

Authority, Freedom and Responsibility

Initial, Ongoing and Final Salvation

David Gooding

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Our Lord's Authority

The Gospel by Matthew

The title that I have given to this morning's talk is intended in the first place as a description of the Gospel by Matthew, as it will deal with the question of *our Lord's authority in general and its application to our lives*. Our discussion will immediately relate to what our good friend has just said, because it will investigate the question of *tradition* in relation to holy Scripture.¹

So now I would like to lead you in a study of the central sections of the Gospel by Matthew, and two things seem to become very clear. One is that Matthew is concerned to present our Lord Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God', to whom all authority is given both in heaven and on earth (see 16:16–19). The other is that, not only should we know the historical facts about what our Lord Jesus said and did, but we should personally accept the lordship of the Messiah for ourselves and apply it to our lives. Thus it is that Matthew characteristically preaches the gospel in these verses:

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (11:28–30)

This is Matthew's great statement of the gospel in the terms of our Lord's invitation to take his yoke. No other Gospel writer quotes those words of the Lord Jesus, only Matthew. John will preach the gospel in the terms that 'whoever believes in him . . . [has] eternal life' (3:16), and that is blessedly true.

What is meant by the term 'yoke'

Just let me remind you, therefore, what is meant by that term *yoke*. It is a metaphor for one or two things; perhaps, in the first place, a metaphor for kingly rule. You will remember the vivid story in the first book of Kings. Solomon had died and Rehoboam, his son, was to be made king. 'All Israel had come to Shechem to make him king', we are told (12:1). Even though he was Solomon's son, they were not prepared to have Rehoboam on just any old terms. Instigated by Jeroboam, they said, 'Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you' (v. 4). In effect they were saying that if he didn't make it lighter they would not serve Rehoboam.

¹ We do not have the recordings of other speakers, nor the later general discussion.

So he took counsel first with the old men who had served Solomon. And they said, 'If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants for ever' (v. 7).

Solomon had begun to be unreasonable in the demands he made of the people and far exceeded the terms laid down in Deuteronomy for a king. He accumulated gold and he multiplied wives and he did all sorts of things that Deuteronomy said he shouldn't. With a vast harem to keep up and endless building projects to carry through, he had to bring the people into forced labour and he made their yoke very heavy. So the elders said that Rehoboam should make their yoke lighter and the people would serve him.

Then he had a word with the younger group, and they said, 'Nonsense, Rehoboam, you must take a tough line.' They told him to say to the people, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions' (vv. 10–11). In other words, 'If my father's yoke was severe I shall make it one hundred times more severe.' As a result, the kingdom split. The ten tribes went off and elected Jeroboam to be their king, for Rehoboam's yoke was too heavy. A sad business it all was.

Do you perceive the one startling thing that is not mentioned in those chapters when the dispute arose? They didn't say, 'Let us look at what the king should do as laid down for us in Deuteronomy. If we have strayed from Scripture and its authority, let's get back to it. If, perhaps, we have not come up to the full strength of scriptural authority, let's adjust things to that end.' Instead of that they just argued, and there is no mention at all of consulting the guidelines of holy Scripture. The nation split and never recovered before the exile.

Yoke, therefore, is a term, a symbol, an emblem of kingly authority. When our blessed Lord offers us his yoke, he is offering us his kingly rule. He invites us to lift up the yoke voluntarily and put it on our shoulders. 'Come, take my yoke. Lift it up and carry it.' You will see that it is not so much the promulgation of a law, it is the offer of a gospel. In taking his yoke we shall find rest to our souls.

The rabbis also talked of their yoke, meaning their authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, if you wanted to know what Scripture did or did not demand, you consulted the rabbis. They would lay down their authoritative interpretation, which they put as a yoke on your life.

Our Lord, likewise. Here in Matthew, perhaps more than in any other Gospel, he is presented to us not only as a king but as the Lord who teaches us to come, take his yoke and learn from him. Did you notice what he said? 'Learn from me.' He is a teacher who is offering to teach us, and of course his teaching comes with kingly authority. The 'yoke' is his teaching. Matthew will tell us of two things about that authority as he records for us the incidents of our Lord's life, ministry, death and resurrection.

1. The validity of our Lord's authority

How do we know that he is the king he claims to be? How can I be sure at that level that Jesus Christ rightly has the authority he claims?

2. Our response to his authority

What will induce us to take up his yoke? By taking well-chosen incidents in our Lord's life, Matthew analyses for us the nature of our Lord's authority. By seeing that he is indeed king, and by perceiving the nature of his rule, we may gladly respond to him and willingly take up his yoke.

I propose, therefore, to give a bird's eye view of the central sections of this Gospel, as I perceive them. Not in detail of course, but, 'skipping over the mountaintops', to point out what, it appears to me, these three sections of Matthew's Gospel are really about. They are not a haphazard collection of isolated stories; they are very carefully selected and arranged to deal with certain prominent themes and problems.

Section 1: The validity of our Lord's authority and our response to it (7:28–10:42).

Section 2: Our Lord's authority set against the background of the problem of evil (11:1–14:12).

Section 3: The nature of the church's authority (14:22–18:35).

Section 1: The validity of our Lord's authority and our response to it (7:28–10:42)

'And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes' (7:28–29). Let me just point out what many have pointed out. 'And when Jesus finished these sayings,' is a very common phrase in this Gospel. Matthew uses it in order to divide up his narrative.

We shall find a similar phrase in 11:1, 'When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.' Again in 13:53, 'And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there'. And another such phrase in 19:1, 'Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.'

As a good and efficient civil servant in the income tax department, why does Matthew order his material and group it so that it illuminates different leading themes? I'm going to suggest that, first of all, in the section that runs from 7:28–10:42, he will talk to us about the nature of our Lord's authority, and therefore also about the path of our discipleship.

The validity of our Lord's authority

Let me come, therefore, to the first part of my thesis, and look again at 7:28–29. See how Matthew quietly develops his theme. He tells us that when our Lord had finished these words, that is, the words of the Sermon on the Mount, 'the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.' You'll notice that what struck the people about our Lord's teaching was his authority. That is what attracted them to him.

Look then at 8:1. 'When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him.' Don't let us pass it by and not fail to notice that you gain nobody's respect by preaching a tentative, apologetic, not quite sure whether it's this way or that way kind of teaching. The thing that still commands people's respect is the teaching that comes with divine authority. Don't let us lose our nerve in our modern generation. Our Lord taught them, not as their scribes but as one who had authority, and the crowds followed him.

Look immediately at 8:9. Here comes a centurion who is attracted to our blessed Lord, appealing to him for healing for his servant. What is it about our Lord that has impressed the centurion? Well, he tells us, 'For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my servant, "Do this", and he does it.' If he himself had such authority, he expected our Lord to be able to wield an infinitely greater authority.

Pass over to chapter 9 for two verses there. Some people had brought to him a paralytic, whose sins our Lord had just pronounced to be forgiven. So he says in verse 6, 'But that you may know that the Son of Man has . . .', and much here will depend upon your translation.

Allow me pedantically to beseech of you to use *exact* translations in your studies. It will save you a lot of time. Matthew has gone out of his way to indicate that he's dealing with the question of our Lord's *authority*. It would be helpful if translators didn't go and spoil it for you and make life difficult by translating it somewhat differently and stopping you from seeing the flow of Matthew's thought. "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" — he then said to the paralytic — "Rise, pick up your bed and go home" (9:6).

Then Matthew, like other Gospel writers who record this incident, describes to us the reaction of the multitudes in verse 8. Mark and Luke record it in slightly different terms. It's only Matthew who chooses to repeat this word *authority*, for that's the kind of thing he's interested in. He tells us, 'When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.'

Then, lo and behold, he introduces the final chapter of this little section with the same theme. 'And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction' (10:1). Along with the doctrine of our Lord's own authority comes the doctrine of the authority that our Lord delegated to his apostles, and of course that remark has enormous historical implications for the authority of the apostles. As Christians, we accept the words of our Lord about his apostles, do we not? 'Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me' (v. 40). Our Lord delegated authority to his apostles.

Our response to his authority

If that is one side of Matthew's theme in chapters 8–10, there is inescapably another side to it, just like a coin has two sides. If the authority of Christ is one side of the coin, the other side of the coin is our response to that authority. What shall that be? Let's notice how Matthew develops it.

'When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him' (8:1). As I've already said, that was as a consequence of our Lord's authority, 'for he was teaching them as

one who had authority, and not as their scribes' (7:29). Listening to those dreary scribes was indeed a pain in the head. Now they listened to someone who spoke with authority and they followed him.

You say, 'But all that means is that they followed him down the mountain.'

Well, yes, it was physically following him down the grassy slopes of the mountain. But that was a start. Some people, having listened to Christ, go away and forget all about him and the distance between them and Christ becomes more than ever it was.

Presently Matthew tells us that our Lord decided to go on a journey, and a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go' (v. 19). Then another man came with various suggestions. 'And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead"' (v. 22).

Then verse 23 says, 'And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him', which was a very reasonable thing for disciples to do. If you have a teacher who teaches with authority, then what learners do is to follow. But we shall soon see that following the Lord Jesus will involve them in a journey. Once more it will start off as a physical journey, but presently it will transmute into a journey of a deeper spiritual sense.

Let's come over to 9:9, and what are we talking about here? 'As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.' Look at verse 19. Things have gone into reverse now, for Jairus is asking the Lord to come and raise his daughter from the dead: 'And Jesus rose and followed him'. There are times, as we will see, when we have to lead the Lord. If that's a novel notion to you, wait and see what it means. Finally, verse 27, 'And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him'.

Matthew has collected stories from all over the place and put them together in this section because he is interested in this twin theme. On the one side our Lord's authority, and on the other side the response of the disciples to follow the Lord Jesus.

The nature of our Lord's authority

Now, let's come back to chapter 8, where Matthew has three stories to illustrate the nature of our Lord's authority (vv. 1-17).

Suppose you went to Russia and you thought that May Day would be a suitable day to be in Moscow, somewhere near the Kremlin. If you said to Andropov², 'I understand you're a very powerful nation, please illustrate your authority and power,' he might say to you, 'Stand here for a moment while I parade our authority before you. Do you see this thing here? If we tell you what to do and you don't do it, we can shatter fifty of your cities at once. Is that not great authority?' Your knees begin to sag in the middle.

The cleansing of the leper (vv. 1-4)

What is the nature of our Lord's authority that will lead anybody to submit to him?

² At the time of these talks Yuri Andropov was Leader of the Soviet Union.

When he came down from the mountain . . . a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.' (vv. 1-4)

Why show himself to the priest? *Because the priests had a God-given authority.* Let us be unmistakably clear, the priests in the Old Testament banished uncleanness in the name of God. We won't now go into the vexed question of whether leprosy is a type of sin or not; that's another big subject. But the priests in the Old Testament certainly were under command to banish lepers, and leprosy was described as being unclean. God is not for uncleanness.

Now here comes our Lord; how will he exhibit his authority in matters of cleanliness? Will he say that the law is old fashioned and we don't have to bother about cleanliness? That we're in a much more permissive age and all sorts of things that shouldn't be done, things condemned by the Old Testament, you can do them now and it's okay?

No, no. Our Lord chose his authority this way around. Whereas the Old Testament condemned uncleanness to be banished, our Lord banishes the uncleanness itself. He doesn't say 'try and be clean'; he demonstrates his authority by making the man clean. Then he sent the cleansed leper to the priest.

What would the priest say? The priests were naturally a bit suspicious about the Lord Jesus. Some of them said he was a very loose man and they objected to his claim to be the Messiah. What could you say, if you were a genuine priest and you really believed that your God given mission was to uphold cleanliness? Here comes Jesus Christ, and he sends you a man who was a leper but has now been cleansed. If you are against uncleanness you will be for Christ, won't you? How can you be for cleanliness and against the man who can make the leper clean, without denying everything you have stood for?

