

HELP FOR CHURCHES IN CRISIS

About the Author

Ian Flanders has recently joined the radio production team that puts together *Serving Today* and other Christian programmes. He has over fifteen years' experience as missionary, Bible teacher and pastor.

Ian grew up in southern England, not far from London, in a Christian context. He heard the gospel regularly, but was always aware that he had not as yet made a faith commitment. As he left home to pursue his studies, he began seriously to question Christian teaching, but as he did so, through the Christian testimony of new friends, God graciously made everything crystal clear. Rather than allowing Ian to drift into a new life in the world, the Lord gave him new life in Christ through a personal faith in his death upon the cross.

As a response to the Lord's incomparable mercy, Ian had a growing awareness that he should make himself available to the Lord, to do his bidding. As a result he was led into full time Christian ministry.

Ian spent seven years in a large city in southern France, where he was mainly engaged in evangelism and Bible teaching amongst the immigrant community. During this period he also had some short stays in North Africa.

Following his marriage, Ian and his wife, H el ene went to North West France to oversee a small church planting work, also for a period of seven years. Sadly, this work was badly affected by various difficulties and crises. Some of these experiences have influenced the writing of this booklet. It is Ian's desire that others be better prepared, and more able to cope with similar problems that they might encounter in the course of their Christian ministry.

Why do things go wrong?

"Help for churches in crisis". This may strike you as a surprising title for a booklet, so let me explain what it is all about.

It is possible for pastors or church leaders to think that because God has promised to be with them, ministry will be really easy, and that looking after a church is quite straightforward. It is possible to think that success is guaranteed and will be painless. Now I am sure that you have met with problems in the course of your ministry. This is inevitable. Sometimes people can become disoriented during periods of crisis in church life, have doubts, and wonder what they have done wrong. Experience shows that being a church leader or pastor is not without difficulty and I want us to understand why that is so. I also want to help us to cope with the various struggles and problems that we might encounter in church life, in a way that is biblical and honouring to God. I want to reassure you that when things do go wrong in the church

this is not necessarily a sign of God's disapproval, nor of a lack of faith on your part, nor of failure.

So, what kind of issues will this booklet deal with? These can be gleaned by reading the New Testament for right from the very early days churches had difficulties and went through periods of crisis. The New Testament does not give us a picture of ideal, trouble free churches. No, they had to face up to some very real crises, things did go wrong. Some churches faced opposition and persecution. In other churches travelling preachers or local Christians tried to introduce false teaching. Sometimes folk could not get on with each other for various reasons. There were arguments and divisions. In other situations people who claimed to be Christians committed very serious sin.

You may already have met with similar sorts of difficulties in your own ministry. In all of these cases church leaders need to know how to react. Indeed many of the New Testament letters were written to address these kinds of problems.

Do not be surprised

I want to begin by simply underlining that, just as the first Christians were not surprised when things went wrong, so also, we should not be surprised. I would like to refer to a couple of passages in the New Testament. Firstly, Acts 4:23-31. The apostles Peter and John had been arrested for announcing Christ in Jerusalem. The local authorities then forbade them to preach the gospel. Yet, when they are

released and go back to report to the church they seem to accept that this sort of opposition should be expected.

I say this because they quote Psalm 2, which says: "*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed One.*" I believe these early Christians understood this verse in the following way – that just as a sinful world had violently opposed Jesus Christ, then this same sinful world would continue to show its hostility to Jesus by opposing those who follow Him, the church.

In a general way, Psalm 2 reminds us that the rulers and authorities of this world have, more often than not, resisted and opposed God and his purposes. The Psalm is also prophetic, telling us that the one whom God would send and anoint, that is Christ Jesus, would also encounter this hostility. Of course, the Jewish and the Roman authorities of the time, worked together to put Christ to death.

Then, I believe that the apostles saw themselves, and the church, as being the Lord's representatives on the earth. As such, they could expect that the nations, authorities and peoples of the world would continue to rage and plot against the church as an expression of their hostility to Christ. The trouble Peter and John had met in Jerusalem was proof of this conviction.

As an aside, it is comforting to note that just as Herod and Pontius Pilate's conspiracy to finish off Christ did not and could not succeed, in the same way, any attempt the world may make to extinguish the church will never succeed. Just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will work out his life giving purposes in and through the church until the day that Christ returns to take her into eternity.

Indeed the apostles really had no excuse to believe that life as a follower of Christ would ever be easy. For Jesus himself had warned them many times that this would just not be the case. We can read for example John 15:18-20: *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. Remember the words I spoke to you 'No servant is greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."* These words were spoken the night that Jesus was betrayed and led off to his eventual death. They cannot be misunderstood. Jesus was preparing his followers for the trouble that he knew they would meet sooner or later. I would suggest that the apostles fully expected to encounter problems, and for this reason they were better prepared to cope with them.

We too should expect that sooner or later difficulties will arise in church life. The better we have prepared for them, the better we will be able to steer the church through trying times. If we have some idea of the kind of difficulties that we may have to face, and that these things are to be expected, then, when they happen, we should not be taken unawares, we should be better able to cope spiritually.

Similarly, if we are able to think through some of the issues, and how we should react, beforehand, then we should be better equipped to deal with crises when they occur. This is the purpose of this booklet.

First steps when things go wrong

One important question that we can ask is this - what did the church in Acts actually do when they were confronted by a crisis situation?

There is a very important lesson for us in Acts 4. The first thing these early believers did was to meet together to pray. Their first reflex in a crisis was prayer. *"When they heard all this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God"*; Acts 4:24. Equally, when things go wrong for our churches, our first reflex must be to meet together to pray together.

It is interesting to note that these believers did not pray for the opposition to stop. Rather, they prayed for faithfulness and strength to accomplish the task that God had entrusted to them – that of preaching the gospel. *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness"*; Acts 4:29. They trusted that God was sovereign. They trusted that out of this apparent reversal for the church, God would do right, and act in a way that would bring honour to the Lord Jesus. It is interesting to note that in the book of Acts, following every period of crisis that the church faced, God overruled

and turned every apparent reversal into a glorious advance for his kingdom.

So then, a first lesson that we should particularly remember is this. We really should not be surprised when trouble strikes the church, when things go wrong. These difficulties should not throw us into confusion, doubt or panic. Instead, our first reflex should be one of prayer. We should pray for God's strength and for God's answers, trusting that he will respond and supply our need just as he did for those believers in Acts 4.

A second lesson that we should retain at this point is this: God has given us in his Word, the Bible, an immense and wonderful resource of wisdom. The Christians who met together in Acts 4 found that God spoke to them, in the scriptures, in a way that corresponded to their need and situation. God has continued to do so throughout history. When difficulties do arise, we too should consult the Bible, and we will find advice there that will help us in trying circumstances. We shall be looking at this God given counsel throughout this booklet. So, be reassured, when things do go wrong, hope is to be found in God and in his Word, the Bible.

Public enemy number one

I have just mentioned that we should not be surprised when churches meet difficulties because a sinful world is just as opposed to those who seek to follow Christ, as it was opposed to Christ himself. We need though, to recognise

that the church also faces an unseen enemy who is intent on causing as much evil and distress to the people of God as possible. The Bible speaks of an evil spiritual person called Satan, or the Devil, who has under his charge a host of allies known as demons or evil spirits. The Hebrew meaning of the word 'Satan' is adversary, or enemy, one who stands against God, against Christ, and against the church.

The Bible is fairly quiet about the activity of these evil spiritual forces and I am certain that God wants us to be more interested in knowing Christ than in knowing the devil. Nevertheless, we do know some things about him and we do need to be aware of his intentions and his general way of working.

Firstly, the devil tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent Jesus Christ from accomplishing his mission of salvation. In Luke 4:1-13 we read the account of when the Devil sought to tempt Jesus in the desert. He knew that Jesus had been sent on a mission by his Father, and the Devil sought to divert Jesus from that mission. He sought to undermine Jesus' submission and determination by making other options look more attractive. This is not the last time that the Devil attempts this. In the Gospels we read that sometimes the Devil even spoke through Jesus' disciples in an attempt to dissuade him from pursuing his mission. An example of this occurs in Mark 8:31-33. As Jesus was being put to death, Satan may have had the triumphant feeling that this was the end of the story, but Jesus was

raised from the dead. His is the victory through the cross and the resurrection, over Satan, over sin and over death.

Nevertheless Satan and evil spirits remain active today. Their desire is to enslave people into the destructive power of sinful passions, to blind people to the light of Christ, and to keep people from the liberating power of Christ (see for example 2 Corinthians 4:4; Luke 8:12).

Finally, and what is perhaps more relevant to our subject, Satan is the enemy of the church and will seek by all means possible to disrupt and trouble churches and believers alike. See for example 1 Peter 5:8 *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour”* (see also Ephesians 6:11-12).

We must remember though that the Devil is not God. He is limited in what he can do. The Devil has neither God’s power nor God’s knowledge. Nevertheless, there is one thing that he is very good at. Telling lies. The Greek root of the word ‘devil’ means malicious slanderer, that is, someone who tells lies in order to cause harm. He is very skilled at making unbelievers and Christians believe things that are just not true, and when we start to believe things that are not true, then that is when we can start to do things that are harmful, destructive and ungodly. When people start listening to the lies of the Devil they can soon become a source of trouble for churches.

The clearest example of this happening in the Bible is the encounter of Adam and Eve with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This snake was a physical incarnation of Satan, but this does not mean that all snakes are. We can read an account of what happened in Genesis 3. God had told Adam and Eve not to eat of a certain fruit in the garden. The serpent then appeared and started contradicting what God had said. He in fact made God out to be a dissimulating liar, which is the utmost slander. The serpent held out some seductive promises, all lies of course, but which Adam and Eve believed. The result was that Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and then had to face the consequences. They were thrown out of the Garden of Eden; they were deprived of fellowship with God and destined to die.

