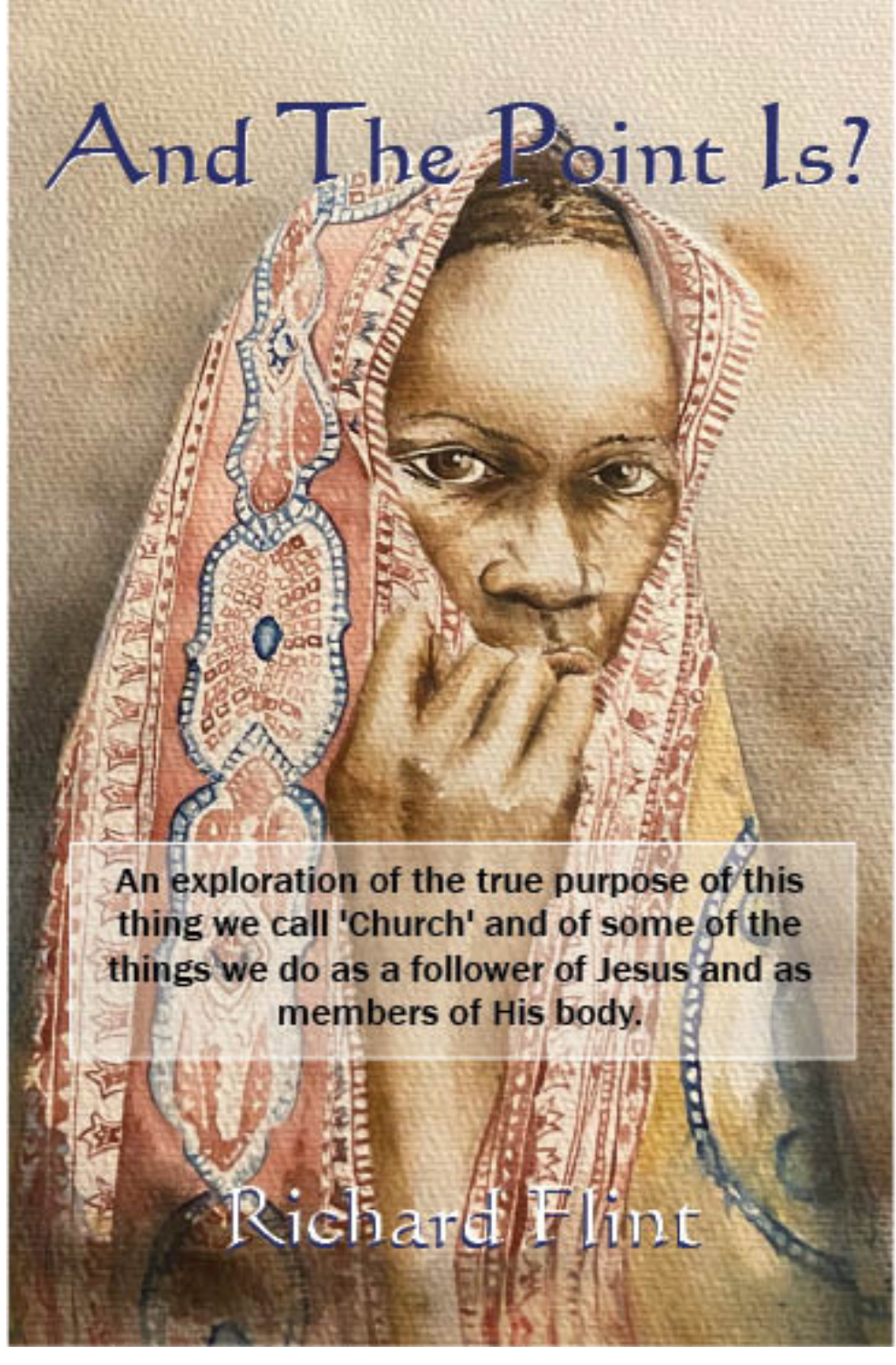


And The Point Is?



An exploration of the true purpose of this thing we call 'Church' and of some of the things we do as a follower of Jesus and as members of His body.

Richard Flint

This book was inspired originally by a local Church notice board posing the following question as the topic to be considered in the sermon that Sunday, What is the Point of the Church? Quite the question. My response was to begin thinking the following thought, can the overarching purpose of the Church be summed up in a single point? Quite the thought. This book does indeed set out to settle this thought and to answer this question. It also moves out, more broadly, to use the same process to probe some of the things we take for granted in the life of the Church, with some surprising results. Before concluding, to answer the ultimate question for the universe and everything within it: and the point is? All from the perspective of what the Bible seems to be telling us, if only we have ears to hear.

Saved for over 50 years, the Lord has taken Richard Flint on an interesting and challenging journey within church world as both a leader and follower.



Indeed, a journey through which he has had to rethink much of what he once took to be true. However, the fruit of this has been a re-evaluation of both the purpose and shape of the Church.

The love he has for the true body of Christ remains as strong as ever. And as we move into the end of the end times, this is a timely message for us all who would want to follow in the steps of our master, Jesus Christ. He now lives in the north west of England and is married with two daughters and has two grand children.

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by Richard Flint

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Contents

1	What is the Point of the Church?	7
2	What is the Point of Fellowship in the Gospel?	49
3	What is the Point of Being a Follower of Jesus?	79
4	What is the Point of the Closet?	103
5	What is the Point of Baptism?	131
6	What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?	197
7	What is the Point of Praise and Worship?	241
8	And the Point Is?	277

Chapter 1

What is the Point of the Church?

This question was posed on the notice board of a local Christadelphian ‘Church’ and was the subject of the message that was to be delivered in their next meeting. Indeed, what an important question this is for us: ‘What is the point of the Church?’ Indeed, this is the essential question that we will be exploring here. As we set our sights on the condition of the post Covid ‘Church’. A Church that is undoubtedly broad, encapsulating as it does the heretical to the hysterical and all stops in between. Is there a clearly definable point to the existence of the Church today? And if there is one, how do we find it? Where do we look and who do we listen to, to show us the way?

What is the Point of the Church?

The question that we are grappling with can be understood in one of two ways. On one level, it could be a challenge to the very existence and validity of this religious construct that we have come to call the church. Is there a point to it or should we all just pack up and go home?

On another level, the question carries a far more positive import. To this end we might rephrase the question in the following way, is there one essential point to which the church might aspire? Can we boil the church down, using scripture as our guide, into one simple yet truly profound to its existence and the purpose for which it has been placed on the earth? Now there is a challenge, you would think. But, perhaps not!

For there is a point and this point is found in one individual who lived on earth about two thousand years ago. Jesus is His name, and He is Christ to His followers. He is our foundation in all things. However, beyond this what is there a point to the church. Indeed, what is the relationship between the church and Jesus Christ? Why has the Lord Jesus founded this gathering of people on earth? Can we identify its essential purpose or point? To help us, we are simply going to look at scripture to provide us with the answer.

It may surprise you to know that actually there is no explicit mention of the church in the Old Testament. This is because Jesus took everyone by surprise when he began to talk about such a potential entity. Indeed, the apostle Paul actually describes the church as a mystery,

This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning
Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:32

What is the Point of the Church?

What Paul is saying here in its context is that the essential relationship between the church and Jesus is of the same nature as the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. This is an important starting point for us as we look to answer the question, what is the point of the church?

**The Church has been and is being created to provide
the bridegroom with a bride,
a beautiful bride for whom He is looking to return,
and to take home to His Father.**

Not too peak too early, we do believe that this is the overreaching and overarching point and purpose of the two thousand years of the church's history and it is a story that will continue to develop until the bridegroom does indeed return and claim His bride. Therefore, perhaps, we might describe the church as a bridal chamber; that is a private and prepared space within which the bride is being prepared for her big day. Indeed, this is imagery that we can find within Old Testament prophecy and which we will be returning to later in this piece,

...let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber,
and the bride out of her closet.

Joel 2:16

Clearly, therefore, this was not an idea that originated in the New Testament. Indeed, the Lord God's chosen means of relationship with humanity was, is and has always been a marital one in nature. In turning to the Old

Testament, we find the Lord God making the following vow to Israel,

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.

Exodus 19:5

These words were actually part of a marriage covenant, and through the people's response,

All that the LORD has spoken we will do

Exodus 19:8a

They were, in effect, as a nation saying to the Lord God 'yes, we do'. Indeed, we have this marriage relationship confirmed many times in scripture such as here,

Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD;
for I am married unto you.

Jeremiah 3: 4

And also by the prophet Isaiah, where he plainly states,

For thy Maker is thine HUSBAND; the LORD
of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy
One of Israel...

Isaiah 54:5

Tragically, for Israel their spiritual sin and backsliding is described within the context of this marital relationship as well and is, therefore, identified as adultery. Indeed, an adultery which eventually lead to Israel being spiritually divorced from the Lord God.

And I saw, when for all the causes whereby
backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put
her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her
treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went
and played the harlot also

Jeremiah 3:8

However, the good news is that directly as a result of this the way is prepared for a new marital relationship that will be established through a new covenant, again found within the Old Testament,

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that
I will make a new covenant with the house of
Israel, and with the house of Judah:

Not according to the covenant that I made
with their fathers in the day that I took them
by the hand to bring them out of the land
of Egypt; which my covenant they brake,
although I was an husband unto them, saith
the LORD:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make
with the house of Israel; After those days, saith
the LORD, I will put my law in their inward

parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Jeremiah 31:31-33

A new covenant that will bring salvation not just to Israel but to the whole of humanity and this is a covenant through which a new virgin bride is being made ready. The preparation for which will be achieved through a people who have had their hearts transformed such that they to fall in love with the bridegroom. Indeed, His law of love will be even written on their hearts. And as we move to the outworking of this new covenant within the ministry and teaching of Jesus we can identify the transformed heart as being its central theme and an important part of which is this marriage covenant motif.

The first extended section of Jesus' teachings are recorded in scripture in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, and at the beginning of which we find, again what we know as, the Beatitudes. This short group of sayings given in proverb form by Jesus provide us with a wonderful spiritual overture for all that is to follow. Speaking here specifically to His disciples, Jesus explains that their hearts have to be stripped back to a place of true spiritual poverty before they can begin to be built back up again with the character and nature of the Lord Himself. It is only when we come to a place where we have hearts that are truly at peace that we can then truly make peace and impact the world around us with this peace. Moreover, this peace has one unique source, Jesus Himself.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you:
not as the world giveth, give I unto you.

John 14:27

And this peace is the peace of the Hebrew word 'shalom'; a quality of peace where there is an order and a balance before God and before man. We are at peace with ourselves through our peace with God and will therefore be sheading seeds of peace wherever we go, alleluia!

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace
of them that make peace.

James 3:18

This is a process, and through this process we are perfected, as we grow into a maturity in Christ. And moreover, at the centre of who we now are is a peace that is rooted and grounded in His love and his unconditional acceptance of us¹. At this point as the seventh beatitude tells us that we have made it, we are a child² of God and an heir of Christ.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be
called the children of God.

Matthew 5:9

There is a journey. We are saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. Nothing in Christ is static. We need to be moving on from one level of His glory to the next³. Not that we ever fully arrive on this side of His return because

What is the Point of the Church?

for us there is a constant need to push on for that upward calling⁴. We are a new creation being newly created every day as we walk into and through those things that our Father has prepared beforehand for us to walk through⁵. And the destiny that the Lord has for us all is found in the new covenant,

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

John 13:34,35

In response, therefore, to our question, what is the point of the church? Is it not to be found here?

It is within the Church that this new covenant of selfless love is to be exercised.

The Church: a one stop shop for Agape love

It is within the church that this quality of love is to become the reality of every relationship being worked out within it. This powerful reality will speak louder than any words to those on the outside, who witness it first-hand. Indeed, this is the powerful reality that needs to shine out into a world full of the darkness, selfish love and the pain that this causes. To shine out so that the world is drawn toward us and not repelled by us.

Ye are the light of the world...

Matthew 5:14a

It is here and only here, that the individual who comes to this light will find the source of this light within each of those who shine with this light and this light is the true light of the world, who is Jesus.

It is here, that they will find the true source of all light which is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is here, that they will find for themselves the love they need to begin their own journey of carrying the cross for themselves. This is a journey of heart transformation. A metamorphosis whereby Jesus' light within them will burst into life and come to true brilliance in Him. For the light at the heart of each of us is the light of His presence.

This process is described for us within John's prologue to his Gospel. We simply need to replace the given subject, John the Baptist, with that of the expected and the true potential of the church,

There was a man sent from God⁶

This means that there is always room for another man or woman as the labourers are few⁷, John was just a man,

The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.⁸

It is not so much about our lives but about His life being evident in our lives.

What is the Point of the Church?

He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.⁹

We are merely a clay lamp¹⁰ in need of the oil, which is the Holy Spirit and the light of Jesus will ignite the light in our lives

That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.¹¹

The point of the Church is to be a signpost to Jesus by shining with the light of His love.

Light is love¹²

And moreover, the consequence of this is that as the church shines with His love, it is then that all men might be saved, as this light will shine like a searchlight illuminating the path to Jesus. Indeed, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that a church which comprises those who have walked the walk of heart transformation, will shine like a city that is set on a hill. The effect will be unavoidable and unavoidably alight.

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

Let your light so shine before men, that they

may see your good works, and glorify your
Father which is in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

The grammar here is important. The 'Ye' in the 'Ye are' in the Greek is second person plural and therefore Jesus is referring to the impact of His light shining out from the love within the gathered church. Whereas the 'your' in the 'your light' is second person singular so this means that we individually shine when acting out this covenant of love one to another and thereby we glorify the Father. Paul captures this dynamic very well when he writes the following,

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the
sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a
crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye
shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the
word of life...

Philippians 2:15,16a

We have here in Paul's teaching the journey of heart transformation expressed within the process of becoming blameless and harmless¹³. This is the culmination of the journey as we are recognised as true sons of God and, therefore, true representatives of our Father through a transformed nature and character that we share with His son, Jesus. Or, as Jesus describes this we have made our journey through the beatitudes and have become peacemakers such that we now shine with His light in the midst of this dark world. The key to this is that we hold forth to the word of

life who is Jesus so that we are rooted and grounded in Him and His love.

**The point of the Church is to shine
with the light of Christ
and to enable everyone within it to become their own
source of His light within the surrounding darkness.**

Indeed, a love the point of which is to reach beyond the confines on the church.

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying,
All power is given unto me in heaven and in
earth.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing
them in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever
I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you
always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Matthew 28:18-20

The church, because it carries the love of the Lord, it also carries and is representative of the authoritative power of Jesus on the earth and the sole task for which is to teach, or more accurately¹⁴ to make disciples, of or in all nations. The keys to which are to baptise and then to deliver the teaching and lifestyle of Jesus. Interestingly, the task of soul saving does not feature here, as indeed this remains the prerogative of the Lord God.

We are all called to sow seeds of love and peace into the heart of those who walk within and those who walk without.

The point of the Church is to make disciples.

Indeed, disciples are to produce disciples. Followers of Jesus are to produce followers of Jesus. According to the teaching of Jesus, therefore, what is a disciple and who is a follower of Jesus? Helpfully, Jesus does provide us with a clear and succinct definition for what it takes to be His disciple,

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

Luke 9:23

The means by which anyone can become a disciple of Jesus is through a walk of self-denial and to carry their own personal cross on a daily basis. This clearly is a journey that will take an individual in the very opposite direction in which everyone else is usually travelling in our modern social media driven world; the direction of self-actualisation that is even espoused broadly within church world today. To the contrary, Jesus identifies here, as He does throughout His teaching, that an individual's self-life is the major obstacle to their development as one of His followers. In order to achieve this He uses the symbolism of the eventual means of His own demise, the cross. How can we understand this symbolic picture?

The cross was the wooden frame which Jesus was forced to carry through the streets of Jerusalem to the place of His own execution. The cross was then the wooden frame onto which He was brutally nailed and then hoisted to suffer one of the most painful deaths known to mankind. The cross was where Jesus' earthly tenure ended. The cross brought an end to His life in the flesh of a fallen humanity, a life where He demonstrated a way to rise above the fall of mankind and walk obediently before His Father all the way to the cross.

I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished
the work which thou gavest me to do.

John 17:4

What Jesus offers to us here is a spiritual picture of the end of our own flesh life. We need to understand that to follow Him is to walk the walk of a disciple. This will entail on a daily basis times, that we will have to carry words, attitudes and actions from those around us and which are forced upon us. Things which will be burdensome and painful and challenge who we are and, therefore, importantly will challenge our self-life. They will enable us to discover what it is to feel spiritually poverty stricken and empty of anything within; lost and hurting, so that all we have is Him to hold onto. These will provide us with opportunities through which we might discover what it is to be meek and to turn the other cheek. We will learn how to exercise mercy and to bite our tongue. We will increasingly develop a hunger and thirst for the things of God as the things of the world lose their appeal. We will develop a purity

of heart as the true squalor of our own hearts is revealed to us. And ultimately, we will come to a place of rest as a child of God and peace-making has become our reality as Father has brought all things into His 'Shalom' order. This walk is wonderfully described here by Paul,

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;

Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.

2 Corinthians 4:7-11

And also by James,

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

James 1: 2-4

And then by Peter,

...though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ

1 Peter 1: 6b-7

Therefore, from these three scriptures we can see that there is a consistency in the understanding of what the walk of a disciple or follower of Jesus might entail. A walk that will produce in the individual a manifestation of Jesus in their flesh: a perfect work where they lack for nothing and receive something instead that is far more precious than gold.

The point of the church is to support everyone to
carry their cross

Staying with the writers of the epistles, we can see that they understood that the point of the church was to provide support for the journey of discipleship. Two passages from the writing of Paul illustrate this very well,

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets;
and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and
teachers;

What is the Point of the Church?

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ

Ephesians 4: 11-13¹⁵

What we have here is a clear definition of the point of church,

The point of the church is to support everyone to come to perfection

The Greek word translated ‘perfection’, like shalom, carries a meaning of completion and maturity. There is nothing else more important than this in life, to find completion and maturity in Christ. The actual term translated as ‘perfecting’ is a Greek word used uniquely here by Paul. This word is ‘katartizō’ and it means completion through being made whole, being refurnished or by being given the strength required. Three elements that succinctly capture for us the three essential elements of the journey of sanctification.

Before moving on, we may be able to grasp in fairly abstract terms what perfection might mean for each of us, however, does scripture pin it down more precisely. Indeed, can we find anywhere within the word of God where its concretely defined for us? I think we can.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.
For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?
And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?
Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Matthew 5:44-48

These are the words of Jesus as He concludes the first part of His Sermon on the Mount teaching in Matthew's gospel. The call is to become sons'¹⁶ of our Father who is in heaven. The call is to be perfect like your Father in heaven. The call is to be so changed that you are able to love enough, even to love your worst enemy. This, as defined here by Jesus, is perfection.

The good news is that none of us are Father God and therefore few if any will ever have love enough, but the Greek is very encouraging. The translation of verse 48 is a little misleading as we have it here, the actual term should read that we will be perfect. The second person future tense is being used here, and as we have already seen this is the journey! We may be unfinished business, but we are the

Lord's unfinished business and, as the Lord said with His last breath, 'it is finished'¹⁷. Enough said!

Sadly, however, the systemic religious church as we have it today seems so unaware of how important this journey actually is. The focus is too often on building the church, whereas the focus needs to be on building the body, there is a difference. Indeed, the point is that all the ministries given to the church and the ministry gifts to be exercised within the church, if done right, will have one focus, and only one focus, and that was, that is and that will be, until Jesus returns, perfecting the saints in Christ. Preparing us to be able to love enough. A transformational process of the heart that has, is and will prepare the bride who has been, is being and will be made ready for her bridegroom.

The apostle Paul also teaches that the responsibility to play a supportive role for others who are walking with you through this process, is not wholly dependent on the naturally 'gifted' or paid few of church world. No, the only qualification that counts is whether or not you can love enough!

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:1-2

Importantly, we can identify here how the responsibility to support others on the journey does not lie

What is the Point of the Church?

with those deemed to carry a ministry or special authority within the body. Here we see that within the properly functioning church those further along on the journey of discipleship carry a responsibility for those weaker than themselves and who are stumbling in some way. By this Paul states that an individual would be fulfilling the law of Christ, which as we have seen is the new covenant or commandment or the law of Christ to love one another, which was inaugurated in the upper room on the night before He died.

The point of the church is to bear
each other's burdens

Indeed, bearing one another's burdens is another way of describing cross bearing.

For if a man think himself to be something,
when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.
But let every man prove his own work, and then
shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not
in another.

Galatians 6:3-4

We can never move away from the foundational truth of Jesus' teaching in the beatitudes: the truth of our state of absolute spiritual poverty before God. Indeed, as we touch the lives of others we need to be motivated by the love of Jesus and to minister out of his imbued character within us such as we see here described as the spirit of meekness.

This profound and revelatory understanding of our true state before the Lord has always to be our foundation that lies behind all our words and all our actions. Indeed, such a state, as expressed here, a state of perpetual nothingness. The temptation when we do help others will always be to think otherwise, as Paul puts it to think highly of ourselves, to think we are something after all. However, let us beware for this is the beginning of all heresy and deception. And as we see with the experience of Uzzah in scripture¹⁸, when we touch the Spirit with the flesh the outcome is never a good one. It is all about Him. We are and can only ever be clay pots formed by Him and for Him and any and all glory goes to Him.

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

Let us move on to continue to explore the bridal motif within scripture as an important symbolic metaphor to help us understand the point of the church within the teaching of Jesus and in the New Testament more generally. First of all, we find it within Jesus' own teaching,

And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said,

What is the Point of the Church?

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son,
And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come.

Matthew 22:1-3

Therefore, for two thousand years or more there has been a call from scripture that a wedding feast is approaching, and two thousand years on we are so much closer to it now. For anyone to arrive at the celebration and to be allowed in there is a journey to be made.

A journey of transformation
we cannot go as we are,
we must go as He is!

This is the journey that the apostle Paul challenges us to make,

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.
And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Romans 12:1,2

What is the Point of the Church?

This is a journey that requires a spiritual sacrifice that will mean that there are merely the ashes remaining of our previous life.

This is a journey that will require us to swim against the tide.

This is a journey that will require our brains to be washed clean through the word that is spoken¹⁹ to us such that we metamorphose,²⁰ becoming less like us and more like Him.

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are **changed** into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 3:18

This is a journey through which we become the mirror image of Jesus.

We will not get in without this journey.

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:

And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Matthew 22:11,12

This is a journey where our rags are transformed into His riches

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.

Isaiah 61:10

For we are far more than merely being guests at the marriage feast of the Lamb,

Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.

And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb

Revelation 19:7-9

We are the bride!

And has she made herself ready?

We find a clear identification of His followers with His bride in Jesus' teaching to the disciples in the upper room on the night before He died. A caveat does need to be put in place here, as explored above, from Jesus' teaching concerning the marriage feast above, it would seem that this does apply exclusively to

those who have taken the journey of transformation.²¹ It will all be about the cut of our jib, so to speak, clothed as we will be by the Lord God in His garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. We are being made ready for His son as we allow Him to make us ready. Ready we will be!

This is the import of Jesus' words on their last night together, I am coming back for you.

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

John 14:2-3

The reference here seems to be to first century Jewish marital culture. Once the couple were betrothed there would be a period of preparation before the wedding celebration. During this time, the bridegroom would prepare a room at His family home for their wedding night and for their ongoing life together. In the meantime, the prospective bride would prepare herself for the coming nuptials. The bridegroom, when the time had come for the wedding, would then return to His bride, collect her and take her home to his father's home for the wedding to take place. This does seem to be the process that Jesus is making reference to here.

We might mention at this point the Matan or bridal gift. Before the bridegroom left to make his preparation he would leave his bride to be with a special gift as a down

payment for all that was to come in terms of the blessing that the marriage and ongoing married life would provide.

Do we recognise similarities here with the special gift the church has received as a down payment for what is to come?²² Indeed, Jesus' teaching in the upper room in John's gospel centres largely on this wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, a Matan or bridal gift to the church. Essentially, this gift is the means by which and through whom the church will be prepared, made ready and transformed into the bride.

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you
another Comforter, that he may abide with you
for ever;

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world
cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither
knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth
with you, and shall be in you.

John 14:16,17

We are still within this time of bridal preparation, even today two thousand years on from the bridegroom's departure. Indeed, what are the preparations that we are we making? Are we truly prepared? Have we allowed ourselves to be made ready?

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also
loved the church, and gave himself for it;
That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the
washing of water by the word,
That he might present it to himself a glorious
church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such

thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:25-27

Clearly, the bride has been gathered over the last two thousand years as individuals have walked as true disciples during this whole time of the history of the church and these are they who will rise first when the Lord returns.²³ However, has there ever been a actual representation of gathered glorious church, save in the first generation of its life, that we find described in the writing of Paul in Ephesians 5? Paul, interestingly, also describes this church as being without spot and wrinkle. What might he mean by this? Perhaps the point he is making is that there will be an expression of the gathered corporate body in the earth at the time of the Lord's return that will not be suffering from the acne spots that represent spiritual youthfulness and it will not be wrinkled like the old, but will be a vibrant and mature church. A bride of the right age who has been made ready and prepared for her bridegroom to return. Therefore, we can recognise again how important the process of and journey into maturation is for the believer. Perhaps, in these last days we might look for the Lord to build a church, His church, which will be a gathering that is glorious, holy and without blemish and as His bride will carry a spotless and smooth spiritual complexion.

Indeed, as was mentioned above briefly, we do find this expectation prophetically foretold in scripture,

Gather the people, sanctify the congregation,
assemble the elders, gather the children, and
those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom

go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

Joel 2:16

We believe it will prove to be both a helpful and challenging exercise to unpack this verse in the light of what we have exploring together and, hopefully, as we do this those with ears to hear we might be able to catch something of the prophetic voice of the bridegroom for our own time.

• Gather the people

“Gather the people” the prophet exclaims. As does the Lord. The Lord is still the church builder. Indeed, a church that he is building today that lies beyond the religious system. An expression of the church that truly carries His name, and who hears His voice above the clamour of all other competing voices. Indeed, this will be an expression of the church that is characterised by the Good Shepherd gathering His sheep into His sheepfold by leading them out of from wherever they might have been lost or even worse, trapped by abuse and control.

But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.