Even for the most cynical, it is still one of those early pieces of evidence that the claim of our Lord's authority is true. You're for decency and for cleanness, and our Lord demonstrates his authority by exhibiting his power to make people clean.

I needn't preach to you all those delightful overtones and undertones of this story. How our Lord bridged that terrible gap brought about by uncleanness that separated this man from society. It is symbolic, perhaps, of that greater gap that our moral uncleanness has brought between us and God himself that, left unbridged, must place us on the wrong side of the eternal gulf. Christ bridged that distance, not by saying uncleanness does not matter. Quite the reverse: by touching the leper and banning the uncleanness.

Matthew gives us several examples now of our Lord in action, not only against uncleanness but against weakness.

The centurion's faith (vv. 5-13)

Here comes a centurion and his trouble is that, though he has great authority to say to this soldier 'go' and he goes, and to this one 'come' and he comes, and to another 'do this' and he does it, there is one poor man who can do nothing. The centurion can say it a hundred times

a day, but the man is paralysed. The centurion represented military and civil power under the Roman emperor, so this story may serve us once again as a parable.

Of all other known forms of authority, take the highest form of authority that the law knows of itself. It will say to you, 'do this' and you're supposed to do it. But most of us have found in our experience what Paul confesses to. When the law says 'do this', he either can't do it or doesn't want to do it.

For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:22–24)

Even though I get to the state where I delight in the law of God—my reason approves it, my emotions delight in it and my will is raised on the side of doing it—my sin rises up and overpowers me. I say, 'Wretched man that I am!' The nature of Christ's authority is not just adding another law, which would make life even more difficult; it empowers me to do what otherwise I could not do.

Christ heals many illnesses and diseases (vv. 14–17)

Matthew adds the story of what happened as the sun was setting and the sick were laid around him. Whether it was physical or spiritual infirmity, he healed them, to fulfil what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, 'he [himself] took our illnesses and bore our diseases' (v. 17; see Isa 53:4). This is a vivid word given by Isaiah. Messiah was to put his shoulder under the weak and carry the infirm. That speaks volumes of the grace of Christ and the nature of his authority. In that authority there is release and there is salvation, because he comes alongside our weakness and puts his strong shoulder under our infirmity and carries it. The authority of Christ is not just the promulgation of another law; it is the announcement of a Saviour with authority to release us from our weakness and infirmity.

The cost of following Christ (vv. 18–22)

I suggest that those early stories present us with the initial contact with Christ and that delightful gospel of his authority. But if that initial contact is genuine it must lead to deeper experience.

While the crowd was around him, our Lord remained there. Then presently he announces that he's going to leave (v. 18). Why did he leave when there were so many people enthusiastic to hear his teaching? Well, it presented the people with a decision. Would they say, 'I want to know who that was. He preached an unusual sermon; it was quite interesting—Oh, I wonder what there is for lunch!' Or, 'Here is this great teacher, doing some marvellous things and works of salvation. He can't go! If he's going I will follow him.'

Now there begins a journey. At first, it's a physical journey, but there are lessons to be learned that couldn't be learned if they weren't on the journey. It then becomes a journey into the discovery of the Lord Jesus and into the discovery of themselves. Our Lord allows circumstances to arise for the disciples when they will personally discover the powers of the

Lord Jesus. That is always so on the path of discipleship. There are lessons to be learned as it starts, other lessons in the middle, and yet more on the other side. The Bible is simple in that sense, and so is life. There are lessons to be learned at the beginning, in middle life, and at the end.

However, let's start at the beginning. One good man came. He was a scribe, so he was used to the theoretical interpretation of holy Scripture. He had a lot of theory in his head and, entranced by our Lord's teaching, he proposed to follow him. "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (8:19–20). What did our Lord mean?

You say, 'Perhaps our Lord himself very often didn't have the ordinary common creature comforts of life, and if you follow him on the path of discipleship you may have to rough it in the middle of Africa or somewhere.'

I suppose that's true, though it is to be noticed that very often on earth our Lord did have somewhere to lay his head. There was Mary's house, and then those two very kindly women in Bethany who made him as comfortable as they could (see John 11). I don't think he slept every night of his life on the Mount of Olives, did he?

He meant it in a deeper sense. That verb is used once elsewhere, to my knowledge. There was one place where he *laid* his head, and that is on the cross when he said, "It is finished", and he *bowed* his head and gave up his spirit' (John 19:30). For my part I am inclined to take the saying, 'nowhere to lay his head', to mean that he had come to our earth to do a work, and until the work was finished he was never able to lay down his head at night and say, 'Now it's done, it's finished, I've arrived.' On Calvary that work was done.

All who follow him in the path of discipleship had better lay it to heart. We will never on earth come to a place where we'll be able to say, 'I've completed the course. I have now arrived; it's finished and I can lay down my head.' We are on a journey and some progress will be made, but I assure you that it will never be completed on this planet until we sit down with Christ in his kingdom.

Then there came another disciple, who was taught that in following Christ no prior claim can be put upon him, not even the sacred claim of his own father. However, if we follow Christ, one of the first things he will do is to send us back to behave well at home and look after our elderly parents (see 15:4–6). Not even the claim of parents can come before Christ; there is no prior claim to his Lordship.

The disciples in the storm (vv. 23–27)

Jesus is Lord of the physical powers of the universe

See them now as they begin the journey across the sea and there comes a storm. They couldn't have learned this lesson on dry land. The waves and the wind are howling around them and it seems to them that the boat is about to go down. They wake the Lord and he calms the storm. Does that tell us that, if you're on a 'boat' in life, you'll never go down? It would be a rash thing to say that no true Christian has ever 'drowned', wouldn't it?

On one occasion I was at the Lord's Supper somewhere in England and a good brother expounded this story to us, assuring us that the 'boat' in which Christ travels will never go

down. When he sat down a very lank and lean man got up, I didn't know who he was but it turned to be Dr Wilfred Tidmarsh of Ecuador. His first words were, 'I have to tell you that five of your missionary brothers have perished at the hands of the Auca Indians.'³

The story of the storm tells us that the Christ I follow is Lord of the physical powers of this universe. They thought he might drown if he didn't hurry up and wake up, but he is Lord and by him and for him all things were created and through him they hang together (see Col 1:16–17). He is their goal, and the powers of this universe will never catch him napping. Sooner or later in the path of discipleship I shall need to come to the conviction that the Jesus I follow is not merely a theoretical teacher of theology, he is the Lord of the physical powers of this universe, the physical powers of my body and brain, and my service and discipleship will involve trusting him. He will maintain my 'boat', as Paul found on the Mediterranean Sea. If it is in the Lord's interests that Paul should witness for him in Rome, Paul will be there, Mediterranean notwithstanding. If it pleases the Lord of creation that Paul will eventually die, he will die, and the Lord remains Lord of the physical powers of the universe.

The two demon-possessed men (vv. 28–34)

Jesus is Lord of the spiritual powers of the universe

When they got to the other side they had to learn another lesson: that our Lord is master not only of the physical powers, but of the spiritual powers of the universe too. As they got to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met them, coming out of the tombs. Matthew isn't content with recording just one; according to him there were two. And then he adds a phrase that no other Gospel writer uses, 'so fierce that no one could pass that way'. What an obstacle. Now the path along which our Lord was leading them led them to a point where hostile spirit powers seemed to threaten their progress and make it impossible to proceed.

Sooner or later any true disciple will find a similar thing. When a man or woman steps out to follow Christ along the path of discipleship, at first there are many victories, triumphs, glories and joys. And then, 'sure as eggs is eggs',⁴ there'll come a point where Satan will be there to make further progress impossible, if he can. Our Lord takes them this way to demonstrate to them that he is not only Lord of the physical powers of the universe, but Lord of the spirit realm as well, and he opens the path by dismissing the demons.

And behold, they cried out, 'What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, saying, 'If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.' And he said to them, 'Go.' So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. (vv. 29–32)

³ On Sunday, 8th January 1956, Jim Elliot (28), Pete Fleming (27), Ed McCully (28), Nate Saint (32) and Roger Youderian (31) were killed by the Wuaorani Indians (referred to at the time as the Auca Indians).

⁴ Something that is absolutely certain. *Easy Learning Idioms Dictionary*. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers. The earliest-recorded appearance was in a dictionary of slang published in 1699.

And then there is a terrible thing. The herdsmen watched as our Lord demonstrated victory over the very powers of hell. They run into the city and tell the locals about it, and especially about the demon-possessed men. Everyone comes out and when they find that their pigs are lost and consider this to be more than human authority that was now amongst them, they beg him to leave their region, *and he went*.

That is the nature of his authority. You can come to him who has all authority on heaven and in earth and tell him to get going, and he will. He is not a tyrant and he will never remove your free-will. If you choose eternal disaster, in the end he will honour your choice. Oh, how we would wish, in some sense, that God was a tyrant who would save us against our will. But he won't, for he's not a tyrant.

I must resist my temptation to sermonize, and so we come to chapter 9.

Jesus heals a paralytic and forgives his sins (9:1-8)

What more must we learn about our Lord's authority and of the path of discipleship? Some glorious things, only this time you will see our Lord coming under criticism. There were those in his community who thought he was a very loose man really (see Luke 7:39; John 8:41, 48). He was gaining popularity by making discipleship not hard enough. So on this occasion when he was presented with a paralytic, and he said, 'your sins are forgiven,' the scribes lifted up their hands in holy horror. You can't tell people their sins are forgiven just like that! Usually if people sinned they brought a sacrifice to the priest and the priest pronounced forgiveness. For Jesus Christ to stand there and offer complete and utter forgiveness in his own name, that was blasphemy. People can't know such forgiveness on earth.

To this day it appears to some theologians to be altogether too easy. They will tell you straight, 'No, while you're still here on earth you cannot know that you're completely forgiven.' They argue that if people knew that their sins were forgiven in that sense, they would take liberties and live the most disreputable lives. It's not only professing Christians who will tell you that. I spoke with a Buddhist the other day, and after two and a half hours he told me the very same thing.

The Epistles explain further on the matter: Christ does offer complete forgiveness of sin. How did our Lord demonstrate the reality that he does have authority to give that kind of forgiveness? By empowering the paralytic to walk. If I claim to have forgiveness from the risen Christ, let me remember that the evidence of it before the world is my ability to walk straight, to the glory of God.

The call and conversion of Matthew (vv. 9-13)

Again the Pharisees criticized our Lord for eating with sinners, and in particular with tax gatherers. Matthew tells us our Lord's answer to that criticism, first of all by giving his own conversion story. How did Matthew get saved? He was sitting with the money bags at the receipt of custom. Although the job brought him disgrace and contempt, and he'd been excommunicated from the synagogue because of it, he braved all that social unpopularity and boycotting because his love of money chained him to his post. Our Lord came by with an authoritative, 'Follow me.' With his command there came the power that broke Matthew's

bondage and he never went back to this very doubtful occupation involving so much oppression and swindling.

Matthew then held a reception in his house and invited other tax collectors, and Jesus was there with his disciples. When the Pharisees saw him sitting with them, they said that it was socially unacceptable. They asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' (v. 11). They were criticizing our Lord for mixing with the doubtfully rich, to which our Lord answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick' (v. 12). If someone has a serious disease, you'll put him in isolation. Someone has to go to where he is or he will die, but attending him is no evidence that the doctor approves of the disease.

By the time dinner was over, everybody at that dinner table knew what it was for. There were a few tax gatherers squirming in their seats when it became evident to them that Jesus was telling them about their sin and their need for repentance and being reconciled with God. There was no doubt that our Lord was not talking about approving of the 'disease' but of banishing it.

