone and so cause confusion. Sometimes this verse is interpreted to mean that if you are a true believer you will not fear *dying*, and since many of us do fear dying, then with some there arises another fear that perhaps they are not believers at all. When I hear of folks thus distressed, I feel in my more wicked moments like taking the preachers who preach thus carelessly and putting them in the middle of a field (a one hundred acre field preferably) with a roaring wild bull six feet behind them and see whether they fear *dying* or not! Most of these preachers would run for their lives. They can't help it you know, for the reason that God himself, the creator, has put fear in our hearts, just like he's put it in the song bird. It is a necessary preservative mechanism to keep us alive, and it is not good to tell people that if only they are true believers they will not fear *dying*.

What the Bible is talking about is not fearing *death*. You may see dying if the Lord doesn't come presently. It may be difficult, or it may be swift and painless. What our blessed Lord promises is that you will not see death (see John 8:51). For the sting of death is sin. The sting is not the dying; it's what will happen after death to those who die without Christ. 'The sting of death is sin. The strength of sin is the law' (see 1 Cor 15:56). It's no good hoping that after death, somehow sin doesn't matter. The strength of sin is God's immovable law. Oh, the wonder for the believer that we need not fear what happens after death. We shall not indeed see death. For us, 'to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord' (see 2 Cor 5:8). And the glorious promise is that, one day, along with nature and long before it, we shall be delivered from bondage to corruption and be given glorious bodies 'like unto the body of our Lord Jesus Christ' (see Phil 3:21).

There is glorious freedom then, and you can think, I'm sure, of many more freedoms into which we are introduced by the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Freedom we are willing to give up

Now, I have to remind you of a thing so strange that if you didn't know your history very well, you would nearly find it impossible to believe. You might think it is instinctive in the human heart to love freedom. We tell ourselves that the last thing on earth we would do is to

give up our freedom. That isn't true. And in the spiritual realm it is often very untrue. History has been the witness, consistently down the ages, that freedom is a thing that God's people, alas, will often begin by compromising and then, by forgetting, sometimes in the end lose altogether.

Let me take some examples of this.

An unbinding on the Sabbath (Luke 13)

The ancient people of God turned what God meant for their freedom into a bondage. You will recall the incident in a synagogue that Luke records in his chapter 13, where our Lord was teaching on the Sabbath in the synagogue. There came in a woman bent double, with knees to nose, whom Satan had *bound* these eighteen years. In she came, shuffling her difficult way, to listen to the Saviour. And the Saviour, in his infinite compassion, stopped his preaching and delivered the woman and made her stand upright! Whereupon the ruler of the synagogue was filled with dismay and resentment and preached the people a very vigorous sermon that they should not come and be healed on the Sabbath day, but wait and come another day to be healed. And our Lord rebuked him, of course (see vv. 10–17).

The poignancy of the situation will come home to our hearts if we remember what, according to God in his Old Testament, the Sabbath was meant to celebrate. In the book of Deuteronomy and chapter 5, the reason for the celebration of the Sabbath would be that once upon a time, Israel had been slaves under the yoke of Pharaoh; and God, in his goodness and power, had broken that yoke and brought them free (see vv. 12–15). In the book of Leviticus, God has the most beautiful description of what he did for Israel when he broke the Egyptian yoke and set them free. This is how it reads:

I am the LORD your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their bondmen; and I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you go upright.
(26:13)

What a lovely metaphor drawn from human anatomy, isn't it? 'I broke the yoke that burdened your neck and kept you bowed down with a stooping stance of a slave. I broke the yoke and bid you stand up straight and hold your head high and look the world in the face—to look God in the face.' That is God's idea of manhood. Our very physical anatomy from which the metaphor is drawn reminds us that we of God's creatures, alone among the primates, stand upright. What a glorious philosophy of man the creator has, giving us in our very posture a posture of dignity—the posture of free men and women made in the image of God, to walk upright, to look the world in the face. And oh, the marvel of it: sinners though we are, God's redemption is geared to this purpose still—to break the yoke that sin and Satan have placed upon us and cause us to go upright. He makes us able, my brother, my sister, worms of the dust though we were, and sinners to boot, but we have been freely forgiven by God and begotten as his children. We have been made to go upright, to have access to God, and look at God in the very face and know ourselves accepted. Oh, what a glorious God we have!

Now, of course, some of us, feeling our arthritis, are beginning to develop an un-comely gait, aren't we, and tend to look down. But the spirit remains free, does it not? 'I made you to walk upright.'

And it was the Sabbath day in the synagogue, and here comes this daughter of Abraham— heir to the promises of God and to the great redemption of Egypt, and Satan had bent her double and kept her bowed down like some shuffling slave. God incarnate, in his mercy, speaks the word and breaks the bonds and sets her free to walk upright! And the ruler of the synagogue? He was not at all pleased. That's not what Sabbath is about for him. Somehow, for him, Sabbath—the celebration of freedom—has become an observation so clouded with his rabbinical rules that the rules have to be kept, even if it means leaving people bent double. How curious a thing is religion?

