

HOW TO

Survive

IN THE

Pharisee

CHURCH

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HOW TO
Survive
IN THE
Pharisee
CHURCH

and Other Questions for Confused Christians

**NORMAN
WALFORD**



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ISBN 13: 978-1-4141-1260-2

ISBN 10: 1-4141-1260-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2008905621

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK HAS been a long time in the gestation. My friends say that I was talking about it 20 years ago at least. Through the years, they have been faithful to remind me of my professed intention and have given me the encouragement to see it through to completion. From halcyon days in Amsterdam, my thanks go out to Dwight, Innah, James, Marjo, Naoko, Rina, Wendy, John and Jean, and others. In Singapore, Ong Sin Qua (“SQ”) has been unfailing in his support and encouragement, while Tan Sing Huang, Phil Sylvester, and Renee He Xiu Qing have given many hours of their time to reading, correction, and suggestions for improvement. At Mount Hermon, Ken Kuhlken and Marty Magee gave me encouragement at critical junctures.

Going further back, my thanks go to Max Turner, now Professor of New Testament Studies at the London School of Theology—without him there would have been no story to tell.

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INTRODUCTION

IN APRIL 2007, I presented a synopsis of this book for critical review at a Christian Writers' Conference in California. The critic assigned to me was, to say the least, critical!

"Look at it!" she almost screamed. "It's all about you! Why would anyone want to read a book all about you?"

Desperately, I cast about for a suitable riposte. "But Keith Miller wrote a book that was all about Keith Miller, and that turned out to be a bestseller."

"Keith Miller is famous! You are not famous!"

"Yes, *now* he is, after writing the book! Back then no one had even heard of him!" I wanted to say, but didn't.

My critic was right about two things. Yes, a lot of it is about me; and no, I'm not famous. I make no apologies for either.

We live in an age of celebrity Christianity, and this is as true in the world of publishing as elsewhere. Publishers are in the business of selling books, and the most effective way of doing this is to select authors who are already well known in other spheres. Pastors of megachurches, established television personalities, and stars from the worlds of sports, politics, and the media all fit the bill.

This is fine, up to a point. These people may have earned their success by hard work and perseverance, and there may be much that we can learn from their examples. At the same time, however, there's a danger that we can end up with an unbalanced view of Christianity that has little or

nothing to do with the reality of the ordinary believers who make up the great majority of the church-going public.

I like to play golf. I also enjoy watching Tiger Woods and the others on the pro tour. I admire their technical excellence and the mental qualities that help them maximize that ability. I'm just not sure that watching them makes much difference in my own game. I could never make those shots, and it's probably better that I don't try. I'm better off finding my own style of play—a style more suited to my age, physical condition, and limited natural ability. However, when I go to my club and watch the high handicappers who play at around my own level or a bit better, I can see what works and doesn't work for them, and from that I can often pick up something that really does improve my own play.

Church can be the same way. At the top are the stars. They run the show, do the preaching, write the books, and generally seem to have the whole thing figured out. Many of them are talented, highly motivated, and hardworking. They have a clear vision of what they feel is their calling and of how best to achieve it. But they're *different* from you and me. They may have their own sets of problems, but those are not necessarily the same as the frustrations and feelings of inadequacy that plague the rest of us.

Below the stars, there's often a second layer. This is made up of able and articulate people. They've been successful in their careers, and they've figured out that by applying the same principles and techniques that worked for them before, they can get on equally well in church. They've figured out how the system works and seen how to work it to their own advantage.

And then there's *you* and *me*—the rest of us. We know and love God, and deep down we'd like God to use us a bit more, but we've never attracted the attention of the church talent scouts—they just don't see us as being particularly "useful." In our darker moments we can even wonder if God feels the same way. Perhaps he's also on the lookout for people with a bit more talent and ability than we can offer. Even if we are able to dismiss these feelings of inadequacy, there can still persist a nagging feeling that perhaps God might have a lot more in store for us than we've found so far, if we could just find the way in.

If this is you, as it's often been me, the Bible brings a message of hope. God actually *appreciates* those with limited talents and self-confidence. In fact, it's just such people—people like us—who God wishes to use the most in the building of his kingdom. Jesus' stated aim was to reverse

the “normal,” worldly way of operating and put the last first and the first last—a total revolution.

Most church leaders prefer to take a safer road than this. In a way, I can sympathize with them. Unlike you and me, they’re trying to make a living out of it, and they have a lot more to lose than we do if it all goes wrong. It’s not surprising that they prefer to stay with the tried and tested “safe” options. Realistically, they’re probably never going to take a chance on you, or on me, and most likely, we’re going to have to cut our own road.

In the course of writing this book, my understanding has, inevitably, evolved. I planned at the start to write a book about how the church has often seemed more of a hindrance than a help in my life with God. I understand now that the reality of my struggle is more complex. I’ve come to see that there has often been an unhealthy codependency in my church relationship. Codependency implies fault on both sides of the relationship, with the faults and inadequacies of the one party compounding and reinforcing the faults and inadequacies of the other, and vice versa. If I wasn’t the sort of person I am, then I wouldn’t have run into the sort of problems in church that I did.

A chief purpose of the book is to unravel the complexities of this tangled relationship and lay them out for all to see. That’s why a lot of it, as my critic helpfully pointed out, is about me. It’s also about me and God, and about me and the church. There are three parties in this relationship, and three-way relationships are never simple and straightforward.

If the relationship is complex, the timelines running through this book are not entirely straightforward either, so to avoid any possible confusion in readers’ minds, I will lay out here a brief overview of the book’s structure.