John 10:2,3

Jesus is calling His own sheep by name and he is leading them out of the system so that they can come into His sheepfold. Perhaps here we can hear echoes of Hebrews 13?

Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

Hebrews 13:13,14

We hope and believe that this will be an end-time move of God that will occur without the gate and without the camp of the religious system that is the church, as those with ears to hear seek for more and seek for a kingdom and a city that is to come and respond to this call and are drawn together in small flocks by a shared love for the Shepherd. Indeed, it will be a spiritual gathering who meet because they are together, rather than meeting to be together, there is a difference! It is all about the heart and it is all about the journey.

**We meet together because we are together
(think about it)**

• **sanctify the congregation**

Indeed, as we have already seen the point of the church is that He might sanctify the people by His own blood! As

What is the Point of the Church?

we have been exploring; what is the point of the church? The point of the church is to be a house of sanctification. Essentially, the church is a house of sanctification. The gathering within which everyone is to be supported and encouraged in their own journey towards being made perfect in Christ. This, again we believe in faith, will be an end time move of God to prepare and make ready a gathered people for His Son, Jesus.. A move within which the all-embracing sanctificatory point and purpose of the church will be discovered afresh. This will be the glorious expression of His church that Paul exhorts us to look for expectantly. She will be a mature yet virginal bride who has made herself ready for Her bridegroom.

For by one offering he hath perfected for ever
them that are sanctified.

Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us:
for after that he had said before,

This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my
laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I
write them

Hebrews 10:14-16

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly;
and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and
body be preserved blameless unto the coming
of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:23,24

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:2

• **assemble the elders**

This is an important aspect of the new move of God as the Lord builds His church. This is similar to the process of rebooting a computer and taking it back to the factory settings. Church leadership and Godly authority was always meant to stay with the one and only Shepherd of the flock, Christ Jesus, and it was then to be exercised through a team of elders. It is His power and authority exercised through humble, loving, obedient, servant leaders of the church, as Paul describes it here,

And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power,
Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places,
Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come:
And hath put all things under his feet, and gave

What is the Point of the Church?

him to be the head over all things to the church,
Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth
all in all.

Ephesians 1:19-23

And he is the head of the body, the church:
who is the beginning, the firstborn from the
dead; that in all things he might have the
preeminence.

Colossians 1:18

Indeed, providing us with a leadership model that aligns
the old and new covenants.²⁴

And Moses went out, and told the people the
words of the LORD, and gathered the seventy
men of the elders of the people, and set them
round about the tabernacle.

Numbers 11:24

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou
shouldest set in order the things that are
wanting, and ordain²⁵ elders in every city, as I
had appointed thee

Titus 1:5

Furthermore, we need to discover what it means to
operate under a leadership model which defers its decision
making through the Holy Spirit to the Lord, such as we see
exercised at Antioch in Acts 13,

As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said,...

Acts 13:2a

We also need to discover what it means to operate under servant hearted leadership such as that modelled by our Lord on the night before He died,

Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

John 13:13-15

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

1 Peter 5:1-4

A lesson clearly learned by Peter following his conversation with His resurrected Lord on the Galilean beach,

He saith to him again the second time, Simon,
son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him,
Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He
saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

John 21:16

Interestingly, the Greek word translated here as ‘feed’ is a different word from the one used in the rest of the dialogue between the risen Jesus and Peter. The word used here is not the usual word for feeding the sheep food which is ‘bosko’, but is the word ‘poimaino’ which means to care for the sheep as a shepherd. Therefore, there does need to be a connection between the love that an elder has for their fellow believers and the love they have for the Lord. For the flock needs the love, the servant heart and the authority of the good shepherd to emanate from and through the earthly leadership in order for them to flourish and grow in the things of God, being ensamples to the flock.²⁶

• gather the children, and those that suck the breasts

Sadly, because the church has not been effectively discipling the body it can be likened to the Simpsons; although this TV cartoon series started in the 1980s forty years on the children have not aged or matured, Bart is still 10, Lisa is still 8 and Maggie is still just a toddler who is not

able to walk or talk. There is a parallel in the church today, it is as though the majority of believers within the church system have been infantilised, trapped as children, never being nurtured and allowed to grow up into the meaty things of Christ. This is similar to what we read concerning the believers to whom the writer to the Hebrews is writing.

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers,
ye have need that one teach you again which be
the first principles of the oracles of God; and are
become such as have need of milk, and not of
strong meat.

For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the
word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

But strong meat belongeth to them that are of
full age, even those who by reason of use have
their senses exercised to discern both good and
evil.

Hebrews 5:12-14

Believers who have been fed for too long on a diet of baby food and who have been going over the same basics time and again without anything ever changing in their lives and hearts or ever moving on to their higher calling of perfection in Christ. Who know nothing of the journey.

Therefore leaving the principles of the
doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto
perfection...

Hebrews 6:1a

This move of God will be characterised by believers who, when they are gathered, still understand as a child or even as a babe and who are still being fed on milk. However, this will change as they are now supported, encouraged and empowered to grow up in Christ and to move on towards their own level of perfection or maturity. To become true sons of God. To truly start the journey for themselves.

That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ...

Ephesians 4:14-15

• let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber

Here we have the context for all that has preceded this prophetically signposted event. Christ Jesus, the bridegroom, leaves his chamber and returns for His bride, just as He said He would. The bride has made herself ready and this will prove to be the catalyst for the bridegroom to go forth from His chamber. A return that is captured prophetically by Paul when he writes the following to the church at Thessalonica,

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto

the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4: 15-18

We do need to understand that once again the picture being painted here by Paul is a marital one. Within the Jewish wedding celebrations at one point the bride and the bridegroom are carried aloft on chairs and they literally meet together in mid-air. In this way they are caught up together in the air, as will the bridal church when Jesus, the bridegroom, returns to claim her for Himself.

• the bride out of her closet

The final aspect of this move of God is that it will be rooted and grounded on a profoundly important restoration of the closet experience for the individual believer.²⁷ This will be a new found understanding of how important our one to one with Father is in terms of the transformative process of our personal sanctification. We have not just been provided with a place to meet but the Lord encour-

ages to recognise that there is a crucial place in the here and now that believers will need to regularly utilise to enable Father to ring the changes in our hearts and lives. Through which, as we have explored above, it is here that Father desires to take each of us through the stages of the beatitudes and to enable each of us to metamorphose into the very character and nature of His son, Jesus Christ.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:6

Jesus encourages His disciples to come to His Father, indeed, He is the only way by whom anyone can come into relationship with God the Father. Just as Jesus Himself said that in all He said and did he was restrained to walk in obedience to His Father²⁸, how much more are we? It is Father God who is looking to bring about the transformative changes in our heart and lives. As He formed the first man in the garden He is still looking to form each one of us into the image of His dear son Jesus. Perhaps we can detect the prevailing heart of Father God in the words of Paul when he says the following,

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:2

This is the voice of the Father to each one of us, we are betrothed to one husband, my son Jesus, and I am longing to present you to him a virgin. No matter what you have done or where you have been in your life, you can be presented to the bridegroom as part of the bride, holy and without blemish. Nothing is too hard for me and no one is too far from me.

And the crucial place in which this transformation will take place is in the closet. Here we can open up our secret lives to Father and in this secret safe place He will then do the work in our hearts that will bear fruit in our lives. This will be His open reward for each one of us, a transformed heart and a character and nature that increasingly looks, sounds and even smells more like Jesus.

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Significantly, the Hebrew word translated in **Joel 2:16** 'closet' is the word 'sukkah' meaning a booth or tent and reminds us of 'Sukkoth' the Jewish feast of tabernacles. This in turn is a reminder of the desert wanderings of the children of Israel as they made their way from Egypt to the land of promise and where they learned to trust and depend on the

Lord God in all things. In turn it reminds us of our own journey as we, spiritually speaking, learn similar lessons being brought to the end of ourselves so that we too can develop a dependency on the Lord in all things.

In conclusion, therefore, and as we return to the central question that we have been trying to answer; what is the point of the church? We might simply answer it in the following way using **Ephesians 5:26,27** as our guide.

And the point is: The Bride

Stage 1: That he (Christ Jesus) might sanctify and cleanse it (the bride) with the washing of water by the word

Stage 2: That he (Christ Jesus) might present it (the bride) to himself (Christ Jesus) a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it (the bride) should be holy and without blemish.

Notes

1. See Ephesians 3:17-19
2. Literally 'a mature son'.
3. See 2 Corinthians 3:18
4. See Philippians 3:8-14
5. See 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10
6. John 1:6
7. Matthew 9:37
8. John 1:7
9. John 1:8

10. See 2 Corinthians 4:6-7
11. John 1:9
12. See 1 John 2:8-10
13. In the original Greek this word carries the meaning of unmixed
14. The translation in the King James version is open to question here.
15. See 'Taking the Form of a Servant' by the same author, in which a full exposition of the scriptural model for church leadership can be found: downloadable free from the author's website: richard-flint.com
16. The koine Greek here is 'sons' and not 'children' which would be 'teknon'.
17. John 19:30
18. See 2 Samuel 6:7
19. See John 15:3
20. This is the literal meaning of Greek word used here-like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly!
21. Scripture does seem to indicate that a distinction does need to be made between those who as part of the bride enjoy the marriage feast of the lamb and then return with the Lord to rule and reign with Him during the Millennial reign and those who will be saved and enter the eternal state that lies beyond the Millennium. ! Corinthians 3: 15 might be taken as an indication of this.
22. See Ephesians 1: 14
23. See 1 Thessalonians 4: 16
24. An extensive study has been made on this area by the author and is contained within his book 'Taking the Form of a Servant', downloadable free from the author's website:

richard-flint.com

25. The Greek word translated here as 'ordain' simply means set in place and does not carry any reference to ordination as we might understand it today.

26. I have written extensively on this subject of the Biblical leadership model in 'Taking on the Form of a Servant'. downloadable free from the author's website: richard-flint.com

27. I have explored this idea in greater depth in my book 'Back to the Future: The Rebuilding of the Tabernacle of David':downloadable free from the author's website: richard-flint.com

28. See John 5: 19, 30

Chapter 2.

What is the Point of Fellowship in the Gospel?

I thank my God upon every remembrance of
you
Always in every prayer of mine for you all
making request with joy,
For your fellowship in the gospel from the first
day until now
Being confident of this very thing, that he which
hath begun a good work in you will perform it
until the day of Jesus Christ:
Even as it is meet for me to think this of you
all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch
as both in my bonds, and in the defence and
confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers

of my grace.

For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;

That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;

Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:4-11

The phrase, 'fellowship in the gospel' appears in scripture on just one occasion, and yet as a phrase it does seem to succinctly capture for us the essential function or point of the concept of fellowship that lies at the true heart of the life of the true church where ever this might be. Indeed, as expressed here Paul is describing the very impact of the fellowship in the gospel on the community of believers in Philippi. For him, as the apostle who was called to carry the message of the cross as far into the Gentile world as the Spirit lead him, it is the all-encompassing, ongoing work and ministry of Christ on earth that is to occupy the life of the church from Pentecost¹ until the Lord returns for her as His bride. A work of God and of grace in which he exhorts the believers in Philippi to have total confidence. As we continue to move through this beautiful passage of Pauline writing one word calls out to

us at every turn-LOVE. Paul has these spiritual brothers and sisters in his heart as they are held together by their shared fellowship in the gospel. He longs after them from the very deepest place of not just his being, but of Jesus in Him! He is eager that it is this love that pervades every aspect of their fellowship life, such that the delicious ripe fruits of righteousness hang low from the trees in the garden of their heart. And this love and these fruit bring us right back to where this all emanates- all this is by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God!

However, before we try to ascertain what the fellowship of the gospel might mean for us today and how we might know and move in such LOVE, let us explore how these two terms of fellowship and the gospel are to be understood through exploring their usage in scripture. Starting with the meaning of the word 'gospel'.

• **What is the gospel?**

What a stupid question, you may be thinking. Obviously, the gospel is the good news that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and offers us beyond the cross eternal life. However, by stopping here are we missing something that should be considered as an integral part of the gospel? We believe, therefore, that it will prove useful to dig a little deeper into the word of God to see whether this might be true. As with most concepts within scripture it is often useful to start with their first occurrence in the word of God, and this is the case here. For this we need to turn to Matthew 4 where we read the following,

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.

Matthew 4:23

The first mention of this term here does indeed provide us with its overarching context; the gospel will always be related to the kingdom. The Greek word that is translated as gospel actually does carry a meaning of ‘good news’, therefore, the gospel of the kingdom is the good news of the kingdom. Two further questions then follow: what is the good news and what is the kingdom?

The answer to these questions can be found in the message Jesus delivers a few verses earlier in Matthew, where we read the following,

From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Matthew 4:17-19

Having been tested in the wilderness we have recorded here the moment at which this message of the gospel of the kingdom was released as Jesus begins to preach.² The message Jesus delivers has three distinct elements:

- Repent
- Follow me
- I will make you fishers of men

The context for these three elements is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand or not far away. Indeed, Jesus spends the rest of his ministry teaching his disciples about what it would mean for them to follow Him and thereby to become citizens of this new kingdom.

These three elements inform us that

- there is a point of entry to this kingdom, which is repentance,
- there is then an ongoing relational journey within this kingdom here on earth, as we follow Him wherever He decides to take us
- there is a process through which we become equipped and prepared to be citizens of this kingdom,
- which Jesus identifies as being a fisher of men.

This is the gospel of the kingdom. There is something clearly cyclical about this. We begin by being caught ourselves and we end up being able to catch others. However, once caught the crucial element that we all need to understand is the stage in the middle. We need to understand what it is to follow Jesus. We need to know personally what it is to be made into a fisher of men. What is the process? What is following Jesus?

For it is so important that we do understand these things because this is the essential message that Jesus came to bring, this is the gospel of the kingdom and He desires that this is the message that echoes down through ages throughout the whole world until His return, as we read near the end of Matthew,

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be
preached in all the world for a witness unto all
nations; and then shall the end come.

Matthew 24:14

However, what are we dealing with here? Is Jesus saying that we should all be standing on street corners shouting at people that the end is nigh? Lovingly informing anyone who happens to pass by that unless they repent they will go to hell? If this is what Jesus has told you to do then go for it. However, perhaps our approach to communicating the gospel of the kingdom might require more subtlety, love and hopefully a relational connection with those to whom we are sharing this good news. This would seem to be what Jesus had in mind, for at the end of Matthew we find Jesus' final words to His disciples, where we read the following,

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying,
All power is given unto me in heaven and in
earth.

Go ye therefore, and teach (=to make disciples)
all nations, baptizing them in the name of the
Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching (=to teach) them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Matthew 28:18-20

On the other side of the cross Jesus leaves the disciples with His 'power' and the power described here is not the power of force, either temporal or spiritual, but that of authority³. We have been given Jesus' authority to do two things: to make disciples and to teach them to follow Jesus. Significantly, we are not told to save souls or to bring individuals to repentance, this is God's work. In terms of the three elements of the revealed gospel that we have been given in Matthew 4 the ongoing work of the disciples was to facilitate the replication of their spiritual reality in the lives of others and leave the rest to the Lord God. The key term here is facilitate, to oil the wheels of the this journey for all those for whom the Lord might have given us opportunity and oversight with love.

What about the kingdom? After all, are we not told by Jesus that the kingdom is nigh? There are clearly two realities at work here, the now and the not yet. The actual kingdom over which Jesus will be King and ruling out of the tabernacle of David in Jerusalem during His Millennial reign is yet to come. However, the preparation for life in this kingdom began when Jesus began to preach concerning this kingdom. The ongoing requirement for us to follow Jesus is a twofold preparation, first of all to catch men today and for them to be made ready to

be a citizen of Kingdom on Jesus' return tomorrow. The key for both is expressed by Paul when he writes the following,

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink;
but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the
Holy Ghost.

For he that in these things serveth Christ is
acceptable to God, and approved of men.

Romans 14:17,18

The Kingdom of God is not physical but spiritual. It is now and yet, not yet. It is as we follow Jesus that we are transformed to carry His righteousness, His peace and His joy by which we are both prepared to catch men by the witness of His Spirit in our lives and also to be prepared for His kingdom for which we are required to increasingly carry his character and His nature as a true son of God. Thereby, being made both acceptable to God for the Kingdom and, also, approved of men as carriers of the good news that they need to hear through the witness of our lives and not just our words.

The gospel or good news of the Kingdom that Jesus preached can therefore be understood as the good news that the Lord has an eternal plan for a spiritually enlivened and heart transformed humanity and that through God each of us can enjoy His gift of revelation of this for ourselves.⁴ We say this because the important element that turns theory into practice, a dead religion into a living faith and head knowledge into heart transformation is revelation. A spark of heaven finding receptive kindling within the

heart of man to catch fire and to create light. Let us remind ourselves of Jesus' own words of loving heartfelt thanks to His Father,

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, **and hast revealed them unto babes.**

Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to **whomsoever the Son will reveal him.**

Matthew 11:25-27

And let us remember Peter's moment of God given insight,

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: **for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.**

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And I will give unto thee the keys of the
kingdom of heaven

Matthew 16:15-19a

Indeed, what is the rock upon which the church will be built? The rock is the cornerstone of personal revelation of not just who Jesus is, but who Jesus is to me. The church is built on the rock of heartfelt revelation not on Peter the pebble, as some would have it. To see the importance of personal revelation look at how Paul describes his own acquisition of the gospel,

But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which
was preached of me is not after man.

For I neither received it (the gospel) of man,
neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of
Jesus Christ...

Galatians 1:12

And notice how he also describes revelation of the gospel in terms of an internal light bulb receiving power for the first time in the following scripture. Indeed, without this light we cannot see the gospel, we are spiritually blind,

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are
lost:

In whom the god of this world hath blinded
the minds of them which believe not, lest the
light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the
image of God, should shine unto them.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

when revelation comes what a transformation!

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

Moreover, when the gospel has done its work, look at the impact,

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Philippians 2:13,15; Matthew 5:16

In Christ, we move from receiving the light of His revelation to being transformed into a point from which the light of the revelation of Jesus might emanate the reality of this revelation through our lives to a world lost in darkness. The gospel has done its work in us and through

us is beginning to do its work in others. Again, as described by Paul,

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

To help us understand this process more clearly let us explore the experience and example of Paul as we find it in His writings, beginning with his salvation and calling,

But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:

And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

But when it pleased God, who separated me
from my mother's womb, and called me by his
grace,

To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach
him among the heathen; immediately I
conferred not with flesh and blood...

Galatians 1:11-16

Paul's autobiographical description or testimony of his own calling is captured succinctly by the phrase that has been highlighted in the text. The whole of God's dealings with this great man from the womb onwards can be summed up in the simple reality that God wanted to make him into a walking and talking manifestation of Jesus. God had so got hold of Paul's heart, life and character that he was a carrier of the nature of Jesus and therefore because of this, he carried the gospel. and as we have seen above, this was totally due to the fact this had been received by revelation. The light we receive is the light that we release. Indeed, in the passage above there is a four-letter word that explicitly expresses this reality; the word is 'that'. Paul has the authority to preach the Jesus among the heathen precisely because Jesus has been revealed in him. Without this his words would have been merely empty rhetoric, but with revelation they carry the power of God unto salvation.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ:
for it is the power of God unto salvation to
everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also

to the Greek.

For therein is the righteousness of God revealed
from faith to faith...

Romans 1:16,17a

The gospel, therefore, as described by both Jesus and then Paul is more than a message. It is a message that is underpinned by the quality of the messenger.

**We do not just give the gospel we need to
become the gospel.**

Moreover, in this endeavour, we are not alone. We have been given a support network to help us on our way. This is why we are added into the body of Christ when we are saved. We are provided with a place of loving, supportive nurture, so that we can grow up in God. So that we can move from babes in Christ to become sons of God. So that we become fishers of men. This is just what Paul describes in his letter to the believers in Ephesus, where he writes the following,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:
According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:
Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein
he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Ephesians 1:3-6

Just like with Paul, mysteriously, our destiny has also been preordained, even before the foundation of the world⁵ we were chosen in Christ. And moreover, at the same time in the court of heaven we were given a wonderful destiny to become a son of God; a vessel fit for the master's use, a vessel fit for the gospel. Indeed, this would be a salvation and destiny that would be worked out and supported within the beloved which is his church, the body of Christ on earth. This body, the body of Christ on earth is the fellowship in and of the gospel.

What is fellowship?

Again, we might think we know what this term means. Perhaps, however, at this point it will be helpful to understand more clearly what the term fellowship actually means within its usage in scripture. Essentially, the term fellowship is the translation of the Greek word 'koinonia'. A word that literally carries a meaning of partnership and of a shared endeavour. Its specific meaning therefore within scripture will always be defined by its context. Therefore, the phrase to have fellowship in the gospel means that those involved are partners in this shared endeavour of the gospel. And this as we have seen is a cyclical process. Indeed, a process for which we have been brought together as the body of Christ. And it is

within this loving microcosm of humanity that the overarching purposes of God to gather a people for Himself bears fruit. Indeed, such a people who will be prepared and made ready to be a beautiful bride for His son and for His Kingdom to come beyond this. And, as followers of Jesus in the here and now will be a true representation of His kingdom rule of love on earth such that others are then added. Drawn like moths to the flame of the light of Christ and His love grace and mercy that shines forth out of the lives and hearts of those who are following the master. Those who have been fished become those who do the fishing. It is this in which we are to have fellowship, this is the gospel. This is the fellowship of the gospel.

In turning again to Paul, we find a helpful description of just such a joint endeavour as he actively shares the gospel in first century city of Thessalonica, a city to be found in north east Greece even to this day. From the scriptural account of Paul's mission to this city is in Acts 17 it seems to have been quite a troubled visitation, with the Jews reacting strongly against the message that Paul had brought to them. However, it is also clear that the gospel did bear significant fruit in the city,

And some of them (the Jews) believed, and
consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout
Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief
women not a few.

Acts 17:4

Those who had come through to faith at Thessalonica seem to have begun to meet in the home of a man called

Jason who is then described as having suffered the wrath of the Jews. We are told that both him and his household were physically assaulted and dragged before the town council. What is interesting, however, is the way the Jews of Thessalonica at this meeting before the city leaders, describe the impact of the gospel at this time, they say Paul and Silas with this gospel have ‘turned the world upside down...’⁶

It will be instructive to take some time unpicking the detail here.

But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children:

So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us.

For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God.

Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe:

1 Thessalonians 2:7-10

Paul was endeavouring to impact this community with the gospel and in this passage, we are given wonderful insight into the way he worked and the values that underpin his ministry.

- We were...

Paul was clearly not alone, we are told he came with Silas. He was working with others, there was active participation in the purposes of God by Paul and the community of believers that was being established in this particular Greek town and in the household of Jason. There was, therefore, fellowship in the gospel here. However, what form did this take?

- gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children

Paul goes on to describe their approach. The actual metaphor here is of a wet-nurse, i.e. as someone taking the place of a child's mother to provide the sustenance of their own breast milk for the child. Paul is basically saying that they were able to provide the right spiritual food at the right time and in a form that was accessible for the people to whom they were communicating the gospel in Thessalonica.

- So being affectionately desirous of you

An approach motivated by hearts that are described here to have carried very strong feelings. Indeed, the Greek term used uniquely here is one that is usually associated with the longing of love.

- we were willing...

This translation does not express the full import of the Greek word used here. Paul is actually telling his readers that

they actually had great pleasure in bringing the place, one of love and spiritual zeal in Christ.

- ...to have imparted unto you not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls

It was an experience that went beyond the mere words of the gospel, they were sharing the truth of the words from a more profound place, they were sharing their lives, why?

- because ye were dear unto us.

Why were Paul and his team doing what they were doing? There was clearly a strong relational connection between Paul, his team and the community within which they were working. Again, the Greek here is strong, the word translated as 'dear' actually carries a meaning of dearly, well beloved, esteemed or even a 'favourite'. It is the adjectival form of Agape and is the same word that Father God always uses of His own son Jesus in the synoptic gospels.⁷

- our labour and travail

This said, this undertaking was also demanding, strenuous and very full on, but because the motivation was one of love then the message was effectively carried through their perseverance and long suffering.

- Ye are witnesses, and God also, how... we behaved ourselves among you

The gospel is more than words, it has to be carried by the lifestyle of those who bring it.

i) With holiness

ii) Justly

iii) With Blamelessness

In this, Paul and his team in Thessalonica were a manifestation of what Paul himself describes as the overarching aim and purpose for the people of God on earth and in society: not just sharing the gospel, but active, loving participation in the fellowship of the gospel. An aim and purpose wonderfully expressed by this verse,

...that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world...

Philippians 2: 15

This is fellowship in the gospel

As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children,

That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word

of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

1 Thessalonians 2: 11-13

In this, the second part of the same passage, Paul goes on to describes the methods they had used in Thessalonica for the ongoing work of the Gospel as it impacted and transformed the lives of those that had been touched by it.

- how we:
 - i) exhorted=to come along side
 - ii) comforted= to calm, console and encourage
 - iii) charged=literally to be a martyr for your sake
- every one of you,

In the Greek the point that everyone no matter their gender, status or age were included is a very strong one. This gospel was universal and fully inclusive.

- as a father doth his children

Here, Paul demonstrates his underpinning heart felt motivation for delivering the gospel- it is the work of a loving spiritual father, a motivation that is expressed within these beautiful words that are found elsewhere in Paul's writing,

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy:
for I have espoused you to one husband, that I
may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

2 Corinthians 11: 2

For as we saw when reflecting on the true purpose of the church above in chapter one, the ultimate context for the work of the gospel is to prepare and make ready a people for the return of the bridegroom, that is the bride. And here it is clearly expressed,

- That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

Indeed, this is the same ultimate purpose that is being described here by Paul, a walk worthy be called the bride of Christ,

- the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received:
 - i) not as the word of men
 - ii) but as it is in truth
 - iii) the word of God
 - iv) which effectually worketh also in you that believe

The gospel is not just carried in words. However, the words which do carry the gospel must come from the heart of God, full of love and conviction, but never out of condemnation and brow beating. They must contain scriptural truth and focus on Jesus who is indeed this Truth. Then, Father has something to work with and which He then uses to start to work on us!. This is a spiritual dynamic that seems to be expressed here by the prophet Isaiah,

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it

shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

A dynamic that Paul also describes here, we, each of us, whether we realise it or not, carry within us the spiritual seed of revelation of Christ and His love which we sow liberally through our words, actions and attitudes as we walk through this world,

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

However, in this wonderful endeavour we need each other to support us on the journey. Even Paul himself recognised how important this was for his own ministry,

And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith...