Replacing the yoke for new believers (Acts 13)

You may take another example, now from the Christian church. In Acts 13, Paul went into the synagogue at Antioch and preached the glorious message of justification by faith. What a stirring message it is that 'through this man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins and by him, all who believed are justified from all things, which could not possibly be done through the law of Moses' (see vv. 38–39). Presently, with great honesty, the historian Luke tells us the Christians gathering together in Jerusalem to talk over the doctrine of salvation found 'among themselves', if you please, 'certain of the Pharisees which believed' who stood for the idea that these Gentiles who had turned to Christ and been justified by faith could not be saved unless they observed the rite of circumcision and kept the law (see 15:5). So quickly did men's limited understanding seek to restrain the God-given freedom that the gospel was designed to promote. And very roundly and sternly did Peter rebuke them, and he could be stern when he chose. 'Why do you tempt God?' he said. 'You seek to put upon the neck of these Gentile believers a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear' (see v. 10).

Would to God that had been the end in Christendom of all attempts to restrict and compromise the liberty that we have in Christ, but history tells otherwise. How soon were freedoms compromised, partly through misunderstanding and failure to comprehend. Some of the early Christians got hold of the Jewish Old Testament and read it without understanding what Bill MacDonald would call *dispensationalism*.³ And finding that Israel had a priesthood separate from the laity, ordained and with a high priest, they thought it would be a good idea to bring that into Christianity, thus restricting the liberty of all God's people in that priestly office. Finding in the Old Testament the tabernacle with its layout: its Holy Place and its Most Holy Place and the wall of the veil separating the two, they thought it would be a good idea to build Christian meeting places on that pattern.

Throughout Europe and throughout Asia to this day you will find many a church building, and particularly in the East where, if you enter, halfway down the church you will find a wall stretching from one side to the other. In the middle, there is a door and a veil, and on each side a door. Behind that wall is the holiest of all, deliberately built after the form of

³ William MacDonald was another of the plenary speakers at this conference and spoke, during one of his sessions, on the topic of dispensationalism.

the tabernacle. Through that door and into what they would call the Most Holy Place, where only the priests may come. The people must always stand outside. Sometimes the door is opened so that they can see a little bit of what's happening inside, and sometimes it is shut to impress on them that God is not too pleased with them. Oh, the sorry result in the hearts of millions who, by this very architecture, are constantly taught that it is not possible for the ordinary person to enter into the 'Most Holy Place' and into the presence of God. Only the priest can do it, and he (poor man) can only do it in this special bit of ground on earth. It is no wonder that those millions kept out from entering this special little area in a building on earth find it very difficult to grasp the glorious freedom of the gospel; that through Christ the veil has been rent, and we have access into the holiest of all. And it is not merely when we go to heaven, but in spirit now, we can enter, stand by the throne of God and know ourselves accepted.

These, my brothers and sisters, are not trifling matters. If we would fulfil the commission that our gracious Lord has given us, we must prepare ourselves carefully and with the compassions of our Lord Jesus so that we may be used of God to help these many millions to find the glorious liberty of forgiveness of sins and justification by faith and acceptance with God and certainty of his heaven.

Preaching repentance and the wrath of God

Now, it is true in the present climate there has been a ferment of thinking and of shame, so that many of the hitherto sacramentalist churches now have modified many of their doctrines, and it is possible to hear people, who twenty years ago were deeply imbued with sacramentalism, now speaking evangelical language. And God be heartily praised for every one for whom that language represents that they have genuinely found the freedom of salvation. But, in our compassion, we must be careful, for if we would help them, we must try to make sure that they have understood the language that they use. For nowadays, evangelical language can be used sincerely by people who have not yet grasped what the language really means. And you may think that they have had one experience, when all the time perhaps they haven't.

Some years ago, I was involved with a Bible study in private homes with a group of people, most of whom came from a sacramentalist background, though not all of them. Many of them had had some charismatic experience, and I was invited to conduct serious Bible studies in their homes, and I gladly did so. I found that when I tried to speak about justification by faith, they constantly would change the phrase. They preferred to talk about *sanctifying grace*. So, fearing my education lacking, I enquired about a book that would help me understand this concept of sanctifying grace. When I began to read the book I was eventually given, it rejoiced my heart. It said, 'Forget all the trappings of religion; sanctifying grace is personal experience of Christ. It is to have God himself dwelling in you. That is sanctifying grace. And, as he grows in you and you have personal encounter with him, gradually you are being transformed into his image, so one day you will be like him.'

I thought, 'This is marvellously wonderful!' And so I read my book, and I came to the chapter entitled 'What happens when we die?' And that informed me that, of course, when we come to die, we shall not be fit to enter the presence of God forthwith. It then had two

propositions to make. It said that when we come to die, of course, few of us will feel that we ever did anything worthy of being damned.

At that point, I put the book down to ponder this idea. Few of us will think that we've ever done anything worthy of being damned? I said, 'Well I'm in that few anyway, for doing things worthy of being damned is precisely what I have done.'

I said, 'How can you, Mr Author, tell me that few of us feel we've ever done anything worthy of being damned?' But then I began to think of his presupposition. His idea was that he was born into this world under the taint of Adam's sin, but when as an infant he was baptized, the taint was washed away and somehow a miracle took place, and he became a child of God. Since then, he feels he's never done anything really worthy of being damned. There were peccadillos by the score, of course, and moderately serious sins, but none that would qualify for being damned. On that he rested his hope that one day he would be in God's heaven. And I said with some horror, 'Oh, but my good man, I read you just now talking about personal experience of Christ and God dwelling in you. It was wonderful, but there's something wrong here in your very foundation, for you have bypassed repentance.'