John's disciples (vv. 14-17)

It was not only the Pharisees who got a little bit perturbed about our Lord and thought that he was too loose in his authority. The disciples of John got a bit upset too. They had believed the message of the forerunner and professed repentance, but John had taught them to fast. They observed that our Lord didn't teach his disciples to do so and they were a bit worried about it. Our Lord was making it too easy for his converts, which is one way of getting popularity, isn't it? If you give people a veneer of religion and don't make it too difficult, you're liable to get more followers. To the disciples of John, it appeared that our Lord was making it too permissive, which casts an interesting light upon our Lord's ministry. How did people imagine that? Our Lord replied that, when it comes to fasting, it is to be applied when there is a good reason and in proper circumstances, and not because it's in a rule book or something.

He said, 'Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved' (v. 17). You can put old wine into a stiff old wine bottle because the wine has settled down and matured. If you've got new wine that's all full of ferment you'd better not put that into old bottles. It'll break the bottle, so you'll lose the wine and ruin the bottle as well. New wine will have to be put into a new leather bottle, not the same one.

You can read this at two levels of personal experience. Mature settled people, who've been believers for about forty-five years or so, can accept the disciplines of life. They know that it's remarkably tough and perhaps unyielding, and they've grown used to it over the years. But you cannot expect a new convert to stick immediately to that same level of discipline. His emotions are still working hard and the strength of the past might well reject it. It doesn't mean that there should be no discipline at all, but it will have to be suited to the condition of the person who is to receive it.

John preached repentance and when they sat under his ministry the people quaked. 'Flee from the wrath to come,' he told them. When they were down in Jordan being baptized they

were feeling pretty solemn, and I don't think they shouted, 'Hallelujah! I'm going to be baptized.' No, they confessed their sins and were baptized.

And then came Jesus with his delightful message of forgiveness and the gift of eternal life. Such joy as the previous dispensation had not known, let alone known how to express. Therefore, there had to be a new kind of discipline. As for fasting, our Lord said, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast' (v. 15). It would be an odd wedding where all the guests fasted. When the bridegroom's taken away, then shall they fast. Fasting has to be appropriate to the situation; not done because it's Friday, for instance.

Jairus's daughter and the woman are healed (vv. 18-26)

While our Lord was still speaking, Matthew introduces us to the fourth and final part of this series of stories. People had been criticizing our Lord that he was too lax, but watch now what happens in the path of discipleship. A ruler came in and knelt before him. Mark tells us that his name was Jairus and he was a ruler of the synagogue. His daughter was dead. Forgive my fancifulness, but you can lay down the law in the synagogue and tell people how to behave, but if the young lady is dead what use is that? What's the use of impeccable teaching in a church if everybody in the pews is dead? You can have all your fasting, rules and regulations, but what you need is life.

Jairus says, 'My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live' (v. 18). *The Lord followed Jairus.*

You say, 'I thought we were meant to follow him, but now the Lord is following Jairus.'

Quite so. But, you know, in the further reaches of discipleship there will come times when our Lord will wait for you to come with your need to him. 'Lord, there's a bit of our church,' or, 'there's a bit of my life that needs your attention, will you come?' He will wait for you to show him the way there.

As he's going to Jairus's house there came this woman who had been suffering from a discharge of blood for twelve years (v. 20). According to Jewish laws she would spread defilement wherever she went. I'm not being fanciful here, when I say that it's an illustration of dangers at the spiritual level. Says the writer to the Hebrews to his readers, 'See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled' (Heb 12:15).

Beneath our expensive clothes there are hidden weaknesses that spread defilement in our churches: 'Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice' (Eph 4:31). The path of discipleship will mean that we shall have to come to the Lord Jesus for him to deal with those deeper hidden things.

Two blind men (vv. 27-31)

Then there came two blind men and they followed him. What a curious situation. Can you imagine it? They can't see the Lord Jesus, so they're just listening and they want to get near him. He seems to be going, so they try to follow. Why doesn't he stop and heal them? He knows what they want but he lets them follow. It was difficult for blind men to follow him

down those narrow little streets with all those crowds. Presently, the voice went quiet. Where has he gone to now? He'd gone into a house, so these poor fellows had to grope their way down the street until they found this house and they went in. They must have wanted their sight, mustn't they?

Paul tells his young converts in Ephesus that he prays for them fastidiously, that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened (see 1:18). Yes, they're Christians already, they've trusted the Lord Jesus, but there's a sense in which they still need their eyes to be opened to see things about our Lord, the purpose of his calling and the power that attaches to it. If we want that kind of thing, we shall have to follow our Lord, persist in our following and persist in our praying. He does not necessarily give that illumination to us overnight.

The sending out of the twelve disciples (10:1-42)

Let's move on to chapter 10, which concludes this particular section on our Lord's authority. It is what you might describe as the briefing of the apostles as they went out to preach. Two things are to be noticed about this briefing.

1. When they went out to preach our Lord delegated to them his authority. That is historically true of the apostles in a very special sense. In a subsidiary sense it is true of us.
2. When our Lord briefed the disciples he seemed to talk to them about things that went far beyond their present time.

And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. (vv. 11-15)

So he points to the day of judgment, and then he says,

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (v. 23)

Whatever did he mean? He seems, if you ponder it, to be referring to *the second coming*, but the second coming didn't take place during that missionary journey. Finally, as he briefs the disciples, he says,

The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. (v. 41)

Once more our Lord turns their attention to the time of his second coming and the rewards. What is he doing? Amongst all of those commandments relative to briefing for the task of

preaching the gospel, there is this common theme. As they go to preach, they are to preach against the background of the coming of the Messiah and of the day of judgment. It doesn't matter that he won't actually return for the second time in their lifetime; that's neither here nor there. They are to preach against the background of that ultimate authority.

What they say now to someone sitting by the wayside, sharing their lunch with them, speaking the gospel to them, is to be against the background of the final judgment. If that person comes before the final judgment unconverted, the supreme judge must remind them of that conversation by the roadside. It was *the word of Christ* that the disciples preached and it came through their lips. In that sense it was *their word*, and in the day of judgment that person will be required to answer for what they did with the word that was spoken to them. The power of Christ is delegated to his servants and if anyone perishes it is because they reject the word of God. But in another sense it was the disciples' word: they brought it and it was the disciples who told them the word.

If we are to preach the word with authority as our Lord preached it, it must always be against the background of eternity, the second coming and the final judgment. And I say again here what I said at the beginning; it seems to me that sometimes in this modern day people lose their nerve and are afraid to get up in the name of Christ and preach his authoritative word.

To preach it effectively to others, it stands to reason, as chapter 9 showed us, that we must learn to obey it ourselves. We must be prepared for the path of discipleship and follow the Lord not only through the initial easy stages but into those deeper and further parts, bringing him into the very centre of life to those weaknesses that spoil our testimony and spoil our churches. It's by knowing his own authority working out in our own lives that we go and preach it. Our ultimate authority is not, 'Look how good a specimen I am.' Our ultimate authority is that final day of judgment, and it is the Lord's word that we preach.

I have tried to expound that passage (superficially enough, I know) to show in some sense how those three chapters hang together. I'm now going to suggest what the next two major sections of this Gospel are about, and how they fit into the developing story. I'm not going to expound them; I'll just mention their leading themes in the hope that I can open a window for your further study.

Section 2: Our Lord's authority set against the background of the problem of evil (11:1-14:12)

The very next section opens with our Lord going around teaching and preaching. 'When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities' (11:1). Didn't he always do that? Why mention it specifically here?

Because here, in a very special sense, the ultimate authority of his teaching and preaching is set against the background of the great problem of evil, which is illustrated to us by the fact that John the Baptist was in prison. He had rebuked Herod for his immorality in the name of the Lord Jesus, calling upon Herod to repent so that he might prepare for the coming of Messiah. Herod didn't repent; he put John in prison. John naturally thought that our Lord

would get him out of prison and put a stop to this evil in high places by instituting a day of judgment upon Israel. To John's profound disappointment, our Lord did not do it and John perished in prison.

That story raises for us the great problem of evil in this world, doesn't it? Why does God allow evil to carry on? If Jesus is the Messiah, why doesn't he put a stop to evil? Many of the disciples were also disappointed. They thought our Lord was going to do like the Maccabees did; he would raise an army and with divine miraculous power presently intervene and put down evil. Our Lord did nothing of the sort. Therefore, they were grievously disappointed.

How and when will evil be put down?

It raises the whole question of what our Lord thought he was about, and therefore what we are meant to be about in face of the great problem of evil that still exists in our world. If Jesus is the Messiah, in what sense has he come to put down evil, and how does he propose to do it?

Matthew turns, therefore, to deal with the problem. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah; but in that sense he is not attempting to put down evil and he allows John, his own forerunner, to perish. He does not intend to pluck out the weeds now: 'Let both [the wheat and the weeds] grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn' (13:30). He's going to let them grow until harvest and then the judgment will come, but not now.

If he isn't going to raise an army like the Maccabees and put down evil by force now, and if that's got to wait until the second coming, what is the programme for now by which the King shall establish his authority?

Matthew gives us the answer: he went to teach and to preach. To illustrate the same point, he told the parable of the Sower (see ch. 13). The sower went out to sow to establish his kingdom, not by the sword but by the word. Matthew's Gospel is about authority, as applied to the individual and to the world. One day Christ will come again in power and great glory to execute the judgments of God and set up his kingdom, but that is not what he is doing now. Evil is allowed to go on and God doesn't repress it by the sword. Christ's tactics were for himself to preach, and then to send out his apostles and servants to preach his word, as the sower sows the seed.

Let's just bow our heads and ask for God's blessing to be upon us.

We thank thee Father for these moments spent with thy servant Matthew as he points us to our blessed Lord and his divine authority. What a gospel that is to our hearts; the release and the joy it brings, and the power we learn to appropriate from our risen Lord. Bless this word to our hearts, we beseech thee, that, entranced and attracted to our Lord, we may gladly take his yoke upon us.

Help us in this present age, that we may be wise to our Lord's tactics; that we may do what he wishes us to do, and fearlessly and with full conviction go forth

into this world to preach his word as the sower sowing the seed and looking for the ultimate harvest.

Bless us, we beseech thee now, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[The Church's Authority](#)

Problems and Solutions from 1 Corinthians

First of all, we shall continue from where we left off this morning, when we were considering together the authority of our blessed Lord. I was advancing the thesis that we should look upon his authority, not as some severe and rigorous demand that is made upon us but something of a veritable gospel of salvation. In a word, *his authority is our salvation*. He uses his authority to put his massive shoulder under our weaknesses and infirmities, and thus deliver us from powers from which we could not possibly deliver ourselves. When we preach the authority of Christ, we must remember that we are not calling people to some dismal discipline; we are offering them deliverance and salvation. Of course, when we accept his authority we shall be expected to respond by obedience in the endless path of progressive discipleship, and we tried to follow this morning what that will mean.

Section 3: The nature of the church's authority (Matthew 14:22–18:35)

Had the clock not defeated us, we should have come across a portion in the Gospel of Matthew that underlines this connection. Had we heard our Lord saying '... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (16:18), we should have come across a number of exceedingly important and fundamental statements relative to the power that our Lord Jesus delegates to his church. Being in the church of Christ means access to his power and, in some sense, employing the power that he himself possesses.

Peter walks on the water (14:22–33)

Before we look briefly at some other stories in Matthew that illustrate this very thing, let's look at a preparatory lesson our Lord taught Peter on another sea journey in the night of a storm. The apostles were rowing their ship but making little headway. They were becoming disheartened when they saw what they imagined to be a ghost coming across the water. That terrified them but didn't surprise them altogether. I suppose ghosts are so much *nothing* that they can easily walk on water. It turned out not to be a ghost, and a familiar voice cried above the noise of the wind and the waves, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid' (v. 27).

