

The Young People's Magazine

**Issued by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland
Reformed in Doctrine, Worship and Practice**

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” Ecclesiastes 12:1



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Number 8

Ahab, Jezebel and Naboth's Vineyard

Ahab was a wicked king of Israel. He had a palace in Jezreel; beside it was a vineyard owned by a man called Naboth. But Ahab wanted the vineyard for himself to grow plants in it; he came to Naboth offering to buy it or else to exchange it for a better vineyard.

Naboth had a serious difficulty; it was part of his inheritance. It had been held in his family for hundreds of years, coming down from one generation to another since Joshua's time, when God had given the land to the people of Israel. He had told them: "The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is Mine" (Leviticus 25:23). Naboth feared God; he had a sincere respect for Him and for all His commandments.

So there was only one answer he could give to the King, powerful though he was: "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee" (1 Kings 21:3). While Naboth wanted to show all proper respect to the King, he must always obey God first. If the wish of the King came into conflict with the will of God, Naboth must follow God's command rather than do what the King wanted – even if he could get a better vineyard by giving the King what he asked for.

Here is an example for us all to follow: whatever anyone may ask us to do, whatever orders people in authority may give, whatever laws governments may pass, there is something that has much greater authority. What God has said in the Bible, including His commandments, has much greater authority than any other power in this world.

God is greater than any human being, infinitely so; He is greater than any group of human beings. They may have authority – as Ahab had because he was the King of Israel, and as governments and courts have today, and employers and teachers, among others. But in every such case, their authority is limited and it is subject to God's authority. We should recognise their authority, but at every point where their authority clashes with God's, it should be clear that "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

This is how Peter and the other apostles answered the High Priest in Jerusalem when he charged them with disobeying the command not to teach

in the name of Jesus. But He, the Son of God, had sent them out to preach the gospel everywhere, and Jesus' command was what they knew they should obey, not the high priest's orders. There was a clash between what the high priest wanted and what the Lord Jesus had commanded; so the disciples obeyed Jesus in spite of the danger they were putting themselves into. Yet we must not rely on our own strength or our own wisdom in resisting orders to do what is wrong. We must pray for God's help; we must ask Him to direct us in what we say and in all our reactions.

But how did Ahab react? He acted like a spoilt child who is in a bad mood because he did not get what he wanted. Ahab was displeased at Naboth's reply. So he went to bed; he turned his face away from everyone; and he refused to eat any food.

Then Jezebel his wife came where he was. She wanted to know what was wrong. Ahab explained to her about his offer to Naboth and that Naboth refused it. She was even more wicked than Ahab and even more devoted to the false god Baal. She asked her husband if he was the ruler of Israel; she was implying that the king should be able to do anything he wanted to do. She told him to get up, to eat some food and "be merry". Then she promised to give him Naboth's vineyard. So she gave instructions for a court to sit and sent men to accuse Naboth falsely of blaspheming God and the King. Naboth was found guilty and condemned to death. It was a shocking display of injustice, and similar injustices take place today.

Perhaps you wonder why God did not save Naboth from Jezebel's wickedness. There is no doubt that God was able to do so, but He saw fit to do otherwise. Often we cannot explain why God works, in His providence, as He does, but He always has good reasons for the way He acts. One thing we can be sure about is that God-fearing people like Naboth are brought at once to perfect blessedness in heaven as soon as they die – they are taken away from all the injustice and sin that they experience in this world.

Jezebel told Ahab when Naboth was dead, and the King went at once to Naboth's vineyard to take possession of it. But in the vineyard, Ahab was to meet someone whom he very much wanted not to meet. God told Elijah to go to confront the King there. God's prophet was to warn him that he would experience a terrible death because of his sin.

Ahab did not like Elijah; God's prophet had rebuked him for his sin too often for the King to give him a warm welcome. Ahab asked, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?"

Elijah was not frightened in the presence of his King; he had too much respect for God's authority. He answered plainly and honestly: "I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the

Lord” (1 Kings 21:20). Ahab would have to be punished for his wickedness, and so would Jezebel. God always punishes sinners in a lost eternity if they do not come to Him by faith for forgiveness. But He punishes some sinners in this life, which is what God threatened to do to Ahab and Jezebel.