You see, Satan tries to make us doubt God’s Word, and he slanders God’s character. Satan will hold out seductive alternatives for us to believe, ideas or activities that may seem attractive, but really his aim is just to get our lives into an ungodly mess. We often speak of being tempted. This occurs when the devil makes something look desirable, and seeks to influence our decisions, but these things often turn out to be nasty traps which spoil lives, and which above all lead us away from God. When trouble arises in churches it is often because somehow the devil has succeeded in tempting someone to believe or do something that is contrary to what God has revealed in the Bible.

Resisting the enemy

It sounds as though we have a really dangerous enemy, but what can be done to thwart his efforts? James exhorts his readers to resist the Devil, promising them that he will have to flee. *“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the Devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.”* (James.4:7-8). This verse teaches that an attitude of submission to God, and a closeness in our walk with him, will go a long way to keeping us secure against the Devil’s attacks. See also 1 Peter 5:9 *“Resist him (that is the devil), standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”*

However, the passage in the Bible that perhaps best deals with this whole question is Ephesians 6:10-18. *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the Devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the*

Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

Here, the apostle Paul acknowledges that there is a whole host of evil spiritual forces that assail the churches. He exhorts his readers to “Stand firm” and to “Be strong in the Lord”. We can resist so long as we depend, not on ourselves, but upon the Lord to help us. In the verses that follow Paul compares the Christian to a soldier who puts on various pieces of armour in order to protect himself. Paul speaks of the importance of truth, of righteousness, of readiness, of salvation, of faith, of the Word of God, and of prayer. Now, without explaining these verses in any great depth, there are a few basic lessons I would like to leave with you.

Faith in God’s Truth

The first lesson is the importance of faith in the truth of the Word of God. To ‘stand firm’ is to be utterly persuaded that what God has said is true and to live daily in a way that is consistent with that conviction.

As I have already shown, Satan will lie to us in a whole variety of ways. As Christians we need to be able to discern truth from error, and right from wrong. To do so we need to have been taught the truth, and this is what Paul means when he speaks of having the belt of truth. We need to be well grounded or established in the teaching of the

Word of God. As Paul says elsewhere, we are to “*let the Word of God dwell in us richly*” (Colossians 3:16). To do so we must have a good understanding of the Bible and that means reading and studying it regularly, if possible with the help of reliable persons or books that will help us to grow in our understanding. If you are teaching in a church it is important that you help your congregation to grow in its knowledge and understanding of the Bible so that believers will know what is true and what is not. When problems or questions of doctrine or behaviour arise we must always ask ‘what does the Bible have to say on this matter?’

Not only do we need the belt of truth, but also the shield of faith. We can know what the Bible teaches, but a further question is this – do we believe it? Satan can put us under pressure with all kinds of thoughts and ideas. To employ the shield of faith is to say – ‘no, however things may seem, this is what God has said, I am going to believe him, and I am going to live my life accordingly.’

The shield of faith must also be used when the devil tries to slander us. He can plant thoughts in our mind that will make us feel very bad about ourselves, and thus seek to convince us that we are not really Christians. Faith believes God when he says that in Christ we have been cleansed, reconciled and adopted, and that we are secure in that position. This is what wearing the ‘helmet of salvation’ and the ‘breastplate of righteousness’ is really all about. Christ, in his great mercy, has clothed us in his

righteousness and salvation and it is upon this basis alone that God sees us as fit to enter his presence and live as his sons. Satan may seek to accuse us, but when we exercise faith in what Christ has said, done and given, then these accusations should be of no effect.

The second lesson is the importance of prayer. We have already seen in Acts 4 that when the church encountered difficulties the believers met together to pray. In Ephesians 6:18 (see above) Paul also stresses the importance of prayer. We are too weak and vulnerable to stand against the Devil in our own strength. When we pray we express our dependence upon God and he gives us his strength and all that we need in order to cope with a particular situation or crisis that the Devil may have provoked.

The Final Outcome

It may be quite discouraging to know that things can go wrong as we seek to serve the Lord by serving the church. It may even be frightening to know that we are engaged in this spiritual conflict with such a formidable enemy. We will almost certainly encounter periods of crisis in church life because we are involved in a struggle against the world, the devil and indwelling sin. We must learn from the Bible how to conduct ourselves during times of crisis. We must learn from these crises, which, in God’s hands can become stepping-stones towards spiritual maturity and greater effectiveness in ministry.

To conclude this chapter, I just want to remind ourselves that the final outcome, or victory, is secure. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 *“I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”* Church work might seem at times to be a long struggle. The church does sometimes seem to suffer reversals, and situations can deteriorate as a result of moments of crisis, but Jesus is saying that whatever anyone on earth or in the spiritual realms might throw against the church, he will finish the task, and his church will be built. We should take comfort and encouragement from that thought.

The apostle Paul had some extremely difficult experiences as he sought to serve God, so often things seemed to go terribly wrong, but he too had this assurance that the promises of God would never be thwarted – Romans 8:35, 37-39 *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Chapter 2 Persecution

Whilst in many countries Christians can live quite peaceably, there are numerous places throughout the world where the gospel is quite brutally opposed and where

Christians can suffer for their faith. Some of you may be in such a situation, and I am sure it is very difficult. I personally have lived, albeit briefly, in a country where there was much opposition to those who wanted to follow Jesus. I have met Christians who have been arrested, tortured and imprisoned. Others lost good jobs because of their faith, and others were completely rejected by their families. I have to say that those I met were lovely, faithful believers, despite their suffering and loss. I admire them greatly.

Opposition or persecution from those who live around us may take many forms. At its most severe and cruel Christians can be put to death, imprisoned, or tortured for their faith by the ruling authorities. In other places persecution may take the form of discrimination. Christians may find it difficult to get jobs or access to public services such as education, housing, or health. Believers may not be allowed to meet together, or may be very limited in their activities because of government restrictions. Alternatively, persecution may take the form of rejection by those who previously loved us, or by insults or mockery. Whatever the case, persecution is a very painful process and when it strikes it is easy for believers to wonder what has gone wrong.

Persecution in the Acts of the Apostles

There is much in the Bible on the subject of persecution. Just as people violently opposed Christ, they also opposed the church. As the apostles and other believers in New

Testament times sought to announce the gospel, they encountered much hostility. In Acts 4, Peter and John were arrested and forbidden to preach. In Acts 7 Stephen was stoned by a violent mob. In Acts 12 James was executed by Herod. In Acts 16 Paul was mobbed, arrested and imprisoned. Many other examples could be quoted.

You may think that the gospel is essentially a message of peace and love and wonder just how people can react so violently to such a message. However, whilst it is true that the gospel is a message of peace and love, it is more than that. If we want to have peace with God then Jesus made it very clear that we must repent; that is we must change, we must reject sin and error, and embrace truth and righteousness. Now, I think that people do not like being told that they must change. They do not like to be told that everything they have always believed is wrong, or that the way they behave is wrong. In a sense the gospel threatens to turn upside down a whole way of life and that can provoke quite a reaction. When people feel threatened they can become aggressive. Governments can also feel threatened by the gospel, which may challenge our rulers on issues such as social justice, hypocrisy and corruption. This can lead to a desire to quench Christianity so that their own position may be protected.

As we read the New Testament we can see this kind of thing happening. I could perhaps mention one example that is found in the book of Acts (18:23-41). When Paul was in Ephesus he had to face a riotous mob, stirred up by

a man called Demetrius. This man was a silversmith who made idols and he realised that if people started becoming Christians they would no longer buy his idols, and he would lose money. He convinced the mob that the gospel would threaten the cities' livelihood. Demetrius did not want to change, he did not want to lose the profit he was making from his wicked activity, he felt threatened and he reacted aggressively.

Comfort for the Persecuted

Whilst it is helpful to understand why persecution sometimes arises it is important to see what God has to say to those who are undergoing such trials. We shall consider first of all some surprising words spoken by Jesus; *“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven”*. (Matthew 5:10-11)

Some people might think that to be blessed is to be rich, successful, popular, and to have a trouble free life. However that clearly cannot be the meaning of the word here if Jesus says: “blessed are those who are persecuted”.

No, someone who is blessed is someone who has become an object of God's favour, someone who has received his special grace in Christ Jesus. Such blessedness is fundamentally spiritual and eternal and not material and

temporal. That is, we are blessed because of what God has given us and made us in and through Jesus Christ, and these blessings remain whatever the circumstances of our lives may be, and however painful these circumstances might become. Paul says in Ephesians 1:3 *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”* He then goes on to make a list of these blessings. The Christian is someone who has been chosen by God, he has been redeemed, forgiven, adopted, loved, and he has been given the hope of eternal life.

Now, these things are true of all believers, and if this is the case we need to understand of what particular comfort Jesus’ words ‘blessed are those who are persecuted’, can be to believers who are facing opposition.

Firstly, when people are being nasty to us because of our faith in Christ, we can feel pretty bad. We might feel that we are nobodies in the eyes of the world. We might feel as though we do not belong. We might feel rejected, or believe we have been cursed. It may be true that people think this of us, and treat us in such a way. However, for the Christian it is what God thinks of us that should be the most important. So, when Jesus says that you are blessed in the opposition you are suffering, he is saying that you are someone special to God, that you are someone important to God, and that you are an object of his special favour and grace. Now, that is something that everyone should be glad about.