What is repentance? Well, in the apostle's language, the conditions of being saved are these: he went around preaching 'repentance towards God, and faith in the Lord Jesus' (see Acts 20:21). Repentance does involve agreeing with God that things such as stealing and lying and mistreating your mother-in-law are bad, but repentance is something far more fundamental than that. Let's get it into our hearts; it is repentance towards God: it is agreeing with God in his verdict against ourselves. And what is God's verdict? Here it comes: 'All have sinned [in the past], and all do come short of the glory of God [in the present]' (see Rom 3:23). That is God's verdict. God's word says we stand before God's law with our mouths shut, every one of us: 'for we know whatever things the law says, it says to them who are under the law that every mouth might be shut and the whole world become liable to the judgment of God' (see v. 19). That is God's verdict. To turn round and base your hopes of being accepted into God's heaven on the fact that since you've been baptized you've never done anything worthy of being damned is a fatal mistake and misconception.

We do need to get hold of it. We must face not only God's holy law but God's holy wrath. According to the Apostle Paul, the glory of the gospel is this: 'I'm not ashamed of the gospel,' he says, 'for it is the power of God to salvation' (see 1:16).

And, Paul, why do I need to be saved?

'Because the *wrath* of God is revealed . . .' (see v. 18). The wrath of God against my sins is the first reason why I need to be saved. God's verdict on me and my efforts, from first to last, from the past to the present to the future, until I die, is that I come short and deserve his curse. But many who speak evangelical language nowadays have not perceived it. It is often not their fault.

We could illustrate it to ourselves perhaps by an analogy. Here is a young gentleman, and he has the most superb Cadillac you ever did see, but he is of a stupid variety. He doesn't bother to fill it up with oil. Going at seventy miles an hour, he puts it into reverse to see what will happen. He drives it while he is under the power of alcohol and, one day, being almost drunk, he smashes it into a concrete post and reduces it to ruin. In the cool night air and the shock of it, he realizes what a fool he has been. This lovely Cadillac is reduced to a shambles.

While he's contemplating that disaster, another thing hits him: the car wasn't his anyway; he'd borrowed it from the owner! And panic nearly seizes him. What on earth will he do now? How shall he meet the owner? He resolves upon a plan. For the time being, he'll keep as far away from the owner as he possibly can and hope he doesn't manage to get into the owner's presence too soon. He must find some skilful car mechanic or engineer and, with the engineer's help, he'll begin to reconstruct the old Cadillac. And, granted he only has enough time, perhaps he'll be able to get it, well, if not perfect, near enough, so that when he has to meet the owner and can't avoid it, the owner will say, 'Well, you oughtn't to have done that to my Cadillac, but you've made a good, honest effort to put it right, and we'll overlook the shortfall, my dear good man, since you're a friend of mine.'

And you know, my good friends, there are a lot of people who think of Jesus Christ like that. They come to see they've wrecked their lives. It dawns on them that, as creatures, they are not their own. One day they must meet the owner. How shall they meet him? Their instinct is they hope they don't have to meet him too soon, but they hear of Jesus Christ, and that he's good at putting lives right. That's what the preachers say, isn't it? So they apply to Christ, all reverently and sincerely, but their concept is that Christ is in the business of helping you to mend your shattered life so that, given time, you may mend it sufficiently well, with his help, so that when you meet the owner, he will of course say, 'Well you've not succeeded. You're certainly not perfect. You still come a bit short, but you haven't done anything worthy of being damned.' And then he might accept you. I have to tell you that our blessed Lord Jesus Christ is not in that line of business.

You say, 'That's cruel. That's why people don't like the doctrine of the wrath of God, you know. They're doing their absolute best to put their lives right to meet God. They have no assurance in their heart that they will be accepted, and if you insist that they have broken God's law and are under his wrath, they naturally resent it out of fear, if not out of pride; and they don't like the preaching of the wrath of God.'

My good friend, the wrath of God is one of the most marvellous and beautiful things that you could possibly preach. Preach it with sensitivity and love, for the very jewels of heaven rest their untarnishable glory upon the divine wrath and displeasure against sin. Oh, my brother, my sister, thank God for his wrath! It's one of the most beautiful things in the universe. And when the angels come with the seven last plagues to pour out the wrath of God, they come, not dressed in funereal garb of black; they come dressed in garments so brilliantly white that they are overwhelming beautiful (see Rev 15-16). The preservation of the glory and the beauty and the jewels of heaven depend on God's displeasure and determined opposition to sin.

Then how can I meet him? Oh, hear the gospel! How it rejoices our heart to come back to the gospel, doesn't it? What is the gospel? Not that you have to seek Christ's aid to patch up your broken-down old Cadillac, hoping one day it might pass inspection. The gospel is you can come and meet the owner right now as you stand amid the wreckage. If ever things are going to be put right, that's how you'll have to begin. You can come and meet the owner. How can you come? If you will face his judgement, if you will repent and acknowledge you deserve to be damned, then God has a Saviour for you, right there and then! If you put your faith in him, God will accept you for Christ's sake and justify you and guarantee that he'll never cast

you out. You've heard it ten million times; I hope you've not heard it too many, lest you should forget to say, 'Hallelujah!' in your heart. Accepted by God as I stand amidst the wreckage: that is peace. Of course, it must be followed, now in company with Christ, to put the wreckage right, but the acceptance is not dependent upon that progress, but upon that initial repentance and justification.

Friend, it is not being unkind to say these things. It is the most compassionate thing you can do, if you would set people free, to bring them to face this route of repentance, and then the route of faith in the Lord Jesus.

The old, bad book I spoke of said that while few of us will think we've done anything worthy of being damned, 'of course few of us will feel worthy to enter the presence of God forthwith. In fact, when we first see God, we shall be terrified.'