In fact, Ahab did pay some attention to God’s warnings to him. He tore his clothes, which was a sign of sadness; Ahab was showing that, to some extent, he was sorry for his sins – sorry, at least, about the consequences. He put on sackcloth, a sign of humbling himself before God, and he fasted. Also “he went softly”; he was more careful about how he lived.

God took notice of the change in Ahab’s behaviour; because of that change, Ahab did not have to suffer the threatened punishment in this life. But it is clear that there was no real change in Ahab’s heart. He was not truly sorry for his sins; he did not seek forgiveness from God; his was not true, saving repentance; he had no love for God and His commandments; he was not like Naboth, a man who feared God.

Ahab had many privileges. *First*, he had contact with God’s prophet Elijah, who warned him about his sins and their consequences. We will never meet a prophet, someone like Elijah who brought messages directly from God to people in this world. But most readers have opportunities of hearing ministers preach to them about sin and salvation. In the Bible, ministers are called “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20); they are not prophets, but they speak on behalf of Christ. He has sent them out to preach the gospel, the good news about salvation through the Saviour whom God has appointed, the One who died in the place of sinners so that they may have their sins forgiven and receive all the other blessings of salvation.

Second, Ahab had access to the Word of God. It was not all written then, of course, but parts of it were: Genesis to Deuteronomy, for instance, and many of the Psalms. He had, in these books, a lot of teaching about the holy God, about sin, about the way of salvation from sin and about how people should live in the presence of God, who sees all things. But Ahab did not care about the Scriptures. He did not recognise the kindness of God in giving him and his people a revelation of what was so tremendously useful for sinners, showing them how they might have eternal life.

You have access to the whole Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation. Do you treat it as a hugely-important, absolutely-necessary message from God to you? It shows you how you can get safely through this world and safely into heaven. God is telling you to repent and believe the gospel. But make sure your repentance is sincere, not like Ahab’s, which went no further than some of the sins of his outward life; it did not take to do with his heart. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Challenges in a Godless World

8. A Personal Challenge

Matthew Vogan

This is the final section of a paper given at last year's Youth Conference. Last month's article pointed out that, though the challenges from the world are dangerous, yet they can be fruitful if they bring people to consider the answer the Bible gives to these objections. "The Church in our day needs to be able to give such an answer to sinners who are destroying themselves."

All that we have already considered must challenge every one of us as to where we stand spiritually. We are not simply making observations about the state of our society in a detached way. It affects us deeply; it is an urgent matter for us.

The challenge we face prompts the question: What do we believe? It also poses a still more difficult question. Supposing we know what we believe, are we going to live according to what we believe? Does it have any impact on how we live? It is possible to "halt . . . between two opinions" in our wills and our practice, even if we do not in our understanding. Are you trying to keep a foot in both camps: the world and the Church? "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). Secular humanism will have you to serve it and live according to it, no matter what particular truths you may profess to believe. It will not allow you a halfway house for long.

It is possible for you, in your mind, to accept what Scripture says, but what does your life say? Does your way of life ignore God and seek to undermine His claims and requirements? Are you going to go on in the way of destruction? Are you going to sell your birthright like Esau? What really matters to you: image, success, popularity and material things, or Christ? Does Christ mean anything to you?

What is most important to you? No doubt there may be many things in your plans and thoughts, such as work, a university education, a career or marriage. Listen to the counsel of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

Moses came "to years"; he grew up. Perhaps that is where you are now. He was faced, on the one hand, with all the treasures of Egypt and the pleasures of sin for a season. He could have had all that this world deceitfully offers. On the other hand, there was suffering affliction with the people of God. Outwardly that was not attractive. It was not what the world

valued; in fact it was despised. But we are told that Moses made his choice and acted by faith. He chose “the reproach of Christ”, bearing reproach for the Redeemer’s sake.

In fact he weighed this carefully and spiritually and he concluded that the reproach of Christ had “greater riches than the treasures in Egypt”. He had “respect unto the recompence of the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26). As he considered the glory of God and eternal riches, over against something that was merely for a moment and unsatisfying, it was a very clear choice.

We could say that he had to choose between God and mammon (that is, money). In many ways, that is the same choice that faces us today. Mammon is the god of Western nations. We are consumed with consumerism or “covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5). But as the Lord Jesus reminded us, we cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve both God and mammon. The claims they make demand our entire service. Secularism is a whole way of viewing the world and living in it; this undergirds the worship of the creature more than the Creator.