1 Thessalonians 3: 2

And the point is... Fellowship in the Gospel is a shared endeavour for the body of Christ within which we support and are supported to be an effective carrier of the presence of Christ and, therefore, by definition a sower of the seed of Christ. The method of sowing is through the whole of our lives. The quality and quantity of the seed which we sow will be determined by the quality of our heart and this in turn will be determined by the degree to which we are walking as true sons of God.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;

Holding forth the word of life

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath

bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

John 1: 12; Romans 8: 13, 14; Philippians 2: 15, 16a; James 3: 17, 18: 1 John 3: 1, 2

Amen.

Notes

1. See Acts 2
2. It must be remembered that there had been a very significant precursor to this which was the ministry of John the Baptist who had been proclaiming the same message but his had been a work of preparation for Him who was to follow.
3. The Greek word used here is *exousia*, see also John 1: 12
4. See 1 Corinthians 2:10
5. The phrase 'from' or 'before the foundation of the world' occurs eight times in the New Testament (Matthew 13: 35; 25:34; John 17:24; Ephesians 1:14; Hebrews 4:3; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8; and 17:8). And through these we learn that the plan for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the gospel and even our election in Christ, as we read in Ephesians 1, were decided upon by the triune Godhead within the pre

creation court of heaven. The Greek word that is translated 'foundation' in all eight occurrences is katabole which can mean to inseminate, which suggests that this wonderful life giving plan was seeded into the very framework and fabric of creation. For more on this read 'We Shall All Bear the Image of the Heavenly' by the same author, free to download from his website, richard-flint.com

6. Acts 17:6

7. See Matthew 3:17; 12:18; 17:5, Mark 1:11; 9:7; 12:6, and Luke 3:22; 9:35; 20:13

Chapter 3.

What is the Point of Being a Follower of Jesus?

Essentially, why does Jesus call individuals to walk with Him and to follow a path that He has laid for them? When one considers, to achieve this He paid the ultimate painful price of obediently going to the cross and dying a once and for all sacrificial death, then this is clearly an important call. The good news of the gospel is that three days later He rose again and thereby offers to anyone and everyone the opportunity to be spiritually saved and to follow Him through the rest of their lives. However, beyond the wonderful free gift of salvation is there something more, a reason beyond this, another point or purpose to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Is salvation a perfect end in itself, or is it merely the beginning

of a process or journey into a God given calling?

By asking these questions what we have in mind is to capture, if we can, the one essential fundamental potential purpose or calling in God for any and every individual man or woman that has ever walked upon this earth since the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Does such a purpose or calling truly exist? Surely, we are such a complex mixture of culture, personality, gender and skill sets that a 'one size fits all' answer to this question is unrealistic and makes no sense when we consider the whole melting pot of mankind that is spread in its billions across our world? However, perhaps this is not the case? For, as with all matters of spiritual truth we do have one infallible, universal point of reference to which we can turn. This is the inspired word of God, the Holy Bible. More to the point, we also have within scripture the actual words of Jesus Christ, the very son of God, who is Himself the living Word. Indeed, does Jesus provide us with an answer to this question as to what is the point of following Him? We believe He does. And moreover, to find the answer to our question we need to turn to some of the first words that are actually recorded as having been spoken publicly by Jesus in Matthew's gospel, where we read the following,

From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew

his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

Matthew 4: 17-19

Perhaps, we might have the definitive answer to our question right here, ... and I will make you fishers of men? Is the point of being a follower of Jesus that we will become, as a consequence, a fisher of men? Is this as simple as it sounds? In part it is, because Jesus does not waste His words.¹ If He says that the ultimate outworking of following Him will be that an individual will be so transformed that their lives will be defined by the fact that they now catch others for Him, then this is what He means. However, it is important that we understand what this outworking will entail. This is clearly not something that automatically happens when we are saved. Although the impact of our salvation will initially touch and affect those around us and others might also find salvation as well at this time through this. Sadly, however, this is not usually a continuing or long lasting reality.

The words of Jesus are clear He is describing a process. He says I will make you, this will be the making of us. And what will be made will be a version of us that catches other human beings. He says He will make us fishers of men and therefore there will be a requirement for a transformational process. This will take time and there will be significant staging posts along the way beyond our moment of Cross empowered salvation. We know this because we have the example of the journey of the apostle Peter, as we saw above he was one of the first individuals to respond to the call of Jesus. His calling is described here in Matthew 4, however, the point at which he

was ready to catch men came later. Interestingly, at what stage does Jesus actually recognise that Peter was ready to catch men? To find out, let us turn to Luke 5, where we read the following,

And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from
henceforth thou shalt catch men.

Luke 5: 10

What do we find here? According to the judgement of Jesus at this very moment Simon Peter has arrived at the point from which moving forward he will be able to catch men. What has happened to enable this to happen? The scriptural context here is important. Jesus has just demonstrated to Peter and his fellow fisherman that He has a better eye for where the fish are than they and has enabled them to turn a relatively poor fishing trip into a bumper haul in which the nets of all the boats are fit to burst. It is at this point that Peter has a moment of self-revelation in which he is able to see the true state of his own heart. This is demonstrated by his dramatic response to the miracle he has just witnessed,

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus'
knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful
man, O Lord.

Luke 5: 8

Therefore, why is this moment so crucial for both Peter and the Lord? What does Jesus recognise here in Peter that elicits His response that now, from this moment, Peter was

ready to catch men? What has changed?

Peter has become a true worshipper. Worship is much used and a much misused term within church world today. We characterise going to church with going to worship. We label a certain kind of corporate song singing as worship, as distinct from singing a livelier praise song. We might even attend an event that is described as a worship meeting. However, consistently within scripture when worship is referred to the actual meaning of both the Hebrew and Greek words will usually be referring to an individual prostrating themselves before a dignitary or before God or gods in an act of obeisance.

The first use of the term in scripture comes from Abraham when speaking to his servants and telling them a tale about why he was setting off with Isaac to the top of mount Moriah, carrying a bundle of twigs and a rather sharp knife.

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

Genesis 22:5

In the original Hebrew this literally reads, I and the lad will go yonder to bow down.... When Jesus is talking to the woman at the well the conversation at one stage is all about worship, but are they talking about where they sing there slow songs to God?

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit

and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

John 4:23,24

Is God so insecure that He is desperately needs to hear us sing songs about how wonderful He is? We do not believe that Father God does carry any such character flaw. Again, this time the language is Koine Greek, the actual meaning of the word that is translated as worship and through which we carry an impression that it is all about song singing, is bow, kneel or prostrate yourself before a dignitary, God or gods in an act of obeisance.

Therefore, who is a true worshipper? What is true worship? Indeed, who are those that Father is seeking? And what does it mean to do this in spirit and in truth? To answer these questions we need to return to the account of Peter and his moment before the Lord.

Indeed, what a moment, as He seems to have seen the true dark state of his own heart in contrast to and through revelation from the dazzling light of the Lord. However, this was not a reason for his disqualification, to the contrary For Jesus this was just where Peter needed to be. He was now profoundly qualified. Qualified to fulfil his calling as a follower of Jesus and he was now fully equipped to be a catcher of men. And as he lay there face down in the gritty sand of that Galilee beach he was now also a true worshipper, lying there broken before the Son of God.

This is something that we can see elsewhere in scripture²

such that it is only when we are brought to the end of ourselves that we can begin to grow in Him, to be like Him and to touch the world for Him. This was clearly not the end of Peter's journey, but it was a crucial staging post for him. The starting point is to see ourselves as we truly are. As we will see, the key to becoming effective fishers of men, for both him and for us, is to walk in honesty with Jesus and to allow Father to bring about the transformation from within that is required. A transformation that will increasingly provide us with the capability to catch men; the net being His presence within, a holy lifestyle and a character that increasingly reflects the true nature of Jesus.

**We don't just give the gospel, we must become
the gospel!**

Jesus Himself was clear within His teaching that there was a process here. Indeed, the first piece of teaching that we are given is a beautiful overture of the spiritual truths that were to follow and flow through Jesus' ministry. These are the beatitudes. An encapsulation of the journey of heart transformation that is required of all true followers of Jesus.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Matthew 5:3-9

A journey beginning, like Peter's, with a revelation of our true state before the Lord God, 'poor in spirit', and ending fully equipped to fish for men as a 'peacemaker'. And moreover, as a true child of God, for they shall be called the children of God, we are at this point carrying something close to the family likeness in heart, character and therefore in our life style. Jesus goes on to describe, that as we have been taken through this process of heart transformation, the two consequences will be that we are in Him, the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This will have a double impact on the world bringing flavour and the light of revelation. This will also be marked by the quality of the lives lived before the world by those who have made this journey, indeed, a quality that can be summed up in just one word, love. For it is a journey on which we are not alone,

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein
he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Ephesians 1:4-6

Listen to these wonderful words, not just words but promises. Don't just read them, but listen to what they say to you-yes you!

- We are chosen- I pick you
- Chosen before- yes before, in the court of the pre creation heaven, the foundation of the world
- Chosen to be holy and without blame
- Chosen to walk before Him in love
- Chosen to become a child of God
- Chosen to be accepted-you are accepted- in the beloved body of Christ.

Therefore, we do need to realise that it is precisely the extent to which we are like Christ in our heart and lifestyle that will impact those we encounter. In this way the fishing net of the Lord is thrown out into the sea of mankind and men are caught.

Jesus also highlights the need for a process of transformational change when later in Matthew He further defines what is required to be a true follower,

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man
will come after me, let him deny himself, and
take up his cross, and follow me.

Matthew 16:24

Therefore, what we learn here is that Jesus is still looking for those who would follow Him, but now He is helping us understand that to do so will require a response from such a person. The response being that they are required to walk a walk of self-denial and are actively carrying the means by which this self-life will be despatched, our own cross. On the cross Jesus was physically suspended naked before the world and left to die. He had actively and obediently placed Himself in the hands of the world so that the eternal purposes of His Father might be fulfilled. Spiritually speaking this is where Jesus desires us to follow Him. He desires that we follow Him, or as Paul describes it, to have the same mind as Jesus who,

made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Philippians 2: 7-8

In the same way, the follower of Jesus will be required to make themselves of no reputation by forsaking any worldly ambition in their lives, to take upon themselves the form of a servant, to actively humble themselves by challenging the pride and selfish motivations in their heart and to be obedient to the death of their flesh life as they actively put themselves into the hands of the world and carry their own cross into the nine to five realities of their life. This is the way

a follower is called to follow Jesus. For as James, the brother of Jesus, declares the result will be worth it,

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and
he shall lift you up...

... the wisdom that is from above is first pure,
then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated,
full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality,
and without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace
of them that make peace.

James 4: 10; 3: 17, 18

The result being sowing peace and reaping new spiritual life in the receptive hearts of those around us. This is a fisher of men, it is what we need to become because as Jesus says this is what He will make of us if we walk the path that he desires to lay for us. It is important for us to realise that, spiritually speaking, nothing has changed since day six of the creation week in terms of the eternal purposes of the Lord God, He is still looking to make men and women in His own image. It is all about Him, His holiness, His righteousness and we are the simple clay pot in which this is to be made manifest. A reality clearly described by Paul,

For God, who commanded the light to shine out
of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give
the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in
the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that

the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

2 Corinthians 4: 6, 7

Being an effective fisher of men is all about His presence being manifestly expressed in and through our lives. From salvation onwards, we are this earthen vessel carrying the precious presence of His Holy Spirit. A reality that Jesus encourages His disciples to look forward to on the night He was betrayed,

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you...

John 14:16-18

For as Paul explains our salvation is sealed by the Holy Spirit,

In (Christ) whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

Which is the earnest of our inheritance until

the redemption of the purchased possession,
unto the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:13,14

Paul, at this point, seems to be reflecting the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet is faced with a legal obligation to purchase or redeem a piece of land from a family member. The purchase is described in the following way,

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days.

Jeremiah 32:14

As we can see, the language is very similar here to that used by Paul. We have the earthen vessel of 2 Corinthians 4 as well as the evidence of a redeemed purchase from Ephesians 1. The two forms of evidence described by the Lord God in Jeremiah 32 are a helpful metaphorical representation of the two ways a believer experiences the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in their lives. An experience which can be understood as being both sealed as described by Paul in Ephesians 1 and as evidence which is open, i.e. manifest to others, such as we find described by Jesus in John 7.

The indwelt Holy Spirit is therefore functioning in two distinct ways within the life of a believer. On the one level He is at work developing a believer's family identity, increasingly setting

His seal of holiness, righteousness and love in their heart. Paul describes this function of the Holy Spirit as the spirit of adoption.

...but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the
deeds of the body, ye shall live.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they
are the sons of God.

**but ye have received the Spirit of adoption,
whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself
beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the
children of God:**

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and
joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer
with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Romans 8: 13b-17³

Notice how it is the Holy Spirit who is at work within the life of the believer supporting the process of sanctification and the dying to self, leading them towards a walk of true and effective sonship, carrying the family likeness in their character and nature as they go. Providing them with the unshakeable security of knowing that they are sealed for eternity, but also that they are still a work in progress

Using the imagery of Jeremiah 32 the second ‘open’ or manifest aspect of the believers indwelt experience of the Holy Spirit seems to be that which Jesus describes in His dramatic intervention in the temple in Jerusalem at the climax of the feast of tabernacle celebrations that we find in John 7.

What is the Point of Being a Follower of Jesus?

He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

John 7: 38-39

What Jesus seems to be saying here is that His followers would be clearly identifiable by the fact that they, in effect, would be walking fountains of living water, and that anyone walking near them would not be able to avoid getting wet. Paul seems to teaching the same idea, although he uses the metaphor of light and darkness, when writing to the believers in Corinth,

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

2 Corinthians 4:6,7

Again, we have here the clay pot symbolism. We are filled and we are called to overflow. What do we understand by the use of such symbolism and metaphor? Are we in the realm of hyper-charismania such that this outpouring finds its manifestation in bizarre behaviour, as it is usually

understood today in the evangelical/charismatic church? We do need to be careful to divide scripture with care and to let scripture commentate on scripture. The question we do need to ask here is whether or not we can find elsewhere in scripture a description of the true purpose of this 'open' manifest expression of the Holy Spirit that would pour forth out of the belly of a believer? We believe there is, and it is found in John 16, where we read the following,

Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.

And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

John 16:7,8

In chapters 13-17 in John's gospel Jesus is preparing His disciples for His imminent departure and He is unveiling for them the wonderful new relational reality of the indwelt Spirit that was to come to them and would be in them once He had finally left them. For them and for us it provides us with the most extensive teaching on the Holy Spirit, His function and role within the regenerated believer.

Therefore, instead of being reliant on any latter-day experience driven presumptions it is important that we do understand from the mouth of the Lord Himself, whose Spirit this will be, what impact He would have on the world and those we encounter as we carry this, His, presence with us into our lived lives. Simply said, Jesus explains to them

that the impact of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives on those around them would be to reprove or convict of sin, convict of righteousness and convict of judgement. Again, this will be dependent on the extent to which the Holy Spirit is able to flow from us to effectively touch those around us. Or, sadly, the extent to which we might get in the way by the unregenerate quality of our heart that is expressed within the things we say and the we do. We are the limiting factor. We can either be a bridge or a wall, a conduit or a blocked pipe, a bright light or a dusty bulb. We can exude the sweet fragrance of the Lord or the stench of our past (and sadly ongoing) lives.

Bridge or Wall, you choose

This is why we need to actively engage in the process by which the Lord makes us into part of His fishing fleet. For how will they be convicted of sin if they are all too aware of the sin being expressed within the life they see being lived before them? How will they be able to be convicted of a lack righteousness in their own lives unless they can see a righteous life being lived out before them? How will they be convicted of impending judgement unless they can see that they are living in darkness whereas before them is someone who is in the light?

To help us understand what this will mean moving forward it will be helpful to turn to a particular passage in the Old Testament which will provide us with a powerful picture of the precisely where in the world the Lord would want to place His followers. Indeed, He desires that everyone

who aspires to be His follower understand more clearly that they are called to make an impact just where they are. That means where you are. This is not dependent on feelings or anointing it is dependent on the reality that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and if allowed He will do the rest, if He has the right quality of material to work with and through.

This passage is Numbers 16. It would be helpful for you to take some time read it yourself. In this particular passage of scripture we have the account of the rebellion of Korah, where the leadership authority of Moses is challenged; a rebellion in the ranks of the children of Israel that is severely judged by the Lord God. However, within the judgement there is an element of grace which speaks into our present-day reality. For at a particular point Moses, despite the rejection he has suffered at the hands of his brethren, decides to intercede on their behalf and to stand in the gap for those who are suffering under this act of judgement. We join the narrative in verse 46 as Moses is giving his brother Aaron some timely instructions,

And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun.

There is a problem of an impending judgement and the response was for Aaron to go to the altar, i.e. the place of sacrifice, and to take fire from there and then to go out into

the midst of the judgement. Moving on in the narrative to verse 48 it is important that we see where Aaron took the fire from the altar and what happened when he did,

And he stood between the dead and the living;
and the plague was stayed.

The picture here is a redolent one for us, because today in the same way we need to know that the Lord desires to position each of us in the midst of a world that is under judgement. However, before we do we also need to have come from the place of sacrifice, which for us is the cross. We are to take fire from there and to then carry this fire to where it can make an atoning impact. The fire is crucial because this is a picture of the sealed aspect of the presence of the Holy Spirit that we explored above. For as we place the fire in the censer of our heart it will go to work burning up the dross in our life, our selfish lust and pride, and when we arrive in the place where we are to stand it is here that the open aspect of the indwelt Holy Spirit becomes manifest as we are positioned between the spiritually living and the dead where He will be potentially carrying the conviction of the Holy Spirit for those around us.

Paul in his teaching does seem to concur with this understanding of our call to be part of the Lord's fishing fleet and indeed how this will be achieved. Let us first of all turn to his letter to the church in Philippi where we find the following verse,

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the
sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a

crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye
shine as lights in the world;
Holding forth the word of life...

Philippians 2:15,16a

We can within this passage both the process of sanctification here and also the consequential positioning that will come from this. The challenge for each of us is to become the blameless and unmixed⁴ individuals the Lord desires us to be, to truly carry the family likeness as sons of God. For the Lord desires that we are placed in the midst of this increasingly crooked and perverse nation, so that His light might shine out of us and onto those around us with His love and conviction. Paul also describes elsewhere the potential for impact we each do have in and through both the 'sealed' and the 'open' aspects of the Holy Spirit in our lives,

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth
us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest
the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.
For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in
them that are saved, and in them that perish:
To the one we are the savour of death unto
death; and to the other the savour of life unto
life. And who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Just like Aaron as he stood in the midst of the plague we are also described here as standing between life and death. The truly scary aspect of this is that the spiritual life and death

of an individual who encounters the Holy Spirit through us will actually judge themselves in terms of whether or not they receive Him and His convicting message or not. To one we will be a sweet savour, however, to others we will be a stench in their nostrils

It is all about Jesus, He is the sweet savour, and we carry His presence we are merely the earthen vessel in which it is contained. Paul points out here that is the Lord who desires to make Himself manifest in us, by us and through us whether we realise it or not. For wherever we are, so is He and He is perpetually looking to stop the plague that is fast spreading all around us and to bring revelation of the cross.

Paul does leave us here with a question, And who is sufficient for these things? How do we answer this question? Are we ready to follow Jesus? The call is challenging, but the reward is eternal for those who will benefit from the quality of fishing vessel He will produce in us. Therefore, what is the point of a follower of Jesus? To allow Jesus to make us into fishers of men through the quality of Him expressed in and through our lives.

Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.

Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.

And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice

together.

And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth.

I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours.

John 4: 34-38

How hungry are we?

And the point is... Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Notes

1. See Isaiah 55: 11
2. See Psalm 51, Isaiah 6, Matthew 5: 3, 4 and Acts 9
3. See also Galatians 4: 5-7
4. The Greek word translated 'harmless' here literally means to be unmixed.

Chapter 4.

What is the Point of the Closet?

Having been saved into evangelical circles fifty years ago, the expectation was that we should have a daily appointment with God that was called the ‘quiet time’. We were told that this should be built into the fabric of our life and that to miss this fifteen minutes of prayer and Bible reading would be detrimental to our spiritual health. There was even the adage that featured on posters outside churches at the time suggesting that ‘7 days without prayer makes one weak’. Although I believe spiritual discipline is important in the life of a follower of Jesus, all this achieved for me was to front load my young spiritual life at this time with a heavy dose of religious obligation and a sense of duty. Just like brushing your teeth, holy habits are important to bring spiritual shape to your life, but there is something not quite right here. There is something missing, something that would transform this call to spend time with God from one of obligation to one

where this time might provide each of us with a vital spiritual springboard that would release us into the day with spiritual energy, otherwise known as faith, and new found expectation concerning what you and Father God might get up to today, otherwise known as faith. Therefore, what is this, the missing point of the closet? For Jesus clearly encourages His disciples to,

...enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:6

The key part of this exhortation from the Lord is that Jesus understands that the God who loved the world so much, this God who had sent Him to show the world this love, wants an intimate, personal relationship with each one of His son's followers. This is because we are now, like Jesus, His spiritual children. And the closet is the place where this relationship is to be developed and worked out. The place where the Father is able to take the reins of our lives and guide us towards his reward, for He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him¹.

David makes a very profound observation in Psalm 51,

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts:
and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to
know wisdom.

Psalm 51:6

He seems to have understood that the most important place for a man to know truth was in their heart or inward part and so like a stick of Blackpool rock no matter where we are broken our identity and our internal message to the world would remain the same. There is one word which captures this thought and this word is integrity. Integrity is determined by an internal integral reality and there needs to be an internal integral reality at the heart of all true disciples and this reality is Christ and his presence. By His Spirit Jesus desires to be at the heart of who we are, what we think and what we then do, so that we might be an integrated whole. To repeat another familiar adage, you know a true Christian not by how they act, but by how they react. Scratch the surface and what do you see? To have integrity means that an individual is marked by an essential consistency in their words and their actions. This means that when scratched nine times out of ten we will not let ourselves and the Lord down. Indeed, there will be a consistency that can only flow from an inner thought life that has been renewed and a heart that has been purified and actions that are then modified by both. This is the true truth in the inward parts that the Lord so desires and it is the second part of the verse that helps us understand how He will achieve this...and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

This is encouraging, because David also understands that for an individual to enjoy truth in the inward parts, they need to know that it will be the fruit of a journey that they will be taking with God, it's that journey again. This journey will be a very exclusive journey. In fact, there are only two on this journey, you and God. No one else is invited. Just you

and God in a hidden place working together on the hidden aspect of what makes you you, making you to know wisdom.

Indeed, as David discovered for himself the place where this became a reality in His own life was the secret place that he enjoyed with the Almighty. A reality that he described beautifully in his Psalms.

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the
most High shall abide under the shadow of the
Almighty.

I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my
fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Psalms 91:1,2

And interestingly for us in Psalm 31: 20² where David also describes this his special meeting place,

Thou shalt hide them in the secret of thy
presence from the pride of man: thou shalt keep
them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of
tongues.

The word that is translated as 'pavilion' here is the sukkah, the transient ephemeral flimsy physical shelter that commemorates the exodus journey through the wilderness towards the land of promise. The purpose for which, as described here, was as a refuge from man's pride, no doubt including David's own and as a secret place to stop the world and get off into the presence of the Almighty for a time.

We have also been offered such a place. Indeed, a place where our own pride might be challenged. A place that is ours

alone to sit in the Father's presence and to commune with our God. To spend precious time unravelling the complexities of our lives, hearts and circumstances and allowing Him to be Lord and to sit on the throne of our lives. Indeed, as with David, an essential part of which will be challenge the ever present blind spots of pride in our hearts. This is the closet experience for the disciple. Not a place for duty and obligation, but for love, life and transformation in Christ, through the Spirit and overseen by Father.

• **The Closet Experience Revisited**

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old:

That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this.

Amos 9:11,12

Let us dig a bit deeper into the use of the term 'sukkah' as a metaphor for our time in the closet. It also appears in the prophetic witness of the prophet Amos, the word tabernacle is a translation of the Hebrew word 'sukkah' in this verse. This is a word that does describe the flimsy tent like structure that is still used during the feast of tabernacles to remind the children of Israel of their journey through the desert having escaped from Egypt by the hand of God, however. Through its usage by the prophet within this end time prophecy we believe that it does have something

to say prophetically, even to us, today. We say this also because this scripture from Amos was used by James, the half-brother of the Lord, when he stood up to pronounce his judgement on the situation that was being discussed at the council in Jerusalem that we find in Acts 15. They were discussing what to do with Paul and Barnabas and the spiritual fruit that was being born within the gentile world under their ministry. What was going on here? Was it the Lord? Surely Jesus came to his own people, the Jews? What part of this do the gentiles have? At it is the midst of this discussion that James got to this feet and said the following,

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me:...

And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

Acts 15:13,15-18

Therefore, the fact that the prophet through the Holy Spirit has used this unusual term 'sukkah' to describe this end time Davidic tabernacle is both interesting and we

believe very significant. For it describes the very quality of the structure that is to be built not just for the corporate gathered expression of the body of Christ that will dwell within it. Clearly, within the internal context of the use the prophet word from Amos by James the reference here is to the body corporate. The prophecy finds its fulfilment through the fruitful spread of church in the Roman and Greek Gentile world of the time, however. More importantly for us, as we are considering our time spent in the closet, it can also be taken to describe the intimate space within which Father desires to spend His time with us individually. David use of the term in this way gives a clear reference point for this³. And moreover, as with the corporate Tabernacle, this one to one closet or 'sukkah' experience is also in desperate need to be rebuilt in our own time and for us to thereby regain both an understanding of its spiritual purpose for our lives in Christ and also the actual dynamic experiential reality of it as well.⁴

We believe an important aspect of the Lord's rebuilding purposes is to reinvigorate the closet experience for each believer as we move inexorably into the darkness of the end times and closer to the Lord's return. To raise it up as the place of true communion between the believer and Father God, to close the breaches, and to repair the ruins of what passes for a relationship with God in these difficult and confusing days. It will be need to become our go to place. The place we go to to be sustained, as the path ahead becomes increasingly spiritually arid and dry. This is the place we need to come to in order that we can drink of the living waters⁵, be fed by the vine⁶ and changed into the image of Christ from glory to

glory⁷. For it is here and only here that we find the fountain of life⁸.