At that point, I nearly put the book in the fire (except I'd paid for it). Where, in that kind of notion, is faith? The Bible says, 'when we see him, we shall be like him' (1 John 3:2). Oh, the wonder—faith to respond to the gracious invitation of God, with boldness to enter into the very holiest of all, now in spirit, as one day we shall be in body.

Developing attitudes that guard the gospel

If then we would be true friends to these people, what must we do? I turn now to some attitudes that we must learn to confirm or, if need be, to develop in ourselves. I refer to Paul's discussion of these things in the Epistle to the Galatians.

Walking according to the truth of the gospel

According to 2:14, we must, 'walk uprightly, according to the truth of the gospel'. Do you get the phrase? '*Walk uprightly, according to the truth of the gospel*'. Here, Paul charges Peter himself with hypocrisy.

Now, there are two kinds of hypocrisy: one is pretending to be what you are not, and the other is pretending not to be what you are (or pretending not to believe what you do believe). And Peter was, on this occasion, guilty of that second kind of hypocrisy. He had been at the conference at Antioch where Jews and Gentile believers ate their food together, as we do at this conference. And Peter enjoyed the meals until there came some men down from James, and Peter got up and he said he didn't feel well and he had a stomach ache, and he was going to his room.

'Oh, no you don't,' says Paul. 'No you don't, Peter, my man. It's no stomach ache you've got. It could be a fit of nerves maybe. You're going, aren't you, Peter, because there are some people that would hold it's not fit even for Christian Jews to eat with Christian Gentiles, because the Gentiles aren't circumcised. And, Peter, in your heart of hearts you don't believe it. You don't believe that circumcision is necessary for salvation. You don't even believe that circumcision contributes to salvation do you, Peter? In your heart of hearts you believe that those Gentile believers are as saved as you are. You mustn't pretend not to believe what you do believe. You must not fudge the gospel like that, Peter' (see vv. 11–14).

Nor must we. We must not engage in ceremonies that would give the onlooker the impression that we don't believe what we do believe; or that we do believe what we don't believe. We must walk consistently with the truth of the gospel.

Understanding our liberty to come directly to God's word

Secondly, we must make sure we understand our liberty to come direct to God's holy word. At one stage, there came a gentleman to me who had been asked by his friend to come and see me. He was proposing to enter a monastery, and he asked me what I thought. I said I found that difficult, because this particular church cursed me.

'Whatever for?' he said.

I said, 'For being sure of my salvation, old chap.'

'Oh,' he said, 'well, you shouldn't be, should you?'

'Why not?'

'Well it depends on works, doesn't it?'

'I didn't know it did,' I said.

'Well,' he said, 'it does of course.'

So I read him the glorious verse from Romans 4, which says that 'to him that does not work, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness' (v. 5).

'Oh,' he said, 'I don't know what that means. I didn't know that was in the Bible anyway. The trouble with you people is you think you can interpret the Bible yourself. You can't do that. It was the church that gave you the Bible, and you must let the church interpret it. You must take it to a priest and let the priest tell you what it means.'

I said, 'That's very interesting. Suppose I had been in Arabia when Paul the apostle was there, and I had gone and found him, and I said, "Excuse me, are you the Apostle Paul, sir?" And he said, "Yes, I am." Suppose I'd said, "Well, look here; I want to find God. No fussing around; I want to find God like you talk about. How do I find salvation, sir?" If he had told me by word of mouth what he writes here in this chapter 4 of Romans, could I have heard what Paul said, understood it, believed it and been saved, or would I have had to take it to the church—the other apostles at Jerusalem?'

The man said, 'You'd have had to take it to the church in Jerusalem, my boy.'

I said, 'No I wouldn't, because Paul tells me in Galatians that even when he went up to Jerusalem, the other apostles "added nothing to him"' (see 2:6).

Herein is our charter of liberty. Actually, the church did not give us the Bible. The church was given the Bible through the apostles and prophets, and our glorious liberty is this: that while we take advantage of every God-given teacher that there is, in the last analysis, we are free to come, read his inspired word, understand it and believe it and be saved. Let's hold onto our liberty and in that particular. Let us stand by the canon of the Old Testament that our Lord Jesus himself authorized and authenticated.

For many centuries, sacramental churches and others have given the apocryphal books of the Old Testament, if not altogether equal, then semi-equal, status with the Jewish canon. For many centuries, evangelicals have resisted it. Now I notice that evangelicals are giving in to it. One can respect their motives. They say, 'But if we want to get our sacramentalist friends

to read the Bible, they won't read it if it hasn't got the Apocrypha with it, so we do it simply out of tactics.'

I'm not a judge of God's other servants, but what a dangerous thing it is. If you give a person a Bible with that Apocrypha in it you must be prepared for him to believe what it says at the end of Second Maccabees — that sacrifices for the dead are right and necessary things, and unrepentant sinners in their lives can be saved after their death by your offering of sacrifices for them. Then you have to meet the scorn of your unbelieving, atheist, scientific friends for all the sheer nonsense and silly little stories that there are in some of those apocryphal books. Oh, my dear Christian friend, let us not fluff the gospel, not even in our strategies of evangelizing.

Wariness of false liberty

Finally, the other side of the story is that as we stand for true Christian liberty according to the gospel, we must be aware of false liberty. Very early on in the church there arose teachers preaching liberty, but it wasn't true liberty; it was permissiveness. And we read together Peter's denunciation of those false teachers: 'They have turned from the right *way*' (see 2 Pet 2:15). The very term reminds us of our Lord Jesus' description of what the way to life is. It begins with a gate, and it is a narrow gate, but it is followed by a *way*. There is a gate and a way; neither is optional. Enter the gate justified by faith, and you have peace with God and acceptance. You will then be expected to follow the way (see Matt 7:13–14).