Peter came to a conclusion and did a peculiarly Petrine thing, overleaping all sorts of logical steps in the process. He said, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water' (v. 28). How did the conclusion follow from the premise, 'Lord, if it is you, let me do what you're doing'? Peter wasn't always worried about pedestrian logic, but I suspect that if

he had thought it through it would have gone like this. 'It isn't a ghost; it's the Lord himself. He's solid flesh and bones like we are, and if he can walk on water, what about me?' So he says in a moment of enthusiasm, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'

I don't know whether John thought privately, 'What a blasphemous suggestion. Of course you can't do like Christ does, Peter. What are you suggesting?' Ah, but our Lord had arranged it so that Peter should learn that that was precisely what he was expected to do: do like Christ did. 'Come,' said the voice, which was all the authority needed to indicate that Peter's suggestion was not undue enthusiasm.

Some Christians do give way to undue enthusiasm and try to do all sorts of things in the name of faith that God never asked them to do, and are silly things to do anyway. If you're going to do some great bold venture of faith, you'd better have authority for it. Faith without authority isn't faith; it's presumption.

The divine voice said, 'Come,' and faith responded to a word of the Lord. Peter found that with his eyes on Christ he could do what the Lord did.

You say, 'That didn't last long.'

I know that it hasn't lasted long with me on any occasion. Soon I find where the true authority lies and where the true power is. It is not in me, ever; but as long as my faith is going out to the Saviour he can give me the power to walk as he walked.

And Peter did it. When his attempt broke down through fear and lack of faith, and he began to sink, our Lord proved what a master he is in the teaching of his disciples. When they fail their lessons, he is there to carry them. When Peter began to sink and the water gurgled around him, our Lord didn't first preach to him, and say, 'You silly man, Peter, why did you doubt? Learn to have strong faith.' No, he'd have been sunk under if our Lord had waited for any such lesson. Stretching out his hand he took hold of him — and then he preached to him. Peter discovered that Jesus is indeed the Son of God (v. 33).

What a discovery it is to find that I have redemption through his blood (Eph 1:7). Whose blood? The blood of him through whom all the creation was made. It was for my salvation and eternal glory that he made this planet — that's why it's here. So that I might be born on it, in the course of life find the living God through Jesus Christ, and be taught to walk as he walked. He is master of the planet that he built so that I could be here, find God on it and be saved.

The transfiguration and the healing of the boy with a demon (17:1-21)

Following the passage in Matthew 16 that is discussing the church and what the church means, in the next chapter there is another incident recorded by Matthew. In his old age, or even in middle life, Matthew doubtless looked back upon many of these incidents in the life of our Lord and saw in them wonderful preparatory lessons that Christ in his wisdom had given them so that they could see illustrations of what it would mean to live with Christ in his church.

Our Lord went up the mountain of transfiguration and took with him three favoured disciples. While they were gone, there came a father with his son to the remaining disciples at the bottom of the mountain requesting that they cast out the demon, but they couldn't do it (17:16).

Though not physically present, he would still be among them

When our Lord came back down the mountain he expressed his wearied frustration. 'How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?' (v. 17). He was preparing them for the fact that he couldn't be physically with them for ever.

'One of these days I shall have to go up more than a mountain; I shall have to go to glory. How long shall I be with you until you get the lesson that I don't have to be here physically for you to do the work that I want you to do? Why couldn't you have done it, even though I was up the mountain?' Soon he was to tell them, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them' (18:20). Being in the church means being in that company of people in which the blessed Lord is present.

Therefore, it must become obvious to us, even from a superficial reading of the New Testament, that the church has some authority. Somewhere along the line this authority gets itself involved with the matter of our salvation, and here all sorts of difficulties begin, don't they?

When the church obstructs the gospel

We must know strangely little of ecclesiastical history, if we're not immediately aware that, so far from helping salvation and the work of the gospel, there have been periods in the history of the church when it has been precisely the church and ecclesiastical structures of all sorts and kinds that have impeded the gospel, rather than help. It has been like a tyranny upon the hearts and spirits of individual believers and, instead of promoting their growth, has contributed to their being stunted. So much so that some people have reacted by becoming impatient with everything ecclesiastical, and said, 'Let's forget the church', as though it were an expensive irrelevance, 'we'll not have any formal structures and get on with the work of evangelization.'

How should the churches be ordered?

That kind of situation leads us eventually to ask ourselves again if we can indeed afford to dispense with the church. Is it an irrelevance or an impediment? If we can't afford to dispense with it, how shall we organize it?

In our second session this morning, we discussed among ourselves other related topics to do with the role of tradition.⁵ We discovered that, according to the New Testament, there are bad traditions that damage people spiritually and in addition they insult the Lord. There are good traditions, the gospel is one and church ordinances another, which we are expected to keep faithfully and all the apostles will praise us if we do.

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. . . . For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.
(1 Cor 11:2, 23)

So, evidently, we must keep not only the gospel but the traditions and the ordinances of the church that have come to us from our blessed Lord. That leads us on to the question of how,

⁵ Not recorded.

in general, we should order our churches. I want to argue with you that, when we face that practical problem in our generation, we could follow the example of the apostle Paul in the way that he regulated the churches of his day.

The overriding basic principle that must determine the way we order the church is this. The church is an institution set up by God for the furtherance of our ongoing salvation, and therefore we must see to it that nothing we arrange nor any organization that we construct will impede the work of our ongoing salvation. That's going to be my general thesis, and I am going to argue it from certain examples taken from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Christendom's false claims

I am aware that I ought not and cannot discuss such a question without remembering certain large claims, which have appeared in the course of Christendom's history, that are quite false. I must mention it now because I would not wish anybody to misunderstand what I am about to say.

False claim: there is no salvation outside the church

In more extreme days perhaps than we live in now, some have claimed that there is no salvation outside the church. That is not what I am preaching tonight: it is the very opposite of what I preach. That claim is utterly wrong on a number of counts.

In the first place, it gets the true order of things ingloriously the wrong way round, and puts the cart before the horse in a magnificent fashion. What a mistake it is to say that there is no salvation outside the church; the contrary is true. You can't get into the church unless you're first saved. If there was no salvation outside it, you'd never be in it.

Let me show that my contention is true to Scripture. We read that familiar story of Peter's encounter with the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:13–19. He came to our Lord as Simon, and our Lord, looking upon him as Peter, said to him, 'You are Simon; you shall be called Cephas', which is Aramaic for *Petros*, which happens to be Greek for 'a stone' (see John 1:42). That's an odd thing to say to anyone, isn't it? But there it is. When Simon came to Christ, Christ received him and gave him a new name. It wasn't that it was prettier than the one he had before, but a new name significant of a new life and character.

Before we received Christ we only had one life, one nature called the human nature. When we came to Christ we received a new life, and with it a new nature. We became what we never were before, children of God with eternal life. Of course, it is possible to have a Christian name nowadays and the whole thing be a sham because you have never received a new life, never really been born again.

In Peter's first letter he indicates that his experience was not meant to be unique in this particular matter, for he says to his fellow Christians, 'To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, *Ye also*, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house' (2:4–5 KJV).

Peter, what do you mean by 'ye also'?

'Well, as I was, you too were built up as living stones. When I came to Christ I was made a living stone; when you came to Christ you were made a living stone.'

'Whatever for?'

‘So that you could then be built up as a spiritual house.’

God is in process of erecting a spiritual house; another name for it is the church. The architect’s specifications specified that every stone in the building must be a living stone. How do you become a living stone? One theory is that you get a lot of old dead stones and build them into this building and hope that, by being in the building, they will one day emerge into living stones. That is a fallacy. The house has got to have living stones in it—that’s what it’s built of. How do you get the living stones? Well, first you have to make them living stones. Then they get put into the church. Therefore, to say there’s no salvation outside the church is nonsense, chronologically speaking.

Or, if you want a simple plain statement of Scripture, ‘And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved’ (Acts 2:47). That is what happened on the day of Pentecost and after. As God added to the company of the believers, who did he add? The people who were being saved. As they were saved he added them, and this, of course, is the process.

In the second place, it springs from a defective view of salvation itself. Salvation in holy Scripture is very wide and covers a very large area—initial salvation, ongoing salvation and final salvation. Alas, some people have the notion that salvation, in the sense of acceptance with God, is a thing that lies at the end of the Christian journey.

They imagine salvation to be like a university degree course. If you want to take a degree in a university—I’m not doing a little bit of surreptitious advertising—the first thing you have to do is get into the university. That isn’t always so very easy, but you will not get a degree at a university without first getting into the university, and, as you well know, the mere getting into the university is no guarantee that you’re going to get a degree at the end. Of course, it’s a reasonable expectation. By doing the best you can, with exceedingly indulgent, helpful tutors, patient beyond all measurement and sympathetically minded, you might at last get through. No university that I know of will guarantee you a degree just by getting in; you’ll have to wait until finals to know whether you’ve got it or not.

Many people suppose that salvation is like that. If you want to be saved, first you get into the church. Then the church, being almost as kind and indulgent as university lecturers, will do her best, with the various courses she will put you through, to prepare you for finals. Whether you are saved or not cannot be known until you pass finals. Therefore, they say that there’s no salvation outside the church, like we would say that there’s no getting a Queen’s degree outside Queen’s.⁶ That is horribly mistaken, isn’t it?

As to salvation in the sense of acceptance with God, it lies not at the end of the journey but at the beginning. It is all by God’s great grace. The moment I put my trust in God and receive the Saviour in repentance and faith I am justified, accepted with God, with immediate access into the holiest of all. I don’t have to be in the church to get it; it is because I’ve got it that I then become part of the church. I have received initial salvation in terms of acceptance with God and entrance into the holiest of all. I am born again. I am alive with a new life, a living stone built into that spiritual building.

⁶ Queen’s University Belfast.

The church's part in my ongoing salvation

Having said that, let me emphasize that it is evident from Scripture that the church will now be used of God to further my ongoing salvation. I'm now using the term *salvation* in the sense, for instance, in which Paul would talk in Ephesians 4:13: 'until we all attain . . . to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'. How shall we grow? We shall grow 'by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly' (v. 16). It is the plain fact that, having become a child of God, some of God's grace comes to me directly, and a great deal of it indirectly through other people: through my fellow believers, other members in the body of Christ, as the Lord ordained. It would be foolish for me to say that I do not need the church. If I am to grow as God intends, much of the grace he gives me will come indirectly through other members of the Body of Christ. 'And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (vv. 11–12).

How then shall we order the church so that it might do its function and save it from imbibing all sorts of traditions that are harmful, impeding the very work it was meant to do? To ask the question is, in part, to show the lines upon which the answers must go. In considering how we ought to run the churches and correct them when they've gone astray, it appears to me that one of the basic considerations that we shall have to bring to the problem is the constant prayerful examination of how they fit in with God's design for the ongoing salvation of his people. Does it fit in with God's purpose in having a church? Perhaps you will say that there are many such purposes; maybe one of them is that we shall act as a dwelling place for God, as a temple for his praise?

The church and its relation to our salvation

Problems and solutions from 1 Corinthians

Tonight I want to go on to discuss a topic that is not unrelated to our Lord's authority, and that is *the church and its relation to our salvation*. It must be evident at once to us all that the church is somehow connected with this matter of our Lord's authority.

The church must always be organized so that it does not impede the purpose for which it is being constructed. Therefore, rather than theorize, let me take some examples. What I propose to do is to look at some of the problems that afflicted the church at Corinth so extraordinarily early in her history. I am persuaded you know off by heart both the problems and the solutions, so all I want to do is to point to the principles that underlie what Paul is saying and the kind of consideration he brings to bear upon the problems, so that we might learn not only to obey what he says but to copy him. His answers appeal to some aspect of our salvation.

Taking other names: chapters 1–4

Christ was crucified for you

Paul spends the first four chapters dealing with these various problems. In chapter 1 he turns to the scandal that was beginning to develop among the Christians when they were calling themselves after sundry prominent Christian apostles and preachers, and thus dividing the believers into factions, each carrying the label of a different name of a different preacher.