To replace the obligation of religion and the quiet time mentality, and to reconstitute the closet as the place for relationship, a place for communication and a place for transformation and change. A place where a loving Father God talks to His children, and they occasionally talk back, this is a relationship after all.. A communication that comes from one heart into the midst of the other, the heart is our Ark of our new covenant of love where His presence resides and His words to us are,

...there I will meet with thee, and I will
commune with thee⁹

As we have said the 'sukkah' is still a feature of the feast of tabernacles which was inaugurated to celebrate and to keep alive the cultural memory of the story of the Exodus for the children of Israel.¹⁰ It is a yearly reminder of this time in their history where they travelled across the unforgiving wilderness of Sin for forty years. A journey that took them from their wonderful liberation from Egypt as the Red Sea was parted and they walked free from bondage and slavery. To experience the providential care of Jehovah, their God, and to understand increasingly more about Him and to come to know themselves as they made their way towards the Promised Land.

And thou shalt remember all the way which the
LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the
wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee,

to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

Deuteronomy 8:2

Spiritually speaking this is also our journey. We have each been liberated from our own individual place of slavery and bondage to the world, which is our Egypt. We are, also, then called to make our own desert journey towards the land of promise. This is our journey, a journey from flesh into the spirit, a journey of true discipleship.

And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

Exodus 16:10

There is an interesting moment of revelation that is captured in this verse. The children of Israel are described here as turning together and looking at the way that lay before them with new eyes. The wilderness has not changed, it is still the same harsh reality but now as they looked towards it they saw something new. They now saw that this was the way that they would find the glory of God, to find and understand the character of the living God and in this they would find their own destiny. This was the way of the cloud and the Lord God was leading them forward into the wilderness and into His providential care.

Likewise we each need to turn and look afresh at our own lives and recognise that although the path may at time

be hard and narrow, His presence is leading ever onwards so that we will be moving increasingly into his glory, which is the character and nature of Christ. And the place of shelter along the way for us, as it was for the children of Israel, is the 'sukkah'. A flimsy fragile structure that is us, as Paul was very aware of himself as he looked toward the consolation that we are being prepared or clothed for a far better dwelling place.

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven:

If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked.

For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

2 Corinthians 5:1-4

Indeed, within this our given dwelling place, He desires to have a regular meeting where we can find daily shelter in Him. A place within which he can help us to know this wisdom; this is our hidden part and this is His secret place and here we will find His wisdom. And as we shall see below, it is within this special place we will be clothed and prepared to be part of His bride.

Hebrew is written from right to left and so the word 'sukkah' in Hebrew is written,

סכך

This provides us with a helpful word picture for the idea of sheltering with the Lord within the 'sukkah' that we have been exploring above. Let us take each Hebrew letter in turn.

First of all, let us consider the letter samekh, ס. The picture here is of security, for as we enter the shelter of our sukkah we can know that we are enfolded by His love and that on every side we are surrounded by him. The shape with its small lip also suggest that our time within the sukkah will always lead us forward into His purposes for our life.

The second letter, which is kaf, כ provides us with a picture that suggests whenever we enter this shelter we will find His presence waiting for us. We are told that, by His Spirit, He is with us until the end of the age and that He will never leave us nor forsake us. He is faithful to be there, however, the reality is that we too seldom are willing to take time to join Him.

Lastly, we have the Hebrew letter hey, ה and this time the picture is one that reassures us that as we enter this space we are spiritually covered, here we come under the shadow of the Almighty,

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the
most High shall abide under the shadow of the
Almighty.

I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my

fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Psalm 91:1,2

The small gap in the Hebrew letter can be identified as a small window through which we can look out at the wilderness way ahead and from here we can look with eyes of faith and to see the cloud of His glory lying ahead of us and leading us on into his purposes.

• **The Closet Experience Reimagined**

Within scripture we can also find other symbolic metaphors that might help us understand how important our secret life with the Father is within our own particular closet.

The Womb



In Lamentations 3 we read the following,

It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

The LORD is my portion, saith my soul;

therefore will I hope in him.

The LORD is good unto them that wait for him,
to the soul that seeketh him.

It is good that a man should both hope and
quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

Lamentations 3:22-26

The actual metaphor here is obscured within the Hebrew. In verse 22 we are told that the Lord's compassions never fail and the Hebrew word that is translated 'compassions' can also be translated as 'wombs' as it is on four occasions in scripture.¹¹ The most telling of these references is in Isaiah 46 where we read the following,

Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, and all the
remnant of the house of Israel, which are borne
by me from the belly, which are carried from the
womb:

And even to your old age I am he; and even to
hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I
will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.

Isaiah 46:2,3

The idea expressed here is that Father God will continue to carry His people as though they were still within the womb, even into old age, and they will, in due spiritual time, be delivered as of out of the womb. For in Genesis 2 we read that Father God originally formed the first Adam out of clay and for us the forming work goes on within our spiritual

womb as the second Adam, Jesus Christ, is being formed in us.

Even every one that is called by my name: for
I have created him for my glory, I have formed
him; yea, I have made him.

Isaiah 43:7

This is the wonderful transformation that Father desires to do for each one of us as we spend time in the closet or the sukkah in His challenging presence.

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things
which are above, where Christ sitteth on the
right hand of God.

Set your affection on things above, not on things
on the earth.

For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ
in God.

When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then
shall ye also appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4

The good news from the scripture in Lamentations is
that our womb will not fail us for,

Being confident of this very thing, that he which
hath begun a good work in you will perform it
until the day of Jesus Christ

Philippians 1: 6

If we remain and abide in him then we will come through to full term in Him. It is His work and he is performing it. And the place for this work to be performed is within our closet as we give Father access to our heart.

The Chrysalis or Cocoon



Another important metaphor that describes the setting for this transformative process can be found in the teaching of Paul in **2 Corinthians 3:17,18**,

Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

The key word for us here is the word 'changed', we each have the capacity in God to be changed from the person and character we started out with when we came to Christ into the image of Christ, this is a new nature which needs to replace our

old nature. The scriptural context is the occasion when Moses had spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai in the presence of God and when he returned to the camp of the children of Israel his face was shining with the glory of the Lord.

And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses,
that the skin of Moses' face shone: and Moses put
the vail upon his face again, until he went in to
speak with him.

Exodus 34:35

Spending time in the presence of God physically changed Moses and therefore Paul is saying that for each one of us the impact of spending time looking into the face of God in our closet will have an even more dramatic effect. It will not be our physical appearance that is changed but more importantly our heart and very nature will change as we become more Christ like or as he describes it in his letter,

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known
and read of all men:

Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the
epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with
ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in
tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

2 Corinthians 3:2,3¹²

So, therefore, what connotations does the word 'changed' have for us, what is the metaphorical picture being painted here? The Greek word translated 'changed' is the word 'metamorpheo' from which we derive the term

‘metamorphosis’, which is the process by which all insects, and particularly one insect, the butterfly, go through to turn from a juvenile version of themselves into their adult mature form. For a butterfly this is a description of the miraculous events that take place within the cocoon or chrysalis. What starts as a relatively ugly bug is transform into one of the most beautiful creatures within God’s created order; the butterfly. The process is quite remarkable. The original caterpillar is dissolved within the chrysalis and is reconstituted as a butterfly which emerges in due time to fill the air with its beauty.

What a wonderful picture this is of our own special spiritual chrysalis, the closet experience with Father within which, through reflecting on His son through His word and in our lives, we ‘are changed into the same image’ day by day from one level of glory or Christ like character to the next. A process that will only end when we emerge as manifest sons of God with Christ as our King in His millennial reign.¹³

A Changing Room



A third metaphor can found by inference within the teaching of the writer of the book of Hebrews, where we read,

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,
Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith...

Hebrews 12:1,2a

Each of us has a race to run, a spiritual race of faith. However, in order to be at our best for this race there is a need for some preparation. Anyone contemplating running the London marathon will not just turn up on the day and expect to be in the right physical and mental condition to complete the twenty six or so miles. They will have to have prepared for it in the months prior to the actual race day.

For us the race starts the day we are saved, from then on each day is an opportunity to set our eyes on the Lord and to begin to experience this coach calling us forward into His purposes. His purposes being to please the team boss who is the Father and we are also assisted by the team physio, the Holy Spirit. In this way perhaps we can recognise this closet experience as being likened to a training/changing room. A space within which we are able to work on laying aside every weight and besetting sin that we need to work off and leave behind so that we can run our race in a more effective way.

Paul teaches similarly, that we need to consistently put off the old man and to put on the new man,

That ye put off concerning the former
conversation the old man, which is corrupt
according to the deceitful lusts;
And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;
And that ye put on the new man, which after
God is created in righteousness and true
holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24

We, therefore, do need a changing room where this transformation can take place. A spiritual space within which we can take off our old worldly clothes and replace them with our new garments of salvation. In this way we are made ready for the race to come. A place where we are able to allow the coach to train us to put on our game face. For as Paul also teaches we do run for a prize,

Know ye not that they which run in a race run
all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye
may obtain.

And every man that striveth for the mastery is
temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain
a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.

1 Corinthians 9:24,25

What we all need to strive for is a mastery over the flesh such that we increasingly are able to run the race, our race, in the spirit and free from any surplus flesh. This as Paul describes here echoes the words of the writer to the Hebrews.

What does the word temperate mean here? The Greek term used here is one that is drawn directly from the language

of the athletic world of the time and it means that the individual concerned has control of their diet such that they do not consume anything that will be deleterious to their ability to be the best athlete they can be. In spiritual terms they have a mastery over their own flesh and in all things impose the will of the spirit to enable them to be the most effective disciple of Christ as they can be. And this mastery is the fruit of time spent with the coach in the training/changing room.

By this we will all receive the prize, which are the welcoming arms of the Lord as he stands on the other side of the winner's tape, because we can all win the race that is set before us as we set our sights on Him on a daily basis.

The Bridal Closet



The fourth and final scriptural metaphor can be found in Joel, where we find the only other place where the term 'closet' is used in the King James translation of the Bible, apart from its use in Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 6.

Gather the people, sanctify the congregation,
assemble the elders, gather the children, and
those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom

go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

Joel 2:16

The context for this verse is an end time prophetic one that is anticipating events that are also foretold elsewhere in scripture, such as in John 14,

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

John 14:1-3

And Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5,

Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and

without blemish.

Ephesians 5:24-27

Also in 1 Thessalonians 4,

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven
with a shout, with the voice of the archangel,
and with the trump of God: and the dead in
Christ shall rise first:

Then we which are alive and remain shall be
caught up together with them in the clouds, to
meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be
with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:16,17

The essential idea here is that when the Lord Jesus returns, He is returning as the bridegroom to collect His bride, whom He will then take home to His Father's house.¹⁴ For our present concerns this does provide us with another way of understanding the purpose and importance of the closet experience for the true disciple. Namely, it is the means through which we will be prepared and made ready to take our place as part of the bride.

The term 'glorious,' by which the bridal church is defined in Ephesians 5, as we saw when exploring the chrysalis metaphor in 2 Corinthians 3, is concerned with the demonstration of the character and nature of Christ. The end time bride will undoubtedly be such an expression of His church and, therefore, it will be a gathering of individuals who understand something of the importance of spending

time in the bridal chamber or closet being prepared for this great day.

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem,
coming down from God out of heaven, prepared
as a bride adorned for her husband.

Revelation 21:2

This verse takes us beyond the millennial reign of Christ and to the new heaven and new earth of the eternal state. However, it is interesting that the new Jerusalem is described here as a bride adorned for her husband and in the description given of this city in Revelation 21 we can see what form this adornment will take; a combination of gold and precious stones. It is thought provoking, therefore, when one notices the quality of a disciple's work that will survive through the fire of the judgement seat of Christ in 1 Corinthians 3.

For other foundation can no man lay than that
is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
Now if any man build upon this foundation
gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble;
Every man's work shall be made manifest:
for the day shall declare it, because it shall be
revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every
man's work of what sort it is.

1 Corinthians 3:11-13

Is there a connection here between the preparation and fruit of a disciple, with the preparation of the bride and

ultimately with the New Jerusalem itself? This is indeed quite a thought.

Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:12,13

However, the key for each of us, working out our salvation in the here and now, is the work that we allow Father to do in our heart in the closet. Indeed, such a work that will ensure that it survives any fire of judgement. Whichever metaphor we might find helpful we must be careful that we do maintain a balanced and healthy picture of our God. We must learn obedience and that at times this aspect of our salvation will be difficult and challenging producing both fear and trembling. For Father God is a jealous God,

For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.

Deuteronomy 4:24

And as such, He jealously desires that He can spend this precious time with us. So that He can consume, by His refining fire, the 'stuff' in our lives that is either weighing us down or getting in the way and preventing us from walking in our true potential, to overflow with Him, through His

Son and by His Spirit in our daily realities. And these are the same daily realities that He desires to use to work in us truth in the inward parts, as we walk through whatever the daily realities throw at us, we will be walking through them in Him and with Him by the Holy Spirit, our comforter and advocate.

From Paul's first letter to the ekklesia in Thessalonika we will leave you with a wonderful promise for your time spent in the closet,

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly;
and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and
body be preserved blameless unto the coming of
our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do
it.

1 Thessalonians 5:23,24

And the point is?

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy
laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I
am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find
rest unto your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:29,30

...enter into thy closet, and when thou hast
shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in

secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:6

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

Revelation 22:12,13

Notes

1. Hebrews 11: 6c
2. See also Psalm 18: 2
3. See for example Psalm 18:11,27:5 and 31.20
4. See Back to the Future; the Rebuilding of the Tabernacle of David for our own time, by the same author free to download from richard-flint.com
5. See John 7:38,39
6. See John 15
7. See 2 Corinthians 3:18
8. See Psalm 36:7-10
9. See Exodus 25:22a
10. See Leviticus 23:41-43

11. Genesis 49: 25, Proverbs 30: 16, Isaiah 46:3 and Ezekiel 20: 26
12. This a prophetic fulfilment of Ezekiel 36: 25-27, see also Jeremiah 31: 31-34.
13. Romans 8: 18,19
14. See John 14: 2; This is the rapture and there will then be the marriage feast of the lamb and the Lord will return with His bride to deal with the Antichrist and to rescue the true Israel at the culmination of the Great Tribulation and before He begins His Millennial reign as king of kings. Our focus here is not the eschatological timetable and we are merely stating our present understanding of the order of the events that are still to come.

5.

What is the Point of Baptism?

“In the first century, water baptism was the outward confession of a person’s faith. But more than that, it was the way someone came to the Lord. For this reason, the confession of baptism is vitally linked to the exercise of saving faith. So much so that the New Testament writers often use baptism in place of the word faith and link it to being “saved.” This was because baptism was the early Christian’s initial confession of faith in Christ.” ^{1*}

We believe that today we are at a time when preparations are required in order that the earthly body of Christ are positioned such that when the Lord does return He will find faith on earth, and that He will also find a semblance of that church or ekklesia that, in the words of Paul,

... he might present... to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:27

Interestingly, in the verse that precedes this description and which provides the means by which this will occur we read the following,

That he might sanctify and cleanse it (the ekklesia) with the washing of water by the word...

Ephesians 5:26

What we do notice here is that Paul is employing the active use of water as a symbol for the word of God in the essential spiritual process of sanctification and generally cleaning up our act as His people. Paul is therefore telling us that just as physical water cleans us physically, the applied word of God acts as a spiritual cleaning agent for our hearts and our nature. Indeed, a cleansing agent that will, if allowed to do its work, produce in us the quality of a redeemed community on earth that Paul describes, and for which He is looking to return; as a bride fit for Him, the bridegroom.

We find this use of water as a spiritual cleanser also expressed by Jesus Himself when teaching His disciples on His last night on earth,

Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit:

and ye are clean, but not all...Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

John 13:10; 15:3

The heard and applied words of the Lord for those who follow Him are a water that cleans the very heart of man; this is essentially the implication here of what the Lord is saying to His disciples.

Perhaps, therefore, we will be able to recognise that within scripture water is used metaphorically as a means by which an individual can be made spiritually clean. Can we trace this as a motif that runs as a thread throughout the word of God? Indeed, as we read above, might we come to a fresh understanding of how water once functioned in the early church and perhaps not just as a symbol? In turn, therefore this will then potentially lead us to a re-evaluation of how the essential water based sacrament of baptism needs to find its true place in the conversion journey of new believers once again.

To this end it will be helpful to trace this motif or theme of water within scripture, starting in chapter 1 of Genesis where we read the following,

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:2b

When studying the word of God there is a reliable rule of thumb that determines that when exploring themes or terms within scripture the way they are used and understood

when they are first mentioned will roughly be the way they are to be approached throughout their usage henceforth. With regards to the term 'water' or 'waters' we find that its first mention comes right at the beginning of scripture in Genesis 1 and what do we notice about the way it is used and what is the context? Prior to the six days of creation we find a universe and an earth already present, but as described here they are in a condition that is pregnant with potential. Interestingly at this stage there are just two elements mentioned together; waters and the spirit of God. This will prove to be an important conceptual relationship as we move forward in our study of the word. Indeed, in the last chapter of the Bible we read the following,

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

Revelation 22:17

Therefore, we believe that we do need to be aware of a significant relationship between water and things of the Spirit within scripture.

Secondly, within the narrative of the creation in Genesis 1 we are shown how all physical life comes forth as a spiritual work wrought by the spoken word of the Lord God and that it is out of these waters that all life will come as they are drawn back to reveal the earth within it.

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven

be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

Genesis 1:9

As the waters are drawn back the fruitful earth is revealed and life can begin. What we have here described in the original physical creation narrative of Genesis 1 is the potential for all life and potential fruitfulness coming out of the waters, a physical creative process that ultimately leads to those who carry the very image of God walking the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Genesis 1:27,28

Likewise, could this also represent a metaphor for the spiritual new creation which will eventually find its fulfilment in Jesus and the cross. After all the spiritual act or acts of creation that will flow from this will also lead to those who will carry the very image of God walking the earth.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his

Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Romans 8:29

Moving on, a third potential example of how water has played an important role within the unfolding purposes of the Lord God is provided by the universal flood narrative, also from Genesis. Significantly for us, the flood narrative is used metaphorically within scripture. This can be found in 1 Peter 3, where we read the following,

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins,
the just for the unjust, that he might bring us
to God, being put to death in the flesh, but
quickenened by the Spirit:
By which also he went and preached unto the
spirits in prison;
Which sometime were disobedient, when once
the longsuffering of God waited in the days of
Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein
few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.
The like figure whereunto even baptism doth
also now save us (not the putting away of the
filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good
conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of
Jesus Christ

1 Peter 3:18-21

We will be unpacking this scripture later, suffice to say that a connection is made here between water and salvation, and that

for us, according to Peter, this has an outworking and spiritual fulfilment within the act of baptism as a personal response to the finished work of Jesus. Here the symbolism is to be saved from the filth of the the flesh or the effect of sin in our lives, for which Christ obediently suffered the cross for each of us.

The Exodus narrative provides us with another, the fourth, symbolic use of water that speaks to us concerning how we are to be set free from the world and its systems. This can be seen in and through the rescue of the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt and from the oppression of the Pharaoh. Again, we have scripture to helps us understand the significance of this event in terms of what it represents for us as a metaphor. Paul writes the following concerning these things,

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea...

1 Corinthians 10:1-2

The aspect of this that it is important for us to notice here is that there are two elements within which Moses and the children of Israel were baptised, the water and the cloud. The cloud was both a spiritual covering and means by which they were to be lead in the desert, as such the cloud is a symbol for us of the Holy Spirit. And the water speaks for itself. We have here, therefore, a metaphorical representation of the two baptisms, water and spirit.

The final reference to water that we will be exploring is

found in a story that occurred during the children of Israel's journey through the wilderness on their way to the promised land,

And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them,

And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee.

Exodus 15: 25-26

The active symbolism here is to the irreplaceable fact that the decisive element that is required to transform the water through which we pass in water baptism is that we take, by faith, the cross of Christ into the waters with us. This is the piece of wood that needs to be thrown into the bitter waters of our life so that we can rise up out of the water made sweet in Him. Therefore, perhaps we do need to realise that baptism is more than just a symbol, it can have concrete results when faith is present. Potentially, surely the import of this narrative that also speaks down to us through the ages is that we can leave our old sick selves behind in the water, be it a physical or psychological sickness. The key will

be His grace and our faith.²

We do seem to have within the early chapters of scripture at least five different metaphorical pictures that place water alongside significant features of the Lord God's ongoing salvific plans for mankind; water and the Spirit, water and the fruitful purposes of the Lord God, water and salvation from our sin and from the influence of the world, and, last of all, it is the place where the impact of the cross is experienced as we rise up to new life out of the waters of baptism.

Therefore, with these things in mind, how do we understand these words of Jesus,

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee,
Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit,
he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

John 3: 5

Jesus is probably referring here to the breaking waters of the physical birth, however, might there also be the possibility of Him making another oblique reference here as well? Indeed, a reference to an underlying spiritual reality that the entrance to the Kingdom of God might be gained through both a spiritual and a watery portal?

Jesus, Himself, establishes the importance of baptism within the ongoing mission of His ekklesia in the world and do we take Him at His word here?

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world,
and preach the gospel to every creature.

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved;
but he that believeth not shall be damned.

Mark 16: 15-16

Jesus does seem to be suggesting in this passage that water baptism together with faith are the determining factors for salvation.

Acts 2

Therefore, what did Jesus have in mind when He gave the disciples this final instruction? At this point, it will be helpful for us to read the account of the first converts to the new faith that we find in the book of Acts. The disciples having received their instructions from the Lord, both before and after his resurrection were now in place and empowered following Jesus' final ascension to deliver in practise what He had taught them and this would have included how to deliver and utilise the rite of baptism for new believers who come to faith. We join them on what is recognised by most as the Church's birthday, this is the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has come down on the disciples in tongues of fire and filled them with the Holy Spirit inspiring them to speak forth in new languages. Following this Peter stands to preach the good news of the kingdom of God for the first time. A message that elicits the following heart felt response from those who have heard it,

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in
their heart, and said unto

Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 2: 37-39

This is the first description in scripture of the process by which an individual will find salvation and become a new believer in Christ. It should therefore be considered to be normative, that is to say the scripturally verified means to true salvation for everyone that is to follow. This show us just how the Father wants the process of salvation to occur; this is His salvation, this is His plan and this His process over which He has place His Son as Lord. Isn't it? I am right here, aren't I?

Therefore, it will be helpful if we break this process down into its constituent parts:

- Now when they heard this

As we know from elsewhere in scripture, where we are told that „... faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God³. The gospel does require to be delivered through words delivered in such a way that they can be received. However, from Jesus' ministry it is clear that an important factor in this is whether or not the ears, and therefore the

minds and hearts, of those on the receiving end of the exchange have a certain level of spiritual receptivity. This is why Jesus often challenge those listening as to whether their ears were actually hearing. 'He who has ears let him hear' was his regular refrain, and clearly most present would have had ears. Therefore, what He was asking, was whether or not the people were truly understanding his words with their minds and taking it to their hearts. This is what we find here in Acts.

- they were pricked in their heart

Words, when in the Spirit and timely, will have their desired effect and will impact the hearts of those who have been prepared to receive it. Those, for whom their hearts have been prepared to receive the seeds of eternal life. Here we are reminded of the words of Isaiah,

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

- what shall we do?

Hearts when stirred will elicit a response, will ask questions, will need to put right that which is wrong, and the one and only response that is acceptable for Father God is threefold:

1. Repent

"Repentance (metanoia, 'change of mind') involves a turning with contrition from sin to God; the repentant sinner is in the proper condition to accept the divine forgiveness."⁴ This is a God given moment of hope and potential eternal change of direction for any who have been touched by the gospel in their heart. As Paul says in Romans it is the goodness of God that leads to repentance.⁵

2. Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins

Up until this point we have all probably been comfortable with what we have been reading. The act of salvation will always require a repentant, changed and impacted heart that is a response to the initiative of the Father as He leads us to the cross of His Son, Jesus Christ, by His Holy Spirit. Salvation can only be received as a sovereign act of grace from God. However, from this passage what we see is that it is at this moment when God has touched the heart of an individual with his love, grace and, most importantly, conviction, and they have responded in faith to this His beckoning call, that we are required to go through the waters of baptism. And not, as in my case, five years later. It is at this moment that we are to be baptised into very character and nature of Jesus Christ and into His body. It is at this moment, claimed by faith and by this act of obedience, that we gain remission for our sins, that we enter the kingdom of God and we take are place in the body of Christ? Does the word of God say

anything less? It is at this moment that we receive the seal, the indwelt stamp of Father God on our hearts

3. You shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The final element is the reception of the promised Holy Spirit. Like the Lord before us, who received the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove as He rose out of the river Jordan, having placed Himself in humility under the ministry of His cousin, John the Baptist, we should also expect to receive the Holy Spirit once we have been baptised in water within our conversion initiation as is outlined in Acts 2. However, we do need to stop and consider in a little more detail what this third element of the conversion initiation might mean for the individual. Indeed, this will be useful when dealing with the baptismal accounts that we will be moving on to look at later, where the apparent order of acquisition of this element does seem to differ from this norm.

In Ephesians 1:13c we are described as being sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, i.e. a seal, traditionally made from wax, such as you would have had on an official document, and the Holy Spirit Himself is then described as,

The earnest of our inheritance until the
redemption of the purchased possession
Ephesians 1: 14a

What does this mean? Paul is explaining that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that we receive at salvation is an earnest. This is an old fashioned word meaning a guarantee

or a down payment that is made prior to the arrival of whatever the down payment was for. Therefore, for us here, considering the earnest or down payment of the Holy Spirit we have received through Christ, we can clearly look forward to a greater reality of the same Holy Spirit in the future. This is merely a taster for what is to come during the Millennium and beyond. This is a betrothal gift which encourages us to expect more of the same once the Bridegroom has returned and taken us home with Him to His Father.

The picture, therefore, is clear to us. As a believer we each now are indwelt by the very presence of God through his Spirit.