As we have already seen, you can expect to be challenged personally every day by a secular and godless society. How will you respond? The first response of course must be to trust Christ as Lord and King and submit to Him. Where there is a living union with Christ, you must keep faith in exercise. You must also seek to maintain the fear of God; so that man (however highly elevated by others) is only small by comparison, a mere creature “whose breath is in his nostrils”. God is all – man is small. You must also seek to be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you will not be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1-2).

You may ask, What should I read? Are there books that would be helpful? No doubt there are many books that help us both to understand and to counter particular ways of thinking in a godless society. But I am not going to single out anything in particular. They may strengthen your thinking but they are unlikely to give you a great deal of spiritual strength. Instead I would say, Read the Book of Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Job, Isaiah and Daniel. These are books (and indeed the rest of Scripture) that *will* give spiritual strength. They encourage trust in the Lord in the face of godlessness and the prosperity of the wicked. Strengthen yourself in Scripture; see how others like Daniel not only endured but prospered in Babylon. See how God-centred Scripture is, and have your thinking corrected in the way that Psalm 73 describes so powerfully. “Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?” (Isaiah 2:22).

Consider how to walk humbly and obediently with God. Read carefully and often the way that *The Larger Catechism* uses the whole of Scripture to

expound the full implications of the Ten Commandments. Read Psalm 37: 1-11; there you will find these commands which are so helpful in a time such as the one in which we live: "Fret not"; "Cease from anger"; "Wait patiently"; "Hope"; "Delight thyself in God". These are commands with a promise; pay attention to the promises that are attached to each of them.

Christ has overcome the world and He calls His people to be overcomers in His strength. Samuel Rutherford puts it so well: "The world is one of the enemies that we have to fight with, but a vanquished and overcome enemy, and like a beaten and forlorn soldier; for our Jesus hath taken the armour from it. Let me then speak to you in His words: 'Be of good courage', saith the Captain of our salvation, for 'I have overcome the world'."

If you are wearied with the constant challenges, consider Christ. This is the constant duty of a believer in every circumstance. Looking to Christ by faith is the only way to find strength for our souls. "Consider Him who endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds". "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2-3).

"Remember That Day"

A man who believed the Bible once arranged to meet a group of infidels – people who rejected the Bible and its teachings. They had arranged to discuss their differences, but when the time came, the infidels broke their agreement and, instead of respectful argument, they poured out blasphemies. A large Bible had been placed on a desk as the basis for their debate, but the infidels threw it on the floor and trampled over it; they had no respect for God or for His book.

Nor had they any respect for those who believed in God. The Christian could not make himself heard and soon realised that this was not a proper situation in which to discuss the Bible. All he tried to do was to give a few words of warning about the coming Day of Judgement, but he had to give up. He made his way to a narrow staircase at the opposite side of the room, while the crowd hissed at him and cursed him. He noticed a young man standing at the top of the stairs who was joining in the mocking laughter directed at the Christian. He stopped for a moment to warn the young man: "My friend, remember *that day*", the day he had tried to speak about.

Years passed, and one day the Christian stopped at an inn when he was on a journey. The woman who ran the inn told him that one of her guests

very much wanted to see him; he had heard someone mention the Christian man's name. The two men went into another room to speak together. The other man first locked the door and then said, "Kneel down with me and entreat God that He may have mercy on me in *that day*. You told me to remember it, and from that day to this I had no peace."

No doubt the Christian did pray, and one would expect that he would also have given the younger man good advice. But if God is to show us mercy on the Day of Judgement, we must seek mercy from Him while we are in this world. We must look by faith to Christ Jesus, whom God sent into the world to be the Saviour of sinners; we are to look to Him because He suffered and died in the place of the ungodly. It is through Him that sinners can find peace with God. And we are to turn from sin and lead holy lives; in other words, we are to repent.

This is the sort of teaching that the Christian would have given the man. Perhaps he quoted the words that Paul spoke in Athens long ago: "God . . . now commandeth all men every where to repent: because He hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath ordained [Jesus Christ]; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30,31).

You may not have openly rejected the Bible, but you do need to remember the Day of Judgement. You need to plead with God that He would have mercy on you on that day. You need to seek mercy from Him while you are in this world – but you must not put that off until some day far away in the indefinite future, a day which never comes. You ought to seek the Lord *now*. You ought to repent and believe the gospel *now*. Then you will be at peace with God throughout the rest of your life; you will be at peace with God on the Day of Judgement and throughout eternity.