On the wrong of it, I do not propose to talk at length. Though I have to confess to you that when I have been tempted to do that, good Christian friends, whose judgment I on the whole admire, tell me that this is such a silly little matter that you waste your breath on it. ‘What’s in a name,’ they say, quoting I think it’s Shakespeare or something to that effect.⁷ It’s marvellous how, when it comes to the things of God, we’re prepared to dismiss this matter as a simple problem. But we wouldn’t dream of dismissing it on anything else. ‘What’s in a name?’ they say. ‘It shouldn’t matter what you call yourselves.’

Did I ever tell you—I suspect I did because I’m getting old and I repeat myself—about that good woman Mrs. Smith? One night, sitting by the fire with her husband, she was cleaning out her handbag. Accidentally she tipped the contents of it upon the carpet and Mr Smith, being a gallant gentleman, helped her to gather up the contents of this handbag. Presently he came across what looked to him like a visiting card, and being rather curious he read the name on it, ‘Mrs Fitzgerald-Smith’.

‘That’s interesting, my dear. Fitzgerald-Smith—double barrelled Smith. It must have been an important Smith, not like us plain Smiths. May I ask who this Mrs Fitzgerald-Smith is?’

‘Oh, it’s me,’ she says.

‘I didn’t know you were Fitzgerald-Smith. I’m not Fitzgerald-Smith. How did you come to be Fitzgerald-Smith?’

‘You’ve forgotten who Fitzgerald was, I suppose. Don’t you remember when I first met you at that dance years ago, there was a man called Fitzgerald who introduced me to you?’

‘So what?’

‘Oh, well, there’s lots of Smiths about and I thought it would be nice for people to know which Smith I am, if I also took the name of the man who led me to you. So I call myself not just Mrs Smith but Mrs Fitzgerald-Smith.’

What do you suppose Mr Smith would say?

‘That’s an excellent idea, my dear?’

No he wouldn’t, or if he did he’s a weakling of a husband. If he were a jealous husband he’d tear the card up and put it in the fire and forbid her to print another, wouldn’t he?

I tell you, the Lord our God is a jealous God and he won’t have you putting somebody else’s name alongside his, not even to distinguish you from some other Christian. How will Paul answer the problem? ‘This isn’t just a little matter,’ says Paul. ‘Can’t you see how allowing yourself to take all these names conflicts with the very basis of the gospel?’

⁷ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II.

The basis of our salvation

First of all, it detracts from the unique glory of the Lord Jesus and from what is the basis of salvation (1:13). Tell me what the basis of salvation is.

You say, 'The basis of salvation is that Christ was crucified for me.'

Yes. Was Paul crucified for you, by any chance?

'He told me about the gospel message; he told me about the cross.'

He may have done. But telling you about the cross is one thing, being crucified for you is utterly a different thing. If you call yourself after Paul, it clouds the unique glory of Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

What else does it do? It conflicts with the deliberate strategy of God that he's aimed at our salvation. Tell me, how did you manage to get into Jesus Christ? You *are* in Jesus Christ I hope? How did you manage to get into Jesus Christ?

You say, 'I'll tell you. There came to our place a very clever man; his name was O'Flaherty. He had such a logical brain and he argued so finely and incisively that he destroyed all my doubts and he put me in Christ and I've been a Christian ever since.'

Well, I'm very sorry to hear that, for one simple reason. One of these days there'll come someone with a cleverer brain. He'll have even better logic; he may be an atheist or agnostic, and he'll take you out of Christ.

How did you come to be *in Christ*? Says the apostle, 'Because of [God] you are in Christ Jesus' (1:30). God put you in, and for that reason God will not share his glory with anybody else (see v. 31). It is basic to your salvation that you should see that you are in Christ, not because of somebody's wisdom, somebody's riches or because of somebody's anything. No flesh shall have the glory of having put you into Christ, only God himself, so that your faith might be in the power of God and in nothing else. Don't go and confuse it by labelling yourself an O'Flaherty Christian. To organize our churches under the label of some man, or some doctrine, or what have you, other than the name of Christ, conflicts with what the Holy Spirit is trying to do.

'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ' (3:1). 'You're like a lot of little infants when it comes to spiritual things, aren't you? Instead of having grown, and able now to take strong meat for your spiritual diet, what went wrong with you? You began to put your faith in men, brilliant preachers and teachers, and took your eyes off the only true source of spiritual growth, which is the Holy Spirit himself.'

'No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God' (2:11). We can understand the things of God only as the Holy Spirit reveals them to us. God will use brilliant preachers and sometimes veritable donkeys. Don't ask me how I know; I do know. It is also written in Scripture that on one occasion he used a donkey, so I take courage (see Num 22:22–35). If we suppose it's the donkey, we put our faith in the donkey; or if we suppose it's the brilliant preacher and put our faith in the preacher. If we lose that sense of immediate dependence upon the Holy Spirit we are on the way to spiritual poverty and stunted growth.

It matters, says Paul. We mustn't organize our churches even in such an apparently innocent thing as the taking of names, because it derogates from the unique glory that is God's.

It stands opposed to God's deliberate strategy and takes people's attention from the blessed Holy Spirit.

Immorality: chapters 5–6

Cleanse out the old leaven, for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed

Let's take another problem. We are told that immorality broke out in the church of God in Corinth, 'of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans' (5:1). So much so, that the Gentiles living around were absolutely shocked. What is to be done and why should you do it?

According to chapter 5, such people were to be judged.

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. (vv. 4–5)

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (v. 11)

Now there are some people who are sincerely against church discipline and excommunication. They have argued this on the basis of our Lord's famous parable of the Weeds, where he likened the kingdom of heaven to the fields in which a man planted good seed. When the good seed was down, his enemy sowed weeds and presently they both began to grow.

The servants enquired of the master, 'Lord, shall we gather the weeds?'

He said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn' (Matt 13:29–30).

Many have sincerely thought that that is a directive for how we ought to behave in churches. We should not attempt to excommunicate people whose lives are in this grievous state, lest we root out genuine believers as well. In such a context I submit that that is a misinterpretation of the parable. First of all, our Lord wasn't talking about the church; he was talking about the world. 'The field,' said he, 'is the world', not the church (v. 38). Secondly, his prohibition, 'Don't root out the weeds,' was not addressed to elders of Christian churches but to the angels responsible for the final judgment (see v. 39). When at last the command is given for the weeds to be rooted out, it will be the angels who come and do the reaping, not the elders of the church. Our Lord is saying that in the field of this world there are genuine believers, and others who are not. The final judgment is not yet; it shall not come until the end of the age. God does not propose to institute the judgment now: 'Let both grow together until the harvest' (v. 30).

Paul is not talking about the world. In fact, he expressly excludes it: 'For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges

those outside' (1 Cor 5:12–13). It is a sad and sorry thing, and Paul answers it by appealing once more to an aspect of our salvation.

He reminds them that 'Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed' (v. 7). He is, of course, referring by analogy to the Passover in ancient Israel, where they were delivered out of the land of Egypt by being sheltered from the wrath of God through the blood of the Passover lamb. In a similar but higher fashion we too have been delivered. We too have a Passover lamb, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that by his blood we might be saved from the wrath of God.

In Israel, if you were true to God's directive, you could not be redeemed unless simultaneously you were prepared to keep the feast of unleavened bread. There was no Passover redemption that left it as an option whether you would eat the unleavened bread or not. To this day, Jews who observe the regulation keep the feasts of Passover and unleavened bread together, without a gap between them.

Paul indicates that this is the divinely given example as to how we are to behave. Redemption through the blood of Christ brings with it immediately—not as an optional extra but as an integral part—that we keep 'the feast of unleavened bread'. Not now purging literal leaven from our houses as Israel did, but spiritually from the church and, indeed, from our own lives. 'Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed' (v. 7).

Why is that important?

I submit to you it is for the very sake of the gospel. You are in a Christian church; you preach the gospel and profess to get folks converted. Let me think of some hypothetical church where there's a man and it is rumoured that he makes his money by keeping brothels downtown. He's a big boy in the business community; he has a lot of money to spend and he supports the church, so they can't turn him out. Well, they'd better stop preaching the gospel, for if the gospel this hypothetical church preaches is that being redeemed by the blood of Christ permits church members to indulge in such antisocial sins, who's going to believe it?

Paul was getting so very upset because they were allowing immorality in the church such as even shocked the Gentiles. How many Gentiles were going to get converted after that and listen to the gospel, if that's what the gospel is? Church discipline is there, not to enforce some harsh, rigid regulation. It is there, firstly for the sake of the gospel, and then for the sake of the man who is to be dealt with. For if he is a believer, then, if all else has failed, the discipline might lead to 'the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord' (v. 5).

Chapter 6 is talking about less severe things, but serious enough, on this same matter of immorality, and Paul continues the same thesis. It is a mark, perhaps, of how the gospel has progressed in our own country, or once did progress, that in these parts everybody recognizes that sexual immorality is wrong—or do they? Why I say that is because in Greece they hadn't a clue that it was wrong. The apostles had to tell converts in the church that it was wrong. They never would have guessed it and they had to be told. On what grounds did Paul tell them?

You were bought with a price

Once again Paul takes them back to the basic principles of salvation and to what happened at the Exodus when Israel was redeemed. At that time the wrath of God hung over the head of every firstborn in Egypt. If an Israelite firstborn had not been protected with the blood of the Passover lamb, that night he would have perished under the wrath of the angel of God. He was as good as dead had it not been that the lamb died instead of him. Said God, 'From now on I claim that firstborn as my own.' You see, he owes his life to God, doesn't he? 'Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine' (Exod 13:2).

Why should you not commit sexual immorality? Why must the church take a tough line on this? Because, if you have been redeemed, you are not your own; you have been bought with a price. Says Paul, 'Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body' (1 Cor 6:19–20). The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit; you are a living stone in the very temple of God. 'You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 2:5).

Functioning as members in the Body of Christ: chapter 12

Let us not dwell merely on negative things, but in these last few minutes let us dwell on positive things. How shall we order our churches? When it comes to the *ministry* of the church, does it matter?

You say, 'Yes, of course it matters.'

Why's that?

'Because the church is meant to effect what the salvation of God has achieved, and is achieving. Therefore, no organization of any church ought knowingly to impede what God himself is doing.'

Baptized into one body

What did God do when he saved us? Among all the other things he did is this, says Paul, 'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit' (1 Cor 12:13). We were implanted into the very Body of Christ, that wonderful glorious reality that God is in the process of making these days. A new thing; a marvellous thing that you will not read of until the day of Pentecost, in which real human personalities are taken up into the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is put into them, so they are in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is in them. By that means they are formed into one Body, still being individual personalities, but now part of something that is more than an individual personality. Just as my members form one body because they each share the same life, so you and I, if you are a believer, are in the same Body, whether you like it or not. You can't do anything about it, for Christ has put you in his Holy Spirit and his Holy Spirit in you. By his grace he has taken me up into his Holy Spirit and put his Holy Spirit in me, and between

me and you and around and in us both is that same life of Christ. That's what salvation has done.

Why did God do it? Because he wanted a Body where Christ could express himself through each member. And he who made our human bodies, with the intention that each member should function, has created the Body of Christ with that same intention: that each member according to their gift should function. I suggest therefore that we must see to it that in the organization of our churches we encourage and not impede the functioning of each gift, and each member according to their gift.

Our ongoing salvation

Now my time is gone but I trust I have made my general thesis clear. To go a fraction further on that last observation, being a *member* of the Body of Christ is a direct and immediate result of my salvation; but my *functioning* as a member of the Body of Christ is important to my spiritual growth, and therefore to my ongoing salvation. If I don't function I shall be stunted, even as my right arm would be stunted if I never used it. So my thesis is simply this. In these days, if we would be true to God's word and our Lord's example, we must examine our traditions again and hold fast and tenaciously to those that come to us from the Lord himself through his apostles. On the other hand, any traditions that we find do not come from him and go against his word, or even contradict it, must resolutely be put aside.