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

We are the clay vessel or flagon and he is the wine contained within this vessel. However, as Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 5 the contents of our vessel do need to be regularly topped up.

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit

Ephesians 5:18

The metaphor which comes to mind is that of a bank account. The money we keep in the bank can be kept in different ways; we will usually have a current account for the daily use of our money such as to deal with the direct debits, etc. and we will also have savings accounts or investments and this will be money that is invested for the future. Perhaps, we can recognise that it is the same with the indwelling of the Spirit in our lives, if I am not being too irreverent here? The down payment of the Spirit is our savings account, a measure of the Spirit stored for a future time when the Lord returns and we also have a current account of the Spirit that has a daily flow in and out of our account as we interact spiritually with the world, the body and the Lord.

In Jeremiah 32:14 we find a description of a particular land purchase that the prophet was viewing as a prophetic act. What is of interest for us is the spiritual picture that this one verse does provide for us in terms of this understanding of the two important aspects of the role of the Holy Spirit as an indwelt presence for the disciple that we are exploring here. Particularly, as we will see within this verse some of the same terminology that we have already encountered in Ephesians. Indeed, helpfully the prophet does seem to be bringing things together as we try to understand something of the indwelt reality that we all enjoy through the Holy Spirit.

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of
Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of
the purchase, both which is sealed, and which

is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days.

Jeremiah 32:14

What we have here is the legal process by which a piece of land has been bought and as part of this process certain evidences or in our terms earnest have been issued to the purchaser, who is Jeremiah. These receipts or proofs of purchase are described here to be of two kinds one is sealed and one is open and both of which are then described as being placed within an earthen vessel.

It is possible that Paul might have been referring to this very legal process or even this scripture when writing about another purchase, a spiritual one, that is also kept in an earthen vessel when writing his letter to the believers in Asia Minor,

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise,

Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:13,14

For the believer, the indwelling Holy Spirit is the evidence that we have been purchased, and purchased for a very high price indeed!

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

In this scripture in Jeremiah there are two aspects or out workings of this evidence of our purchase, one is sealed and one is open. Indeed, it is this, the sealed evidence, that is described in **Ephesians 1:13b**,

...in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise

It is sealed, therefore, untouchable, safe and secure within the bank vault of our heart. This kind of inner sealed evidence we find described in Romans 8:15-17a, as the Spirit of adoption,

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ

Romans 8:15-17a

What is the Point of Baptism?

From a profoundly deep place we now know that we belong to a new spiritual family, we have a secure eternity and we have an unshakeable foundation in life who is Jesus. This our sealed reality, our guarantee, but as Paul goes on to describe it can only get better,

...if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

Romans 8:17b-19

There will be a new day, when the Lord returns where we will come into a fullness of this glorious reality. This is our inner, sealed reality of the Spirit, our identity in Him and, of which, we have now only the down payment of what is to come. Wonderful, unfathomable realities such as are expressed by Jesus in **Revelation 3: 21** will be ours one day,

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

Therefore, there is this sealed reality of our indwelt reality of the Spirit, however, as in the verse in Jeremiah 32 implies there is a second aspect or outworking of the evidence of our purchase and this is an open one. This is related to

our ongoing dynamic relationship with the Father through the Spirit. Our daily lived reality with God. There is a need to maintain our earthen vessel and keep it topped up. And it is this aspect that is described in Ephesians 5 where we read these words of Paul written within an exhortation about public worship,

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess;
but be filled with the Spirit

Ephesians 5:18

Here being drunk or full of wine is directly juxtaposed with an exhortation to be filled with the Spirit. Paul is challenging the issue that was a problem in the Church at Corinth, where people were using the agape meal as an opportunity to get drunk, rather than using the opportunity to come together for its primary purpose and share the your spirit in the Spirit with one another, and as an opportunity to be filled by God and prepared for His purposes beyond the meeting. As Jesus says in **John 7:38,39**,

If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and
drink.

He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath
said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living
water.

(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they
that believe on him should receive: for the Holy
Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was
not yet glorified.)

Father desires that we have an overflow of Himself such that we can bring refreshment, conviction and challenge to those around us, and this is to be achieved merely by His presence in us being full to overflowing. For, by the ongoing work of the Father on our hearts and lives our presence will increasingly be an expression of His presence, His nature and His character. Let us be reminded at this point that in Him we are a living, breathing expression of His tabernacle and as such we are, where ever we are, a meeting place between man and God.

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

He dwells with us and in us so that He can reach out through us and be connected to the world which He still loves so much. This, he achieves by His Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, which is Him in us. Therefore, the more there is of Him the less there is of us. Therefore, be filled with the Spirit!

For what is the overflow of the Spirit in our lives? And such an overflow that others might be touched by it? What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? What does it mean

for this to be understood as the ‘open’ aspect of the evidence of our saved spiritual reality? It will helpful to return to the verse in Jeremiah 32 and to explore the depth of meaning in the Hebrew word that is translated ‘open’ to answer these questions.

Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel...

Jeremiah 32:14

The word translated as ‘open’ here is the Hebrew word *galah* and in its literal sense it means to be naked, or to be fully uncovered. Therefore, the spiritual picture that is being painted before us in Jeremiah 32:14 is that the evidence that we have been purchased with a price by Jesus is that there is a spiritual dynamic at work in our lives which uncovers the reality of who we truly are, making us spiritually naked or, to use Jesus’ words here, spiritually poor⁶ before Father, ourselves and sometimes before each other. Afterall, we are always naked before Father. This is a crucial place for us because it is from here, and only from here, that we can be built up by God unto a new man in Christ⁷.

Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

Hebrews 4: 13

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass

the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 3:18

The transformation that is involved here is one that involves the death of self, such that the self-less new man, Christ and His nature and character, can increasingly become who we are in the realities of life. A transformational process which is dependent on the finished work of Christ and is experienced in and through His Spirit with whom we are indwelt. This is the process described by Paul in Romans when he writes,

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ...

Romans 8: 13-17a

The other aspect of being 'open' is that we live lives before the world and each other such that it is obvious who

we are and who is living within us, for we carry a presence, His presence, and we are called to shine with His light in the midst of this perverse and crooked generation⁸.

Indeed, what we have described here are the two evidences of our purchase in Christ. The open evidence is mortification of our flesh life in the Spirit and the fruit of the righteousness that will flow out from us through this process.

Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Hebrews 12:9-11

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

James 3:17-18

What is the Point of Baptism?

The sealed evidence, as we have seen, is our spirit of adoption in Christ. And as the verse in Jeremiah concludes it is then when our individual earthen vessel contains the evidences both sealed and open ...that we may continue many days. We will have and be lasting fruit⁹, indeed, a fruitfulness that takes into His millennium as His bride. Indeed, this is the process we are baptised into,

Know ye not, that so many of us as were
baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his
death?

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism
into death: that like as Christ was raised up from
the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we
also should walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3,4

As we return once more to reconsider the three elements of baptism and their order within the conversion initiation process, we are left asking the following questions: to begin with, can this really be true? If this truly was the way then, is it still the way it is meant to be today? Is this the God given order through which we are meant to pass so that we can enter the Kingdom of God? Who has passed this way? What does this mean for those, such as myself, who have not?

To answer these questions we will need to move on to explore in the rest of the book of Acts to ascertain whether or not we can trace a consistency in the baptismal practise of the apostles in the early church, before looking at Paul's teaching on the subject.

Before we do, however, it is important that we notice the verses that follow in Acts 2, for when Peter has finished addressing the gathered crowd, in verse 41 we are shown the amazing fruit that this day bore for the kingdom of God,

Then they that gladly received his word were
baptized: and the same day there were added
unto them about three thousand souls.

Some three thousand souls form the first church on earth, and it is very interesting to notice how they are described in this verse. It does not tell us that they gladly received the word and were saved, no it tells us the vital piece of information that they received the word and were baptised. Why? The reason being is that the three elements of an individual's conversion initiation are vitally important. This is because for the early church the one and only indicator, i.e. the visible proof, that an individual was saved and in the kingdom was that they had gone through the waters of baptism, and thereby giving testimony to this fact. At this point it must also be said that this is not empty religion. The physical act of baptism would be pointless and spiritually meaningless without the faith filled, and heart felt acceptance of the message.

And, we also need to recognise the fact that as a result of the word being received and that these three thousand folk were baptised and therefore saved, they were also at this moment 'added unto them'. The twelve, had already become 120 and at this moment they became 3121¹⁰. The body of Christ now had a body. We are baptised and therefore saved

into the ekklesia, literally meaning that we are called out of the world into a new gathering that has its home in heaven, the true body of Christ. For this is an important aspect of the baptismal rite, for as we will see later, when we are baptised we are baptised into the body of Christ.¹¹

Acts 8

Let us journey through the account of the expanding life of the early church in Acts and explore how the rite of water baptism functioned and was used within the spread of the gospel. The first two passages we will turn to are in Acts chapter 8. Here, we are joining not the apostle Philip, but Philip the deacon that we first meet in the church in Jerusalem in Acts 6, who seems to be operating as an evangelist within the ekklesia that has been scattered into Judea and Samaria under the persecution lead by Saul of Tarsus, who would become the apostle Paul¹².

But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

Acts 8:12,13

Here, we have clearly stated that the response required to verify that the Gospel message has been received and that the

individuals are in a state of grace and faith was to be baptised. However, interestingly something here is missing. Where is the received gift of the Holy Spirit that we encountered in Acts 2? This omission is actually noted in scripture and then subsequently rectified,

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem
heard that Samaria had received the word of
God, they sent unto them Peter and John:
Who, when they were come down, prayed for
them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:
(For as yet he was fallen upon none of them:
only they were baptized in the name of the Lord
Jesus.)

Then laid they their hands on them, and they
received the Holy Ghost.

Acts 8:14-17

This narrative does raise certain questions. Why does it require Peter and John to come and lay hands on the new believers in order that they can receive the Holy Spirit? Is this, therefore, an apostolic function? Indeed, in verse 13 we read that Philip was clearly operating in miraculous signs and wonders which are an indicator of true apostleship,¹³ therefore, why did this situation require the support and intervention of Peter and John?

What is significant for us here, as we consider in general terms how in practise baptism was used in the early church, is that within the conversion initiation in Samaria, which is the first detailed account of individuals

being saved within a non-Jewish context, baptism was the expected and required active response from those who had received the message in their hearts. What this account does help us with is to recognise that within the early church there was an expectation that a laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Spirit to be received not into the person, but onto them. And moreover, that this laying on of hands was required to come from someone who carried the appropriate apostolic authority. Is this to be considered normative? This, we will have to discover as we make our way through the scriptural record in Acts.

We do seem to be being shown that there is to be an expectation for a second event of the Holy Spirit as part of the full conversion initiation event. Admittedly, this is implicit here rather than clearly stated. How else, however, can we understand this process. We hear, we repent, we believe, we are baptised, and we receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. Surely, our first encounter, indeed, our very indwelling within our hearts and spirit by the Holy Spirit comes at the point of our repentant belief, where, through faith, we are born again, enter the kingdom of God, the household of faith and the body of Christ and are sealed for eternity. That which comes on us after we are baptised has to be a second encounter with the Holy Spirit. As we have seen above, one is sealed and the other is open. We are sealed and we are filled.

Moving on in chapter 8 of Acts, we find Philip this time supernaturally translated to the Negev desert where he encounters a devout Ethiopian Jew, a palace eunuch,

who was returning home having worshipped in Jerusalem. Philip climbs up onto the chariot on which the man was travelling and presents the gospel to him. The gospel had its effect,

And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Acts 8: 36-38

This is a wonderful account of the salvation of this travelling eunuch, and in answer to his question what can stop me being baptised there was only one thing that had to be established-was he in faith?

And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

Acts 8: 36-38

For it is the eunuch who commands the chariot to stop as he was the one in faith, literally driving this encounter, and fully desirous for the water and for his salvation. Again, as in the previous example there is no mention here of the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit as being part of the conversion initiation for the Ethiopian eunuch.

Acts 9: Paul's Conversion

Moving on to Paul's conversion initiation we will find that it contains some unique features, such as his starting point as a radical Pharisee and a fierce persecutor of the church. Indeed, it is whilst he was on his way to the city of Damascus to continue his violent work of religious suppression that the Lord Himself supernaturally intervenes by literally stopping him in his tracks. As Paul lay in the dust having fallen off his donkey, he understandably wants to know who has done this to him and Jesus' words in response are intriguing,

I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

Acts 9:5b

What might Jesus mean by this phrase to kick against the pricks? It would seem to be a reference to the way reluctant cattle are goaded along in the direction the drover wants them to go. They would use thorn branches to help them encourage the recalcitrant beasts towards their destination. Perhaps, by conviction, the Lord had been working on Paul for some time encouraging him to change direction?

However, what we also do need to notice is the form of address Saul, soon to be Paul, uses to address his supernatural highwayman, he calls him Lord. Perhaps he already knew who he was? Indeed, at what stage is Paul actually saved?

Three days pass and Saul is left without sight, literally scrambling around in the dark, no doubt trying to make sense of what has just happened to him. With support,

he has finally made his way to his intended destination, Damascus, now under new orders from a new master. There is a knock at the door. Standing there is another fearful and a little bewildered soul called Ananias. For whilst Saul had been going through his epiphany on the road to Damascus, up ahead in the city instead of preparing himself for the coming onslaught from Saul and his men this new believer in the Way, Ananias, was taken to one side by this same Jesus, this time through a vision. Now to be prepared for a very different encounter with this man, Saul. No doubt in fear, but more importantly in obedience,

... Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

Acts 9:17,18

It is hard for us perhaps to fully understand how brave Ananias was to obediently follow the instructions he had received in a vision from the Lord and walk into, what would have been for him, this lion's den. However, this particular lion was now toothless and broken and in need of what Ananias could give him in Christ. The first and probably overlooked gift was that he called him his brother establishing

that they now had a family connection, for they were now both adopted children of God.

He then shares the promise of a filling with the Holy Spirit, as well as the restoration of his sight. At which point Saul gets up and is baptised. We are not told who baptises him, but it would surely have been Ananias.

In the text there is no mention of the promised infilling by the Spirit for Saul, we must assume that it did occur at this time perhaps as he came out of the waters of his baptism? Our assumption is based on the fact that he was soon boldly preaching in the synagogues in the very area in which he had been found by his messiah, for him now Jesus Christ was indeed the son of God.

And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

Acts 9:20

Again, the clear unchangeable consistent feature in this account of Paul's conversion initiation that he shares with everyone else so far is that he was baptised and this was the one unqualified necessary response to the fact that he had met Jesus and his life was turned round and he was now a follower and not a persecutor of Jesus. We are told that he would be filled in the Holy Spirit which is the same phrase that we saw used first of all in Acts 2 when the twelve apostles received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Might this be a special way of receiving of the Holy Spirit reserved for the apostles, whose ranks Paul would be joining? Probably not as Paul encourages the believers in Ephesus to

be continually full of the Spirit, here using the same Greek terminology as well¹⁴.

Acts 10

Moving into the next chapter of Acts we have the significant moment when the ekklesia and the message it carries becomes more than just a Jewish cult movement as it begins to impact the world of Rome and its Gentile citizens. Again, as with the conversion of Paul we are shown the Lord working on both sides of a narrative in order that, at the denouement, He can bring the two sides together in Him and His purposes. On the one side we are introduced to a Roman centurion called Cornelius who is stationed at the Roman fortification on the coast at Caesaria. Here, we are told that he was,

A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway.

Acts 10: 2

A man who had already some level faith, to say that he feared God with all his house is surely tantamount to say that he was a believer? Clearly he had been well prepared to be used of the Lord to enable the good news of the kingdom to break out of the Jewish enclave of Judea and to move out into the wider gentile world of Greece and Rome. Indeed, he too receives a vision and from the outset knows from whence this has come and to whom he is talking to in response to this

vision. He addresses Jesus as Lord, and as we read elsewhere no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit¹⁵. As well as this we are told that Father has also been able to receive, hear and respond to Cornelius' prayer life and respond to his alms giving which also suggest that there was already a real and active relationship at work here. Therefore, at this stage, we can surely make an informed assumption that he had received the spirit of adoption and that spiritually speaking he was already born again, alive to God and a true believer.

In the vision Cornelius is directed to send an emissary to a particular house in the port of Joppa, to seek out a particular man who would be the apostle Peter. And on the other side of this story we then are shown how Peter is challenged, again through God given visions, to embrace the new thing the Lord wanted to do, the introduction of the mystery of the universal ekklesia¹⁶. The Gentiles were to be included in the ekklesia, the good news of the gospel was for all mankind, and not just for the Jews. The symbolism that the Lord used was to challenge Peter to break the Mosaic dietary law with regards to what is and is not kosher to eat. Three times the Lord repeats the vision in order that Peter might understand that the Lord was not in reality talking about food when he says the following,

What God hath cleansed, that call not thou
common.

Acts 10: 15b

Sadly, he remained confused, but the events then overtook him and his confusion, as the men arrived from

Cornelius and there was another knock at another door. they then all travelled together back to Caesarea and to the God arranged meeting with the Roman centurion.

What God hath cleansed, is this a retrospective comment and one that foretold what was to come? Was Cornelius already spiritually kosher, i.e. saved and therefore spiritually clean or was this yet to happen?

Peter returned with these men sent by Cornelius where he found the faith he needed to cross the threshold and to enter this Gentile 'infected' space. And then he was able to preach to those gathered with the centurion and as he was sharing the Holy Spirit fell on the gathering in a way that was similar to the day of Pentecost as the Gentiles in attendance began to speak in tongues and worship the Lord God. Peter no doubt taken by surprise says the following,

Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?

And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.

Acts 10: 47, 48

The issue here is that the conversion initiation for these newly believing gentiles required completion. They had heard the word, they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit and now they needed the one element that was missing to make their conversion complete, baptism. And they were baptised in the name of Jesus, but we are not told for what purpose,

there is no mention here of remission of sin.

Peter's question sounds a little like the question often asked in a wedding ceremony, does anyone have a reason why this man and woman should not be married. However, what is actually being expressed by this question is far more profound than is there any reason why they cannot get baptised, what Peter is inferring here is that without them going through the waters of baptism they would not be fully saved. Yet again we are being shown that for the early church going through the waters of baptism was not an optional add-on, it stood as the one and only verifiable sign that an individual was saved and having crossed, literally, over into the very kingdom of God.

Significantly here, the order of the various elements of the conversion initiation differs from the order we saw in Acts 2. Cornelius does seem to have a pre-existent state of salvation and the main focus for this narrative is that he, with his household, were able to experience the gift of the Holy Spirit in a powerful way indicating that, as is seen argued in Acts 11, the Gentile world is to be spiritually blessed in the same way as the Jewish one.

Here, we find Peter, having returned to Jerusalem, explaining what has just happened to those who still needed some convincing, the members of the circumcision faction,

Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift
as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord
Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand
God?

Acts 11: 15

Therefore, what we can take away from this account of baptism within the early church, and indeed, the first baptism fully within the prevailing Gentile world? The main point seems to be that potentially a delay is possible between an individual being saved and then going through the waters of baptism. We say this because we have identified that Cornelius was already in a position of faith and in communication with Father right at the beginning of the story. We can all therefore breathe a sigh of relief. This said, the normative order will be that which we have witnessed in the remainder of the baptismal accounts in the book of Acts, however, the ruling principle in this new spiritual kingdom is grace and not religious legalism.

Acts 16

And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.

And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.

Acts 16: 14-15

The next account of baptism that is recorded in the account of the development of the early church in Acts, occurs in the city of Philippi. There seem to be two important

What is the Point of Baptism?

aspects of this story for us as we explore the practise of baptism within the the early church. The first being the wonderful phrase we find in verse 14,

...whose heart the Lord opened

With regards to the one and only essential element that is required for anyone to come to faith and to go through the waters of baptism, this is it! The Lord takes hold of the handle to the door of our heart and opens it for His Spirit. He paid the price and He reaps the fruit. Salvation is a heartfelt exchange between the Lord and anyone who would be saved. Salvation is a work of God, but a work none the less we have to play a part, but only a part. Indeed, in this scripture we are shown the process of salvation through which all must go through.

• **Hear**

Lydia had spiritual ears to really hear the words spoken by Paul. The very words that the Holy Spirit was working with within her heart, convicting her of sin, righteousness and judgement.¹⁷

...faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Romans 10:17

• **Faith**

Lydia's heart was opened by the Lord and she was able to receive the sown word of God. This is just what Jesus thanks His Father for in Matthew 11,

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

Matthew 11: 25-27

To have her heart opened is another way to say that Lydia had received the revelation of which Jesus is referring to here, and came into faith.

• **Salvation**

Lydia attended to the things in the word of God that spoke and challenged her in her heart. The picture here that Greek word translated as 'attended to' is of ship being sailed into a harbour to find a safe place to anchor there.

Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil

Hebrews 6:19

She had come home, safe now within the new kingdom.

• **Baptism**

Lastly, Lydia, as a result of these three things, was baptised, with her whole household.

This is a beautiful picture of this process, and it does need to be noted that there is no mention here of any reception or filling with the Holy Spirit at the time of this baptism or as part of Lydia's conversion initiation. As we have already seen to whom was her heart opened, if not to the Spirit?

Another important element of this story for us is captured by the use of the word 'when', which is a translation of a Greek conjunction that can mean a wide range of terms such as like, as, or after. However, what is important for us to see is that the baptism here is the stepping stone for what comes next. For we are told that when she was baptised she was used of the Lord to join with Paul and to begin a house church in her home.

This is the pattern we first see in the sending out of the disciples during the Lord's earthly ministry¹⁸. Here He encourages them to look for the son of peace with whom to stay and to look to work with in terms of sharing the good news of the kingdom. Lydia is such a person and here within this narrative we are given a glimpse at Paul the church planter at work.

And on the sabbath we went out of the city by
a river side, where prayer was wont to be made;
and we sat down, and spake unto the women
which resorted thither.

Acts 16:13

What is the Point of Baptism?

A scene surely redolent of another man sitting by another source of water and talking to another woman in John 4. This time it is Paul who, in the Spirit, is alive and available to meet this God appointed moment in faith. From which, a new work begins with this life changing conversation. For it is this conversation that God used to open the heart of just one of the women there washing the dye out of the fabric in the river. For as Paul says himself,

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season...

2 Timothy 4:2a

Staying in Acts 16 we encounter Paul in a very different situation, not by a river praying but in a prison cell praying and praising. The situation in Philippi had become problematic since Paul and Silas had set free a demonised young woman, who had been stalking them. The consequences that came from this landed them beaten up and bruised in the local prison. However, wherever we are and in whatever happens to us God is at work,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10

The key is to always be available to Him and he does the rest. And in the middle of the night as they were praising God in their dismal dungeon, Paul and Silas were miraculously

set free by a God triggered earthquake. The walls came down, and the doors were opened, and their chains fell off. However, Paul and Silas stayed where they were, they knew God was at work. Instead of facing worldly judgement for failing to keep his charges secure, the jailer was offered the way to salvation from eternal judgement. Once again God was at work in this man's heart,

Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

Acts 16:30

Interestingly, we find ourselves in a very similar scenario to what we encountered on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. This time an individual is moved not by any words he has heard preached to Him, for we are not told about any conversations he might have had with Paul and Silas prior to the events of this night. Instead the narrative suggests that the man is moved by the act of selfless redemption that he had experienced through Paul and Silas. An act through which instead of saving themselves physically from the prison, they stayed in order that this man and his household might be saved from the eternal prison of hell.

It at this stage that Paul and Silas provide the jailer and his household, who seem to live at or very close to the prison, with the message of the Gospel,

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,
and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

And they spake unto him the word of the Lord,
and to all that were in his house.

Acts 16:31,32

The response to the Gospel that is required, i.e. what must I do to be saved?, as stated clearly here by the apostles, is one of a faith filled and heartfelt belief in the message. We then in the narrative have two separate washings described.

And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway.

Acts 16: 30b-33

First of all, the apostles' physical wounds that they had received through the thongs of the whip are bathed and then the jailer and his household are bathed spiritually in the stripes suffered by the Lord as reflected in the waters of baptism. The key term for us here is 'straightway', an adverb that means, not surprisingly, immediately. There is, therefore, clearly a stress being placed here on the timing of the baptism. The apostles first needed some patching up, but when they were in a fit state to minister they immediately, that very night, found some water and the whole household was taken through the waters, having first believed. There is no mention here about any reception of the Holy Spirit, but we are told that jailer,

... when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.

Acts 16: 34

Acts 18 and 19

In Acts 18 we are simply informed that in response to Paul ministering the Gospel in Corinth,

And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.

Acts 18: 8

The normal, expected and assumed conversion initiation for the early church is neatly captured here by three words hearing, believing and, then, baptised.

Later in this chapter we have the account of the apostle Apollos' ministry in Ephesus. Apollos is described as,

...an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures... who was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord.

Acts 18:24b,25a

However, there was a problem for we are told that he only knew the baptism of John. It would be helpful, therefore, at this stage to identify how the baptism of John differed from that offered by the Gospel. Elsewhere, the baptism of John is defined as being for the remission of sins¹⁹ and that it was a baptism that related specifically to the nation of Israel²⁰. And,

What is the Point of Baptism?

as we originally saw in Acts 2, the baptism here is described in the following terms by Peter,

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 2: 38

So, what is the difference?

What is helpful is that we are shown that Paul steps into the situation at Ephesus and brings clarity.

And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.

Acts 19: 3-6

Therefore, the process here is developing over time. John's ministry was a preparatory one for the first coming of Christ. However, John merely pointed the way for the one who was to come. Following the cross the call

is for people, be they Jew or Gentile, to be baptised into Jesus, the one who can truly forgive our sins. Following from which we can receive a further baptism in the Holy Spirit, having first received the Spirit of Christ when we first believed. Prepositions are important. Here the Holy Spirit is described as coming 'on' the believers and He also needs to come 'into' them as well, a distinction we noticed above.

Acts 22

The last reference to baptism in Acts comes in chapter 22, where Paul is being interrogated by the Romans in Jerusalem before he was taken under guard to Rome. In his testimony he gives an account of his own conversion initiation, where he says the following,

And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

Acts 22: 16

Again, we are given here by Paul a clear indication that for him baptism is a crucial element of the process of salvation, and it is an element that is best experienced straightway in the moment of faith. For Paul, there is no place for tarrying where baptism is concerned.