What the Bible Says About Itself

7. The Folly of Disbelief

Charles Hodge

Last month's article spoke further of the Old Testament prophecies about Christ. It emphasised how exactly they pointed forward to Him in a detailed way. This article has been taken, with editing, from *The Way of Life* and brings this series to an end. This series on Scripture is also the last one from Hodge's book; we have now gone through the whole volume.

Only those who honestly study the whole system of Scripture can appreciate the argument from prophecy in support of the truth of Christianity. Still,

enough has been said to show that it is impossible to account for how the prophecies of the Old Testament correspond to the events of the New unless God has inspired the Bible.

We have seen that it was predicted, centuries before Christ came, that a great deliverer should arise, to be born of the tribe of Judah, and of the family of David, at the village of Bethlehem; that he should be a poor, humble man and yet worthy of the highest reverence paid to God; that he should be a teacher, priest and king; that he should be rejected by his own people, persecuted and put to death; that he should rise again from the dead; that the Spirit of God should be poured out upon his followers, giving them holiness, wisdom and courage; that true religion should no longer be confined to the Jews but be extended to the Gentiles and, in spite of all opposition, should continue, triumph and at last cover the earth; that the Jews who rejected the Messiah should be cast off and scattered and yet be preserved. Here is the whole history of Christ and His kingdom, written centuries before His coming.

There is no escape from the conclusion that the Old Testament was written by God's inspiration, and that Jesus Christ, to whom the Old Testament writings so plainly refer, is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Many of the most important predictions that refer to Christ were fulfilled by the acts of his enemies. Did Christ bring about the treachery of Judas, or prompt the priests to pay the traitor 30 pieces of silver? Did He plot with Pilate to condemn Himself, or arrange that He should die by a Roman way of putting someone to death instead of a Jewish way? Did He make the soldiers part His garments and cast lots on His vesture, or insist to them that none of His bones should be broken?

These events were predicted, and they happened. There is no answer to this argument from prophecy. The testimony of the Scriptures to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah is the testimony of God. "Search the Scriptures," said the Saviour Himself; "for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me."

God has been pleased to hedge up the way to atheism – to make it difficult to believe that He does not exist. People must believe impossibilities and contradictions before they can intelligently become atheists. Above all, they must harden their hearts to the excellence of the Saviour.

This explanation of why we should believe the Bible and what it says about God is intended to show that unbelief is a sin. This is why Christ solemnly declared, "He that believeth not shall be damned". People flatter themselves that they are not responsible for what they believe. Because to believe is not an act of one's will, they say, no one can be praised or blamed for what they believe.

This false opinion arises from a confusion between things that are very different in their nature. Faith differs according to its object and the nature of the evidence on which it is founded. A man believes that two and two are four, or that Napoleon, once the Emperor of France, died in St Helena, and the man is neither morally better nor worse for such a faith.

Disbelief, in such cases, would point to madness, not sin. But, without having a very sinful heart, no one can believe that it is wicked to be good or that is right to be wicked. No one can refuse to believe in God, especially under the light of what God has revealed in the Bible, without showing that he has no right ideas in his mind and heart. And no one can disbelieve the record which God has given of His Son, without being blind to the glory of God and the holiness of the Saviour.

So it is in vain for anyone to hope that he can be innocent when he has no faith in God or in Jesus Christ. As we look around us we see evidence that the creation is God's work; those who refuse to think of it as His work must be considered guilty – and so must those who refuse to acknowledge the excellence of His Word and the glory of His Son.

The evidence which has convinced millions of people is before their eyes, and should convince them. So, instead of making excuses for their lack of faith, and complaining of the weakness of the evidence, let them confess their guilt in not believing. It is neglect of the evidence, or blindness to it, that allows them to ignore it. Let them humble themselves before God and pray that He would open their eyes to see the excellence of His Word. They should dismiss their objections and be assured that, if the Bible does not win their faith by its glory, the terrors it describes will one day be fulfilled, and their awakened consciences will indeed see that it is the Word of God.

A Grandmother's Prayer Answered

At the beginning of 1814, there were groups of soldiers from Sweden, Germany and Russia within a half hour's march of the town of Sleswick, in Denmark. Not surprisingly, the people in the surrounding villages were panicking; every day they were hearing reports of the soldiers' bad treatment of people.