Then, in that context, as we come to face the matter of our churches in our modern century, how shall we order them? I suggest not by presuming to give in to individual detailed regulations, but this basic working principle shall be prominent in our minds: the ordering of the church must fit in with the fundamental principles of our ongoing salvation, preparing us for eternity.

Freedom and Responsibility

Session 1: Collectively – Galatians; Acts 11:19–30; 1 Timothy

The topic before us this morning is announced as *freedom and responsibility*; a well-worn topic but nonetheless important, and a very large topic. I want to treat it, however, not so much in its general aspect but as it relates to the major theme that we have occupied ourselves with during the conference.

We have thought of the authority of the Lord Jesus and our response as disciples to that authority. We proceeded to observe that the authority of the Lord Jesus is, to some extent, expressed through the church, to whom he has delegated authority. Therefore, we spent some time considering traditions that tend to build up in the churches and learning from the New Testament that there are two kinds of tradition. Some are bad and must be adjusted or, indeed, thrown out because they go against the word of God and are harmful spiritually. Other traditions are good and must never be surrendered for any consideration whatsoever.

We further thought together about the exercise of our Lord's authority in the church, and how, therefore, we ought to go about adjusting the churches from time to time. We suggested to ourselves that, in all our organization of the churches, our thinking should be governed by the basic principles of the gospel that the church is intended to express. Nothing may be done, organized, or allowed in the churches that impedes the gospel, obscures or compromises the gospel, or interferes with the ongoing salvation of the people of God.

Freedom: Galatians; Acts 11:19–30

How free are we as individuals within the church?

In that kind of context, I want to make some remarks this morning on the question of freedom and authority. To what extent is the individual free, and to what extent is the individual required to bow to authority in the church? The topic is made somewhat difficult for me; first, because of the time. It is an enormous topic, one of those topics to which one can do grievous injustice if one has not sufficient time. Then, because of a second difficulty. The Bible itself, as you will have observed, is not written in the form of *systematic theology*. That's why we need such excellent books as have just been recommended to us, where learned and godly men look at holy Scripture and extract its basic principles and doctrines and put them together in a systematic way. They are exceedingly helpful and important.

I suspect that all of us have our little systems of doctrine, which we unconsciously build up over the years by one means and another. If we are not conscious that we have a system,

then that system can become a little bit dangerous. We constantly need to be aware that we do have systems and check our systems by the word of God.

That said, I observe again that holy Scripture is not written in the form of systematic theology. My task this morning would be a lot easier if it were, for I should turn you to the chapter that is labelled, 'Freedom and responsibility, rules 1–10,006.' That would be simple, wouldn't it? In every situation we should refer to the appropriate rule, and that would be that. What a dull book the Bible would be. Who would read it? Any more than they would read their Ford manual that they got with their Cortina car that has similar systematic rules for the running of a petrol engine.

The Bible is not written in the form of systematic theology, and on this topic we shall be obliged therefore to look at Scripture and observe its *principles*, as distinct from laws and regulations. In one passage we shall find certain principles enunciated and illustrated. In other passages we shall find, at first sight, apparently opposite principles enunciated and illustrated. Our task will be to consider all of these principles under the guidance of God and to seek wisdom to know when to apply one and when to apply another.

Therefore, I do trust you will be merciful with me this morning as I attempt to cope with this particular difficulty in saying things about the relation of freedom to responsibility. I shall be obliged in the shortness of time to extract some things that talk about freedom, and then to go to the opposite extreme and talk about things that concern responsibility. I may well get the balance wrong and emphasize one more than another because I have not the time to discuss it with all that exhaustiveness that any responsible systematic theologian would do, if he were writing a systematic theology. Judge what I say, and let us all seek wisdom of God to notice the various principles and to know when to apply the one and when to apply the other.

Freedom in the receipt and understanding of the gospel: Galatians

We all know from Galatians that we are free because we are justified by faith and not by the works of the law (see 2:16). As God's freeborn sons, our justification is not dependent on our works of merit or attainment. Nor is our inheritance, thank God. Not now or hereafter. As freeborn sons we receive our glorious inheritance from our father (see 4:7).

Then in chapter 5 we have the balancing verse that tells us that we must not use our freedom for fleshly license, but to serve others (v. 13). While we are free in the sense that there is no condemnation, there are consequences. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Being forgiven the penalty is not the same thing as being relieved of the consequences.

Let me illustrate the fact. Suppose you were a farmer and God had commanded you to sow barley in your field, and you disobeyed the Lord and sowed oats, wild oats at that. I understand holy Scripture to say that if you are a genuine believer there is no condemnation: the penalty of sin is forever past, having been borne by Christ. 'There is therefore now no condemnation.' Very good, but consider your field in which you have now sowed wild oats instead of barley. As the shoots are coming through the ground, you say, 'These are wild oats; let me get God to do something about this.' So you pray, 'Oh God, turn these wild oats into barley.' I'm afraid not, for the law still applies, 'whatever one sows, that will he also reap' (6:7). Don't use your freedom to sow wild oats, for while there is no condemnation there are

consequences. I do not want to dwell now upon that aspect of the topic, but to come to a more basic consideration.

You will observe that in this great letter to the Galatians in which Paul proclaims our freedom because the gospel is that we are justified by faith without works, he spends the first two chapters relating a great chunk of church history: what happened to him at his conversion, where he went, where he travelled and with whom he consulted from time to time. You might well ask, 'What has this great record of church history, two whole chapters of it, got to do with the basic matter of my being justified by faith? Why do I need to bother about early church history?'

It is because your very freedom is at stake, for consider what has often been said about the Christian gospel. It has been claimed by some that the individual person cannot come to holy Scripture, read it, decide what it means, believe and be saved just like that. Why not? Because, if left to themselves, individuals could not possibly understand the true meaning of holy Scripture,

It has been further urged that it was the church that gave us the New Testament, and therefore individuals by themselves cannot understand it. If we would correctly understand the Bible, we must ask the church to interpret it. Only then can we be sure that we've got it the right way around, because, so the argument goes, it was the church that gave us the Bible. If we were disposed to accept that claim, there would be no final individual freedom. To read and understand the Bible by yourself, you would always be obliged to accept the church's authoritative pronouncement as to what holy Scripture means. Therefore, at this point a basic fundamental principle is at stake and its name is *freedom*.

You will not need me to tell you that this claim, that the church gave us the Bible, is quite mistaken and contrary to the fact. The Christian church certainly didn't give us the Old Testament, did it? If you consider the New Testament, it is a misleading term to start with to say that the church gave us the New Testament, because the church is composed of I don't know how many million people. I'm a part of the church and I didn't give you the New Testament; nor did 99.9% of the church give it to you. It was God who gave us the New Testament: the risen Lord Jesus by his Holy Spirit through certain holy inspired writers. It would be more correct to say that the church *was given* the New Testament through these few, very few, God ordained and specially chosen apostles and prophets.

I shall not discuss in detail this chunk of church history that Paul gives us in chapters 1 and 2, but fasten on several observations that he makes.

Paul did not get it originally from the church

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:11-12)

Nothing was added to what he already knew

Secondly he informs us about an occasion when he went up to Jerusalem and talked with James, Peter and John.

And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. (2:6)

Paul is insistent that when he went to Jerusalem not even Peter, nor James nor John, nor any of the apostles, added anything to him, in the sense of the gospel which he preached.

Why is that important?

Well, let's take it from the very practical point of view. Suppose you had been in Arabia when Paul was in Arabia, or anywhere that Paul was. You sought him out at his lodging as he was stitching his tents, and said, 'Paul, I've been listening to your preaching and I'm concerned. How can I be right with God?' And suppose Paul told you by word of mouth or by letter through the post how you could be right with God in the words that he uses here in Galatians 3–6. Could you read them or listen to them, understand them, believe them and be saved there and then, without consulting anybody else? Or would you have to say to yourself, 'I've heard what Paul says, but I may not have got it the right way round. So I must get to Jerusalem, perhaps, and consult Peter, to know whether I have correctly understood what Paul said, or what is the truth of the matter'?

Well, if it were true that Peter, James, John, or somebody else had given Paul the gospel, then you might be very wise to check. Yes, you've listened to Paul, but have you got it the right way around? So you need to go to the source and consult the source, be it Peter, James or John, who gave him the gospel. 'Now, look here, have I got it the right way around? What did *you* mean when *you* gave Paul the gospel?'

'The fact is,' says Paul, 'they didn't give me the gospel. They added nothing to me.' So therefore it follows that, wherever we are, if we want to be right with God, because Paul got it directly from Christ we may listen to him, understand it, believe it and be saved, even though we've never met Peter nor heard him. There is freedom in the receipt and understanding of the gospel.

Freedom in the propagation of the gospel: Acts 11:19–30

I pass on now to other passages of Scripture that seem to me to indicate a certain important freedom in the propagation of the gospel. As an example of this, I refer you, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, to the story of how the church at Antioch came to be. It is a very exciting story because, as far as the Acts of the Apostles is concerned, it is the first major church to be founded outside of Jerusalem. Although few verses are devoted to the record of it, it is evident that new and exciting things were involved.

It was the first church where people came to be called *Christians*. Let me remind you of the novelty of how it happened.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. (11:19–21)

These men from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and spoke to the Greeks also. That had never happened before. Where did they get the authority from? Was it right to suddenly get an idea like that into your head and go and preach to Gentiles? Well, they did, apparently, and the hand of the Lord was with them and many folks believed.

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (vv. 22–26)

Reading those verses from this responsible historian, Luke, may provoke us to ask one or two basic questions. How did this church get started? Who gave permission?

You'll notice one very interesting thing. Apparently it all happened in complete independence of Jerusalem. People had to flee because they were being persecuted, and they went in various directions to get work, to find a job and a new place to live. As they went, they *gossiped* the gospel, and somebody had the bright idea, 'Why not preach to Gentiles as well?'

There's no record that they had to apply to Jerusalem for permission; they just went and did it. Before they knew, there was a whole group of converts and they had a church on their hands. Churches happen as folks get converted. It was only subsequently and after some time that news of it even came to Jerusalem. When the apostles in Jerusalem suddenly heard that there was a church founded in Antioch, what were they to do about it? So we're told that they sent Barnabas. When he came down to Antioch we listen with both ears to hear what he told them to do.

'My brothers, I am delighted to see, of course, that the gospel has prospered and that the Lord overlooks our little mistakes. But you know, it was decidedly irregular of you to start a church without first consulting us in Jerusalem. From now on, make sure you always consult Jerusalem before you do anything. Remain faithful to Jerusalem.'

No, he didn't. Luke tells us, '[Barnabas] was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' *He told them to remain faithful to the Lord.*

You see, this is not the mere piety in which we sometimes indulge. The fact is that the Lord *was* with them. As these men from Cyprus and Cyrene came and gossiped the gospel in Antioch, someone had the idea to speak to the Gentiles and presently a number got converted and a church was formed. It is not just pious phraseology when Luke says that it happened because the hand of the Lord was with them, directing the work. Barnabas was a spiritual enough man to see it and to exhort those believers to carry on. The work had started because the Lord had directed it. 'You remain faithful to the Lord,' said he.

I take this record to be part of our great charter of Christian liberty in the propagation of the gospel. The living Lord is with us. He is our headquarters. Alas, so very often in the course of history, great ecclesiastical organizations have had a stranglehold on the propagation of a gospel. We should ponder the record seriously and determine in our hearts to maintain our

Christian freedom of evangelization on this basic principle, that we remain faithful to the Lord.

Responsibility: 1 Timothy

We read in 1 Timothy about the church at Ephesus. It was one of the more famous of the early Christian churches, crucial in the evangelization of the area in which it lay. It was a large church that eventually developed all kinds of problems. And here Paul is writing to Timothy, who had the spiritual charge and overseership in that church (1:3). He is telling Timothy, and through Timothy the believers in the church at Ephesus, and us as well, how we 'ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God'. He says:

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. (3:14–15).