To conclude our study so far, what have we found? Our starting point, in Acts 2, was on the day of Pentecost and where we found the first converts who had responded, under

the conviction of the Holy Spirit, to the first evangelistic message that was delivered by the apostle Peter.

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 2: 37-38

We identified here that there did seem to be a conversion initiation process being modelled for us to follow. We identified this as containing the following elements:

- The Gospel needs to be spiritually heard
- Hearts need to be impacted by it
- An active faith response is then required

Then, if these are in place two things are required from the individual,

- Repentance
- Full immersion water baptism

This baptism is defined here as being,

- Into the name of Jesus
- For the remission of sins

Following which, we can then expect,

- To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit²¹

We then asked the question whether such an initiation

process could be identified throughout the rest of account of the early life of the ekklesia in the book of Acts? In response to this question we have seen that there largely is a consistency in practise. Particularly with regard to the place of baptism as part of the essential conversion initiation process. There may have been differences concerning timings and the order in which the various elements occurred, but in every case baptism has been central and clearly the expectation was that it should be the one evidential sign or act that would indicate that an individual was indeed now saved, born again and as a believer was added to the ekklesia, as they now were in Christ Jesus. Moving on, it will be helpful to explore within the teaching of Paul in his letters how he understood this crucial part of the Christian conversion initiation to function spiritually within the heart of a believer. Indeed, what does happen when an individual goes through the waters of baptism according to Paul?

The Epistles

To answer this question, we will be initially turning to Paul's teaching in Romans 6, where we read the following,

Know ye not, that so many of us as were
baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his
death?

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism
into death: that like as Christ was raised up from
the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we
also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

For he that is dead is freed from sin.

Romans 6: 3-7

To truly understand what the apostle is saying here, perhaps, we do need to recalibrate our mind and our theological thinking concerning baptism? For if we are now realising that the rite of water baptism within the process of Christian conversion initiation is more than just symbolism, then we do need to approach the teaching here with a new-found expectation. Indeed, might we see here something that we have so far missed? This could be fresh revelation for us. Is this why the issue of baptism has been such a theological ‘hot potato’, so to speak, for so long?

Indeed, Paul actually begins his teaching here with a challenge to his readers’ existing level of revelation with regards to the vital role that baptism plays in the life of a new believer. Know ye not, in other words ‘haven’t you understood these things yet?’ And what is it that we do need to know?

We need to know that when we are baptised:

• We are baptised into the death of Jesus

Therefore, spiritually speaking when we are baptised it is as if we had died physically. Everything that we were has gone, it is dead. For when someone dies, as those

who have experienced losing someone close to them will testify, the very presence on the earth of their loved one has gone. There is a grief filled space where they once walked. For Paul this a spiritual reality, not just symbolism.

- **In baptism we are buried with Jesus**

When we are fully immersed in the water in baptism, metaphorically speaking, it is as if we had been covered with soil or placed in a tomb. We are lost to sight, and in that moment our physical presence on the earth has gone. Any sign of our body, the tabernacle of our flesh life, is now hidden from view. Indeed, if truly understood and in faith realised, it is hidden from view and never to be seen again! For Paul this a spiritual reality, not just metaphor.

- **In baptism we share in the resurrection of Jesus**

When we come up out of the waters of baptism we are raised from the dead by God the Father. Like the Lord before us, we are drawn out of our watery tomb to walk in newness of life. For Paul this a spiritual reality, not just metaphor.

Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:12

- **In baptism we share in the resurrection life of Jesus**

Paul describes it as walking in newness of life. Why is this? Paul explains further in 2 Corinthians 5,

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

2 Corinthians 5: 15-17

The flesh is now dead, having died with Christ, and the new life in which we are called to walk is as a new creation because we are now in Christ through the baptism. For Paul this a spiritual reality, not just metaphor.

- In baptism we have been planted together in the body of Christ, the carrier of His likeness on earth
Again, as Paul explains elsewhere,

Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,
To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.
In whom we have redemption through his

blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace...

Ephesians 1: 5-7

And, as such, we share a common death and a common life together in Christ. For Paul this a spiritual reality, not just a metaphor.

• **In baptism our old man is dead and buried**

Knowing this... here, Paul, returns to question his readers' level of revelation, as he explains the spiritual dynamics that are at work when an individual is baptised.

- our old man is crucified with him
- that the body of sin might be destroyed
- that henceforth we should not serve sin.

However, to be consistent with scripture, we also need to realise, as inferred here, that there is still an ongoing process of sanctification by which and in which we should now walk. As verified throughout Pauline teaching, such as here in his letter to the ekklesia at Ephesus,

If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:
That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;
And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;
And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Ephesians 4:21-24

However, how many of us would have benefitted from a better birthing in Christ than the confused one we have all received through not being taken through the waters in this way and with this level of faith and expectation for what would occur within us as we did?

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;
And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

John 8:31,32

Let us turn now to another piece of Pauline teaching on water baptism, which significantly seems to place the rite at the heart of the Lord God's over-arching purposes for the bride, which is His redeemed body on earth and for whom is to return. In Paul's letter to the ekklesia in Galatia we read the following,

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:26-29

What is the Point of Baptism?

We also find this same idea explored by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, where we read,

For he is our peace, who hath made both one,
and hath broken down the middle wall of
partition between us

Ephesians 2: 14

Paul is making the point that in Christ, Jews and Gentiles find an unlikely unity, using here the picture of the wall in the temple which prevented Gentiles from accessing the Holy Place, on pain of death. That wall was now gone, and one body, containing both Jew and Gentile, has been created in Christ by the cross,

Having abolished in his flesh the enmity,
even the law of commandments contained in
ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one
new man, so making peace;
And that he might reconcile both unto God in
one body by the cross

Ephesians 2:15,16

There is something here that is too often overlooked, missed or misunderstood. It is by faith that we are spiritually bonded into the kingdom of God at our conversion. And it is through our baptism into Christ that we have put on the ongoing eternal resurrection life of Christ, by which we enter into this wonderful unity of a redeemed humanity. Baptism is more than a symbol. Baptism is more than a metaphor.

We come out of the water of baptism, like the primal earth that we saw in the original creation, with the capacity to be good ground in which to receive seeds of life and to become gloriously fruitful in Christ. Indeed, to be made into His image.

Paul says the same in **1 Corinthians 12 :13** where we read the following,

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

In Christ everyone, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, share the same seed of Abraham and therefore have a share in the same promise, and therefore, we now share the same Spirit as well. By which we share the same body, the body of Christ. Indeed, to be made into His bride.

Baptism is the Washing of the Bride

Moreover, the baptismal rite as instigated by Jesus has echoes of two practises found within Judaism, the baptism rite for Gentile converts to Judaism and the bridal washing rite. The first of these is largely found within later Judaism, there is little evidence for this before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. However, with the second practise, the bridal washing, we do, once again, find ourselves making an important metaphorical connection. For the ekklesia is the embodiment of the spiritual bride being prepared for her

returning bridegroom, who is Jesus.

To help us with this it will be helpful to explore this Jewish marital rite and draw from it our own spiritual truth as supported by scripture. Simply said a bride would in Jesus' day, and as still happens today, undergone a washing rite in which she is immersed in water. Importantly for us, the actual preparatory practise within the rite itself does provide us with an interesting connection with the place and function of baptism within the Christian initiation process. For as we read here in an extract from the website 'My Jewish Learning',

'Before immersing in the mikveh, Jewish law requires that one thoroughly clean one's body, typically including taking a bath or shower, clipping nails, and brushing teeth. This ensures that there are no barriers between the person immersing and the mikveh water.'²²

In the same way there is a preparation that is required prior to an individual going down into the waters of baptism. For there must not be any aspect of our previous life in the flesh that would provide a spiritual barrier between the person immersing and the water of baptism. This is achieved by the work of the cross and has already been effective in the heart of the person immersing through revelation, repentance and faith. Therefore, as they go through the waters of baptism they are prepared to be part of the bride.

And the point is... water baptism is an integral part of the conversion initiation process for the believer. Its

place within the life of the church over time has become both distorted and misunderstood. There is one baptism in water through which we are baptised into Christ and into the one body. There is also a baptism in the Spirit which should normally follow, this is for spiritual gifting and the development of ministry. Through all of which we are prepared and made ready to take our place as part of the bride.

That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the
washing of water by the word,
That he might present it to himself a glorious
church, not having spot, or
wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be
holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:26,27

Notes

1. Viola, F & Barna, G, 'Pagan Christianity?: exploring the roots of our church practices' ; Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois, 2012; p. 188-189.

*The use of this quotation from these authors does not mean that this author accepts or supports their subsequent recent involvement with the emergent church.

2. The author does not believe that healing per se is within the atonement of Christ, but if an individual has genuine God given faith and not the distorted faith of 'name it and claim it' then it is His grace that will be sufficient here and their baptism can be a place for their healing.

3. Romans 10:17
4. F. F. Bruce. The Acts of the Apostles [Greek Text Commentary], London: Tyndale, 1952, p. 97<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G3340&t=KJV> accessed on 22/12/18
5. Romans 2:4
6. See Matthew 5:3
7. See Ephesians 4:23,24.
8. See Philippians 2: 15
9. See John 15:16
10. 3000+120+1
11. See 1 Corinthians 12:13
12. See Chapter 7: the Function of the Ministry Gifts, in 'Taking the Form of a Servant' by the same author on a detailed study on the role and function of the four fold ministry gifts in the early church, free to download from the author's website: richard-flint.com.
13. 2 Corinthians 12: 12
14. Ephesians 5: 18
15. 1 Corinthians 12: 3
16. See Ephesians
17. See John 16: 7-11
18. See Luke 10
19. Mark 1:4
20. Acts 13:24
21. We have recognised that this final element is theologically problematic and that the reception is best understood as being received in two different ways, one for adoption and one for anointing for life and service within the body.

22. Extract taken from www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mikveh/ accessed on 03/02/2019

6.

What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?

Let us begin by posing a quiz type question: in church life today there is one thing we all do as a corporate activity from the eastern orthodox to the charismatics and everyone in between except that is the Salvation Army, what is it? The answer is the breaking of bread, or communion or the eucharist, all different names for one of the two sacraments we are obligated to perform as part of our liturgical ritual within the religious system that is the church. However, how many truly understand the point of this activity? The point, that is, that is true to scripture and its intended point and purpose according to God.

There are two extremes within the church as to how this is to be understood, on the one hand we have the Roman Catholic

belief in transubstantiation; the heretical belief that the bread and wine actually change into the real body and blood of the Lord in the mouths of those taking it. On the other hand, we have the usual evangelical protestant position which sees it as something commemorative or merely symbolic. The truth, however, lies somewhere between the two. For, although we cannot go so far as to claim that the substance of the two elements changes, we do need to recognise that in faith there is spiritual sustenance imparted as we partake of the bread and the wine, we will come to this later. We also do need to recognise the commemorative element of this sacrament that both the Lord Jesus, Himself, and the apostle Paul teach¹. We will, therefore, attempt to come to a scriptural understanding of this sacrament by exploring it within its wider context in the word of God. Through this, we believe, we will be able to approach the breaking of bread afresh within our ongoing shared life in the body of Christ and hopefully we will have discovered once more be this wonderful source of grace and growth in the Lord.

Our starting point will be the Lord's own teaching that is found in both the gospel of John and in Paul's first letter to the ekklesia in Corinth. Before moving from principle to practice, and looking at the way breaking of bread seems to have been used within the early church as captured in the book of Acts. However, let us reflect on the first passage in the Old Testament where we seem to find the first occasion when bread was broken, and wine was taken by individuals gathering together within a covenantal setting².

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

Genesis 14:18

The context is a meeting between Abraham, the father of faith, and this mysterious figure Melchizedek. And having offered the bread and the wine to Abraham, Melchizedek goes on to bless him,

And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.

Genesis 14:19,20

As we shall see, for us the breaking of bread is also a time to reconnect with both our calling, as it is here for Abraham, and to give honour to the source of it all, the most high God and to thank Him for our own deliverance through the cross.

This scripture is also important because in the book of Hebrews Jesus is described as being a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek, fulfilling the prophecy found here,

The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent,
Thou art a priest for ever after the order of
Melchizedek.

Psalms 110:4

Jesus Himself is a priest of the order of this Biblical figure whose name means the king of righteousness, whose reign emanates from what would become Jerusalem and who is described as having neither a mother, father or any line of physical descendants³. A figure who is lost to us in the mists of time apart from, that is, what scripture tells us about him. The little we do know about him comes from Hebrews 7 where the story of the meeting between king Melchizedek and Abraham is used as the scriptural context within which we can understand Jesus' standing as our priestly representative in heaven. For Jesus was not a Levite by birth or a descendant of Aaron, therefore, His priestly credentials need to lie elsewhere. Indeed, it is as the high priest of the priestly order of Melchizedek that the Lord is able to offer, as the once and for all perfect paschal lamb who was slain for the sins of the whole world, His own blood in the heavenly holy of holies in the heavenly Temple. A sacrifice that was deemed as being acceptable by His Father. This is Christ Jesus who now sits at the right hand of the Father in glory.

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;
Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.
But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice

for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of
God

Hebrews 9:11-12;10:12

In returning to our original passage in Genesis 14 it is interesting to note that the reason Abraham and king Melchizedek met together to break the bread and to drink the wine was in celebration of a great victory that Abraham had won against a group of kings who in effect ruled to world at this time. A war that was caused by the fact that Abraham's brother, Lot, had been taken prisoner by the forces of these kings when they attacked Sodom and Gomorrah where he lived. Therefore, interestingly, in type the cause for this celebratory meeting between these two men might actually be understood as a celebration of the redemption of Abraham's brother out of the clutches of the world.

To mark this event Melchizedek makes his one and only recorded appearance on the stage of written history, just three verses in scripture.

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth
bread and wine: and he was the priest of the
most high God.

And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram
of the most high God, possessor of heaven and
earth:

And blessed be the most high God, which hath
delivered thine enemies into thy hand.

Genesis 14: 18-20

Melchizedek, functioning here as a priest of the Lord God, offers Abraham bread and wine, he also has the capacity to provide here a spiritual bridge of blessing between earth and heaven for he is able to bless both the man Abraham and bless God. Again, we can see Jesus here, a priest of the same order, but who is so much more. For He is also able to be a spiritual bridge between man and Father God. Indeed, the ultimate, once and for all time spiritual bridge. And it is also bread and wine which He chooses to be the emblem that characterises His act of redemption, as He rescues man from the clutches of the world through the cross.

Likewise, the sacrament of breaking bread, the communion, eucharist, the bread and wine, or however it is described in your church is a marker and celebration of the finished work of Christ and it is the one thing that we are commanded to partake of each time we gather in or as His body. However, we believe that the centrality of this sacrament and its spiritual purpose and function within the life of the believer and the church needs to be rediscovered in these days. Too often today, it is merely a symbolic chore that we have to endure once a month, with all that uncomfortable handshaking or even hugs as we mouth platitudes such as 'peace be with you'? Or are we missing an essential aspect of our corporate life together and for us also as an individual follower of Jesus as well? Indeed, a simple practice through which we might partake of the kind of heaven sent blessing that we saw in Genesis 14. Look at how Jesus describes the potential impact of this sacrament for the believer,

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of

man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.
Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood,
hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the
last day.

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is
drink indeed.

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood,
dwelleth in me, and I in him.

As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by
the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall
live by me.

John 6: 53-57

Have we missed something here? We will be returning to this passage later. Let us first look at the institution of the sacrament of breaking bread by Jesus on the night that he was betrayed. We find it described in all three of the synoptic Gospels, but it does not feature in John. Although the fourth gospel will be providing us with some essential background insight into the underlying spiritual dynamic that is at work within the taking of this sacrament when taken in faith by the believer. We also have a description of the sacrament from Paul which he seems to have received directly from the Lord as he was not present when it was first given.

The three synoptic Gospels describe the scene in the upper room in the following ways.

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread,
and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the
disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.

What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;
For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.
But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

Matthew 26:26-29

And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body.

And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it.

And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.

Mark 14: 22-24

And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.

Luke 22: 19-20

These accounts of the initiation of the breaking of bread sacrament in the three synoptic gospels all contain a very

similar form of words. The disciples would have been largely unaware of the dramatic events that were about to unfold, the actual context for their gathering together on this evening was to share a Passover meal together. Indeed, the Passover does provide for us a significant scriptural point of reference for us here. In the Lukan account we find Jesus making the following statement,

And he said unto them, With desire I have
desired to eat this passover with you before I
suffer

Luke 22:15

Fundamentally, what we have here is Jesus establishing the spiritual fact that by His approaching suffering He is the once and for all paschal lamb. This is why the Passover context is important here. His death will provide a way to escape the death that is to come for everyone. Instead of all the first born dying as they did in Egypt as the angel of death swept through the land as it did on that night all those years ago. On this night, the Passover meal, that they would be celebrating, would carry this reference to the death of the first born of all creation, the Lamb of God, who will bring salvation to all through the cross over the next two days . As prophesied by John the Baptist,

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the
sin of the world.

John 1: 29b

Indeed, moving forward in the Exodus narrative we can also identify, with help from the apostle Paul, that as the crossing of the Red Sea in type provides us with a scriptural precursor for water baptism, the guiding cloud for spirit baptism and the manna which points us towards the breaking of bread sacrament.

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea;

And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea;

And did all eat the same spiritual meat;

And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

1 Corinthians 10: 1-4

Therefore, returning to the breaking of bread on the night that Jesus was betrayed we see that Jesus was redefining the Passover meal as being fulfilled in Him and His suffering. And from the Passover meal He takes two of the elements, the bread and the wine, and redefines them to now be representative of His body and His blood.

To understand, however, what Jesus means by such an identification, and then what impact this would potentially have on anyone who was to access these two elements of the sacrament we will need to turn to Jesus' remarkable teaching in John 6. Indeed, it is here that we will be exploring Jesus'

own teaching on the connection between the original food from heaven, the manna, with the true bread of life, Jesus.

And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life:
he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he
that believeth on me shall never thirst.

John 6: 35

Here, we find Jesus engaging in a series of question and answers with those who had followed Him to the other side of the sea of Galilee. This coming, significantly, after the feeding of the five thousand had occurred. John may not include Jesus' initiation of the breaking of bread sacrament in his gospel; it appears his focus was elsewhere that night such as the profound teaching on the new covenant. However, importantly what he does provide for us is Jesus' foundational teaching that underpins this sacrament.

**For Jesus is the true bread of life
that is to be broken for the world and
it will be His life blood that is shed for all.**

There seems to be two parts to the teaching. Initially, Jesus is caught up in a positive dialogue with those who have followed Him from having witnessed the miraculous events of the day before. The exchange then takes on a different tone when the religious leaders get involved.

Question 1

And when they had found him on the other side

of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when
camest thou hither?

Answer 1

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I
say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the
miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves,
and were filled.

Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for
that meat which endureth unto everlasting life,
which the Son of man shall give unto you: for
him hath God the Father sealed.

John 6:25-27

Jesus in response to this question, that on the face of it is simply asking Him how He got to where they had found Him, takes those he is talking to, and us as well, to the most basic of human needs. We all need to put food on the table. And moreover, the way that we do this is to work in order that we get paid a wage and by this we can then buy the food we need. Indeed, they are reminded of the events of the previous day where their 'tables' so to speak were filled by the miraculous grace of God and through this He then challenges their fundamental motivation for following Him as far as they have. Fundamentally, what do they want to eat, physical or spiritual food? Jesus in this exchange opens for His hearers the essential idea that beyond the physical world of eating and drinking there is a far more important spiritual reality. And at the heart of this lies the question of how do we fill our eternal spiritual tables with a quality of food that will provide

us with eternal, everlasting nourishment? Indeed, a food that he identifies here as emanating from Himself as the Son of man, who has been sealed by God the Father for the task.

Let us continue to explore a little more deeply what we find here. Why does Jesus describe Himself here as the Son of man and what does it mean for Him to have been sealed by God the Father?

- **The Son of man**

The term is used in the Old Testament within the phrase we first find in **Deuteronomy 23:9**,

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent...

A phrase which is simply describing the physical human reality in which we all find ourselves as part of a common lineage, the family of mankind. This is found consistently expressed in English in scripture with a lower case 's'. However, the phrase the Son of man consistently expressed in English with an upper case 'S' is found within the prophecy of Ezekiel, indeed, this is the prophet's given title throughout in his dealings with the Lord God. His voice is indeed the voice of the Son of man as he proclaims the prophetic word of God to a recalcitrant nation of Israel. A term that is first used here,

And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.

And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me.

And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day.

For they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel 2:1-4

Six hundred years later is the nation of Israel to which Jesus has been sent much different? For Jesus clearly recognises that He is fulfilling this calling first given to the prophet Ezekiel, and for Him it is bring it to spiritual completion. He is now the true incarnation of the Son of man. He, like Ezekiel, has a God given mandate to speak the truth to the impudent and stiff hearted children of His own generation. And moreover, it is in the next chapter that we find an aspect of Ezekiel's prophecy as the Son of man does carry significant relevance for us here.

Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel.

So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that roll.

And he said unto me, Son of man, cause thy

belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.

And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them.

Ezekiel 3:1-4

The roll that the prophet is challenged to eat here is not a cheese roll, this the roll of the Torah. The rolled-up word of the Lord. The symbolism at work here is not lost on us. Jesus, as He talks to those who had followed Him around the lake, is going to identify directly with this very scripture. However, He is not the Son of man who is called to eat the word of God, no, He is the Son of man who is the true Word of God. And this is the context for the challenge Jesus is going to make to all who desire to truly follow Him. We are called to eat the Torah roll that is Christ, indeed, to eat His body and to drink His blood. As the psalmist expresses it,

How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Through thy precepts I get understanding:
therefore I hate every false way.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light
unto my path.

Psalms 119:101-103

However, Jesus the Word is not just words on a page, He is spiritual meat to be consumed within our spiritual belly,

which is our heart. An important aspect of Jesus identification with the prophet Ezekiel here, is that instead of the prophet eating the words on the scroll, the true followers of Jesus the living Word are called to consume Him and His words. The words that are written on the page in scripture and also those precious words that are written on the pages of our hearts and to then walk in them in obedience on a daily basis.

And looking forward, He is also the Son of man who is coming again for those who have fed well on Him,

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.

And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13-14

• Jesus is sealed by the Father

Significantly, as we have seen, we are also informed by Jesus that He was sealed by his Father. What does He mean by this statement? The symbolism is clear. A seal was a way of locking ancient documents. When a letter was ready to be sent, a command ready to be given or a legal notice was ready to be served, it was sealed by heated wax being placed

on the document in such a way that this wax seal would need to be broken before the contents would be revealed to those to whom it was intended. In the same way, what we are being told here by the Lord is that He is a sealed document that has been written by His Father, a letter of love that has been sent to the world and the essential message within will only truly be revealed once the seal is broken and the body of the letter is opened for all the world to read. It is on the cross that the seal was broken, and it was on the cross that Jesus' body was opened such that His blood did flow for each one of us. This is the sound of the seal being broken,

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Matthew 27:46

The true follower of Jesus is also described as being sealed, however, the good news now is our seal is unbreakable. It is unbreakable in Christ for we are now His and because of the love the Father has for his son. And as Jesus will go on to confirm, it is His broken body and shed blood that, when received in faith, will become to us a constant source of spiritual nourishment until He returns as the Son of man.

He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.

For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure

unto him.

The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

John 3:33-34

For we are wonderfully sealed not with heated wax but with the Holy Spirit, Christ's own Spirit.

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:13-14

This letter of love is opened for each one of us to read only by the Father, as described by the Lord Himself when reflecting on His own ministry in a chat with His Dad,

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

All things are delivered unto me of my Father:
and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father;
neither knoweth any man the Father, save the
Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal
him.

Matthew 11:25-27

By Jesus' few words in this, His first, answer to the seeming innocuous question concerning His mode of transport, the conceptual stage has been set by the Lord for the questions and answers that are to follow.

Question 2

Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that
we might work the works of God?

Answer 2

Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the
work of God, that ye believe on him whom he
hath sent.

John 6:28,29

The next question suggests that Jesus' inquisitors have understood something of what the Lord was saying within His answer to their first question as they pick up on Jesus' theme of spiritual labour. They are assuming that what is required is some sort of religious action in order that they might, as they put it, work the works of God. Jesus' reply again challenges them to change tack and to realise that to honour and please God they have to enter the realm of faith

and to recognise who was standing before them.

What is actually being conveyed here by Jesus' response? Perhaps, we do need to look at what Jesus is saying here a little more closely? In their question they are asking what they need to do, they do seem eager? In Jesus' reply what is He potentially saying? They are talking about doing but he points them towards believing. For any work that needs to be done not by you but by God. From the beginning to the end this is all about the work of God. Jesus does not even echo their form of words by saying that for you to work the works of God you have to believe in Me. No, to the contrary He is saying you cannot do the work of God. Look at the tin it says it clearly says 'work of God'. This belief in Jesus is not a work, it is God given faith. For the only work that is required is for Him to enable you to have faith or belief in Me. We know this because Jesus says as much as we have seen above,

I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
because thou hast hid these things from the wise
and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

Matthew 11:25

This is the good news of the gospel, the good news that by His grace, God the Father does it all, the key for each of us is to receive this revelation and walk in faith. And then we are beckoned towards Him,

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy
laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:27

He calls us to rest in His mercy, grace and love. This is not about any form of labour on our part on this side of the Cross, the work comes after!

Question 3

They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?

Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat.

Answer 3

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.

John 6:30,31

As explored above, with the manna, we have the fourth event from the Exodus narrative that speaks to us symbolically concerning the Christian conversion initiation process and the ongoing walk of discipleship. The cross can be found in the Passover, water baptism in the escape through the Red Sea, baptism in the Spirit under the cloud and here we have the breaking of bread symbolised through the giving of the manna from heaven.

As Paul was very much aware ... the Jews require a sign.⁴ The crowd needed something concrete to believe in,

had they forgotten their picnic from the day before? Were the miraculous events of the previous day not enough? In response, Jesus encourages them to look for an even better quality of bread than they had received at the time of Moses. Jesus is indeed encouraging them to look for a sign, the true bread from heaven. What might this bread look like? He is saying if you see me you are seeing all the sign you are ever going to need.

Question 4

Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread.