Secondly, Jesus also says; ‘great is your reward in heaven’. Persecution can bring great loss and much pain, but Jesus says that this will be more than compensated for when we enter eternal life. Jesus is not indifferent to your loss and pain, but he has something far better for you that he is holding back until you reach heaven. The apostle Peter, writing to persecuted believers, says that they have: *“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:4). Our opponents can take many things from us, but they can never take away that which Christ keeps in heaven for us. Heaven might seem unreal and a long way off for those who suffer. However, we need to strengthen ourselves with the certainty of this hope. We can be sure of this hope because God has promised it, and God always keeps his promises. For the Christian, today might be awful, but we can be sure of a brighter future in the age to come. For the unbeliever, today might be very pleasant, but he can be sure of a dreadful eternity. Here is a quote from the apostle Paul, who suffered enormously for his faith: 2 Corinthians 4:17 *“Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”*

Wisdom and Courage

The Bible not only gives comfort and reassurance to the believer who is undergoing persecution, but also gives advice on how a Christian should conduct himself when faced with a climate of opposition and persecution.

On this question I believe that there are two extremes to avoid.

Firstly, the Bible teaches, for example in Romans 12:18, that we should “*if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*”. Paul is saying here, amongst other things, that we should not deliberately provoke trouble. Some today would suggest that martyrdom is a kind of fast track into a place of special honour with God, and they deliberately expose themselves to danger, thinking they will obtain a special reward in heaven. This is not at all biblical.

Jesus did say: “*blessed are those who are persecuted*”, but we must not misunderstand this verse. Jesus is reminding the persecuted Christian that he remains blessed despite all he is going through. His suffering is not a sign of God’s displeasure. Ultimately, what is important is not what the world thinks of the believer but that he has received God’s favour. This blessing is common, though, to every believer who remains faithful. Those who are persecuted are not some higher class of Christian.

At the same time, this does not mean that God is indifferent towards those who suffer in and for his name. We can say that God gives special grace or help to the believer to endure or to overcome a specific situation. Whatever you are going through, says the apostle Paul: “*My (that is God’s) grace is sufficient for you*”, 2 Corinthians 12:9. God is gracious to give encouragement, strength,

endurance and wisdom, according to your need. Now, obviously people who are facing acute opposition have in a sense a greater need of God’s enabling grace than others. We can be assured that God will meet their need. However, being persecuted does not set a person apart as being more honourable and we should not, then, deliberately provoke opposition.

It may be argued that most of the apostles were martyred and that we should follow their example. Tradition does say that eleven of the twelve apostles did die at the hands of those who opposed the gospel. However, in some of these cases there is little solid historical evidence to prove the point. Nevertheless, we can say that the apostles were faithful to the task of mission, but not necessarily reckless or suicidal.

In saying this I mean that when the apostles could avoid, or escape from dangerous situations, they did so. The early Christians were not foolhardy, but exercised wisdom. When persecution broke out in Jerusalem, following the martyrdom of Stephen, the believers scattered into safer parts of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). Similarly, when Paul felt that a situation was becoming too dangerous to stay in a town, he would often move on to the next one (see Acts 14:5-6, 19-20; 16:40; 17:5-10 for example). Equally Paul felt quite justified in appealing to the legal system in order to establish his innocence and obtain protection against those who were plotting his death (the account of which we can read in Acts chapters 21 through to 28).

This is not to suggest that as soon as Christians meet opposition they should defuse the situation by no longer preaching the gospel. This brings me to the other, perhaps more common extreme that I want to mention. It is so easy to be intimidated by opposition. It is so easy to fear the consequences of persecution to the extent that we no longer actually live out our faith publicly, or that we compromise with the wishes of those hostile to us. This desire to avoid conflict and to preserve our lives from pain is quite natural and understandable.

Nevertheless, situations do arise in which we are confronted with difficult choices. A choice sometimes has to be made between compromising or denying our faith in order to have an easy life, or, being faithful to Christ knowing that the consequences could be painful. Now, I am sure that Jesus did not enjoy going to the cross. He did not enjoy the injustice, the humiliation and the pain, but he chose such a path out of love, knowing that in this way he would obtain our salvation. When we are faced with difficult choices, which could involve suffering, pain and loss, Christ is not then asking us to do something he has not done himself.

In situations of persecution, our faithfulness to Christ is tested to its limits. During such times he is in a sense asking us if we love him more than we love our comfortable existence. Jesus said: *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it”* (Luke

9:23-24). Of course, Jesus has already proved upon the cross that he has loved us more than his own life.

It is probably fair to say that many are naturally rather weak and afraid when confronted by the spectre of persecution. How can we then find the courage to stand up for Christ?

Remember that in Acts 4, the apostles Peter and John had been arrested for proclaiming Christ and then released, on condition that they stop preaching the gospel. The church then met to pray about the situation. It is interesting to note that they did not ask God to stop the opposition. Instead, they asked him for boldness, or courage to continue preaching despite the opposition. *“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness”* (Acts 4:29). This is quite an example, but again a reminder of the importance of prayer. It is true that we are often fearful or anxious, and for this reason we need to pray for God’s special help, that he might give us the courage to stick to our convictions. We see in Acts 4 that God did answer the believers’ prayer. He sent his Spirit to strengthen and make bold the believers. *“After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly”* (Acts 4:31). We can be sure that if we pray in the same manner, then God will answer by giving us the courage to act according to our convictions.

I could sum up at this point by saying, on the one hand we should not be going out deliberately looking for trouble, but on the other hand, when trouble arises we should not be doing everything to avoid it. This may sound a bit like walking a tightrope. Every situation is a special case and requires of those actually going through it to come up with their own answers. However, there is a need to find a right balance between exercising wisdom and courage. I want to stress again that a church that will successfully steer itself through a time of opposition or persecution will be a praying church, and a church that seeks guidance in the Bible, God's Word.

Love your Enemies

I want to move on now to look at some counsel that the apostle Peter gives in the first letter that bears his name. Peter was actually writing to believers who were facing the ordeal of persecution. Peter was also writing out of experience as one who had already been arrested for his faith on at least three occasions (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-20; 12:1-12).

It would be worthwhile reading the whole of Peter's first epistle, but for the moment I would just like to concentrate on a couple of verses – 1 Peter 2:12, 15: *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”* And *“For it is God's will, that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”*

Peter exhorts the Christians he writes to, to live out their faith publicly by being good and by doing good. Now, this sounds like something that all Christians should be doing at any time, but we must remember that Peter places this instruction in the context of a time of opposition, and we need to think about it in that context. This fact will make quite a difference to how we apply this thought.

I believe that in these verses Peter is working out the implications of Jesus' teaching that we should *“love our enemies”* (Matthew 5:44).

If Christians are to 'be good' and 'do good' that means first of all that they should avoid all negative reactions to opposition. We should seek to avoid all feelings of anger and hatred towards those who oppose us. Equally we must abstain from revenge and violence and not seek to harm in any way our persecutors. This is a radically different way to behave, but it is the path that Christ took and we are to follow his footsteps.

Now, it's one thing to abstain from evil, but Peter actually goes further than this.

He is telling Christians they should be different in a very positive way. They are to be seen to be good and to do good in the places where they live. Christians should live good lives by upholding and practising high standards of morality. Christians should also do good around them and

show love practically by helping their neighbours or communities.

So, what has all this got to do with being persecuted? There are a number of comments I would like to make:

Firstly, if we respond to evil with good, to hatred with love, then we can maybe defuse a hostile situation and avoid an escalating vicious circle of violence. The Christian must seek to break the chain of animosity by being ready to forgive and ready to exploit every possible avenue for reconciliation.

Secondly, some opposition may be due to prejudice or hearsay. Sometimes false rumours can spread about what Christians believe and do, and then when people see our good lives they may realise that these rumours are false and so they stop their opposition. As Peter himself states, this kind of attitude can sometimes ‘silence the talk of ignorant men’.

Thirdly, some unbelievers may want to take legal action against us, but if no wrong can actually be found in our lives then that can be extremely difficult to do. The lives of the prophet Daniel and the apostle Paul go some way to illustrating this point.

In all of these cases it can be seen that it is ultimately for our own good that we behave in this peaceable and loving way. However, it is also true that the witness of changed

lives, of good lives, is very powerful and may serve to help others come to faith in Christ. This is probably what Peter means when he says ‘they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us’. That is, there are those who will give thanks to God for our good lives, because it is through them they came to knowledge of God. If others’ lives are transformed, and if communities are improved by Christian witness and loving action then there will be many winners.

Nevertheless we have to be honest and say that this recipe of being good and doing good cannot be guaranteed to defuse a conflict situation. It can work, but we have to be realistic and say it will not always work. However, we are asked to be good and to do good because that is what is pleasing to God. Beyond that, conducting ourselves in such a way can bring peace, over time, to some hostile situations. Nevertheless, in other cases our opponents can be so deeply entrenched in their opposition to God that nothing will change them. In such situations Peter’s advice is still the best course of action because it’s that which honours God. Our motivation and desire should always be to do that which pleases God.

A Final Promise

I would like to round off our discussion of persecution with a verse that we find in 1 Peter 1:5. As he writes this to these persecuted believers, he reminds them that they are: *“shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last times.”* However nasty people may be, and however weak and vulnerable we

may feel, God has made a promise. We will one day enter into the fullness of our salvation, the resurrection to eternal life. Men can never take that hope away from us, because it is a promise that is guaranteed by God's power. May this thought be a source of encouragement and strength to you.

Chapter 3 Relationship Problems

The Bible presents the church as a harmonious community, a new society where brotherly love is the example. This is certainly the ideal we should be striving towards but Christians remain imperfect and there is plenty of scope in church life for believers to offend and hurt each other, and for relationships to become strained and broken. For this reason this chapter will address the whole question of what to do when relationships go wrong in church life.

Why do Christians sometimes fall out?

This is certainly not a new problem. We can detect from the New Testament that this type of problem was encountered right from the early days of the church. For instance, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes: *"I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other"* (Philippians 4:2). Clearly there was some tension between these two ladies. It is hard to tell what had happened but some clues in Paul's letter may suggest that there were problems of selfish ambition and rivalry in the church, and that this was spoiling the quality of fellowship. It may have been the case that the source of the rivalry was this very disagreement between these two ladies.