A short break in the fighting was to end on January 5, and everyone in the houses on the edge of the town was terrified of what might happen – except for one godly old woman. She believed one of God's promises in the Bible; perhaps it was: "Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me" (Psalm 50:15). She prayed that God would deliver her

and her family from the danger that threatened them; she asked Him to raise up a wall around them, so that the enemy would be afraid to attack them.

Her grandson objected that she was asking for something impossible. She explained that she was really praying that God would protect them and the rest of the people in the town. "But", she added, "do you think that, if it was the will of God to build a wall round us, it would be impossible for Him?"

The dreaded day came and brought the first snowfall of the winter. Soldiers poured into the town from every direction. The grandmother's house was near the road and it was larger than most of the houses around it; so it should have been one of the most obvious. Some of these other houses were soon full of enemy soldiers, but none of them came near the house where the old grandmother lived. She and the others inside heard plenty noise around them but no one even knocked on their door. The whole family were amazed.

The next morning they looked out and understood what had happened. The high wind had blown lots of snow around the house, particularly between the road and the house; the drifts were so high that no one could get near the house. The grandmother asked, "Do you not now see, my son, that it was possible for God to raise a wall round us?"

Everything was under God's control: the soldiers, the snow and the wind. And God used the snow and the wind to keep the soldiers away from the godly old lady's house. She called on God in her day of trouble; He delivered her from the soldiers and protected her from the damage they might have caused. He saw her faith and answered her prayers; and no doubt she glorified Him afterwards in further thankful prayer.

God is still the same; He still hears prayer. He still tells us to call on Him in times of trouble. Especially we are to call on Him when we feel concerned about the salvation of our souls. He says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these [other] things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). And whatever we pray for, let us never forget to thank God when He gives His answer.

For Junior Readers

The Boy Who Stole the Plums

Rev N M Ross

One day long ago, Rev John Kennedy, a godly minister in Dingwall, was looking out of his study window at his garden. Suddenly he saw a boy climb over the wall into the garden. The boy ran to the plum tree, stole lots

of the lovely ripe plums, and broke some of the branches as he did so. Then he quickly made his escape back over the wall. People heard about the theft and wondered, "Who stole the plums? Who broke the branches?" But Dr Kennedy, who saw it all, said nothing.

But, some time after that, Dr Kennedy gave a talk to the boys and girls of his congregation. He spoke about God knowing everything. He told them that God sees everyone and that nothing is hidden from Him, not even the most secret sin. He then spoke about the stolen plums.

What he said next surprised them. "The boy who stole the plums is with us this evening! I shall not look in the direction of his seat lest I betray him. But I know him. He thought no one saw, but I saw." Then Dr Kennedy solemnly added, "And *God* saw!"

The congregation was very hushed as he pressed home the lesson to everyone that God knows and remembers secret sins. What a shock the boy must have got! But what about our own sins?

We can be sure that our secret sins will be uncovered sooner or later. Remember what Moses said to the people of Israel: "Be sure your sin will find you out". It would be good also if we remembered what Hagar, Sarah's servant maid, said: "Thou God seest me".

The Bible tells us that anyone who covers his sins shall not prosper. One man who did not really believe this was Achan, an Israelite, who stole some gold, silver and an expensive garment and hid them in his tent. God led Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, to find out that Achan was the thief. Achan was dreadfully punished by God.

Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the prophet, also thought he could keep his sin secret. He cheated Naaman, the healed leper, out of two changes of clothing and a large amount of silver by pretending that Elisha was asking for them. He was sure that Elisha did not know, but God knew and showed it to Elisha. Gehazi tried to cover his sin by more lies, but God punished him by making him suffer from the disease of leprosy.

We can never cover our sins by lies or by blaming others. Nor can we make God forget our sins by trying to be good. The only way our sins can truly be covered is by God forgiving them. Therefore we must humbly pray to God to forgive us. We must honestly tell Him about our sins, be sorry for them, and forsake them: all the while believing in Jesus, the Saviour of sinners. Ask God to make you willing and able to do this. The Bible tells us that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.

He will *faithfully* forgive sin because He has promised to do so. He will *justly* forgive sin because Jesus suffered the punishment for the sins of His people so that sinners who believe in Jesus may be forgiven.