We observe, of course, that the immediate context of those words is the earlier verses of chapter 3, in which Paul has given directions for the qualifications of overseers (bishops, KJV) and deacons. Let me say the very obvious; when a church was formed in those early days and had overseers and deacons for its government and working, that church was not a democracy. The members of the church were expected to obey their bishops, their elders, their overseers. There is a verse in holy Scripture that expresses it explicitly: 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account' (Heb 13:17).

Within the church God has appointed some as overseers, elders, bishops, shepherds, pastors—call them what you will, they're normally spoken of in the plural in any one church. God has entrusted to them the charge of looking after our souls, and as shepherds they will be called at the judgment seat of Christ to answer for how they have discharged their sacred and solemn responsibility. They are there to rule.

It is possible, of course, for that power to be abused. On the occasion of the Last Supper in the Upper Room our Lord warned his apostles themselves against the danger of perverting that sacred task.

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.' (Luke 22:24–27)

In the same way, so must the apostles and pastors and bishops and deacons be careful to adopt the attitude of a servant. What a rebuke that is to all the great career structures that have troubled Christendom down the centuries. Having said that, it is possible for all those sacred offices to be corrupted and perverted; nonetheless the command is explicit to the rest of us in

the church: 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.'

The quality of godliness

Allow me, therefore, just to place before your consideration one of the leading ideas in this first Epistle by Paul to Timothy that will help each of us to orientate ourselves, so to speak, within our own local church. That quality, perhaps above all others that we shall need to show in our own local church and to develop by God's help, is the quality of *godliness*.

We sometimes use our Christian terms loosely, so that godliness can stand for sanctification, holiness, zeal or what have you, but in the New Testament these terms are used precisely. You may not have noticed that the term godliness scarcely occurs in the whole of the New Testament beyond two or three times until you come to the Pastoral Epistles, and then there's a great outcrop of this word godliness.

It is the quality *par excellence* that you and I shall need to display if our churches are to live together in harmony and to the glory of God. We have read that tremendous statement that lies at the heart of this little epistle, 'Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness' (3:16).

What is godliness?

The Greek word *eusebeia* has no element in it corresponding to God. It simply means good reverence. The corresponding verb means to reverence something or somebody well. You can use it, and the New Testament does use it, in the sense of showing respect to your family, to your parents, showing respect at home. There the object will be revering father, mother, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. Normally, of course, it is used in the context where the unspoken object is God himself: reverencing God well. As we shall see very briefly in a moment, it means that in all the situations and problems that arise in a church our attitude must always be first to turn from our problem to God, to ask ourselves what is God's view of this thing, and then, respecting God and God's view and God's attitude, by his grace to attempt to interpret that same attitude ourselves in our own situation.

Paul helps us to interpret what God's attitude is in the succeeding chapters. We have the prime example, of course, of our blessed Lord, who interpreted the attitude of God perfectly, and we are to follow his example in that sense. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first Epistle to Timothy is full of different names of God, more than any other epistle in the New Testament: God our Saviour (1:1); God the Father (1:2); the blessed God (1:11); the King of ages; the only God (1:17); the one God (2:5); the living God (3:15); Creator (4:4); the Saviour of all people (4:10); the God of the court of heaven (5:21); the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords (6:15).

If I am going to be godly, I shall need to know God in all these different characteristics and ways, so that I can interpret God and his attitude appropriately in the different circumstances that arise in the church.

Governing by the principle of law or the principle of grace (ch. 1)

The very first thing about God that Paul calls upon us to notice in chapter 1 has to do with the problem of how you govern a church. There were some in Ephesus whose idea of governing the church was to teach the law (see v. 7). The church hasn't been left wanting for people of that kind in the course of Christian history. I suppose it's an easy idea to fall into. If you want the church to behave, then what you do is to get 'the big stick' of the law. 'You will obey, won't you? Because if you don't you'll be lost forever. If you keep the law well, there is a chance that with the help of the church you will be saved. If you don't, the church might withdraw and you will be lost.'

There were those in Ephesus who wanted to govern the church by the application of the principle of law. It was reasonable; that's how you keep people on their toes, isn't it? That's how you get people to behave. That isn't godliness.

How God governs

How shall I know what godliness is? Let me turn now and survey God and who he is. He's the King eternal, the only wise God (v. 17 KJV). Because the church is the house of the living God, the great King of kings and Lord of lords, my eyes and heart should be filled with the sense of the majesty of his kingship, so that I might behave in the church and obey those who have the rule over me. Tell me, how does that great king get people to behave? For instance, if he were plagued with a rebel or two, how would he get them to behave?

'Well,' says Paul, 'I can tell you how, because there's been a test case. At one stage God was plagued with a rebel; he was the worst rebel on earth that God ever confronted. He was in fact the chief of sinners, a sworn enemy of Jesus Christ, opposing the very gospel of God, doing everything he could to destroy the church of Christ. God determined he'd had enough of that; he would make this man an example of the way God deals with rebels.'

Difficulties have turned up in armies sometimes, when armies have threatened mutiny. In olden days the general would line the men up, number them one and so on up to ten thousand. One in ten had to stand out and they were shot. It was extreme, but it put the others in line. That's how the general deals with rebels, so the men had to watch out.

How does God deal with rebels? *He uses grace and mercy.* God was determined to make an example, so he chose Saul of Tarsus. How did he change him from rebel to obedient servant? God entrusted that task to Jesus Christ:

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. (vv. 14–16)

There is one God and one mediator for all (ch. 2)

Or take the problem that comes in chapter 2. Ephesus was a large church in a multiracial city. How would you get harmony in a church with proud Jews and difficult Gentiles? If we want to know how we should behave in a church like that, we'd better look at God. There is only

one God, whether you are Jew or Gentile; there's not one God for the Jews and another God for the Gentiles. There is only one mediator; not one mediator for Jews and another for Gentiles. He is the mediator *for all*. If we would be godly, and there is only one God and only one mediator, we shall have to reflect that in the church, shan't we?

How did Jesus Christ respond in this situation? Well, he gave himself a ransom *for the Jews*. No, no, he gave himself a ransom *for all*. There is only one God, who wants to save all, who would like all to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth; so Jesus Christ will implement that purpose and give himself a ransom for all.

If we will behave rightly in the church we, in turn, shall pray *for all* people: all those who are in authority, whatever government may be in authority (vv. 1–2). Pray for them all, and thus comport ourselves as godly men and women in the church that is meant to reflect God's ideas and attitude.

What happens when I can't respect the elders of my church?

Here I want to quote one thing. When our Lord was here on earth the Pharisees and scribes were teaching many things that were wrong and behaving most unfortunately in many respects. According to Matthew 23, our Lord charged his disciples in this fashion: 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practise and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practise' (vv. 2–3). Our Lord was no anarchist. Why did he tell the apostles to do what the scribes said? Because at that stage, when our Lord was still here on earth, these scribes were men who said at least that the word of God was important. To tell folks to disregard them completely, you would have run the danger that the people would have said, 'Not merely the scribes, but the word of God itself is irrelevant.' That would have been a disaster.

Nowadays, with people getting frustrated with misinterpretations in Christendom, sometimes they are inclined to throw out not only the misinterpretations but the Bible itself, and try to regulate their churches by new-fangled notions that they have spun out of their own experience. That is a way to disaster.

Why did the apostles leave Judaism?

After the resurrection there did come a moment when the apostles could no longer submit or stay with the scribes and the elders of Judaism. On what principle did they leave Judaism? Luke, the great historian, had a sense of what was vitally important and he tells us that, after he was raised from the dead, Jesus assembled with the apostles during the forty days before his ascension. He charged them to go and preach the gospel, to do this and to do that, 'he *ordered* them', says Luke (Acts 1:4).

As they set about doing that charge, presently the Sanhedrin called the apostles before them and *ordered* them not to do what Jesus had told them to do. 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching . . . But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men"' (5:28–29). That, it seems to me, remains a cardinal principle for Christian practice. If Jesus Christ has charged us to do something, then that's what we must do, whoever forbids us to do it.

Freedom and Responsibility

Session 2: Personally—Romans 14

I want to say something about the limitations of the authority of elders, bishops, deacons, or indeed of anybody else. I was trying this morning to say some things about the twin topics of freedom and responsibility. Not in a systematic way, but to try and focus on incidents and statements that express certain basic principles, rather than regulations; principles that we must learn to apply by the grace and wisdom that God may give us. Principles that lie on both sides of a balance, so that we must learn when it is appropriate to apply one principle, and when it is inappropriate; and when it is appropriate to apply the other and opposite principle, and when that is inappropriate.

I hoped that my talk would, in itself, illustrate that kind of balance. There was one part that I wanted to talk about but I didn't get time. A necessary part, perhaps, to put the balance to what I was saying when I concluded.

Summary so far

Freedom: First of all, to dwell on the side of freedom. *Our freedom in the reception and understanding of the gospel*, because it is not true that the church gave us the gospel or the Bible, but rather that the gospel and the Bible were given to the church. In that great difference there lies a tremendous principle of freedom, and so I pointed you to the part of the New Testament (Galatians) where Paul goes into church history to explain that he did not get the gospel from the church. He got it direct from the Lord Jesus, and that means that every man, woman and child is free to come to the writings of Paul, read them, by God's Spirit understand them, believe them, and find peace with God without the necessity of having to take Paul's statements and writings to some ecclesiastical authority, and for that authority to give the final word as to what Paul must have meant.

Secondly, I pointed to an incident in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 19, illustrative of *the freedom we have in the propagation of the gospel*. The incident I quoted was the formation of the first church outside of Jerusalem that is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. With glorious freedom, those who were scattered abroad after the persecution that arose about Stephen, just went, I nearly said, casually, preaching and gossiping the gospel as they went, and making innovations of preaching the gospel to Gentiles. Presently they found themselves ending up in Antioch with a host of converts and a church was born without apparently any control from Jerusalem whatsoever. Without seeking special permission from Jerusalem, whether they might or might not establish a church, it was there. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about it, they sent 'a good man' to see what was happening and to encourage this new church

at Antioch. Because he was a good man, Barnabas told them to cleave not to Jerusalem but to the Lord. A glorious freedom, then, in the propagation of the gospel.

Responsibility: Then I went to the other side of the fence and noticed that, when a church is set up, it is an institution in which the *members are to obey those whom God sets over them* as their overseers, shepherds, bishops—translate the word as you please. In that sense, the church is not to be an anarchy where everybody does that which is right in their own eyes, but a community in which God has set rulers. We are exhorted to obey them that have the rule over us, seeing they watch for our souls as those who must give an account.

I referred to the first Epistle of Paul to Timothy, written to show us how we ought to behave in the church and to impress upon us why behaviour in that church is so important. It reminds us of what the church is. It is 'the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth' (3:15). Therefore, in that house of God, the quality above all other things that we shall be called upon to show is *godliness*, reverence and respect for God. That is not merely a certain awe that comes over the human spirit when the organ plays deep and mystical sounds, but a deliberate attitude that, facing any and every problem, makes a habit of turning first to God, to ask what God's attitude is. And then seeks, under the guidance of its bishops and deacons, to translate God's attitude in the practical situation of the church.

That would mean getting to know God under those various titles which in the Pastoral Epistles he is presented as Saviour, as Father, as the one God, and pre-eminently as the King. It will not have escaped our notice that in the first and last chapters of First Timothy God is referred to as King (1:17; 6:15).

The language that Paul chooses to use at the end of chapter 3, which is bang in the middle of the letter, is deliberately evocative of the Old Testament: '... the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth' (v. 15 KJV). Notice, he didn't say that the church is the truth: the church is the pillar and ground of the truth.