It has to be said that even the apostle Paul was not exempt from becoming entangled in relationship problems. We read in Acts 15:36-40 that he so fell out with his once dear colleague Barnabas that they went their separate ways: *"They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company"* (verse 39). Apparently, the dispute was over whether to allow a third person, Mark, who had failed in some way, to be allowed to join them once again in their missionary endeavours. Barnabas was favourable. Paul was not. Sadly they could not settle their differences, although we do read that in later years Paul had become reconciled to Mark, and fully accepted him as a co-worker (2 Timothy 4:11): *"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."*

In my experience as a pastor I think I have perhaps met with two types of problem, which can badly affect relationships, the first far easier to deal with than the second.

The first would be offence and hurt caused because of misunderstandings that arise because people are different.

Here is an illustration of what I mean: I remember being invited to the home of a poor family in Morocco. Now, they served me a boiled egg to eat, and I knew that it was their last egg and that they were depriving themselves in order to exercise hospitality. Well, for me it would have been polite to refuse to take that egg and to insist that they

keep it for themselves. However, I knew that had I done so they would have been quite offended. So, I took the egg, even though, as an aside, I really do not like boiled eggs.

Anyway, this is just to prove the point that offence can be caused, and relationships strained through simple misunderstandings, just because we do not know each other well. We have different personalities, different cultural backgrounds, different educations, etc. And the bigger the differences the greater the scope there exists for problems arising out of misunderstandings or ignorance. In the early church relations were sometimes quite strained between Jewish and Gentile believers because of their different cultural and religious backgrounds, and these issues needed to be worked through. Normally a Jew would not have been allowed to eat at the same table as a non-Jew. Some Christian Jews carried this over into the church and would not eat with Christians of pagan or Greek origins. We can imagine the offence that this caused, but it was some time before such prejudices and barriers were overcome.

The second type of problem that can strain relationships is rather more painful and difficult to deal with. It concerns the whole problem of sin. Christians can sometimes have attitudes and behave in ways that are extremely hurtful because they are not seeking to master, or put to death sinful tendencies.

The Bible addresses this very issue. For instance, when we read Paul's letters we can find verses like this: "*get rid of anger, rage, slander, and filthy language*", Colossians 3:8; or again: "*the acts of the sinful nature are obvious – hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, envy*" (Galatians 5:20).

Now if Paul found it necessary to write in such a way then these kinds of sin, with all their ugly consequences for relationships, must have been present in some of the Christians making up these churches. Sin, by its nature, not only separates us from God, but often it separates us from our fellow human beings by destroying the fabric of our relationships. Sometimes this occurs slowly over time, sometimes very quickly. Whilst the Bible recognises that this problem exists, it certainly does not approve. Rather, we are told in no uncertain terms to deal with this kind of sin, to get rid of it. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul goes on to write: "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires*", (Galatians 5:24); and to the Colossians: "*Put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature*" (Colossians 3:5). So then, Christians should have a ruthless attitude towards their own sin, condemning it in themselves, and taking the necessary steps to deprive it of life.

In my experience if relationship problems are not successfully dealt with quickly and properly, then they tend to worsen and become a festering sore poisoning the life of

the fellowship. This is because when people fall out they tend to try to find others who will take their side, and everyone can get dragged into the problem. Equally, visible bad attitudes and behaviour tend to be rather contagious. If not dealt with these conflicts can endanger the whole life of a church. It really is essential promptly and fairly to settle these matters.

Encouraging Good Relationships

It is important that church leaders, in their teaching and pastoral ministry, attack this problem on two fronts. Firstly, prevention, that is how to encourage loving attitudes that will avoid or minimise difficulties arising. Secondly, cure, that is how to resolve problems and to promote reconciliation and forgiveness when conflicts do occur. We will spend some time on each of these aspects.

However, before we do so, I would just like to issue an exhortation to all church leaders who might be involved in this type of situation. Jesus said: *“how can you say to your brother ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”* (Matthew 7:4-5). We need very carefully to examine our own lives, and deal with anything the Lord points out, before we can hope to be able to deal with the relational tangles and conflicts involving others. We need to be serious about dealing with sin in our own lives before we can deal with sin elsewhere.

We dare not approach people with an attitude of superiority, and as we become aware of our own shortcomings it will help us to come to others with humility.

So then, sometimes relationships can be difficult in churches. People can fall out, or find it hard to get along. Let us then have a look, first of all, at what we should be teaching believers in order to help prevent these troubles from arising.

Here is a key Bible text, found in Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:2-3). *“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”* There is a lot of profitable teaching packed into these verses.

First of all, Paul reminds us of our high calling. Throughout Ephesians he reminds believers that they have been brought into a new relationship with God. We are reconciled to God; we have been adopted as his children. He has given us new life in and through his Spirit, and we have the hope of eternal life. These are all wonderful truths, but along with this new relationship, Paul is reminding believers that they need to live according to new standards. God expects our behaviour to change and people must understand that.

Paul expects this newness of life, new attitudes and behaviour to be worked out in the life of the church. The church is in a sense to be a new society, a new community, which God has brought into being, and which is to live under Christ's loving but demanding Lordship. The church is to be a model of how human relationships are supposed to work.

We can first of all note that in churches we do not necessarily choose who our new brothers and sisters in Christ are. There can be quite a mixture of different sorts of people, with different backgrounds, cultures and personalities. This was reflected in New Testament churches. There were Christians of Jewish origins, others who were Greek, or Roman, or from a pagan background. There were rich and poor, educated and uneducated, slave and free. This can all be very enriching, but also gives plenty of potential for relationship problems.

In this kind of context, Paul says that we must make every effort to maintain unity and peace. We need to realise that harmony and good fellowship do not come automatically.

They take a lot of hard work from everyone concerned and church leaders need to be helping their congregations to see and overcome the dangers. Unity and peace depend on everyone making an effort to maintain them. Every member must see this as an important and worthwhile responsibility, and something to which each individual must contribute.

So then, just how can each believer contribute to peace and unity in a fellowship? Paul makes it very clear that this is a question of attitudes. Christians are told they must love each other, and we are talking here about a Christ-like love, and not a sentimental or romantic feeling. The Greek word that Paul uses in this text is agape. Agape, or Christ-like love, is that attitude and action which fully takes into consideration the needs and interests of others, independently of whether a person deserves it or not, independently of whether a person is lovable or not.

This is exactly the type of love that Christ displayed on the cross. In our sin we were completely undeserving and unlovable and yet Christ put aside his own interests. On the cross he put our needs first, and he paid that incredible price that obtained the forgiveness of our sins and so many other blessings besides. This is an example of love that we are to seek to put into practice in our churches. Take note of what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi: *“Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 2:2-5).

Now, Jesus Christ died for our sins and, obviously, as Christians we are not called to die for each other's sins. So

then, how does this Christ-like love translate into everyday church life?

Returning to the text in Ephesians, under the umbrella term of agape, or Christ-like love, Paul gives us a number of attitudes which define, in a sense, how this type of love should affect our relationships. He speaks of “humility”, of “gentleness”, of “patience”, and of “bearing with each other”.

‘Humility’ is that attitude which gives respect and consideration to others, to their needs and interests, even above our own. Humility excludes pride. We are not to act as if we are superior to others, but rather we are to consider them as important, valuable persons.

‘Gentleness’ is that ability to control ourselves in such a way that we do not say or do things that might hurt others, even when we feel we are being provoked.

‘Patience’ and ‘bearing with one another’ refers to our attitude towards the weaknesses and failings of others. These should not become a source of irritation, contention or criticism. Rather we are to accept others, and offer them compassionate help where possible, and this, in the knowledge that we also are far from perfect.

This might all strike us as quite a challenge, and we can wonder whether we can realistically expect to achieve this ideal. However, I do believe that we can go a long way to

nurturing brotherly love and peaceful and harmonious relationships. It will not be easy and everyone will have to work hard at it, denying self in some way. That is why it is important for church leaders to grasp the importance of Paul’s teaching. We need first and foremost to examine our own lives and to be an example of these things. We also need to teach and encourage other believers to move in this direction. It will not, I repeat, be easy, and along the way we may encounter some painful situations where relationships have broken down. Such occurrences are difficult to deal with, but we will soon be looking at some Biblical advice on these matters. In the meantime, here are two more exhortations from the writings of the apostle Paul: *“Therefore as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive, as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity”* (Colossians 3:12-14). Now, on the need for us all to push on from where we are, and head towards the ideal, Paul says of himself: *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me”* (Philippians 3:12).

Blessed are the Peacemakers

In the real world, and even in churches where believers are seeking to make progress towards the ideal of brotherly love, Christ like love, things can go wrong, relationships

can break down. It is very sad to have to say it, but Christians do sometimes fall out. They can so easily offend and hurt each other. However, it is the role of church leaders to try to encourage people involved in such situations to put the past behind them, and to give the relationship a new start, hopefully on a better footing. The words the Bible uses are forgiveness and reconciliation. We can now read a couple of texts on this subject.

Paul writes to the church in Ephesus: *“be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* (Ephesians 4:32); and Jesus spoke these words *“if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother...”* (Matthew 5:23-24).

Firstly, I should explain this whole matter of offerings and altars. We have to remember that Jesus was speaking in a Jewish setting, at a time when temple worship and the Old Testament rituals had not yet been set aside. Jesus is recommending to his Jewish listeners that if they have a serious relationship problem, they should deal with it in a satisfactory way before going to accomplish any worship at the temple. In a more general way, Jesus seems to be saying that being reconciled to our brothers and sisters is even more important than worship. He may even be suggesting that God does not look with favour upon our worship if we have bad attitudes in our heart towards any

fellow Christians. He could even be saying that if we are out of fellowship with another Christian because of unresolved relationship problems, then we are out of fellowship with God.