Do you not think that forgiveness is a great blessing? Here is a verse that says so. Perhaps you know it already but, if not, you should learn it:

O blessed is the man to whom is freely pardoned
All the transgression he hath done, whose sin is covered.

(Metrical Psalm 32:1)

For Younger Readers

When Should We Pray?

Lots of people will say that they have no time to pray to God. But perhaps this is the reason that many of them do not pray: they do not want to pray. You should ask God to make you really want to pray to Him.

There was once a good woman who loved God and really wanted to pray. She was probably a very busy woman, and someone asked her a question. This other person seemed surprised that she found time to pray. Was she not too busy for that?

As she swept her house, she explained, she remembered that her heart needed to be made clean. So she asked God to make her clean.

When she was putting things on the table for a meal, she thought of what Jesus said about the marriage feast. She prayed, "Lord, prepare a place for me, and cover me with the new robe."

What did she say as she lit a fire? She prayed that God would light a fire of love in her soul.

Then she might hear the clock striking. She would remember that one more hour of her life was over and she was another hour nearer eternity. She would remember too that God was good to her; her life still went on, and she would thank Him.

We should follow the woman's example and always remember to pray to God. We always need His help.

UK Young People's Conference 2018

The 2018 Young People's Conference was held in Carronvale House, Larbert, with about 25 people attending. These papers were delivered: by Dr Robert Dickie on King David as "the Sweet Psalmist of Israel"; by Rev K D Macleod on the Reformation in Europe; by Rev D Somerset on public worship and reasons for going to church; by Rev J Goldby on the restoration and spiritual recovery of the Jews; and by Rev D Campbell

on “the sons of God” and the doctrine of adoption, in Romans chapter 8. The discussions were generally lively and edifying and we are grateful to those that took part.

The Conference historical tour went first to Perth to see the parish church, St John’s, where John Knox preached his famous sermon in May 1559. This sermon led to the destruction of the Perth friaries and eventually, under the hand of God, to the Reformation of 1560. It was in the same church that the General Assembly of 1618 was held which adopted the notorious Five Articles of Perth. These Articles re-imposed practices such as observing Christmas and Easter, which had been put out of the Church of Scotland at the Reformation, but which had been retained in the Church of England. The restoration of these practices was followed by 20 years of conflict and persecution until the Five Articles were overthrown at the Second Reformation by the Glasgow Assembly of 1638.

Next the tour visited Huntingtower Castle (formerly Ruthven Castle) outside Perth. It was here that the young James VI was taken prisoner by the Protestant Earl of Gowrie in 1582, to break the hold that the Duke of Lennox had over him. The King was held for ten months until he escaped. After a further incident in 1600 – the so-called Gowrie conspiracy – James VI ordered the castle to be renamed.

The third place we visited was Larbert Old Church, where Robert Bruce ministered unofficially for two years after his return from Inverness in 1625, and where he was buried in 1630. Robert Murray M’Cheyne was the assistant minister there from 1835 to 1836, and the tour saw the room in the tower in which he used to hold a Bible class.

It was noticeable that both the Larbert church and the Perth church had evidently held a recent “Easter” service, one of the very things that was cast out of the Church, first at the Reformation of 1560 and then by the Glasgow Assembly of 1638. The Perth church has a woman minister, contrary to Scripture, while the Larbert church is on the brink of closing completely.

(Rev) D W B Somerset

Why We Go to Church

1. Synagogues and Churches

Rev D W B Somerset

This is the first section of a paper given at this year’s Youth Conference.

1. Children taken to church. The first answer to the question, “Why do we go to church?” might be, for some, that our parents take us to

church, that we generally obey our parents, and that we have been taken to church since our earliest years. That was – or still is – probably the case for many of us. Some of us have continued to go to church of our own free will since then; and others perhaps became irregular in their church attendance or stopped going altogether for a while, but have now resumed. And perhaps there are others among us who have not yet reached that stage of life – that “valley of decision” – when we have to decide for ourselves how we will spend the Sabbath day.

Some opponents of Christianity argue that Christian parents should not take their children to church: the children should be left to “decide” for themselves whether they are religious when they grow up. This is one of these arguments that sounds somewhat plausible at first, but when we start to think about it, we realise that it is full of holes.