Answer 4

And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

John 6:34,35

Do you not recognise a loaf of bread when you see one? This particular loaf looks a lot like the man standing in front of them. He is the true bread from heaven. Jesus is the unleaven bread of heaven, sinless and given for the sin of the world, providing the world with all the spiritual nourishment it would ever need.

At this moment the atmosphere of the conversation seems to change. We are told at the end of the exchange that this had all taken place in the synagogue in Capernaum, therefore, at this point do other less supportive individuals begin to express their displeasure at what they are hearing?

Prior to this the questioners were described simply as the people, from here on they are described, rather pejoratively, as the Jews, i.e. the scribes and Pharisees. From this point also it is no longer a straight question and answer situation, instead Jesus is responding to points made within the general atmosphere of grumbling discontent amongst those gathered.

Question 5

The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven.

And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?

John 6: 41,42

Answer 5

Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves...

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.

I am that bread of life.

Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall

live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

John 6:43,47-51

Jesus reiterates the previous truth that a faith filled belief on Him was the key to everlasting life⁵. As we saw before, this faith is God given and not to be worked for. However, He now explicitly begins to not only identify Himself as this true bread that has come down from heaven, He also explains that this faith filled belief is to be demonstrated by an individual eating Jesus' flesh which He says He will give as a gift to the whole world. For anyone who wants to know what the spiritual meat is that we have been talking about all along; indeed that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you, we now know that it was actually the meat of the man who was standing before them, Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus who had grown up among us, we know His mum and dad. Eat Me and you will live forever. This cannot be!

Looking back with 20-20 hindsight we can understand what Jesus is referring to, however, for those listening to this teaching at the time they would have understandably been incredibly shocked by what they were hearing. This includes even His own followers many of whom we are told left him at this moment.⁶ Could He really be talking about some cannibalistic rite here? What part of Judaism is this?

And it gets worse.

Question 6

The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

Answer 6

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

John 6:52-58

Notice that the torah roll imagery is back with the Son of man nomenclature being used by Jesus here. Moreover, Jesus is not only challenging them to contemplate eating His flesh, but now they are being told that they have to drink His

blood as well! Even within the existing sacrificial practise as handed down from the Lord God to Moses, who wrote it all down for the people to follow, there was never any place for blood except as a cover for the sin of the nation sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. It was never to be consumed.

I am the bread of life therefore abide in Me.

However, Jesus states here that as the bread of life it is His own flesh and blood that is offered as the spiritual sustenance that will provide this spiritual life. This is obviously suggestive of the communion sacrament for us looking on with 20:20 hindsight that will be part of the life of the body, however, might it be something more?

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my
blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

John 6:56

Indeed, as Jesus teaches His disciples later John 15, there is a dwelling aspect to this life in Christ. And, we can see this also described here. Jesus seems to be offering here a constant life giving flow of spiritual sustenance, indeed, it is this that we are called to live in the flow of, He is our sustaining bread of life. The clincher being that the Greek word translated 'to dwell' here is the same word that is translated 'to abide' in John 15. And Jesus goes on to say the following,

As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

John 6:57

Again, as we see in Jesus' teaching in the upper room, Jesus was able to be sustained through his Wi-Fi with the Father, 'I live by the Father'⁷, whereas we need to be hard wired, so to speak using electrical terminology, 'so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me'. He had Father, we have the Lord through the vine and the bread of life. As a son of God, a mature follower of Jesus who is walking after the Spirit in obedience we have to stay close. So close, in fact, that it is just like being physically connected.

Abide in me, and I in you.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

John 15:4-5

We can hear echoes of the call to not only do what we see the Father do here, but we are not Jesus. He could do nothing except what He saw the Father doing⁸, we, however, can do nothing without Him. Notice Jesus' actual words

here, we abide in Him and He by His Spirit abides in us- it's a double abiding, how close is that?

This is the level of connectivity that we need to walk fruitfully. As we have recognised, it is as though Jesus could operate on Wi-Fi mode with His Father, however, we need to be plugged in to Jesus to achieve the same level of fruitfulness. We need the direct life giving enrichment of the sap of the Lord through His Spirit to maintain our healthy level of fruitful endeavour in Him, and this is why we have been provided for with the bread and the wine. At this point, on an individual level, we do also recognise the crucial element that the closet also plays in our abiding. Jesus continues,

If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.

Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.

If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

John 15:7-8

The fruit will flow and the prayers will be answered as we live out of the vine, connected to the life source of the Lord and keep His commandments.

However, we need to realise that there is only one thing that is important here, it is all about the cross. And it is the

shadow of the cross that lies over everything here. And Jesus, through his particular use of challenging imagery, was making reference to what would become, for the ekklesia, the breaking of bread sacrament following his initiation of this rite on the night He was betrayed. As the teaching in Hebrews makes clear, Jesus, as the high priest under the order of Melchizedek is able to make an acceptable, once and for all offering of His own blood on the mercy seat in the holy of Holies in the Heavenly Temple, indeed, His own blood that was spilled as His body was broken on the cross. The seal was opened.

How else do we eat or drink Jesus, except within the sacrament of the bread and the wine. And perhaps we do need to revisit what Jesus teaches us from what He says here in John 6. For there does seem to be a connection between a consumption of Him and our spiritual strength and our capacity to live by Him. The disciples, we are told, initially did struggle with this teaching as for them it would have carried a literal meaning. However, following the events on the night before He went to the cross, we now have this idea expressed within a sacrament that is both figurative and spiritually real for those who approach it in faith and with an expectation that is fuelled by the Lord's teaching here in John. Surely if we were to take Jesus teaching here at face value then taking the elements of the bread and wine in faith we should expect the following:

Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and
drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?

- through the breaking of bread, we receive spiritual life

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life

- through the breaking of bread, we have eternal life

and I will raise him up at the last day.

- through the breaking of bread, we will be raised up at the last day

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

- the elements when received in faith provide spiritual nourishment

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me

- through the breaking of bread, we indwell Jesus, we are in Christ

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth ...I in him.

- through the breaking of bread, we are indwelt by Jesus, Christ in us

As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

- through eating the bread, we shall live by Jesus, as he lived by His Father

he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever

- through eating the bread, we shall live for ever

John 6:53b-58

This is what Jesus says clearly here in this scripture, how can we gainsay it? How can we understand it? How should we respond to this teaching? By us missing this is an important element missing from the life of the church? Is there a need to re-evaluate the place, role and function of the breaking of bread within our church experience and even in our own experience as a follower of Jesus?

The question we do need to address is whether or not this was what the early church understood, and has this understanding been lost over time?

To help us we will turn to the account of the early church and its practise in Acts and to explore Paul's teaching in first letter to the church in Corinth. In Acts we do read the following,

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart...

Acts 2:46

It is difficult to infer very much from this verse, however, it is clear that they do seem to have had some understanding of the importance of eating the meat of His body and drinking the drink that is His blood because they did it on a daily basis. Thereby, perhaps we can presume that they were diligently

taking the sacrament in faith and obedience knowing that it was benefitting them in the ways Jesus said it would benefit them. Indeed, the use the term 'meat' that is used here might be helpful as we are taken back to the Lord's teaching in John 6 where Jesus uses this same term Himself concerning Himself,

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is
drink indeed.

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood,
dwelleth in me, and I in him.

John 6:55,56

Perhaps, the use of the term in Acts is indicative of the understanding of the early church and this was indeed encouraged them to break bread every day? As they recognised it as a means by which they might access the Father's grace that would enable them to live out their indwelt life and to look forward with hope and expectation to their eternal reward. As well as supporting them to be carriers of His presence on a daily basis.

Grammatically what is this verse in Acts telling us? That there were certain things that the early church did on a daily basis: meeting in one accord in the Temple and to also break bread from house to house, we can infer this because the 'and' which precedes the phrase 'breaking bread' connects this activity precisely with the activity to which it is grammatically conjoined, the daily meeting in the Temple. The daily aspect of this, therefore, applies equally to both activities. This, therefore, does provide for us a wonderful window into the body life that was enjoyed in the early church, one of togetherness and sharing their lives with each

other every day. And a crucial aspect of this was the breaking of bread. This seems to be an everyday part of this shared lifestyle. Indeed, this breaking of bread seems to have been a normal and natural part of their fellowship together.

What did they understand about this sacrament? An understanding that has clearly got lost in translation since then. And as we have already noticed, the key to understanding what they seem to have understood is found in the phrase that ends this verse, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.

What does the use of this word 'meat' imply here? Does this just mean that they simply enjoyed getting together to eat on a daily basis? This may have been true, but this is not what is meant here? To understand what is meant it will be useful to refer back again to where the term 'meat' is used prior to this by Jesus and, indeed, used within the same symbolic context for the breaking of bread.

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is
drink indeed.

John 6:55

We are also reminded here of another occasion when Jesus used the term 'meat', again it is found in the fourth gospel.

In the meanwhile his disciples prayed him,
saying, Master, eat.

But he said unto them, I have meat to eat that ye
know not of.

Therefore said the disciples one to another, Hath any man brought him ought to eat?

Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.

John 4:31-34

Jesus, once more, takes the natural and applies it spiritually. And once again, the context is food related. Having met the challenge and needs of the Samaritan woman whom he had met at Jacob's well, Jesus is hungry and tired so the disciples have returned from the nearby town with provisions for Him. However, Jesus literally changes the focus from physical hunger to the hunger we all need to find in the Lord, and that is for the lost and to fulfil God's purposes for our lives. For whom or for what are we truly hungry for in this life? There is a hunger that we all need to find in Christ,

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Matthew 5:6

Interestingly, the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical lies at the heart of the apostle Paul's teaching on the sacrament of the breaking of bread that we find in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthian believers seem to be an unruly lot and some order needs to be restored in their meeting together to break bread. The sacrament seems to be part of the agape meal that was an important aspect of the life of the early church. In Corinth the problem seems to be that some

were taking this meal as an opportunity for over consumption, particularly of the liquid variety. This insobriety in turn created issues around breaking of bread that accompanied the feast. However, for us what is important is to recognise that Paul understands, as shown by his teaching here, that there is a clear and fearful spiritual reality that lay behind the physical taking of the bread and the blood.

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

1 Corinthians 11:25-29

Clearly from this scripture there are physical, as well as spiritual consequences, for those who do misuse this sacrament, such as we also see here,

For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

1 Corinthians 11:30

Indeed, for these consequences to be a reality in the life of the early church then this sacrament has to be more than merely something commemorative or symbolic. For as we saw in John, Jesus' words make it very clear that this sacrament does carry a

very real impact for good or ill on those who partake of it.

The Bread and Blood of Unity

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

1 Corinthians 10:16

The sacrament of the breaking of bread also has an important function within the gathered body to help maintain unity among the brethren. We gather around one bread which is representative of the indivisible reality that no matter how hard we try there is in reality, God's reality, only one body in Christ. Therefore, as we gather together it is this togetherness that we must always treasure and to do whatever we need to do to maintain it and to reinstate it if things have gone awry in any of our relationships. Indeed, provision has been made for us. For when we do gather around the sacrament we need to come in a state that is ready and prepared to do so. A state whereby we have a pure and clear conscience before God and before one another, and that we are at peace with ourselves and the body. Indeed, we can see here how the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount does apply here, for this sacrament is our altar,

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought

against thee;

Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

Matthew 5:23,24

The gift we bring to the sacrament of the bread and the wine is ourselves and this gift does need to be in a worthy condition with respect to our relationships within the body before we partake of it this is with regards to the issue of forgiveness in our lives. This is why taking the breaking of bread on a daily basis made sure the early church maintained its peace and unity. In this respect the phrase ‘not discerning the Lord's body’ from Paul's teaching concerning the right way to approach the sacrament is also an important one for us with regards to maintaining corporate unity and love in the gathered body. The sacrament is described as the new testament or covenant in the Lords blood so we should always be cognisant of what this new covenant does require from us,

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

John 13:34,35

The sacrament if properly adhered to is a useful means by which this covenant of self-less love is maintained within the body.

What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?

However, we do also need to know that His grace is always sufficient for us no matter where we have been and what we have done⁹; this a place to come to actively feast on the Lord even when we feel morally unworthy. Humility and honesty is the key here.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

This is a time when the Lord beckons us forward to come to Him even when we are weighed down by the world and our life within it, so that we can feed on Him and be spiritually replenished so that we can find rest for our souls and receive the grace we need.

Paul captures for us a heartfelt declaration of what needs to be the prevailing understanding, attitude and reality for any expression of His body who would gather together to break bread and crucially for each person who is so gathered,

Before coming to the Lord's table, on reflection, in humility and honesty, are you?

- worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,
- With all lowliness and meekness,
with longsuffering,
- forbearing one another in love;
- Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.

(Knowing that)

- There is one body,
- and one Spirit,

What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?

- even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
- One Lord,
- one faith,
- one baptism,
- One God and Father of all,
- who is above all,
- and through all,
- and in you all.

Ephesians 4:2-6

Let us reach out to Him in faith to feed our spirit man through the taking the emblems both together and even on our own, and what about with our spouse?

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

This is that bread which came down from

What is the Point of the Breaking of Bread?

heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

John 6: 53-58

And let us remain here awhile,
Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

John 15:4,5

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

1 Corinthians 11:26

And the point is... Jesus is the bread of life and believers are spiritually sustained by the Father's grace as they share His body and His blood together as members of this same body.

Notes

1. See Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25
2. Here, we are applying the first mention principle which would tell us that the way something in scripture is used

the first time will be an indication as to how it is to be used henceforth.

3. Hebrews 7: 3

4. 1 Corinthians 1:22

5. The Jews at this time did not have a clear concept of what would happen to them after death, therefore, Jesus' argument would have been challenging enough without the apparent reference to cannibalism contained in His teaching here.

6. See John 6: 66

7. See also John 14:10

8. See John 5:19, 30

9. 2 Corinthians 12:9

7

What is the Point of Praise and Worship?

To begin with, let us join Jesus at Jacob's well in Samaria one hot lunch time and eavesdrop on this clearly a pre-ordained conversation He is having with this troubled stranger. Halfway through their conversation and, in response to a question concerning worship asked of Him by this lady, Jesus says the following,

But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.

John 4:23,24

Worship, indeed the worship of true worshippers, has a very real connection with the kairos timing of the Lord God.

There would be a time or, as Jesus describes it here, a coming hour when the time was right for true worship to occur, perhaps in a way that had not been practised ever before. The essential truth here is that through Jesus and through the cross and through the sending of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers, there would soon be such a person as a true worshipper. And by definition these true worshippers would be now available to the Father to practise this true worship. This a logical argument if we take Jesus at His word, and since He is the Word incarnate, then why wouldn't we?

But what is TRUE WORSHIP and what should it look like?

And likewise who is a TRUE WORSHIPPER?

At this point we do need to understand what the term worship actually means here. For we all probably think we know what worship is within our modern world in which music is the ubiquitous sound track to every aspect of our lives. Is it the Sunday morning hymn sandwich experienced in the local Baptist church? Maybe. Is it the capacity for a room or tent full of people to endlessly jump up and down enthusiastically extolling the virtue of their God to the beat of an incessant drum? I do not believe so-but who am I to judge? Is it the quiet meditation of an individual within a cloister? Maybe. Is it the placing of a five pound note in the cup of a poor beggar on the street? Again, maybe.

Worship is much used and a much misused term within church world today. We characterise going to church as going to worship. We label a certain kind of corporate song

singing as worship, as distinct from singing a livelier praise song. We might even attend an event that is described as a worship meeting. However, consistently within scripture when worship is referred to the actual meaning of both the Hebrew and Greek words will usually be referring to an individual prostrating themselves before a dignitary or before God or gods in an act of obeisance.

The first use of the term in scripture comes from Abraham when speaking to his servants and telling them a tale about why he was setting off with Isaac to the top of mount Moriah, carrying a bundle of twigs and a rather sharp knife.

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

Genesis 22:5

In the Hebrew this literally reads, I and the lad will go yonder to bow down....Therefore, when Jesus is talking to the woman at the well, are they talking about where they sing there slow songs to God? What does worship mean here for both Jesus and this religious woman with problematic lifestyle?

Is God so insecure that He is desperately needs to hear us sing songs about how wonderful He is? We do not believe that father God does carry any such character flaw. Again, this time the language is Koine Greek, the actual meaning of the word that is translated as worship and through which we carry an impression that it is all about song singing, is

bow, kneel or prostrate yourself before a dignitary, God or gods in an act of obeisance. However, even though worship is culturally expressed at this time in this way, just as perhaps worship today is expressed by a particular type of song singing, we believe that the essence of worship does not lie in what we do, but in the two elements that Jesus outlines to the woman at the well as being, like we read on our job applications, essential. True and acceptable worship requires there to be both 'truth' and 'spirit' present and actively engaged.

**What we must understand is that worship is not an act
but it is a person.**

The Father is looking for 'such' a person, one who meets His acceptable criterion for being a worshipper. Worship is not about the style of music per se, it is actually not about music at all. It is all about the person who is worshipping and where they stand with the Lord God and what is in their heart. For, as Jesus explains to the woman he has met at the well of Jacob on that hot afternoon, there two determining factors to whether an act of worship is acceptable to Father God as worship at all, is it in the Spirit and is there truth at the heart of what is happening?

**The quality of the worship is determined by the quali-
ties of the worshipper**

As we have seen, the Greek word that is translated both as 'worship' and as 'worshipper' literally carries meanings such as to kiss the hand of one whom is revered, to fall on

your knees and to touch the ground with your forehead, or to pay homage. The Hebrew word has as similar meaning as well. Again, these words are only an expression of something real and profound that needs to be in the heart of the one who is doing the worship. And it is this profound reality within the individual which will mark out their worship in whatever form it takes as being in the Father's eyes either true or false worship and acceptable or not. Therefore, it does not really matter, within reason, what form an individual's worship might take, but what does really matter is how it is judged by Father. And this also means that it isn't up to us to judge the quality of worship and the worshippers, unless we do have just cause.

Jesus establishes in His conversation with the Samaritan woman that the quality of true worship will always be qualified by two qualities, it will always be in the spirit and it will always be in truth. Therefore, in other words, the acceptable worship of true worshippers will be characterised by it being in the spirit and by it being a true representation of the heart of the individual who is worshipping.

• **Worshipping in the Spirit**

What does it mean for worship to be in the spirit? Does this mean that it will involve singing in tongues? As we will see we have to move away from the idea that worship is concerned solely with some sort of church based musical activity. Worship is any action which pays due homage to what or to whom we are worshipping. Therefore, for us, the worship of true worshippers will be any action which will

give glory to the Lord God. This means that worship at its most effective will be expressed at the interface between the worshipper and the world, an act of alms giving, of healing or just a kind word in season. A moment when we are motivated out of the unction of the spirit within us to express the love of God to another in kairos time, which means in the right way, at the right time and to the right person.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou
hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell
whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is
every one that is born of the Spirit.

John 3:8

The Spirit blows where He wills, like the wind, and the true worshipper will have the capacity to follow the lead of the Spirit to be fruitful in the moment whatever that moment might require. And it is also important that when we do have an opportunity to let our hearts soar into the heavenlies as we sing and worship the Lord, using the accepted understanding of the term, it is also important that this is a spiritual event that has the potential to go wherever the Spirit desires to take it. We should be prepared and we should be ready to be used in whatever way the Father does desire to use us in terms of His grace, gifts and gifting. The sad reality is that there is seldom any space provided in our heavily pre planned church events in which this might be possible.

Individually, we are carriers of His presence within the Ark of our hearts and this needs to be the wellspring or fountain of our worship.

He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

John 7:37,38

It is the quality of what lies within that will determine the acceptable quality of what will manifest itself as worship. This is why the journey of the true follower of Jesus that is so important¹.

It is the journey that creates a true worshipper.

- **Worshipping in truth**

The second element that will determine how an individual's worship will be judged by Father is truth. Indeed, when we look at the spiritual armour that is described by Paul in Ephesians it is the belt of truth that does hold everything together.² God is not fooled and he is looking for integrity. Again we are reminded of the words of David when he writes,

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts:
and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to
know wisdom.

Psalms 51:6

David had learnt these valuable lessons, that Lord God even then was able to write his truth and His wisdom on our heart such that we would know how to walk in wisdom, which is in itself a succinct and wonderful definition of true worship.

True Worship is Walking in God's Revealed Wisdom

The wonderful reality is that through what Jesus did achieve on the cross there are those now who have lives rooted and grounded in an unshakeable reality of truth. They have journeyed with their God endeavouring to carry His presence wherever they go. Therefore, the Lord God sees the man and sees His Spirit within the spirit of this man and the truth that undergirds all he is and he finds his life of worship acceptable in his eyes. As Jesus confirms himself later in John,

If ye continue in my word, then are ye my
disciples indeed;

And ye shall know the truth and the truth
shall make you free.

John 8:31,32

However, such truth does need to become an imbedded reality through a life lived obediently following His word and allowing this word to set us free from the tyranny of the wrong tree and to find a freedom in Christ to be who were created to be. For all of us the level of revelation will be different, the key is to be true to our own level of understanding.

• **Sacrificial Worship**

As we have already stated, we do need to move away from the distorted notion that worship is something that happens for a short period some time on Sundays and that fundamentally worship is a heartfelt lifestyle. The quality of worship is also linked to the degree of sacrifice in our lives. Indeed, the first mention of the term ‘worship’ in scripture that we encountered earlier, is very telling,

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.
Genesis 22:5

What was the worship that Abraham and his son Isaac were going yonder to perform? He was going to sacrifice his son in obedience to what the Lord God had instructed him to do. Similarly, in the account of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 the heart of their dialogue was a question concerning where the focus of worship should be, on the temple mount in Jerusalem or according to the Samaritan tradition on mount Gerizim. On both these mountains the focus of the worship would have been one of sacrifice. Therefore, the woman’s question to Jesus could be paraphrased as, our fathers sacrificed in this mountain, and as a Jew you say Jerusalem is the place for sacrifice to be made. The reply of Jesus, if we continue with this paraphrase, does take on a radically new meaning for us.

The hour is coming and now is when the true **sacrificers** will make **sacrifices** for the Father

in the spirit and in the truth, for the Father is looking for those to make **sacrifices** for Him. God is Spirit and those who make **sacrifices** for Him must make them in the spirit and truth.

Indeed, true worship will be sacrificial worship. This is the quality of worship that comes from a disciple who understands and lives out the Lord's commands to deny themselves, to daily pick up their own cross and to follow Him. Is Paul saying anything less in Romans when he makes this challenge to the church?

I beseech you, therefore, brethren by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

Romans 12:1

The 'therefore' as always is there for a reason, and Paul is essentially making reference here to his previous teaching which came culminating in the wonderfully definitive teaching concerning the Lord God's unfinished spiritual business with the Israel of God in chapters 9-11, where we are once again working according to God's kairos time scale.³ Prior to this, over the previous 5 chapters, Paul takes us on a doctrinal journey during which we are shown that the way out of the tyranny of sin and the Law, which are the curse of the fall and mankind being trapped within the branches of the wrong tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The way of escape for all of us is to come to a revelation or

to come into the light concerning the work of His grace over our sin and serving God through faith instead of the Law. By this, in chapter 8, Paul argues that we come to a wonderful place of freedom which he describes in the following way,

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1,2

However, as expressed here this is freedom with an important caveat concerning the quality of our individual walk. It is important that we are travelling in the right direction, from the flesh towards the spirit. Are we walking after the Spirit in our lives? This is the point that Paul is picking up in chapter 12, this freedom is available to us but it will demand that everything we are is given sacrificially to the Lord's purposes. And just like we saw in Jesus' teaching in John's gospel, the sacrifice to be acceptable to the Lord God does need to be one of holiness, or in other words one of truth, and, by definition from the teaching in Romans 8, in the spirit as well.

The verse in Romans 12 ends with the phrase, which is your reasonable service. In other translations of the bible this is translated as worship which is not literarily or literally accurate, however, from the way we have defined worship above, it would be justified. As we have already said worship is a life style that is rooted in the quality of our walk before

the Lord God and this quality is no better demonstrated than through quality of the sacrifices we make. Not out of any sense of religious obligation but out of a heart full of the revelation of His grace for us and His faith in us.

The Greek word translated service in Romans 12:1 does, however, make an important connection for us with the Garden of Eden⁴. It is in the garden that we are shown that Adam had been given two primary tasks to fulfil,

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

Genesis 2:15

The first man in his pre-fall spiritual condition was charged with both dressing and keeping the garden. The word translated to dress here can also mean to serve and it is used consistently in Exodus with reference to the ministry and service related to the tabernacle by the priests. The service of the priests in the tabernacle was a service of worship to the Lord God. In the same way we can view Paul's teaching here. As we individually serve the Lord God within our own tabernacle or the corporate temple of the body, to use Paul's figurative language from 1 Corinthians 3 and 6, this our service of worship.

And again, moving on, as with the worship within the tabernacle or temple, our worship also needs to be characterised by sacrifice if it is to be acceptable to the Lord God. Indeed, there are verses in Paul's teaching which do allude to our sacrificial walk of daily worship having a similar impact on the Lord God, in effect, to that

experienced by Him from the sacrificial worship made in the original tabernacle and temple. For we are told in scripture that the Lord God actually enjoys the smell of an acceptable sacrifice that comes to Him from His tabernacle or temple,

Command the children of Israel, and say
unto them, My offering, and my bread for my
sacrifices made by fire, for a sweet savour unto
me, shall ye observe to offer unto me in their
due season.

Numbers 28:2

Therefore, perhaps we need to have in mind that Father today is waiting to breathe in the aroma that might drift upwards from our own sacrifices offered in due season, or in the kairos timing of God? For as we read in **Ephesians 5:2**,

... walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us,
and hath given himself for us an offering and a
sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour.

To walk in love is our walk of sacrifice and is our walk of worship, a quality of walk and a quality of love that is here defined by the walk of sacrificial love that Jesus has already made on our behalf. And it is this quality of love that is to God a sweet smelling savour.

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye
love one another; as I have loved you, that ye
also love one another.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

John 13:34,35

Whether we realise it or not, from our own tabernacles that are indwelt by His presence we exude of sweet smelling aroma. However, this is not the eau de you or me, this is the sweet savour of Christ within us by His Spirit. Therefore, can we not argue that the quality of the Christ like aroma that permeates from us will be determined directly from the actual level of Christ likeness within us? Also isn't the quality of our sweet savour in Christ in turn determined by the quality of the sacrifice that has been made?