Jesus' words are certainly hard hitting. He wants to underline just how essential it is for Christians to maintain good, peaceable relationships. This is a serious issue, one that just cannot be neglected.

The Bible states clearly that where brotherly relations have broken down, forgiveness and reconciliation are the goal, but how do we set about getting there? How can pastors help Christians who have fallen out? A key Bible text is once again found in Matthew's gospel.

Jesus says: *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him your fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over”* (Matthew 18:15). Jesus is saying here that the two persons involved should make every effort to sort things out between them, without at first involving anyone else. Already this is to swim against the tide of what usually happens.

We can all understand that it is very difficult for someone who has been offended to go and talk to the person who has hurt them. Generally we go to talk to someone else and this usually involves complaining, gossiping, or criticising the person who has offended us. This kind of attitude is very natural, but according to the Bible sinful,

and only tends to generate further problems. The second person might hear about what the first person has said of him and also start going about giving his point of view. In this way the whole fellowship begins to be involved and poisoned by a conflict situation.

I trust that we can see that great damage can be done in this way, and so what should we do if someone comes complaining to us about someone else's behaviour?

I believe that our initial reaction should be to encourage that individual to go and see the person he is criticising or complaining about. We need to help them see that Christian love dictates that forgiveness and reconciliation must be our goal. We need to encourage them to have a humble and gracious attitude and we need to assure them of our prayers for it is true that this kind of initiative is never easy.

Having got this far, what should this private meeting between the two individuals concerned involve?

The best-case scenario is that both parties will come desiring reconciliation. If that is to happen both will need to adopt attitudes of gentleness and humility. The person who has been offended will need to be gentle in the way he explains how he has been hurt, and humble enough to put aside his bad feelings and to say sincerely that he is ready to forgive. The individual who has committed the offence will need to be humble enough to admit that he has been

wrong and to say that he will do all that he can to change in order to avoid further problems. It is my view that true reconciliation cannot take place unless we have sincere forgiveness on the one hand and sincere repentance on the other.

Of course it is often the case that both parties involved in a broken relationship feel offended by the other. Here it is necessary that both seek to repent and that both be ready to forgive.

If at first you do not succeed...

This process of reconciliation is really lovely when it takes place but it will only be successful so long as both parties really cooperate, and exhibit these Christian virtues of humility and gentleness. I wish I could say that this was always the case but sadly situations can be rather more complex than they first appear and sometimes one or other of the individuals is just not ready to resolve things in a biblical way.

Jesus was very realistic on this matter. He knew full well the pride of men's hearts and how difficult it sometimes is to solve the problems that create conflict. For this reason, in Matthew 18 he gives further advice on what to do in such cases. Jesus says: *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the*

church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

The solemn severity of this text shows us how serious the issue is. We cannot just pretend that it is not there and hope that the problems will go away. They have to be worked at. So what practically is Jesus telling us to do?

If two believers cannot sort out their problems by themselves it becomes necessary for others to become involved. However, I would stress once again that the goal remains to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation. Although the text says that anyone can get involved at the invitation of one of the parties, I would suggest that this be one of the church leaders, who preferably should take with him a couple of other mature believers to act as witnesses.

The need for witnesses could be for one of two reasons. They could be direct witnesses of the problem being tackled. They may have seen or heard themselves something of the problem that has arisen. They may be able to give their view of what has happened and help to assess what is true and fair in the matter.

I think it more likely though that they are to be witnesses of what happens during the actual meeting. Following a private meeting both individuals will have their own version of events which may not seem to match up and it is difficult for others to know to what extent each or the

others account is reliable. If there are witnesses present whilst discussions are being held these will be able to give a more objective account of what goes on between the two parties.

Now, it is necessary to discuss what our role should be if ever we are involved in such a meeting. Firstly we need to stress to both parties that the reason we are there is to repair something that is broken, the goal of all this is to reach a position of forgiveness and reconciliation. We need to underline that if this is to be achieved it will need both individuals to cooperate and to display the Christian virtues of humility and gentleness. Having done this we need to listen attentively to what both parties have to say, to their grievances and explanations. We need to try to understand what has gone wrong and clearly identify what obstacles remain, preventing reconciliation.

At this point it may be best to consult the opinions of the other witnesses in order to come to a common assessment of the situation. We are going to need to be as fair as we possibly can. But we are also going to have to say to one or both of the individuals involved where they are going to have to change attitude in order to achieve reconciliation. If one or both are clearly not acting in a biblical way, then gently, but firmly they need to be encouraged to follow a more Christ-like path.

When all else fails

Knowing human nature as it is I do not think we will always succeed. In many cases there will continue to be

resistance to this process. Nevertheless, I do not think we should limit ourselves to one attempt at reconciliation; it may take a long slow process to achieve the desired result. However, Jesus does indicate that where one or other of the individuals stubbornly and flagrantly refuses to follow clear biblical counsel then the church is to meet together in order to agree, in Jesus' words, to "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector".

Tax collectors might not be very popular even today but we need to take time to understand what Jesus really means here. Jesus was teaching in a Jewish context where religious folk considered themselves out of fellowship with particular groups of people – notably with pagans (non-Jews), but also with those who sinfully collaborated with pagans, in this case corrupt tax collectors, who were Jewish but who collaborated with the Roman occupier for their own personal financial gain. A religious Jew, in particular a Pharisee, established certain rules that meant that he could not do certain things with those who were considered excluded from fellowship. Most importantly they were not allowed to sit down and eat with such people, for they thought that in doing so they would become tainted with impurity. Now, I do not believe that Jesus was endorsing the Pharisees' thinking, for Jesus did actually eat with such people and criticised the Pharisees for not doing so. Jesus is however taking an example of what went on around him and saying that there are in fact circumstances in which we should act in much the same way. That is we should exclude from fellowship any individual who adamantly and

persistently refuses to travel along the biblical pathway of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. When everything else has been tried, some form of disciplinary measure is necessary for those who resist the rule of Christ.

What practically, does it mean to exclude someone from fellowship?

It could mean that we do not allow the person to participate in the Lord's Supper. It could mean that we do not allow him to attend meetings. It could mean that we do not associate with him in any way at all. Whatever the case it is a last resort, but a necessary one, which really shows the seriousness of the matter. It shows that the church is a new community of which Jesus expects radically new standards of behaviour.

I would add and underline that the exclusion is not definitive. Rather it is designed as a statement whose intention is to cause the person to think over the seriousness of his misbehaviour. However, as soon as he decides to reconcile himself to his brother and to the church, then he should be welcomed back into fellowship.

Preach Christ Crucified

To conclude this chapter I would just like to give a piece of general advice concerning our preaching. I believe that we should preach regularly on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for this is the price paid, the depth of love that God expressed that we might be forgiven and reconciled to him.

I believe that as Christians meditate on the meaning of the cross they will be more ready to undertake this process of forgiveness and reconciliation with each other. As the apostle Paul has already reminded us, we are to forgive because Christ has first forgiven us.

The active involvement in sorting out relationship problems is probably the most demanding and draining aspect of pastoral work. Unfortunately that is why it can be neglected, and so problems get left to fester where they can often spoil church life. Jesus assures us that whenever we are striving for reconciliation, he is with us and we participate with him in this highest of callings. *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God”* (Matthew 5:8).

Chapter 4 Dealing with False Teaching

In this chapter I want us to consider the whole topic of false teachers and how to protect our churches from the erroneous ideas that they can bring. A false teacher is someone who tries to persuade Christians that they must believe or do something that is in clear contradiction to the plain teaching of the Bible. Such people may come into the church from outside. Or it can sometimes be a member of the church who begins to go astray in his thinking and starts to try to get others to follow him. There was quite a lot of this going on in New Testament times. For example, when the apostle Paul said farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus he issued this warning: *“I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and*

will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So, be on your guard!” (Acts 20:29-31).

Passion for the Truth

In fact, probably most of the New Testament epistles were sent to advise churches, or church leaders, who were having to deal with false teaching in one form or another. One example would be Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Here is an extract: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are trying to throw you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.”* (Galatians 1:6-8). These sound like really harsh words and we need to understand what was going on for Paul to have to write in such a way.

Just as an aside, these verses really seem to express Paul’s passion for the gospel, for the defence of the truth, and we need to ask ourselves whether gospel truth is so important to us that we too are similarly passionate about its defence.

A Gospel Worth Defending

As we read on in Galatians we discover that the main issue at stake is circumcision. It would appear that some persons of Jewish origins who claimed to be Christians, were

saying to these believers of pagan or Greek origins that, in order to be good, proper Christians they must be circumcised and observe many other points of both the law of Moses and Jewish customs. This is in plain contradiction to the instruction of Paul and all the other apostles.

The main thrust of New Testament teaching is that God accepts us into fellowship with himself, and he adopts us as his very own children, not on the basis of something that we have done or could do, but on the basis of what Christ has done for us. We cannot do anything to merit or obtain God's favour; we receive his blessings by believing all that Christ accomplished for us through his death and resurrection.

The Galatian Christians had believed this gospel, and by faith alone they had entered into the reality of its blessings. Now someone was telling them that there was something more to do, that they must be circumcised if they were to retain God's favour. The problem with this is that if they were to trust in circumcision for salvation, they would no longer be trusting in Christ. Their faith would be in what man can do, and not in what Christ has done. *"I, Paul, tell you, that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ ... For in Christ Jesus*

neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value" (Galatians 5:2-4, 6).

This brings us back to the whole issue of faith verses works, which is what really distinguishes the gospel of Jesus Christ from all other human religious endeavour. On the basis of the cross of Christ, God graciously, mercifully, generously gives his favour to all who will believe. On the other hand all human religious endeavour: good works, law abiding, rituals, whatever, will never be enough to satisfy God and so gain his attention.