For example, is religion just for adults (think of the child Samuel)? How would children be able to practise religion if this proposed policy became universal? It would be impossible, which shows that the argument is false. Again, is it the case that children taken to church necessarily continue to do so, or do they not then make a decision (with many of them, alas, abandoning religion when they become adults)? This shows that taking children to church is not a mere matter of “indoctrination”.

Again, how many children who have *not* been taken to church “decide” for religion; and how are they going to decide if they are ignorant of the basics of Christianity? How are they going to learn these basics? Again, the opponent of Christianity is probably taking his children somewhere else on the Sabbath, forcing them not to be religious, and arguably indoctrinating them against religion, and should this be allowed under a supposed neutrality? All the plausibility in the original argument comes from its assumption that the truth of Christianity is uncertain. We want to return to this subject at the end of the paper.

2. Public worship in the Bible. Thinking about the subject more from the point of view of adults going to church, we want to start with a quick history of church-going (or public worship) in the Bible.

We are told something about the worship of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, and the expression “in process of time” (Genesis 4:3) or “at the end of days” (margin) may well refer to the weekly Sabbath, and therefore to more formal worship. But it is usually supposed that the first reference to several people assembling for the public worship of God is Genesis 4:26: “Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord”.

After this we have Abraham building altars and worshipping God, presumably with his family and servants (Genesis 18:19: “He will command

his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord”), but it is not until the Exodus, with Israel gathered together as a nation, that we have the institution of public worship for the whole of society. From then on, there is a regular ordinance, the morning and evening sacrifice (Numbers 28:4,8), with special sacrifices (two extra lambs) on the Sabbath day (verse 9), and with the three great annual feasts (the Day of Atonement, the Day of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles) at which every male Israelite was required to appear (Deuteronomy 16:16).

Most of the children of Israel lived too far from Jerusalem to attend regularly, and therefore local meeting-places developed (or synagogues as they came to be called). The only definite reference that we have to these in the Old Testament is Psalm 74:8: “They have burned all the synagogues of God in the land” (the Hebrew word for synagogue means *place of assembly*). The Psalm obviously refers to the events of the destruction of Jerusalem in the summer of 586 BC. Secular scholars often date the Psalm after the Babylonian Captivity, because they think that there were no synagogues before the Captivity, but it is obvious from the Psalm that there were. Another possible reference to synagogues is Psalm 89:7, “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints”. How long before the Captivity the synagogue developed, we have no idea, but one would think that it was quite early. It is from these synagogues that our Christian churches have developed.

After the Babylonian Captivity, some Jews returned to Palestine but continued to have local synagogues (although still going up to Jerusalem for the main feasts), while others did not return to Palestine, and they simply had their synagogues wherever they were, provided that there were enough men to form a synagogue. By the time of Christ, the synagogue was an established part of the religion of Israel. The practice was endorsed by Christ when He went into the synagogues of Galilee, and particularly into his home synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:15-16): “And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up: and, as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read”. So although synagogues were not explicitly appointed by God, they became part of Old Testament religion and they were accepted by God. We might say that they were implicitly appointed by Him, with His Holy Spirit directing the hearts of His people to assemble in that way.

Whether the synagogues had already split (for example, perhaps into Pharisees and Sadducees) by the time of Christ is not clear, but it seems likely that they had. In Acts 6:9 we read about the “synagogue of the libertines”, which seems to be a group of people defined, not geographically, but by some other feature. The word *libertines* does not mean that these

people were particularly liberal and immoral in their opinions, but probably that they (or their forbears) were Jewish prisoners, captured by the Romans, taken to Italy, and then released. Perhaps for language reasons they met separately in Jerusalem, as did the Cyrenians, the Alexandrians, and others. The Jerusalem Talmud says that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem by the time of its destruction in AD 70.

So, even in New Testament times, there were differences among these synagogues, and a Jew did not simply go to the nearest synagogue, but to that which had his preferred language, and perhaps his preferred doctrine as well. Of course, similar divisions have since arisen in the Christian Church, but the basic model should be that, as with the synagogues, there should be one Christian church in each area and everyone in the area should go to that.

The Apostles began their evangelism in the synagogues, but when they were rejected, they formed their Christian disciples together into churches. It was the "church" in Antioch that sent out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1), but when they came to Salamis they went to the synagogues (verse 5). In Acts 14, they went to the synagogue in Iconium (verse 1), but by verse 23 they were ordaining elders in the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia. In Acts 19, Paul taught in the synagogue of Ephesus for three months (verse 8), but then separated and taught in the school of Tyrannus (verse 9). So the Christian Church gradually developed separately from the Jewish synagogues, and this was hastened by the Gentiles coming in, and by the Jews not wanting to mix with the Gentiles.