We must very carefully emphasize here the difference between the conditions of salvation and of eternal life, and the evidence that we have eternal life. They are two different things, aren't they?

I've always thought it must be a spectacularly moving moment when the midwife delivers a newborn baby. And apparently the custom was in years gone by to hang the baby upside down by its hind legs and deliver a slap upon the appropriate part of the baby's anatomy, whereat the youngster protested with a vociferous yell. And, for the only time in the child's life, mother and everybody else are delighted to hear the yell. The reason for it is this, of course: the baby doesn't get life by yelling, as anybody knows (even I know that); but the yelling is very important; it is the evidence that the baby has life. If a baby doesn't start crying, it's very gloomy news; it could be that the baby doesn't have life.

The condition of salvation is that it is a free gift, but God himself will require the evidence that the person who claims it is a believer, has repented, and does have life. And in our modern day of permissiveness, as in Peter's, the great danger is that the doctrine of the grace of God will be turned into licence and permissiveness, and so long as you say you believe, you can get away with it, even if there's no change in your life, and you can go on in the permissive ways of the world. That is not so, my Christian friends. That kind of permissiveness is not freedom. It is a lie.

The Lord Jesus said, 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32). Those ugly, rebellious passions that are within us? Oh, my dear young friend, those things are not your friends; they are your jailers; they are your prison warders. Listen to the Lord Jesus; he'll tell you the truth about them and make you want to be free, and then he will set you free. That is true freedom.

May God then give us an ever clearer understanding of these things. I am aware that I have been preaching to those who know them better than I know them myself, except there might be someone here who has been Christianized, but is not yet a believer. Listen to God's word, dear friend. He has a wonderful salvation for you. Make sure you have it. But I have dared, my Christian brothers and sisters, to broach this topic with you now, because if in our compassion we are to help people, we must be ourselves clear as to the fundamentals of this gospel and see to it that, by word and by behaviour, we stand firm by the truth of God and do not compromise its glorious freedom.

And may God bless you indeed now.

[The Gospel and Our Life and Activity in the Church](#)

Shall we begin by reading some passages from the first Epistle by Paul to the Corinthians:

For behold your calling, brethren, how that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God chose the foolish things of the world, that he might put to shame them that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong; and the base things of the world, and the things that are despised, did God choose, yea and the things that are not, that he might bring to nought the things that are: that no flesh should glory before God. But of him are you in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, [both] righteousness and sanctification, and redemption: that, according as it is written, 'He that glories, let him glory in the Lord.' (1:26–31)

Now, a further passage from chapter 10 of this same epistle:

For I would not, brethren, have you ignorant, how that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them: and [that] rock was Christ. Howbeit with most of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be you idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.' (vv. 1–7)

Still a third passage, from chapter 11:

For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, how that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me.' In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' (vv. 23–25)

And finally, for the moment, the famous verses from chapter 15:

Now I [made] known unto you brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you, which also you received, wherein also you stand, by which also you are saved; I make known, I say, in what words I preached it unto you, if you hold it fast, except you believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received, how that Christ died for our sins

according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he has been raised on the third day according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas; then to the twelve. (vv. 1-5)

And God give us good understanding of his holy word.

On Tuesday morning, we considered together our Christian individual spirituality. We saw how important it is that, however much progress we make along the path of our individual spirituality and our seeking of God, we should from time to time come back to the gospel to make sure that our progress is indeed true progress and is according to the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, and does not in any way detract from the unique honour and person and ministry of our Lord, and does not take us away from the fundamental truth of his gospel. Then yesterday we considered those delightful freedoms into which the gospel of our Lord Jesus introduces us. We contemplated how glorious they are, and at the same time reminded ourselves of the lessons of history, how easily those freedoms (strange to relate) can be compromised by the people of God and then lost sight of and, eventually, be virtually lost. Therefore, we need here too, in connection with our Christian liberties, to remember the clarion call of God's word: 'Back to the gospel', so that these glorious liberties may continue with us, and that we, by our behaviour, may follow the example of the Apostle Paul, who said of one particular instance in which he was challenged to compromise the gospel, 'to them I yielded not for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might continue and remain even to you' (see Gal 2:5). We must always behave in a way that uncompromisingly and unfudgingly sets forth the glorious truth of the gospel.

Nor is this narrow-mindedness, but sheer compassion for our fellow men and women who seek God from positions of utter ignorance, and are seeking him confused with many a notion that floats around our world. Compassion itself would demand that we get a clear grasp of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus that we might use it to help them to come into the sunshine of the liberty of the children of God.

Back to the gospel in the church

Now, in our final study, we hear again the same clarion call: 'Back to the gospel!' But this time it is in connection with our life and activity in the church of God. Perhaps there is no other place in all the gamut of our spiritual experience where we need so constantly to hear the gospel, and to come back to the gospel, than in the public life and activity of the churches of God, to make sure that all our activities and our experiences and behaviour in the churches of God are consistent with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How to address problems in the church

The church at Corinth was an unusually brilliant church if measured by the large range of their spiritual gifts and abilities. They came behind in no gift as they waited for the coming of the Lord Jesus. But they are a very vivid reminder to us that spiritual gift is not necessarily the same thing as godliness. And if you ask me how I know, I know it by my own experience. My brothers and sisters, it is one thing to be gifted by God to be a teacher; it is another thing to be godly. And the Corinthian church (now they're in glory, God bless them) reminds me,

pointing to their experience, that gift is not necessarily grace, nor godliness either. Gift, if it loses sight of the gospel, can lead into powers of barrenness and compromise and spiritual disaster.