Danger Ahead!

I hope we can in this way begin to understand just why false teaching can be dangerous and why Paul was so passionately concerned to counter it. We do not seek to counter false teaching just because we like the intellectual exercise, or because we want to win an argument. We must do so reluctantly, but because it represents a real danger. Our motivation in contending for the truth of the gospel is to honour God and to protect or care for the church, the group of believers that form Christ's body.

A first danger that false teaching brings is that of division, disunity, arguments and disputes. When someone brings in new and false ideas people will start to argue over the point in question, they will begin to fall out, and they will begin to take sides. All this is painful and disruptive and stops the church from being a loving community, and hinders it in its mission of proclaiming the gospel to the world

around. However, as terrible as all this is, I think there is a far greater danger that false teaching can bring, a threat that really aroused Paul's righteous anger.

This threat is that false teaching can potentially be very harmful to a person's faith, his Christian experience, and his Christian walk. Returning to Galatians, Paul does not go as far as saying that they have lost their salvation as a result of the new and false teaching. He does; however, seem to indicate quite clearly that by following such a path they would lose much of the experience of Christ's blessings. Paul compares works and faith to being a slave and being an adopted son in a rich family. *"God sent his Son To redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights as sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. Formerly, when you did not know God you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?"* (Galatians 4:4-9). To go back to a religion of works is like preferring to be a slave rather than an adopted son. Really there is no comparison! Being a slave is fearful and tiresome. Being a son is liberating and joyful. False teaching can lead us into bad believing and bad behaviour. This saddens the Spirit of God and limits his work in our lives, and that is the real tragedy of false teaching. It leads

people to accept what is second best, or worse. It can give people feelings of false assurance, or lead them to feel guilty anxiety. False teaching ultimately deprives us of the fullness of grace that God wants to pour into our lives. The gospel really is our most precious treasure and something that is worth all our effort to defend.

God's Truth for God's People

The whole question of how we tackle this problem of false teaching will be dealt with in two parts for I think we need to be concerned with both prevention and cure. By prevention I mean teaching believers, helping them to recognise error from truth, to understand the dangers, and exhorting them to remain firmly attached to the truth when actually confronted by false teaching in its various forms. By cure, I mean that which we need to do to correct or repair a situation where false teachers have actually gained an influence and already done damage. Included in this is how we actually deal with the persons who are spreading the false teaching.

Concerning the practicalities of protecting a fellowship from false teaching, the answer is quite simple, but nevertheless extremely important. Those who have a teaching role in the church must apply themselves to the task of teaching God's truth to God's people. Believers will only be able to recognise truth from error to the extent that they have been taught to do so from those that God has gifted to teach. This really underlines the responsibility of

the teaching ministry. It is not something that should be undertaken lightly.

The scriptures themselves back up this point. *“All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”* (2 Timothy 3:16 – 4:5).

Paul had sent Timothy to the church in Ephesus in order to try to sort out some problems, one of which was a certain number of false teachings. Paul wrote 2 Timothy to advise his younger colleague about how to put some of these problems right.

This text reminds us that much false teaching is attractive; it wouldn't be such a problem if it were not. The Christian message is in many ways demanding, as is Christian

discipleship, because it deals with the root problem of the human condition – sin. However, people do not really want to deal with this problem in the way that God wants us to, mainly because of sinful pride. So, any form of teaching that claims to be Christian but which offers easy answers or which appeals to sinful desires will often get a good crowd of sympathisers.

We can sense from Paul's advice to Timothy, that the task of teaching the truth can sometimes be a lonely and arduous one. This is because to do so is often to swim against the tide of popular opinion. It falls to us who have such a responsibility not to get swept along with the tide. Those who are church leaders must be very careful to remain faithful themselves to the apostles' teaching as found in the Bible.

The Bible, rather than what the men of this world think, must remain the highest authority and influence, defining and controlling what we believe. As Paul reminded Timothy, 'all scripture is God breathed'. That is, all that we find in the Bible has been breathed out by God, it originates in him, it is his thought, he has inspired it. The human authors of scripture have merely translated God's thought into writing, in their own particular style, but nevertheless in a way that absolutely and faithfully reflects the revelation that God imparted to them.

We must be ready to spend the time and work necessary to come to a good understanding of what the Bible teaches.

This will take a lot of effort, discipline, and perseverance, but will all prove worthwhile. If you are able to get hold of some good, reliable books that will improve your understanding of the Bible, then that will be a great help. In this way, as we meet new ideas or doctrines, we will be better equipped and prepared to evaluate them in the light of biblical truth. We must always ask, when we hear new ideas, are these faithful to the Bible or not? Do they threaten the gospel message or not? As we grow in our ability to handle the Word of God, so we will be able to pass on that teaching to others, that they too might be firmly rooted in the gospel. This is a demanding task that requires hard work, but it is all very necessary to guarantee the well being of God's people. Here is some further advice from Paul to Timothy. *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”* (2 Timothy 2:15). *“What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.”* (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

I find it tremendously encouraging that we are not alone as we undertake this demanding responsibility. The Holy Spirit dwells within us and will prove to be of great help. He will not replace hard work, but will make sure that all that we do bears fruit, in terms of our own understanding of God's Word, and in the ministry of passing it on to others. We must keep the Bible at the centre of our personal piety

and of our teaching ministry because the Bible is God's Word to us and no other word can ever have the same value or reliability. The Holy Spirit will enlighten us to God's truth as it is found in the Bible. Equally, the Holy Spirit will equip and enable those whom God has chosen to teach the church in order that it might – *“reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching”* (Ephesians 4:13-14).

Correcting Error

Now we must look at what to do when a false teaching, or a false teacher actually starts to influence or trouble believers in our care. Paul's counsel to the young pastor, Timothy, will be of great help. *“Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses, and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”* (2 Timothy 2:23-26). And *“Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction.”* (2 Timothy 4:2).

This text warns us against quarrelling – but is it really possible to counter false teaching without doing so? Quarrelling is a real danger in this kind of situation, which is why Paul alerts us to it. This shows that we must be as concerned about our attitude and behaviour as we are about the truth. It is possible to win an argument, and to score intellectual points, but at the same time to break a relationship and to lose a person. This is not our goal.

Our goal should be at one and the same time to maintain the unity of the church and to move those who have come under the sway of error to a correct understanding of the truth. The text that we read earlier underlines two aspects of this process.

Firstly we are carefully to instruct the congregation. One element of the teaching ministry is to correct error, to show why, from the Bible, a particular doctrine is wrong and harmful, and to show what the Bible teaches to be truth on the matter. This can be done in the public teaching ministry, but in some situations it may be necessary actually to visit individuals personally in order to try to go through things with them and to win them to a more biblical position.

Secondly, is the whole matter of how we go about undertaking this instruction that corrects error. Paul particularly mentions gentleness and patience. I repeat that our attitude is as important as our instruction if we are to move people from error to truth. If we are rather

aggressive, arrogant, or threatening in the way we treat people as we instruct them, then we are unlikely to get very far, and indeed could do great harm to relationships. Gentleness does not imply weakness or compromise in terms of our biblical instruction. We must remain firm if the truth is at stake. However, gentleness implies humility and graciousness in our manner, and respect and consideration towards others. Even if we believe others to be in error, that is no reason to despise them, nor to treat them with disrespect.

Paul then stresses the importance of patience. A person who has come under the influence of false teaching is not necessarily easily convinced of the error of his ways. It may take quite some time and a lot of careful instruction to persuade him of biblical truth. Patience requires that during this time we maintain that attitude of gentleness, that we do not become frustrated or lose our temper with the person.

In an ideal situation those who have been influenced by a false teaching will return to an understanding of the truth and unity will be maintained. Nevertheless it is easy to imagine a situation where those who follow and propagate a false teaching remain stubborn in their convictions. It is necessary to be realistic about these matters. We have a responsibility to instruct carefully, gently and patiently, but that can never guarantee us against the irresponsibility of others' actions. If, despite our attempts to be peaceable and gentle they continue to provoke, and cause trouble,

arguments and dissension, something must be done. It is unwise just to sit by and let harm be done.

If a person is really troubling others with erroneous ideas or leading them astray, away from the gospel, then ultimately it will be necessary to ask that person to refrain from spreading or teaching his opinions. It is probably best to take this step with the agreement and support of other leaders in the church. If a person is happy to respect the position of the church, and to keep his own particular beliefs to himself then there is no reason why he should not continue to worship with the church. In this case there is hope that over time he will come to a more biblical understanding.

Once again this is an ideal situation. One can imagine though that many who hold firmly to false ideas would not take kindly to being told to be quiet about them. This can be a very dangerous situation. We must not allow a church to continue to be troubled by false teaching. It will become necessary for the church to meet together with a view to excluding from the fellowship the person who is bringing in the false teaching. There is support from the Bible for this kind of action. The apostle John says this: *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work”* (2 John 10-11). There comes a point when a church must decisively agree to separate themselves from false teachers. The saddest thing is, that if a false teacher has already gained a hearing,

then some members may choose to leave in order to follow him.

This is all very tragic, but such a separation must be seen as a lesser evil, for it is of utmost importance to protect the integrity of the gospel, and the remaining believers from further harm. The apostle Paul felt the pain of many believers deserting him and the gospel to follow false teachers, but we should be encouraged by his words to Timothy: *“The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed”* (2 Timothy 4:17). The church might appear to undergo reversals and setbacks as false teaching ravages the ranks. It can be extremely discouraging to see folk leave to follow other winds of doctrine. We need to comfort ourselves with this thought, that so long as we seek faithfully to teach the truth, then we have this assurance that the Lord is at our side, to strengthen us in the struggle. What a wonderful privilege it is to know that the Lord is present with us. This should be worth more to us than the good repute or success that can sometimes be obtained at the expense of compromising the gospel.