Another issue which must have forced the separation was the day on which the Sabbath was being kept. This must have been a central issue, and it continues to be one of the problems with the so-called "Messianic" movement in Israel today.

This seems to have been the origin of churches and Christian assemblies. They are a continuation of the Old Testament practice of gathering together in local synagogues for the worship of God and for instruction in the truth. So the question, Why do we go to church? is closely related to the question, Why did the Jews in Christ's time go to synagogues? The answers that come to mind would be that they wanted to do so and enjoyed doing so; that they followed the example of others; that their religion mattered to them and they wanted to uphold it and advance in it; that their religious leaders directed them to attend synagogues; and that they sought the presence of God. To these we might add the Fourth Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). This requires us to do whatever sanctifies the Sabbath, and this would include assembling with our families to praise God and to receive religious instruction, as we have opportunity.

Looking Around Us

Faith that Can Move Mountains

People around the world were gripped by reports of a group of 12 boys who, along with their leader, became trapped deep inside a series of caves in Thailand. What exactly happened is not yet clear but, according to a BBC reporter, “the best guess is they went quite deep into the caves, which is easy when they are dry, got caught by rising flood water, and were forced to go even deeper.” The good news is that all those who were trapped were eventually brought out safely, even although some of the caves were filled with water. A team of divers was assembled, some of whom were specialists in cave diving. Sadly, one diver died when his oxygen tank became empty.

The reporter commented, “They say faith can move mountains. Thailand chose to put its faith in the men who venture inside them.” It was, in fact, the Apostle Paul who wrote, “Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [or, love], I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). To work miracles seems altogether wonderful but, if we do not love God, we lack what is most necessary.

And faith needs a foundation. So what foundation would Paul have had if he was to succeed in moving a mountain from one place to another? If he had a good reason for moving a mountain, Paul would have trusted in the power of God to work miracles. That attitude is according to the words of Jesus: “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (Matthew 17:20). Certainly the age of miracles has passed but God still does wonderful things in His providence. Very likely, true Christians were praying for the boys and their leader to be rescued, and God heard their petitions.

We cannot put our trust in experts, however skilled. Yes, we must use them, as the Thai authorities used skilled divers to carry out the rescue. Experts, however well meaning, may fail us. But God will never fail us. And we need to be rescued from an even more dangerous position than the Thai caves; we need to be delivered from sin and its consequences. Human strength is not enough. We need far greater power; we need God Himself to work in our hearts to make us able and willing to trust in Christ Jesus, who has done everything necessary to save sinners like us.

It is the Bible that says faith can move mountains. No one should make light of anything it says. Its whole message is given for us to believe; it is worthy of our total trust, especially in the things of the soul. “Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength” (Isaiah 26:4).



Members of this year's UK Youth Conference

The Bible is Precious

These lines were written by Robert Murray M'Cheyne, when touring Palestine with Andrew Bonar as part of a trip to investigate what might be done to begin missionary work among the Jews. Bonar had lost his Bible when it fell into the well at Sychar. Amazingly it was found four years later. The last two lines refer to the Scriptures.

My own loved Bible, must I part from thee,
 Companion of my toils by land and sea;
 Man of my counsels, soother of distress,
 Guide of my steps through this world's wilderness?
 In darkest nights, a lantern to my feet;
 In gladsome days, as dropping honey sweet.
 When first I parted from my quiet home,
 At Thy command, for Israel's good to roam,
 Thy gentle voice said, "For Jerusalem pray,
 So shall Jehovah prosper all thy way".
 When through the lonely wilderness we strayed,
 Sighing in vain for palm trees' cooling shade,
 Thy words of comfort hushed each rising fear,
 "The shadow of Thy mighty Rock is near".
 And when we pitched our tents on Judah's hills,
 Or thoughtful mused beside Siloam's rills;
 Whene'er we climbed Mount Olivet, to gaze
 Upon the sea, where stood in ancient days
 The heaven-struck Sodom.
 Sweet record of the past to faith's glad eyes,
 Sweet promiser of glories yet to rise!

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