The interesting thing about Paul's writing to the Corinthian church is the way he goes about, first of all, exposing and diagnosing their mistakes and putting his finger on them; and, secondly, the way he goes about correcting those mistakes. It is not that he says, 'Really, my dear brothers, you can't do what you're doing. Don't you know it breaks rule number two thousand five hundred and sixty-five, sub-section A?' Though to be sure, the holy apostle is not behind using his apostolic authority to lay down the law when the need requires. 'Let a man recognize, if he's spiritual, the things that I write are the commandments of the Lord', he says (see 14:37). Instead, running through this whole letter of First Corinthians is a repeated technique, if I may so call it. He will say, 'Oh, you lovely Corinthians, you can't do that. You mustn't carry on behaving like you're behaving.'

'Oh, really? And why not?'

'Because what you're doing is inconsistent with the gospel, that's why.'

The gospel is not some narrow legalistic rule and regulation invented to limit our enjoyment. If you compromise the gospel, you lose your liberty. In the end you'll lose your joy and, what is far worse, you'll offend the blessed Saviour himself who died that we might have a gospel. Even the most rapid survey of this epistle will illustrate that general principle.

Splitting into groups and naming them after famous preachers

In chapters 1-4 he says, 'You can't carry on like you're doing, forming parties and calling yourselves after the names of famous Christian leaders.'

'Well, why can't we? That's how people do it in philosophical circles. They are followers of Plato or they are followers of Aristotle or somebody else. Why can't we do that in Christianity and promote the truth by each having his own party?'

'Oh, but you can't do that in Christian circles.'

'Why not?'

'Why, it goes quite contrary to the principle of the cross of Christ. "I am of Paul," indeed! Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?'

But, no, of course, that would look terrible, wouldn't it? Fancy baptizing a candidate and saying, 'I now baptize you in the name of the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul.' It would sound odd, wouldn't it? Mercifully, Christendom has never got round to that (thank the Lord). All right then, if you weren't baptized in the name of Paul, don't call your group after the name of Paul, either. Be content to call yourselves after the only name that is allowed us, the name of him who was crucified for us.

Permissiveness in the church

'Oh, my dear lovely Corinthians. But you're not so lovely when you behave like you behave now. This desperate permissiveness that has invaded the church at Corinth and doesn't seem to perturb you; it must be stopped.'

'Why must it be stopped?'

'For a whole host of reasons, but because it conflicts with the gospel.'

When Israel were redeemed by the Passover lamb out of Egypt, they were not set free to do as they pleased. Forthwith and immediately they had to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So it is with the Christian gospel. It offers you, with the one hand, freedom from the judgment of God and the power of Satan, but requires you immediately to begin the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, that is, the feast of sincerity and truth and holiness. And you're not allowed one without the other (see 5:5–8).

Denying the historical facts of the gospel

Thus does he speak to them, and always truly. I must leave you, for time's sake, to search out all the references to the gospel under its various forms that Paul uses to counter the wrong practices of the church at Corinth. They culminate, of course, in that famous climax that he addresses to theologians in the church.

Now, let nothing be said to diminish the importance of rigorous theological thought. We are to love the Lord our God, not only with our heart but with our mind. We are to think. I may not have a very good brain, a Ford, so to speak, compared with your Cadillac, but if I am not prepared to use the 'Ford' that is my little brain to love the Lord with, and to think as rigorously as I can think, then I am breaking the first of all the commandments that says I must love the Lord my God with all my mind, heart, soul and strength (see Mark 12:28–30). It is a puzzling thing to me sometimes when I see men and women of brilliant mind, masters of their physics and of that super intelligence that is the computer. They are grown-up adults in their secular professions and sheer babies, nursery children, when it comes to the knowledge of God's word, having not progressed in life beyond what they were taught in Sunday school. They are unable to discuss even with their unregenerate colleagues the intellectual glories of God's word, so that their colleagues get the impression that their Christian faith is a thing for the nursery and not to be taken seriously by adult, grown-up men and women who are engaged in serious intellectual thought in all other avenues of life.

While that is so, yet here we must tread perhaps most carefully of all, for theology, 'Dame Theology', has shown herself to have a perverse streak all down the centuries, and can sometimes be the first to be false to the gospel, to undermine it with extravagant theories, and in the end, to forsake it. 'Oh, guard your theological thought!' says Paul. 'How say some of you that there is no resurrection? For if there be no resurrection, then Christ is not risen, and we have no gospel left' (see 15:12–19). We must go back to the gospel.

For a moment or two now, I want to take some examples of this in somewhat more detail.

Back to the cross

I come to chapters 1–4 where the fundamental aspect of the gospel, as Paul spells it out here, is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we think at this level, we must be careful to recognize the special intention of these theological terms. *The death of Christ* is one way of referring to his work; the *cross of Christ* is another way of referring to his work; and the terms, in strict thought, are not interchangeable. When we think of the *death* of Christ, we are thinking of certain aspects of his sacrifice. When we talk of his *cross*, we think of other aspects.