Before I close this chapter, there is a further matter that must be taken into consideration. That is, under what conditions is it valid to speak of someone as a false teacher? We can be all too aware that Christians can have quite varying opinions on a wide range of matters. Similarly, even when it comes to understanding the Bible, Christians can have different interpretations of what

various texts might actually mean. So then, the question arises - when is someone's idea to be defined as a false teaching against which it is necessary to act? And when is it to be considered just as a difference of opinion? This is an important question, and all the more so in an age when the world is encouraging us to be tolerant of each others' beliefs, and even to believe that all ideas are equally valid. In such a world it is frowned upon to say that such and such a belief is true and that such and such a belief is false.

In such a world we must be careful not to fall into over authoritarian or tyrannical attitudes. What I mean is that we are not to designate anybody and everybody a false teacher just because they might have different opinions or interpretations of certain questions to ourselves. No, there must be a very good reason for doing so. I think there are two conditions, that both need to be united, before we declare someone a false teacher.

Before I examine these I would also stress that we must not fall into the world's way of thinking. We must avoid the extreme that says that everyone's ideas or beliefs are equally true or valid, and on that basis accept anything and everything that people bring, as teaching, into the church. The Bible plainly teaches that truth does exist, and that we can apprehend that truth in the Bible as the Holy Spirit enlightens us.

Returning then to the question – under what conditions should we declare someone to be a false teacher?

The first condition relates to the teaching itself. It must be in flagrant opposition to the Bible, and above all it must threaten the integrity of the gospel or the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have to admit that there are, for example, many different ideas about how the church should be governed, all of which depend upon various interpretations of biblical texts. However, we must ask ourselves - do these views of church government really threaten the integrity of the gospel or of Christ? I do not think so, except perhaps where a church leader is given more authority than Christ himself. There are many other aspects of Christian theology and discipleship where opinions diverge and where there is room for debate without designating anybody a false teacher.

The Gospel Diminished

So then, what type of teaching would threaten the gospel or the person of Christ? We have already seen earlier the issue at stake when Paul found it necessary to write to the Galatian churches. The particular false teachers in question required of the non-Jewish Christians that they be circumcised and that they observe other aspects of Jewish ritual and law. For Paul, this destroyed the gospel of grace, whereby we enter into God's blessing by faith in the sacrifice of Christ. We can say that any system of teaching that requires ritual, or good works, or rule keeping, as a condition for obtaining salvation, renders the biblical gospel of salvation by grace through faith meaningless, and

this must not be allowed to happen. As Paul writes to the Ephesians: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”* (Ephesians 2:8). Whenever anyone adds anything to faith in the way of human effort in pursuit of salvation, then grace is pushed aside, and there is no longer any good news.

Christ Diminished

Now, what kind of teaching actually threatens the person of Christ? This kind of issue seems to be behind the first epistle of John. John wrote to Christians who had been troubled by false teachers, to reassure them that the faith they had received and accepted from the apostles was the true one. There are a number of clues in John’s epistle that help us to understand something of what these false teachers were saying. *“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus has come in the flesh, is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.”* (1 John 4:1-3). It seems that these false teachers, or prophets, were affirming that Jesus was a divine spiritual person, whilst denying that he was a real human being. They were saying that he only appeared to be human. The Bible teaches that Jesus was at one and the same time fully and truly human, and fully and truly God. This is a mystery, and it is so easy to deny one or the other aspects of Jesus’ personhood. However, to do so is to

contradict the plain teaching of the Bible, to dishonour Christ himself, and to render his sacrifice on the cross meaningless.

The only sacrifice that could satisfy God’s justice needed to be a perfectly sinless human person. The problem is that no man is perfectly sinless, only God is. To resolve this dilemma, God, in the person of Christ, became authentically human, whilst retaining the perfect righteousness of divinity. In this way the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross, of Jesus authentically human and authentically divine, satisfies God’s justice and brings salvation to all who believe.

There are many other false doctrines that clearly threaten the integrity of Christ and his gospel. For example, to affirm that Jesus never rose bodily from the dead strikes a devastating blow to the gospel and to Christ. If Jesus never rose from the dead then surely the whole basis of the Christian’s hope of resurrection is knocked aside. If Jesus never rose from the dead then how can he presently reign as Lord over all?

Stirring Trouble

However, as I said earlier there is a second condition that must be fulfilled for someone to be defined as a false teacher. A person who holds false beliefs but does not actually teach them should pose no real threat. He could be left to attend church services, and he may well benefit from them. It is only when such a person starts actively to teach

his views, and starts to persuade others that they are true that he becomes a problem that must be dealt with. The second condition then is that the person is actually causing trouble, bringing confusion, doubt and disunity.

Chapter 5 Church Discipline

This chapter deals with the whole question of what should be done when a Christian commits a serious sin. This is the need sometimes to exercise what is called church discipline. The whole idea of a church disciplining someone may sound strange to some. It is not something that we generally expect a church to do, and it may even be suggested that a church should not have the right to interfere in a person's life in this way. It is true that in our days churches tend to shy away from this kind of thing. It is certainly something that most church leaders would prefer not to have to do. Nevertheless, it is important to show that sometimes church discipline is necessary.

The first and most important argument supporting this point of view is that the Bible itself speaks of churches having to take disciplinary action against those who have sinned in a grievous way. I would like you to read two texts, the first being what Jesus has to say on the matter: *“If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he*

refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”(Matthew 18:15-18). The second text is from the apostle Paul's teaching, his first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). *“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among the pagans. A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and put out of your fellowship the man who did this?”*

It is fairly clear from this last text that the church in Corinth had not dealt, as it should, with a man who was indulging in a sinful sexual relationship (apparently with his step-mother, which biblically is considered incestuous – Leviticus 18:8). They were just letting him continue as if it did not matter, and they may even have condoned what this man was doing. Now, the apostle Paul is very firm. He does not agree, neither with the man's behaviour, nor with the church's attitude towards him.

For the church at Corinth to have been so lax or negligent in this matter I believe they must have either misunderstood certain aspects of Christian teaching, or perhaps that false teachers had led them astray.

These Christians had probably fallen into the error of some form of antinomianism. This long word signifies the belief that the Christian is under no obligation to obey the Law of God, and can thus behave as he wishes. It is the thought that because God is gracious to forgive our sins then it

really does not matter how much we sin because we have this assurance that he has paid the price; that he will forgive. It is also the thought that because the Christian is under grace and not Law, because the Christian is justified by faith apart from the Law, then the Law has no relevance for Christian conduct and behaviour. This is a common misinterpretation of the concept of Christian freedom but actually we are not free to do as we please.

Paul dealt with this frequent misunderstanding at quite some length when he wrote to the church at Rome. Here is an extract from his letter *“What then, shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin which leads to death, or to obedience which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin you wholeheartedly obeyed the teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness”* (Romans 6:15-19).

The Bible consistently teaches, from start to finish, that if we are in a relationship with God, we are to live our lives according to the standards that he sets and expects. Given that the Lord has shown us immeasurable grace and mercy, to reconcile us to himself, and to adopt us as his own, we are to offer our very selves to him. We are to give him the right to govern our lives, and the Law is a very good guide to the kind of behaviour that God expects of us. The

Christians at Corinth had obviously somehow missed this point. How can we help our churches not to fall into the same trap?

As always, the best form of prevention is simply to teach the whole counsel of God. That is, in our preaching ministry we should include sermons and bible studies that show what God expects of those that he has so mercifully saved. In Jesus we have been brought into a New Covenant. A covenant is an agreement or a contract between two persons where each undertakes to fulfil certain responsibilities towards the other. God has committed himself to forgive us, to be our Father, and to preserve us until the fulfilment of our hope, the coming resurrection. He expects of us in return: trust, obedience, and submission as he lovingly governs our lives. Now church discipline is necessary as a last resort, when a Christian has broken that covenant relationship by serious disobedience.

Private Sin – Public Consequences

It seems to me that today churches are similarly reluctant to undertake discipline but not necessarily for quite the same reasons as the church in Corinth. It is probably true to say that the church is lowering its moral standards. Today many churches accept as normal certain behaviour that would have been condemned as unrighteous not so long ago. There is a tendency to be influenced by the world around, a world which tolerates and even encourages many things that the Bible labels as sin.

However, I think there is also a second reason for this reluctance to discipline. In my experience, I have the impression that Christians now believe that their behaviour is none of the church's business, and that the church has no right to tell someone to stop engaging in a particular course of action. I think this comes from a false idea that our personal behaviour does not affect the church and so the church should not, for that reason, interfere.

To explain I shall take the example of a person in the church who commits adultery. This individual may think that this choice just concerns their personal life, which they should be free to lead as they please. However, this is wrong as all our actions and choices affect a wider group of people, not just ourselves. When this adultery becomes known there will be a huge impact upon the person's family, a crisis that will deeply affect the spouse and the children, and which could lead to the tragic break up of that family. Similarly, if less intensely, other members of the church will feel upset, betrayed and confused, and rightly so. However, the consequences go even further than that. Once the affair becomes public knowledge the church, the gospel and the name of Christ will all be brought into disrepute.

It has rightly been said that no man is an island. We all live in communities: family, neighbourhood, village etc, and our behaviour will always affect those who live around us, positively or negatively. There is no escaping that. For

the Christian the church is a community and if one of the members commits serious sin then there will be knock on effects. The church will have to face up to many difficult consequences.