So, if we think back to the institution of the house of God in Old Testament days, we shall, of course, go to the times of Solomon when he built what is called in some historical books *the temple*, but in other historical books *the house of God*. That house had before it two massive pillars. Their function was to hold up two delightful capitals that were beautifully chiselled according to the art of the time with lilies, pomegranates, nets of checker work and what have you. As people approached this house of God, these delightful capitals were meant to attract people to the God whose house it was.

The pillars and their bases had the work-a-day job of holding the capitals up, corresponding in this present age to the function of the church of the living God, which is the house of God. The church isn't the truth, thank God, but the church's job is to hold up the truth, like sturdy pillars on their bases, and let God's truth appear an attractive thing to the world. If I get a bit wobbly as a pillar, then the delightful 'capital' of God's truth is in danger of being lowered into the mud. The truth won't change, but its presentation could be disastrous.

Therefore, if we are called in our churches, each one to be a pillar and ground of the truth to present God's truth to men and to represent God, we must know God. And if that God is King, as 1 Timothy 1 and 6 claim, it stands to reason that his house will express his kingship,

his government and his control. Godliness will mean respecting that kingly government, which, as we saw, has been pleased to arrange that in the churches there shall be overseers, bishops and pastors to express God's rule. Therefore, we must obey them that have the rule over us.

Are we ever free not to obey?

Then we turned briefly to consider what happens when, in all good conscience, we feel we can no longer obey the elders and bishops in the church. What are those reasons that might compel us to say we can no longer obey them?

I cited, therefore, one incident, and only one—perhaps you may be disposed to question its validity in this context, of what our Lord said to his apostles. Before his death and resurrection, he told them that they were to obey the scribes and Pharisees. Because they sat in Moses' seat they were to recognize the authority of Moses, the authority of the word of God. Just because the scribes and the Pharisees were not consistent themselves in their obedience, the apostles were not to fall into the mistake that they could afford to throw out both scribes and Pharisees, and the word of God. Respect must ever be had for that word of God.

The danger is always present that people will become discontent with the rule in their church and throw out not only that rule but the word of God as well, and invent ideas and structures out of their own experience, or even out of their own heads.

On the other hand, after our Lord's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, the apostles, being good Jews still under the authority of the Sanhedrin, found themselves at length obliged to say, 'Sorry, but we can no longer continue.' Luke records for us the grounds upon which Christianity diverged from Judaism. That is a very long story; it takes Luke 28 chapters to tell it, so I shan't repeat it this afternoon.

The Acts of the Apostles is, of course, not merely a little history to be explained by maps and ancient ships bobbing across the Mediterranean, following first one journey, then two and, at last, the third missionary journey; or were there four? It is a serious historical document, concentrating our attention on those points where Christianity diverged from Judaism. If you notice the point at which Christianity diverged from Judaism, you will then discover what essential Christianity is: so essential that the Christians could no longer continue with Judaism, because to continue with Judaism would be to deny Christianity.

Therefore, Acts remains an exceedingly important document for us to understand essential Christianity, for Christendom has shown an alarming tendency over the centuries gradually to slip back from Christianity into Judaism. What are those points at which we must stick and stand, because not to stick and stand would compromise essential Christianity? Luke has written to help us to see what those points are.

Christianity says that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Judaism says he isn't, and it is impossible to find a compromise on the two. When they came to the crux in that first part of the Acts, it resolved itself to this: Jesus Christ charged them to go and preach in his name, and the Sanhedrin charged them not to preach in his name. They had no option but to obey the Lord and reject the verdict of the Sanhedrin. That was a momentous step for those apostles to take.

Do remember that Peter was ‘only a fisherman’, as they say. As he came to his decision, he found great comfort and guidance in God’s holy word. We find it written in Psalm 118:22: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.’ He perceived that the Sanhedrin were the very builders spoken of, who had rejected the stone that is Jesus Christ. Basing their decisions on that word, the leading of the Holy Spirit and the plain straightforward necessity to obey Christ, they obeyed Christ rather than men and Christianity took its first step to diverge from Judaism. That’s a big historical story. There were other issues over which Christianity diverged from Judaism and Acts relates them.

If we would maintain a Christian testimony in our world, we must take trouble to study the Acts of the Apostles and perceive what those essential features are, so that we might maintain true Christianity and not slip back, intentionally or unintentionally, into a kind of Christianized Judaism. As we do so, I suggest that our attitude should still be a positive rather than a negative one. In the last analysis, I must obey the Lord. If the Sanhedrin won’t let me, or somebody else won’t let me, in the end I must obey the Lord.

Limitations of authority and individual freedom of conscience: Romans 14

Finally, to put another balance if not a check to what I have been saying, I want to point you to the passage in Romans 14. I have stressed, as you have heard, the duty that we are under as individual believers to obey and submit to the elders in our churches. There are limits to the right of other folks to tell us as individuals what to do, are there not? And this is, therefore, one of those classic passages in which the Holy Spirit insists that as individuals we must stand on our own two feet before God and not allow other folks to overrule our decision.

Chapter 14 of the Epistle to the Romans deals with what the systematic theologians describe as *indifferent things*. Should you eat meat, or shouldn’t you eat meat? Should you eat cabbage, broccoli and sprouts, or may you eat venison and pork? Should you observe one day above another, or all days alike? Points over which people have genuine consciences for one reason and another, but over which the New Testament itself does not lay down the law.

Now, we must be careful to see what kind of things are being discussed here because where the New Testament itself does say what we should do, we should do it. But there are large numbers of things in life where the New Testament has not given any positive command or any positive prohibition. Sometimes some of us wish that it had. Wouldn’t life be easy if you could turn to rule 2,065 and that would give you the precise answer as to whether you should eat pork or not? Whether you should or should not keep Christmas. Is Sunday a Sabbath or isn’t it? And so forth and so on.

And the question arises: with all the resources of heaven that God has—thousands of angels each willing to pen another regulation—why didn’t he give us regulations covering every second of life and every activity, so we could always just look up the book and do it? He hasn’t done that, and if we believe in the inspiration of holy Scripture we must decide that he didn’t intend to. Why not? I am going to suggest that the reason he didn’t, at least in part, as chapter 14 seems to indicate, is that he wanted to develop in each individual Christian a sense of *direct responsibility* to the Lord Jesus.

I have a car; I think it's called a Golf. I've also got a book, and when anything goes wrong with the car I look at the book. When I've done that, I no more know the maker than I did before. All I've got is a book of regulations, but if I didn't have a book of regulations and the car wouldn't start in the morning, I should have to go and consult the man who made it. Suppose the lights wouldn't go on, I'd have to go and check with the man who made it. Do you know, by the time I've used up that car, I should have got to know the man who made it.

There are ten thousand and one things in life that call for a decision where there isn't a precise and explicit regulation in the book. It drives me to the one who redeemed me, to consult him in prayer and reading of his word. How shall I make up my mind if I haven't any explicit word in the book? Predominantly above all else, I shall have to remember that I am not free to live to myself. No one lives to himself.

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Rom 14:8-9)

So, I have to live for him and try and find out what the Lord would have me to do because the next thing that I must bear in mind is that I shall have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of myself.

If the Lord says to me, 'Gooding, why did you eat pork?' I shall have to be able to say in all honesty, 'Lord, I thought that's what you would like to me to do.'

And if he says, 'No, I didn't want you to do that at all', I shall have to be in a position to say, 'I'm sorry Lord, I did pray about it and I did think about it, and when I decided to eat the pork I actually gave thanks for it and I really thought that it was what you'd have me to do.'

If he says to me, 'Why didn't you observe that holy day?'—I don't think he will, but suppose he did—I shall have to be careful that I'm not in the position where I have to answer, 'Well, Lord, in my own heart I thought I ought to and it was what you wanted me to do, but Mr. Smith said I wasn't to do it, so I didn't do it.'

What do you think the Lord will say? 'Tell me, who's Mr. Smith? Did Mr. Smith die for you? Is Mr. Smith lord of your life? I died for you so that I might be lord. If, in your heart of hearts, you really thought that I would have you to do something, then that's something you must do.'

Mr. Smith may be a good man, but he mustn't usurp the place of the Lord in anybody's life. That's why we have to be very careful how we treat other people. Says Paul,

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgement on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Rom 14:1-4)

We are ultimately the Lord's servants in that sense, not the servants of men. Though we serve all men if we can, our controller is the Lord. If one man regards a day, he regards it to

the Lord. And if a man doesn't regard it, that's because he doesn't think the Lord wants him to regard it anyway. He is to be fully persuaded in his own mind as to what the Lord would have him do. I repeat, if there's an explicit Scripture, that's the end of the matter; that's what the Lord wants. But if there's no explicit Scripture on such things, then each must be fully persuaded before the Lord in their own mind.

Let's take now an example of something I mustn't do

Think of something that you know in your own heart would not be the best kind of thing for a Christian to do. We'll call it X. Let's suppose you're right, and X isn't the best thing for a Christian to do. A Christian doesn't have to do this thing. But here is a believer and he has a conscience about it. He doesn't have to do it, but he thinks he ought to because the Lord wants him to. I come along and, with my superior knowledge, I tell him, 'You're not to do it.' So, just because I say so, he doesn't do it. I stopped him doing it.

Does it matter? Yes, it matters, because I've come in between his conscience and the Lord. In his heart he still thinks he ought to have done it, and he's got a bad conscience about it. I have spoiled the man's conscience and spoiled his obedience to the Lord. It's clearly a thing I mustn't do. If I get him in the habit of doing or not doing things simply because I say so, even if what he does is right, I have made him do it in defiance of what he thinks the Lord would have him to do. I mustn't do it.

I view with alarm that ever recurrent phenomenon in the spiritual world of leaders overstepping their God given commission. Instead of seeing that in the house of the Lord the explicit commands of the Lord are performed, they insist on ruling other people's lives in all sorts of connections for which they have no explicit biblical authority whatsoever. They do it, certainly, with good intention; they are anxious that the people in their charge shall live godly lives. But, in stepping over the God given boundaries of rule in the church, they are ruining the very thing they were meant to be producing.

They should have been producing in each believer a sense of constant referral to the Lord Jesus, and leading them to mature adulthood in spiritual things by being personally responsible to the Lord in their decisions, for which each one personally will have to answer at the judgment seat of Christ. Instead of mature Christians who can take responsible decisions before Christ, they are producing people who in the end have no decisions of their own and act simply because they're made to by their leaders. I repeat, that is to ruin the very thing that Christ was trying to produce in the character of a believer.

Even simple justice and fair play would approve of what Paul finally says on the matter.

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.
(vv. 7-8)

You must be fully persuaded in your own mind about these things in which there is no explicit command. You must take every decision as those who 'live to the Lord'. Your final criterion is that you honestly believe in your heart that the Lord would have you do it, or he wouldn't have you do it.

My good friend, when it comes to the judgment seat of Christ, nobody will answer for you. 'So then each of us will give an account of *himself* to God' (v. 12). It is so important that, even in these things where I may know I am right in the matter and another man feels the opposite, I must be careful not to use my liberty in circumstances where it would cause that man to go against his conscience. I must surrender my own liberty if the man thinks it's wrong to eat pork.

I know that the Lord doesn't mind if I eat pork: 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (v. 17). But here's a man who thinks you oughtn't to eat pork because the Old Testament condemns it. So I must be very careful and the next time I am eating with him in a hotel or in my home I must respect the man's conscience and not eat pork. I certainly must not make him so embarrassed that he eats pork against his will, for if I make him do something against his will and against his conscience he's not acting in faith and that means he is sinning. 'But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' (v. 23).

You say, 'What does it matter?'

It matters everything, for Christ gave his life so that he might become Lord of that man's conscience. I must do nothing to undermine that habit in his heart of living in faith with a good conscience, personally responsible to the Lord Jesus.

Thank you for listening and for the kind and tolerant way you have already accommodated the weaknesses of your preacher this weekend.

About the Author

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