What then is the point of the cross of Christ? Granted that Christ had to die for my sins that I might be forgiven, why had his death to take the form of the cross since, as we all know,

to die on a felon's cross was the very last disgrace, an insufferable scandal for a human being to undergo? Why the cross? And why the tremendous emphasis on the cross in the preaching of the gospel when Paul and his fellow apostles knew that to preach the cross was a guaranteed way to offend the Jews, and was calculated to make the Greeks think that the gospel was folly?

'So we preach it nonetheless,' says Paul. It wasn't because he was unskilled in the science of communication. Suppose you had tried to tell Paul, 'Look here, our modern congregations don't like hearing of crosses, you know. Soft-peddle it, my dear man, otherwise you'll lose your congregation. It isn't user-friendly.'

Paul would reply by contrast, 'I am determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified' (see 2:2).

What is the point of that element in the gospel? As you know, it is deliberate on the part of God. God is intent on saving men, but to save them he must cure human beings of that fundamental perversity that has shown up in the human character: to go for independence of God, to take an independent stance. Instead of man's confidence being in God, in utter dependence upon him, man has constantly taken even the good things that God has given us and transferred his basic confidence from God to them. God had to complain of it through Jeremiah:

Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches. (9:23)

There is nothing wrong in riches, but if we transfer our confidence from God to those riches, then we have perverted man's true relationship to God and the universe. There is nothing wrong in wisdom, but alas for the human tendency to leave our trust in God and being dependent upon him, simply because we feel that our wisdom is so sufficient, and we put our trust in our wisdom. We will call almighty God himself to the bar of our wisdom, and if he can satisfy our wisdom, we are prepared to listen to him. Ah, but if he doesn't meet the requirements of our wisdom, then we decide that God is inadequate. It is an utter perversity of the faculty that God has given us. 'Let not . . . the mighty man glory in his might.' It is God that gives us our power, but if we allow our fancied power to detract from our dependence upon God, then our power has become weakness indeed. And this is what man has done. It is, therefore, the deliberate strategy of God in the gospel to break that foolish independence.

How will he do it? God's answer was the cross itself: a seeming exhibition of weakness and folly on the part of God. But the cross, in the first place, exposed man's weakness and folly. As Paul remarks concerning the crucified Christ: 'none of the rulers of this world understood or knew the wisdom of God: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' (2:8).

Oh, what ignoramuses they were, when men, with their vaunted political wisdom and expediency and calculated strategies that were deemed good wisdom and political know-how, took the very wisdom of God, the Son of God and the creator of the universe, and nailed him to a cross! And how the resurrection of the crucified Jesus has exposed the utter bankruptcy of human wisdom, of human religion, of human power, and shown man in his independence of God to be a fool, and an utter ignoramus.

The mangled body of Jesus Christ on the cross says another thing: 'See here the penalty that man's sin deserves, the consequence of human sin.' Even physically, it made a wreck of that holy body. Is that what sin is? That is where independence of God will lead.

And see this wonder. How would you break this perverse streak in the human heart, this independence of God and supposed human self-sufficiency? You would devise a way of salvation that holds out the love of God. While we were sinners, while we were rebels, while we were ungodly, even then did God love us (see Rom 5:6–8). And when we have nothing to contribute to our salvation and are powerless to save ourselves, we may look to the only place where salvation is to be found. We may look to the crucified Lord Jesus Christ: God's Son upon a cross, just as the desperate and dying Israelites looked to the serpent on the pole as their only possible means of salvation. And it humbles my pride! My wisdom contributed nothing; my power contributes nothing; and as a bankrupt sinner my only hope is the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ is God's deliberate strategy, therefore. The sad thing was that, in the activities of the church in Corinth, believers though they were (or were supposed to be), now they had got *beyond* the gospel, if you please. It's a dangerous position to get into. Their church politics had now taken to forming groups after famous preachers and boosting the one against the other and introducing party spirit and saying, 'I am of Paul.' They were perpetuating the very false attitude that the cross was designed to smash.

They were glorying in the techniques of Greek oratory. Instead of getting on in a manful way and preaching the gospel in direct, straightforward fashion, they were tricking it out with all the entertainment value of Greek oratorical contest. They said that that was the way to capture the people: soft-peddle the cross. And, of course, it was having disastrous effect. Now, to get the Lord's people to come and listen to the word of God, you had to put on a better show than you could get down at the local theatre when the orators gave demonstrations and exhibitions of their communication skills. 'Well, they said, 'we can get better down in the theatre than we can get in the assembly. We're not coming out to listen there, not unless you bring the super-duper preacher!'

They were coming to wait on super-duper preachers instead of coming to wait on God. For you can have the very best preacher under the sun, but if your faith is in him, ultimately, then he can preach his heart out and you won't get much because, unless God's Holy Spirit simultaneously opens your heart and mind to understand and receive, you will not get to know God any further. God is a person, and unless he chooses to reveal himself, we don't get to know him, and the only one that can reveal God to us is God's Holy Spirit. Oh, how we need to get back to this message that the cross is designed to promote. In church we come not to wait on the great and famous preacher; we come to wait on God with the presidency of the Holy Spirit in the church, so that our expectation is from the Lord. Thus does Paul rebuke them.

The danger of trusting in a big man

I can't help thinking at this stage of the famous story of David and Goliath in the Old Testament. You'll know the background. Israel, coming out of Egypt, knew the glorious experience of the might and power of God. And when at last they arrived in the promised

land, their nation was organized as theocracy, directly dependent upon God. The nation, from time to time, went astray, and they got themselves in all kinds of bondages, but when they did so they cried to the Lord; and the Lord, faithful to his people, raised up deliverers, until the next time they went astray.