Church and Covenant

If we go back to the idea of covenant that I introduced earlier, we can say that the church is a covenant community. Here I mean that the church is, or should be, a group of people who have agreed to live some form of togetherness as a worshipping, serving and loving body. In a sense there is an agreement that each one lives, in private as well as in public, according to the standards of the Bible. We agree together to allow the Bible to govern our lives, our relationships, our behaviour and our attitudes. Now, when one of the members of this group breaches these standards in a serious way, there is a need for some kind of sanction – this is what we call church discipline.

The covenant relationship with which we are most familiar is that of marriage. Here a man and a woman commit themselves to spending their lives together in a special relationship, which is governed by a certain number of promises, customs and expectations. As Christians we are bound by other covenant relationships, to God and to a local body of believers, a church. These are similar but not the same as the marriage relationship. They bring many joys and privileges, but also duties and responsibilities, and when a person breaks that covenant relationship, something has to be done.

When is it right to discipline?

We have to admit, though, that we are all far from perfect, and that we all sin, probably far more than we like to think. It must be stressed that we are not going to be exercising church discipline against all Christians all of the time. The opposite danger to not exercising church discipline enough is to exercise it too much. We should not threaten Christians with this process for every minor misdeed.

At the same time we can say that God desires to correct the believer at all times through the ministry of the Word. As Christians we are to be open to what God is saying to us. We are to examine our lives in the light of his Word, and to seek to repent of sin, and to make progress in sanctification with the help of the Spirit.

Having said all this, it is necessary to examine under what circumstances the church should become involved in disciplining or correcting a believer. Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth may be of some help. He writes: *"I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In this case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard, or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the*

church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). Often we associate the exercise of church discipline with sexual sin: adultery, child abuse, homosexuality, and quite rightly so. We can see that these are all very serious matters, and it should be hoped that the vast majority of Christians would never entertain engaging in such activity. This text does, though, indicate that there are other sins which are equally serious and which hopefully are also rare amongst Christians.

Paul speaks of swindlers. This indicates serious breaches of personal integrity. It means dishonesty, it means exploiting others, or using church money for personal gain. Then there are the slanderers, those who maliciously use their tongues to destroy reputations, those who tell lies. There are the idolaters, those who continue to mix pagan, occult activities with Christianity; sorcery, divination, that sort of thing.

These are all very serious matters. They are sins which can do great harm to the church, the community of God's people, and which can bring the church and Christ into great disrepute in the eyes of the world. God expects more of our lives. Here is an exhortation from the apostle Peter that we should aim for the highest standards in our Christian walk: *"As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;*

for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:14-15).

The Purpose and Process of Discipline

The main purpose of church discipline is to lead the person who has committed serious sin to repentance. For this reason it is preferable to speak of correction rather than punishment. We want the person who has committed sin to understand that what he has done is serious before God and men. We want him to see that his only course of action, if fellowship with God and men is to be restored, is to change his attitude and behaviour.

We have seen previously that the apostle Paul speaks of expelling those who commit serious sin from the fellowship. If our goal is to see the person repent, we may wonder if this is perhaps going too far. Are there not other ways of accomplishing this?

We must remember that the expulsion or banning of a believer from fellowship is but the last resort in the long process of what is called church discipline. This kind of action is only to be undertaken when everything else has failed, when the person so stubbornly denies or justifies their sin that they refuse to repent. So, if this is the end of a process, what comes before?

It will prove helpful to re-read a text that has already entered a previous discussion: *“If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two*

of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:15-17).

Obviously circumstances vary, but Jesus seems to be suggesting that initially, when a particular serious sin becomes apparent, just one person should go to see the individual concerned. The goal is, as Jesus reminds us, to try to win him over. That is, we go to try to persuade the person to stop sinning, to change behaviour, also to do what may be necessary to repair the situation, to be reconciled to those he has offended, and to seek forgiveness from God and men. This is what sincere repentance is really all about.

If the person does repent in this way there is no need to take further disciplinary action against him, at least not in the sense of expelling him from the fellowship. Remember, though, that it may take time for wounds to heal, for relationships to be restored, for forgiveness to be obtained. It may also be helpful to assist and encourage the person in their struggle against sin. For all these reasons, whilst the person should benefit from church fellowship, it may be best to relieve him of any responsibilities that he had, at least for a time, and especially if it was a particular aspect of ministry which exposed him to temptation. For

example, if the offence was in relation to church finances it would be unwise to allow the person to continue to handle church money. Similarly, if the person had engaged in some form of child abuse, it would be improper for him to be in any way involved in children's work. These are sensible precautions, designed to protect both the church and the person concerned, and reflect Jesus' teaching when he said: *"If your right eye causes you to sin it is better to gouge it out and to throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."* (Matthew 5:29).

However, if this first, one to one visit is not successful, Jesus recommends that we have a second try, this time taking along a couple of other mature believers. The goal is still to try to persuade the person to change his ways and maybe at this stage it should be made clear to him that if he refuses to repent then disciplinary measures will need to be taken. If we still fail to see any sign of repentance then the matter will have to be brought before a church meeting, where, should the person's attitude continue, there should be no choice but to deprive the person from further fellowship.

Hoping for Change

Hopefully this is not the end of the matter. The decision to put someone out of the fellowship should not be definitive. The desire should remain to see the person return but only, of course, under certain conditions.

These conditions would be the same as at any other stage in the process - sincere repentance. As the person sees himself deprived of fellowship, it is to be hoped that he sees the seriousness of his situation and all that he has done. It is to be hoped that his conscience will awaken, that he will recognise his sin, and change his ways. If he can prove to the church the sincerity of his repentance, then the church should welcome him back into fellowship. Of course, I repeat what was said earlier, this should be done carefully, with due attention given to restoring relationships, making amends, and seeking pardon. All this will involve a lot of humility and effort on the part of the person returning, and will go some way to proving his sincerity.

We must bear in mind, though, that this needs to be a two way process. The church must welcome, accept and forgive the repentant sinner and allow him to reconstruct his place in the fellowship. This is not always easy to do for folk who have been offended and hurt but God calls us to be merciful just as he is merciful. There is perhaps no better illustration of this point than the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Following a long period away from home, during which he practised a sinful lifestyle, the son returns to the father, fully aware of how wicked he had been. However, the father welcomes him home with open arms. The prodigal wants to come back as a servant, but the father accepts him as a son. This kind of situation does involve pain, but we do need to be merciful because we have all received mercy from God.

This is obviously great when it happens, but sometimes the person who has been disciplined does not return. This is tremendously sad. It may be that the person becomes aware of their sin but lacks the courage, or the humility to face up to it before the church. It could well be that the person remains insensitive, hardened to his sin. This might be proof that the person was never a true believer, in which case it is right that he no longer be in the church. Nevertheless I do not think it right to pronounce judgement in this way. The Lord knows hearts far better than we do and will judge justly. Just as the father never lost hope in his prodigal son, we too can never know when a person might turn back upon his folly.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

We have seen throughout this booklet that there are often demanding and difficult decisions to be taken in the course of pastoral ministry. It will be hard to face up to the challenges of these crises, and often it is tempting just to let things pass, but this apparently easy option will only further imperil the health and safety of the church. The Biblical pathway of servant leadership demands courage accompanied by compassion, decisiveness accompanied by justice, and an overriding motivation of honouring the Lord, our shepherd, and caring for his flock, the church.

Do you feel overawed by such a vision? If so, you are in good company. The apostle Paul also felt the weight of responsibility when he wrote: *“Who is equal to such a*

task?”; (2 Corinthians 2:16). For your encouragement, he answered his own question a little later: *“Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.”* (2 Corinthians 3:5-6).

If God has chosen you for the task of Christian ministry, in whatever form, his purpose for your life is to make you more and more competent in and for that ministry. His Spirit will work in your life to that end. We can have every confidence of that. However, competence in ministry comes not only from formal study, as important as that clearly is, but also from life’s experiences and many of these are as painful as they are formative.

We can take the example of a rough piece of wood or stone in the hands of a skilful sculptor. The sculptor’s desire is to produce something useful and beautiful out of the un-hewn raw material. To achieve this the sculptor must strike the stone with a chisel, or cut the wood with a knife. Now, if stone or wood had feelings, they would scream at every blow, but emerging slowly from this process is something of value and utility.

In the same way God uses our experiences, including difficulties in church life, to mould our character and competences. God’s purpose is to bring us to maturity in the area of ministry to which he has called us, and not to make us rich, successful or even happy. In Romans 8:28 Paul writes: *“We know that in all things God works for the*

good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” The ‘all things’ of this verse must include the crises that we encounter in pastoral leadership, but we can wonder to what good such troublesome times can bring. Certainly, when things go wrong we do not feel good. Again, though, I must stress that God’s purpose is not that we feel good, although ultimately we will when we reach heaven. God’s purpose, according to Romans 8:29, is that “*we be conformed to the image of his (that is God’s) Son.*” So, over and above maturity and competence, God desires to mould us into Christ-likeness. Christ was supremely good, and so the good that God wants to produce in our lives is that of Christ-likeness. Once again, this will emerge as we learn to act and react, in a God honouring and biblical way, in all of life’s experiences, including those that are most difficult and painful.

In many ways it can seem so wasteful and meaningless to see churches undergo crises that can be so damaging and counterproductive. To a certain extent this is true. God certainly does not desire or approve that wickedness afflict his people. Nevertheless these things can be given meaning when we see them as contributing to a learning process that helps us make progress towards maturity of character and competence. Suffering is not purposeless, but can be given purpose as God uses it to good effect to producing Christ-likeness in our lives. The extent to which a sovereign God can bring this good out of much which is inherently evil, will depend on our attitude to these events. If we complain or rebel, if we neglect or refuse to follow

God’s counsel then we will limit the Spirit’s work in our lives and in all likelihood aggravate the situation and the suffering that ensues. If by faith we accept God’s designs, and faithfully follow his advice, then he will sculpt something of increasing beauty and effectiveness from our lives.

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