Further, our sacrificial walk of worship also has an effect on others such that their eternal destiny might be determined by their response to the spiritual fragrance that emanates from us and our lives that we are living before them. In **2 Corinthians 2:15,16** we read the following challenging words,

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish:

To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

Who is sufficient for these things indeed?

Scripture also suggests that included in our sacrificial worship and therefore in the sacrificial offering we are called to make, is also our propensity to be generous givers to those

who have need in the body. In Philippians 4 we find Paul giving thanks to the church in Philippi for its generosity in the following terms,

Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account.

But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:17-19

The sacrificial gift so blessed a brother in the Lord here that it proved to be a sweet smelling aroma to God, i.e. an act of worship. However, let us notice that key the aspect of the giving was that it had come from the right tree, it was an expression of the spiritual fruit that had been produced within the heart of the believers in Philippi. They had not given out of religious duty, such as we find with the confusion over tithing in the church today⁶, or out of some other sense of fear or obligation. Their giving came out of hearts of love and was in the spirit. Therefore, it was an acceptable sacrifice for the Lord God. Let us do likewise. Let us be careful that we do give out of the right motivation, such that it is fruit from the right tree. This quality of giving is again by definition an act of sacrificial worship.

As we turn to our final scripture concerned with the quality of our worship before the Lord God, we perhaps

need to ask a question concerning worship's twin when we talk about modern day church practise; praise. Today, we often have what we call praise and worship times on Sunday. Does scripture have anything to say about the quality or characteristic of praise that might be acceptable to the Lord God?

We read in **Hebrews 13:15** the following,

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.

Again, the language used here of offering up a sacrifice is the language of the tabernacle or temple and specifically carries a meaning of bringing a sacrifice to the altar to be offered up in the place of our sin. There is the idea of transference here, or the idea of an acceptable replacement being provided. And into this we have the idea of praise to God being the acceptable sacrifice or the acceptable replacement.

It is also a sacrifice that is required to be made continually. And it is described as the fruit of our lips, therefore, it is an opportunity for us to bear fruit. It is therefore an activity if done right that will be picked fresh from the right tree by Father.

However, For what is praise a replacement? What is this sacrifice of praise? Is it any more than the singing of the bouncy songs in church before we get serious and sing the slow worship songs? How could this be a continual activity and where is the cost of sacrifice here apart from choosing to

cheer yourself up by actively getting up out of your seat and to sing along with everyone else? Again we are in the quality of heart territory here and to the attitude we have to our lives lived before our brethren in the body and before the world.

Paul exhorts the church in Philippi to rejoice in the Lord always⁷ and this clearly will at times be difficult. However, if we are truly secure in the Lord we would be able to be reflective even in those times when the oxen stumbles,⁸ his presence within us is shaken and something in our self-life dies. To help us with this, in His letter to the believers in Ephesus Paul writes the following,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ
Jesus unto good works, which God hath before
ordained that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10

Paul is encouraging us to realise that we are a work in progress, the term used might even suggest that we individually are a masterpiece, however, if you look anything like me then the beauty will only ever be in the eye of the beholder. The good news is that the beholder is Father.

And moreover, the language used here comes straight out of the original creation narrative, applied now within the context of the new creation, that is you and me. We do need to understand that perhaps at the moment the true picture of who we might be and what we might become have only been roughly sketched on the canvas of our lives. However, as we go through the situations that have been pre-ordained by Father and have learned the lessons within them, then our

true image will begin to take shape. We also need to know that there are no bad situations, even if they feel like it at the time, all is GOOD in Christ.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

Do we know this? And when we do then, our capacity to praise Father through whatever befalls us will help us making progress in Him considerably. Indeed, a positive, always praising disposition is just the way our masterpiece needs to look.

**The spirit can praise in the spirit despite the feelings
and not because of them.**

God is God and in all things His purposes are being worked out, therefore, in all circumstances we can offer to him a sacrifice of praise

We also need to know that the 'good' that the Lord God is achieving in us is the likeness of His son, and as we have seen in order for Him to achieve this he has to remove the wrongness of us and replace it with the rightness of Jesus.

So rejoice when....?

Indeed, what does Jesus himself encourage us to expect once He has taken us, step by step, through the Godly character forming within us that is the Beatitudes,

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Matthew 5:11,12

Sacrificial praise is a lifestyle.

The root word from which the Greek word is translated praise is a word which can mean a 'story'. Therefore, through praise we can be understood as telling a different story. By praising when it hurts we are not giving the usual response to a painful situation; we are instead asserting something of God that comes out of the spirit and is secure in the truth that has been written deep within our hearts. It could also mean that through this we are enabling the Lord God to write a new story for us and a new story for those who witness our God-pleasing response. In this way the sacrifice of praise will potentially be able to bring about fruit for us, as we are transformed by His grace. It will also produce fruit for others to consume by which they will encounter the sweet savour of Christ.

The seeds are carried in the fruit.

Therefore, although worship is still something to be practised and enjoyed for its own sake within the context of a church service on a Sunday or whenever we gather, or by us in the closet. We have hopefully come to an

understanding that worship if properly understood is much more than a thing we do but is much rather the person we need to become. It is not about the worship but it is about the walk of the worshipper and it is this reality that will determine whether the worship we offer is acceptable or not. And crucially whether or not it is in spirit and truth and, thereby, whether or not the person concerned is a true worshipper.

Where are we today with regards to worship in the church, perhaps we can find an answer in Exodus 32, and the scriptural picture that this provides for us. Indeed, a scriptural picture that will help us to understand what seems to be happening within modern worship practise today.

And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.

Exodus 32:5

Moses, their leader had disappeared up a mountain to commune with the Lord God and with Him the living faith of the people also seems to have vanished. As a result of this spiritual vacuum, Aaron, Moses' brother, fashions something concrete and tangible, something that they could see and touch as the focus for their worship. Indeed, something manmade that made them feel secure. Something that reassured them and helped them feel that they were not alone in the desert, and this thing was the Golden Calf.

However, by doing this, it is interesting to note, that actually they were not committing spiritual adultery or

indulging in idolatry here, look at how Aaron describes the festivities,

Tomorrow is a Feast unto the LORD

They were going to carry on worshipping their God, the one and only Lord God, the one who had miraculously set them free from Egypt, with all that this had entailed such as the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea on dry land. This is the same God who had kept them alive in the desert feeding them with Angel's food. This is the God they would be worshipping tomorrow, but tomorrow would be different. For tomorrow he would be given a new identity. No longer the great I am, tomorrow He was to be worshipped in a way that was very familiar with Batman's side kick Robin, as a holy cow. A very expensive and shiny cow, but a cow none the less.

Sometimes we can be blind to what we are actually doing and how far what we are doing is, from what we should be doing. Too often we thoughtlessly assume that the Lord will sanctify whatever we do in His name. However, as with the Golden Calf, as with the party that surrounded the new cart carrying the Ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6 and sadly as with rock concert that passes for Sunday worship they believed they could produce anything, call it worship and the Lord would be grateful. In each of these situations we are taking something from the profane world and offering up to a holy God as our worship, and like Cain before us it will be rejected.

Another account of worship gone wrong is found

in 2 Samuel 6. Here we find the new king, David, doing the right thing, he had decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant in from the cold. It had been kept in storage by the previous king, Saul, and it once again was needed in the centre of the nation's spiritual life.

King David gathered a great entourage of the great and the good of Israel to accompany the Ark on its way, and along with the many musicians and dancers there was going to be a party. The journey from Gibeah to Jerusalem, about 4 miles in length, was going to be joyous one. To cap it all, the King had remembered how the Ark had been returned to the nation by the Philistine priests and diviners a few years before¹⁰ and he decided that he would transport it in the same way. Ordering a brand new ox cart, oxen and a family team of drovers. All was going well until it wasn't,

And David and all the house of Israel played
before the LORD on all manner of instruments
made of fir wood, even on harps, and on
psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and
on cymbals.

And when they came to Nachon's
threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the
ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen
shook it.

And the anger of the LORD was kindled against
Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error;
and there he died by the ark of God.

2 Samuel 6:5-7

The oxen stumbled, the oxcart shook and one of the drovers died trying to problem solve. But, what was the problem here? Why did Uzzah pay such a heavy price? The answer is actually provided in the account of this story that we find in 1 Chronicles 15, where we read the following,

Then David said, None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites: for them hath the LORD chosen to carry the ark of God, and to minister unto him for ever.

1 Chronicles 15:2

David had learned a lesson, the Lord God will only take so much disobedience before He decides He needs to act in judgement. The music, the party, the brand new cart, the oxen and the drovers was how the world might carry the Ark of the Covenant and let us remember that the very presence of the Lord God was being carried within the Ark at this time. The word of God tells us that there was an alternative,

And of Kohath, ...their charge shall be the ark,...

Numbers 3:27a,31a

The Ark and the rest of the sacred elements of the tabernacle were only ever to be carried on the shoulders of those chosen for the task. Today, the same applies. As we have read in John 4 the true worship of the true worshipper is carried in spirit and in truth by those chosen through Christ for the task. Indeed, today, what lesson do we need to

learn, because the Lord God is the same today, yesterday and forever. The Lord God will only take so much disobedience before He decides He needs to act in judgement. The music, the party, the brand new cart... how long does the church and its worship have?

The problem today is largely a theological one. The prevailing spiritual theology in most of the evangelical/charismatic church's worship is that they do seem to be looking to an external force or anointing to come down onto a meeting which they judge to be the presence of the Holy Spirit. They even sing choruses which they believe are giving the Holy Spirit permission to join a meeting, such as 'Come, Holy Spirit, Come'; as if God needs an invitation. The problem is that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the spiritual realities at work here and it is therefore not based on any scriptural truth. Therefore, one of the two elements that we have shown to be necessary for worship to be acceptable by the Lord God is removed; this form of worship is not based on truth, or for that matter in reality it is not in the spirit either. Sad to say the consequence that flows from this according to the teaching of Jesus is that the Father is not looking for this type of worshipper because he cannot receive it as true worship because it lacks truth.

The truth being that the Holy Spirit has been sent to indwell us, so that we are even now in a better place than the twelve disciples who walked with the Lord.

And I will pray to the Father and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of Truth; whom the

world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not,
neither knoweth Him but ye know Him; for He
dwelleth with you and shall be in you.

John 14:16,17

As we have recognised through our study of true worship and the true worshipper our capacity to worship the Lord God comes out of the heart of an individual. It is clear that when we come to salvation and faith in Christ, from that moment, just like in the miracle of natural conception, spiritual life starts. We then begin the journey into discipleship and sanctification within which there will hopefully be a deepening of our experience of the Spirit of God within us. This will be largely determined by how much we allow Him access to our lives, as we become less He becomes more. But we are from the outset complete in Him as we are indwelt by the Spirit of God bringing life to our spirit which has lain dead in trespasses and sins¹¹. The Spirit is not some disconnected force that comes on us from the outside. This is the Old Testament spiritual reality, but as we have seen in the teaching of Jesus the hour is coming and now is when the true worshippers are now equipped to worship in the spirit and in the truth of the gospel. Therefore, when we go to church we do not go to find the Holy Spirit, hoping that He is so pleased with what is going on there that he decides to turn up and to join in. When we go to church we carry the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and we should look within ourselves for Him to express Himself through us. And it is when

we all arrive in one place and at the same time and with the same heart that true worship will happen.

We do not need to look outside of ourselves spiritually speaking. However, the situation is even worse than this because another outworking of this false ideology has developed over the last twenty years or so. During the so called Toronto or Father's Blessing it became the norm for people to travel to Toronto to 'catch the fire' as it was called. The Holy Spirit or as he is often described 'the anointing' was understood as residing physically in this spiritual 'hot spot' and those that did visit were understood to have received from him this particular anointing through the laying on of hands. There has been a series of these hot spots since, such as Pensacola and Lakeland in the US and more recently even in South Wales, however, throughout the same fundamental misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit can be seen here.

However, today there is a form of worship within which there is a tangible sense of the glory of the Lord, the Shekinah. A form of worship where the singing of songs is overtaken by singing which is orchestrated by the Spirit of the Lord. There is a rising of melody gently out of the hearts of those worshipping and expresses itself in a new song that can be carried both in words that are understandable and in the language of Angels as the participants worship in their own prayer languages. A form of worship where the prophetic gifting flows and even the miraculous occurs as those gathered touch and taste something of heaven.

Sadly, today, too often we have chosen our own way to worship Him. We have created a form of worship which is manmade and which makes us feel secure in ourselves. We

have created something that is visible, and which fills our senses and provides what we wrongly believe is a spiritual experience. We have created our own golden calf. We fool ourselves into thinking that we must be blessing God with the sheer professionalism of the musicians and soulful beauty that this form of worship engenders. If we add to this the sad reality that the focus of the songs sung within this form of worship rarely have any scriptural truth reflected in the words and are often even vehicles for heresy. Then, how can God be blessed by this when the two requisites for true worship, namely to be in the spirit and in truth, are missing.

However, what should our response be to our brothers and sisters caught up in such things? We need to share the heart of Moses. He chose to stand in the gap in intercession before God and to plead their case for mercy, so that there might be an opportunity for repentance and therefore change. Amazingly we are told that the first to change here was the Lord God where we are told that, He repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people. (Exodus 32: 14) and Moses then went down the mountain and stood in the midst of this people, who at this stage were naked, and when saw what had happened for himself he was angry. He shared the anger of the Lord, but he still was willing to stand in the gap for them and he offers them a stark choice,

Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and
said, Who is on the LORD'S side? let him come
unto me

Exodus 32:26a

Interestingly, we are told that it was only a remnant, the Levitical priests, who did respond to Moses' call and there were severe consequences that followed for the rest of the children of Israel. However, what we need to focus upon at this time is that there is an opportunity for change, the church can find again true worship. The new ox cart has to be left behind and the presence of the Lord has to be carried again by the priests who have been chosen, prepared and made ready for the task. And as we will see when we arrive in Jerusalem there will be a call for a people, like Moses, ready to stand in the gap in intercession for our brothers and sisters and to provide a way back to the Way, the Truth and the Life within the end time body of Christ. A people who will carry the same message as Moses,

Who is on the LORD'S side? let him come unto Him...

Our God is still a jealous God, jealous for our worship, jealous for his presence and jealous for his people.

For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.

Deuteronomy 4:24

He desires that His presence is still carried by those so chosen and prepared for the task, which includes you and me, if and only if, we are prepared and made ready. And the place within which this transformation might take place is behind the closed door of our closet, where the Lord God will be keen to join us.

Finally, with regards to the actual singing of songs, hymns, or whatever within the body, what does scripture actually have to say? There are not many passages that might help us here, however. In Ephesians 5 we do read the following,

...be filled with the Spirit;
Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns
and spiritual songs, singing and making melody
in your heart to the Lord;
Giving thanks always for all things unto God
and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus
Christ...

Ephesians 5:18b-20

The first element to notice is that this communal event is to be in the Spirit, which is described here as individuals opening their hearts one to another. This spiritual communication is horizontal in its trajectory, as individuals speak and sing to each other through what are described here as psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. A psalm, from its linguistic derivation, seems to be a piece of music that might have been accompanied on a stringed instrument such as a basic harp, such as we are told the psalmist King David played¹². The hymn was a song of praise and interestingly the spiritual song might be the same as the songs we find mentioned in Revelation where they described as 'new songs'.¹³ Perhaps we have described here the singing in the spirit that is described above, particularly because Paul mentions specifically that there are melodies

that are flowing out of the hearts of those gathered. The same three forms of song appear in Paul's letter to the believers in Colossae,

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Colossians 3:16

Here, Paul suggests that the corporate song singing; again horizontal in trajectory, was part of the means by which the word was disseminated, applied and understood one to another. Again, the singing was to be heartfelt.

The final scriptures come from 1 Corinthians 14, where we read the following,

How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

1 Corinthians 14:26

Paul teaches here that we should gather together having prepared in advance, no doubt by seeking the Lord, and when so guided to bring and share whatever that might have been. The list here does contain one sung element which is a hymn.

What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

1 Corinthians 14:15

In this verse Paul clearly accepts as spiritually normal singing in or with the spirit. And clearly if this difficult to understand then he must be referring to singing in tongues.

Therefore, against such sparse proof we might still be able to glean some idea of the early church's practise with regards to singing as part of their gatherings. It was in the spirit and would involve singing in the spirit or in tongues as lead by the Holy Spirit. The expectation was that those gathered were actively engaging their hearts or spirits. The song singing was varied in type, but it was consistent in its trajectory which was always vertical, thereby building up the body in its faith and truth, as we see described by Jude writing later in the first century,

But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Jude 20,21

And the point is... Worship and praise needs to be part of our journey. Worship, as we have seen, is a lifestyle. And day by day we are never too sure what we might encounter, however, in and through it all we have to be aware that we

are carrying a precious load, the weight of His presence. Our spirit now through Christ is indwelt or carries His Spirit each and every day. And similar to the Citroen 2CV car that was designed to carry a basket of eggs across a ploughed field without breaking any, we are now designed in Christ to carry the light burden of His Spirit through whatever comes our way and to do this with thanksgiving, praise and worship. Rejoicing in all things and all circumstances. Afterall, we are on our way to a marriage feast!

That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:27

Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.

And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.

And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the

testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

Revelation 19:7-10

Notes

1. See the chapter 'What is the Point of Being a Follower of Jesus' for a full teaching on this.
2. See Ephesians 6:14
3. See Romans 11:25
4. See 'We Shall Also Bear the Image of the Heavenly', chapter 2 Spiritual Life in the Garden, by the same author for a study of the spiritual truths that lie within the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 2, available free to download as an Epub or PDF document on the author's website: richard-flint.com
5. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19
6. We are called to give, not tithe.
7. Philippians 4:4
8. See 2 Samuel 6
9. Hebrews 12:1, 2
10. See 1 Samuel 6
11. See Ephesians 2:1-6
12. See 1 Samuel 16:23
13. See Revelation 5:9; 14:3

8

And the Point Is?

The reason for giving the text below in full, dear reader, is for us to take some time slowly reading these verses and inwardly digesting them before moving on. The hope is that we might get the point.

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time
past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called
Uncircumcision by that which is called the
Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;
That at that time ye were without Christ, being
aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and
strangers from the covenants of promise,
having no hope, and without God in the world:
But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes
were far off are made nigh by the blood of
Christ.

For he is our peace, who hath made both one,
and hath broken down the middle wall of
partition between us;
Having abolished in his flesh the enmity,
even the law of commandments contained in
ordinances; for **to make in himself of twain
one new man, so making peace;**
And that he might reconcile both unto God in
one body by the cross, having slain the enmity
thereby:
And came and preached peace to you which
were afar off, and to them that were nigh.
For through him we both have access by one
Spirit unto the Father.
Now therefore ye are no more strangers and
foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints,
and of the household of God;
And are built upon the foundation of the
apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself
being the chief corner stone;
In whom all the building fitly framed together
groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:
In whom ye also are builded together for an
habitation of God through the Spirit.
Ephesians 2: 11-22

All done? Ready, is everyone sitting comfortably? Then
lets carry on...

And the point is, what? Perhaps, in this passage in
Ephesians we do find that the beautiful kaleidoscopic

spectrum of all the threads and themes of scripture are focused to produce one single point of light, and that this point of bright, white, pure light falls here:

...for to make in himself of twain one new
man¹

One new man created as a living breathing corporate expression of the one perfect man, Jesus Christ. And this, achieved by the single most important expression of selfless love ever seen, that was offered to the world by a loving Father God and obediently delivered by His dear Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. A once and for all time event that both marks a spiritual watershed for mankind and provides everything that is required for the true purpose of Father God to be realised on earth.

Indeed, this is a purpose that takes us right back the sixth day of creation. On this day the creative purpose of Father God was fulfilled when He created a man in His own image,

So God created man in his own image, in the
image of God created he him; male and female
created he them.

Genesis 1:27

As we read on we find that this man is lost to God in the garden through disobedience. However, again as we read on and hopefully discover for ourselves, in Christ mankind is found once more,

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15:22

The possibility now is that there might be a righteous expression of humanity, the bride of Christ, on earth, a wonderful potentiality and for whom Jesus, the bridegroom, will return and take home to be with the Father, this is just what is described by Paul,

...even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:27

Moreover, the Bible provides us with another pair of scriptural ‘bookends’ that help us to grasp something of the wonderful complete work that Father God has achieved through His Son and by His Spirit. Indeed, what do we find expressed by Moses in the first verses in the Bible?

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and

darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1,2

The first creation was a move of the Holy Spirit, as is the new creation. And the Hebrew here carries beautiful imagery of a bird looking to build a nest in the soon to be created world. Indeed, as the witness of scripture declares, even before the foundation of the world creation would be seeded with light, love and a spiritual destiny for the elect of God within the new creation,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Ephesians 1:3-6

And in Genesis 12, we discover that the key conceptual component for us all to understand is that there is a promise of blessing that comes through Abraham to all mankind.

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:

And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

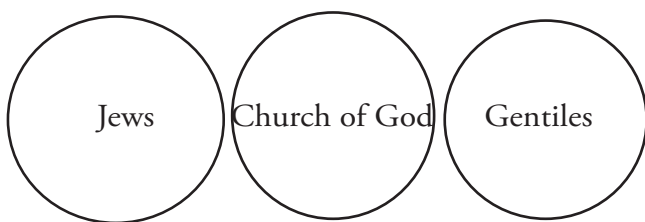
Genesis 12:2,3

And then, in Revelation 21 we find the culmination of all things.

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Revelation 21:3

Moving forward therefore, to find the point of it all, it will be helpful if we once again follow Paul's teaching as he unpacks for us just how this one new man is to be created in Christ. In **1Corinthians 10:32** Paul helpfully compartmentalises the whole of humanity into three basic groupings, so that at any one time, from the Cross, the whole of humanity can fall into one of these three categories, a Jew, a Gentile or a born again believer (the church of God).



Indeed, in **Romans 9:6** Paul importantly creates a distinction within Jewry itself, For they are not all Israel who are of Israel...

The point being made here is that to be truly a Jew it is more than just having a true lineage, there is a requirement for a true faith as well. This is a fundamental challenge to the spiritual complacency of the 'chosen people' that was an essential aspect of the message of John the Baptist,

Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:
And think not to say within yourselves, We have
Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that
God is able of these stones to raise up children
unto Abraham.

Matthew 3:8,9

Jesus also delivered a similar radical challenge to the people who were following Him,

I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek
to kill me, because my word hath no place in
you.

John 8:37

**Abraham's seed is a spiritual seed which needs to find
receptive soil in the heart of an individual,
both Jew and Gentile.**

However, Paul also uses the symbolism of an olive tree to demonstrate that the Gentile church is dependent on the Jewish spiritual heritage for its very life and growth

...and you, being a wild olive tree, were
grafted in among them, and with them
became a partaker of the root and fatness
(richness) of the olive tree

Rom.11:7

And as we have seen above, Paul states in his letter to the Ephesians that an essential unity, or as he describes it a 'one new man'², has been potentially created between the Jewish world and the Gentile world,

...that He might reconcile them both to God
in one body through the cross

Ephesians 2:16

Moving on, let us turn to Paul's letter to the Galatians where we read the following,

Even as Abraham believed God, and it was
accounted to him for righteousness.

Galatians 3:6

Reference is being made here to Genesis 15:6 and therefore, for all who would walk in his blessing faith would be the one key element that would be required, this point is clearly stated by Paul in the next verse, where we read,

Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.

Galatians 3:7

In the following verse Paul makes some stunning assertions,

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”

Galatians 3:8

God is described as preaching the gospel to Abraham and that the justification of the Gentiles by faith was always God’s intention. As we move to the end of the chapter, we find that Paul brings things to a dramatic conclusion. There is now no distinction through race, culture or gender.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

Our unity is in Christ, and as such we now, in spiritual reality, all share the same seed of Abraham,

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:29

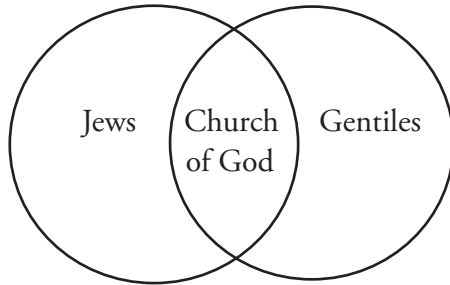
Indeed, in Christ, everyone, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, share the same seed of Abraham and therefore have a share in the same promise, and therefore,

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:13

We now share the same Spirit and the same spiritual genetic inheritance in Christ, and through the indwelling Spirit. The picture of humanity has now changed,

- 1) A believing Jew who is therefore of the seed of Abraham and through faith in Christ, a member of the body of Christ
 - 2) A believing Gentile who is in Christ and therefore of the seed of Abraham, and a member of the body of Christ
 - 3) A non-believing Jew
 - 4) A non-believing Gentile
- (Groups 3 and 4 lie outside of the blessing of Abraham and are in need of salvation)
as has the picture.



Therefore, in returning to our original passage of scripture in Ephesians, where we read the following,

For he is our peace, who hath made both one,
and hath broken down the middle wall of
partition between us

Ephesians 2:14

Paul is making the same point, and this is the point, that in Christ Jews and Gentiles find an unlikely but wonderful unity. He is using here the picture of the wall in the temple which prevented Gentiles on pain of death accessing the Holy Place in the Temple in Jerusalem. That wall spiritually has now gone, and one body, containing both Jew and Gentile, has been created in Christ by the cross,

Having abolished in his flesh the enmity,
even the law of commandments contained in
ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one
new man, so making peace;

And that he might reconcile both unto God in
one body by the cross

Ephesians 2:15,16

And This Is the Point, to make in himself one new man. A lost humanity brought home, brought back into the household of God and brought into a gathered community of love, unity, holiness, joy and peace in Christ and through His cross. This is the plan, this is our potential... when Lord, when will we come into it?

Let us leave the last word and the final challenge to Paul, perhaps here is the answer for all of us who want to follow Jesus?

...for ye are the temple of the living God; as
God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in
them; and I will be their God, and they shall be
my people
Wherefore come out from among them, and be
ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the
unclean thing; and I will receive you,
And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be
my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.
Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved,
let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the
flesh and spirit,

perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

2 Corinthians 6:16b-7:1

Amen.