Well, eventually they got tired of that. I suppose it is a bit nerve-racking, isn't it, if you've got an Ammonite coming up the road, or a Midianite, with his camel breathing down your neck? To wait on the Lord to raise up a deliverer is a little bit, sort of, nail-biting, you know. It tests the old nerves, doesn't it?

So they came to Samuel; and they said, 'Samuel, it's no good, with due respect, having to wait on God every time. I mean, you give us a king, and then we'll have him institutionally installed, and when the Ammonites come we shall just have to call him out. That's what kings are for' (see 1 Sam 8).

Samuel was upset. So was God, but in his mercy, he determined to teach them a lesson. 'You want a king, do you? Do you think that's better than waiting on me? What kind of a king would you like, my dear folks?' he said. 'What about this chap here?' And God presented them with Saul. Now, Saul was some man. Wow. He was head and shoulders above all the rest, with all the brawn. What a man! God said, 'Would you like him as your king?'

'Ah, yes, God. Now you're talking! A big man like that would do very well, thank you very much. We'll install him as king.'

'You'd better not forget to keep on trusting me,' said God. 'But there you are, you can have your big man.'

And for a time things went well. Old Saul, he frightened the whole neighbourhood and got the tribes of Israel bowing to his rule, until one day there came out of the ranks of the Philistines, Goliath. Oh, if Saul was a big man, what would he do with this? This was a mountain of a man! That's the trouble with being dependent on big men: you're safe until there comes a bigger man. Well, Saul didn't know what to do. Big man though he was, his 'big man-ism' philosophy had now failed him, of course.

David volunteered to go. 'Well, my boy,' said Saul, 'it doesn't seem to me very sensible, but if you're determined to go . . . But you're only a youth. You've no experience and qualifications, and this kind of thing, but I'll tell you what, David, my boy—take my armour!'

What a fool. If David had taken Saul's sword, he wouldn't have got within yards of Goliath. Goliath had a spear like a telegraph post. Imagine David coming up with Saul's sword: 'Excuse me . . . let me get a bit nearer.' Goliath would have skewered him.

David didn't take Saul's armour. By deliberate strategy he took five small stones, a staff and a sling. And when Goliath saw David coming with a staff, he was absolutely enraged, and his Philistine moustache went up and down: 'You come to me with a little tiny stick, like a man would use to drive a dog out of his backyard! Are you coming to me, the greatest single combat hero warrior that the world has ever produced, like that?'

Oh, he was enraged. And as they stood taunting each other, David declared his strategy: 'I'm coming to you,' he says, 'and I'm going to defeat you and take your head off (be warned), but my choice of weapons is deliberate, Goliath. If I came to you with weapons like yours, I suppose I could conquer you; but what conclusion would the people of God reach then? Well, that it was the better man that won. What use would that be? I'm coming to you with these

ridiculously silly, little weak and crude weapons so that Israel may know that I come to you in the name of the Lord whose armies you have defied. So when the victory is won, Israel may learn its lesson and not trust in big men any more, but learn to trust in the living God.'

Here is the deliberate strategy of weak weapons that God's power might be made known.

Conclusion

My time is done. Oh, how I would like to say all the other things. I'm coming around to the organizer's view when he said that I shall have to come again. But even this short survey shows us, doesn't it, that it is dangerous in the church: in its activities, in its methods and in its evangelism, to get away from the gospel and to forget the very principles of the cross of Christ? God help us understand what his strategy of the cross is. God give us the courage to be loyal to that cross and its principles, and to say with Paul, 'I am determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified' (see 2:2).

Yes, there is a deeper wisdom to be had 'among those who are mature' (see 2:6), but to come at that deeper wisdom, we shall still have to remember the principle of the cross. If we would learn God's holy word, if in the church we shall be able to sense the riches and the glory and the wealth of our divine inheritance, and together make progress in the knowledge of our infinitely wonderful God and enjoy those things that 'eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither have they entered into the heart of man' (see v. 9), then we must listen to the terms upon which God reveals them: 'but God has revealed them to us through his Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God' (see v. 10).

I was at a conference in Japan some years ago, marvelling at the work that God has done through his servants in that country. I was at a Christian camp, and one of the speakers was a physicist who came from America. And in the interval I got the opportunity of a lifetime, actually, to have a real physicist on two legs, to whom I could put my questions! I have, you know, a little amateur interest in physics. The wonderful thing was that when I started to put my questions to him, he smiled benignly and said that that was a silly question to ask about that particular field in physics. I was delighted, because he now said, 'Now, this is the way you want to go about investigating it.' I had a physicist who had done the research himself to tell me both the questions to ask and the answers that I could get. Marvellous!

And the things of God: how shall I know them? Sometimes I don't even know the sensible questions to ask. Ah, but God has given us his Spirit. He searches all things and the deep things of God. And those marvellous things that eye has not seen and human imagination could never have invented—these things God stands ready to reveal to us in the church! But it will be through God's Spirit. Let us honour all the preachers and teachers we can get our hands on, but let us make sure that our ultimate confidence is not in them, but in God, so that when we meet in church, we come not to hear a preacher, however great; we come to wait on the living God who, by his Spirit, will reveal himself to us.

So may God bless his word. Bless you, my brothers and sisters, in your church fellowships from wherever you come. May he fill your heart with the glory of his grace, and strengthen you to witness effectively to the world by the preaching of the cross of Christ.

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.