Part One is about God and me. It starts in 1969, the year of my first encounter with the God of the Bible, and goes on to describe a series of episodes in the development of that relationship over the years that followed. My Christian life has never been a steady, uninterrupted, straight-line ascent towards heaven. It’s been more of a process of bumping along on the bottom, sometimes for years at a time, interspersed with occasional, blinding flashes of insight that leave me thinking, *How come I never saw that before?* There have been many of these, both big and small, and those that I’ve written about are a few of the most significant, recounted in the order in which they happened. If they involved the church, they did so only in a peripheral way.

Part Two brings in the church. The time frame here overlaps that of the first part, initially jumping back to 1969 again (with a short childhood digression), and then progressing on, by degrees, almost to the present. The events recounted here relate primarily to my relationship to the church. Obviously, since these events were happening to a large extent concurrently with those of the first part, they cannot be entirely dissociated from them. What God was doing in me, as an individual, inevitably impacted my life in the church, and vice versa; so there is some overlap of content as well as of time. At the start of each chapter, I've given an approximate date, as best I can work it out, which I hope will alleviate any potential confusion.

Part Three is more analytical. It starts by looking at two problems that come up again and again—the God who seems to preside so blithely over the disasters and calamities that can so often afflict our lives; and the God who can seem so distant just when we think we need him the most. After that, it moves to the church and church relationships. Perhaps I should say *the two churches*, for the New Testament does indeed describe two—the one that Jesus founded, and the one that fought successfully to have him put to death.

Inevitably there is some generalization and stereotyping in the discussion of the church. I don't stop every few pages to say, *Of course, not all churches are like this! There are some good ones too!* That goes, I hope, without saying.

The first two parts and the third part may appear at first to be unrelated, but they are not. My hope is that discerning readers will be able to see the connections between the principles in the second half and the events in the first half. The events taught me the principles and serve now to illustrate them.

I don't pretend, or wish, to offer a last word on anything. Jesus was wary of those who called themselves teachers, and he told us to be wary also,¹ so I should be reluctant to assume that role. But if this very personal view can help readers to link more effectively to the only true teacher that Jesus ever recognized—that is, the Messiah himself—then it will have succeeded in its objective.

¹ Matthew 23:8–10

PART 1

ME AND GOD

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CHAPTER 1

MEETING GOD FOR THE FIRST TIME

Cambridge: November 1969

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, AND I'm out of cigarettes. It's a grey, blustery November Cambridge day, with the east wind from Siberia seeming to howl uninterruptedly across the North Sea and the Anglian fens, and then funneling down the alleyways of the old university town to chill the bones of any soul unwary enough to venture out.

I'm huddled in the warmth of the college library with my books. I'm eighteen years old.

Eight months ago, much to my surprise and that of my family, my teachers, and I think practically everyone else, I received the letter informing me that my application to study medicine at this ancient university had been accepted. I still think there must have been a mistake somewhere, some sort of mix-up. Six weeks into the course, I still don't really feel I *belong* with these guys. They all seem not just a lot cleverer than I am, but also a lot more accomplished in every other way that I can think of.

I remember the frantic phone calls after the entry exams. It seems one of my papers has vanished—it never arrived in Cambridge for marking. Very mysterious. The exams were held in our school, and at the end of every session, the manuscripts were collected at the front and bundled together to be sent off. One of mine never arrived at the other end.

Yes, of course I handed it in! Not that I actually specifically remember carrying it up to the front—but after all, what else would I have done with it? I mean, I wouldn’t have just left it lying on the desk with the scrap paper to be thrown away, would I?

Would I?

They believe me, but at the back of my mind there’s a niggling doubt...

Luckily, no one’s trying to blame me for it. For whatever reason, it’s gone, disappeared without trace, and not about to reappear. Maybe they feel guilty about the loss, feel they have to give me the benefit of the doubt and offer me a place.

Never mind. I’m here now, and I intend to make the best of it that I possibly can. This is the biggest break I’ve had in life so far. No matter how out of place I may feel, I’m not going to let it go without a fight. So that’s why I’m spending my Saturday afternoon sitting here in the library, surrounded by books, and struggling to keep abreast of the academic work that’s piling ever higher as the end of the term approaches.

But now I’ve got a more pressing problem—the cigarettes. *How could I get hooked so quickly? It’s only been, what, a few months since my first serious smoke. I thought addiction was something that happened to other people, not to me. Well, I was wrong. Suddenly I’ve got an ongoing problem with no easy solution.*

At least it’s not raining. Cambridge is windy and cold, but thankfully, it’s fairly dry. The cigarette shop is only a ten minute walk. It’s hardly worth getting out my bicycle, the usual way of transport around town for students and teachers alike. *I’ll do it on foot, clear my brain in the icy wind.*

I walk out through the college gate, right, left down Senate House Passage, right into King’s Parade, across the road and past the bus stop. Thousands of buses stopping on the same spot have pressed the asphalt up into a little wave. It makes a convenient ramp for cyclists to jump the raised kerb that bounds the paved area leading past the University Church to the market square. Years later, the whole area will be pedestrianized. The buses will go, and with them the ramp, leaving the bicycles to find another way over the kerb.

I go this way every day. The landmarks are familiar, automatic. Today, however, there’s something slightly different. Among the throng of shoppers ambling back and forth between the market and the road, there’s a loose huddle of people static on the pavement. In the middle,

one of them is up on a chair. The others are loosely grouped around him, looking purposeful.

Unusual, but the impression barely registers on my consciousness before being discarded. *The shop closes in five minutes, and I need those cigarettes.* Appointments with destiny, I've found, can come at the most banal and unexpected moments. Unknowingly, I'm about to walk in on the biggest one of my entire life.

A few minutes later, and I'm coming back the other way, hands in pockets against the cold, my fingers twined round the familiar, angular contour of the cigarette pack. Mission accomplished. I'm in no hurry now. The little cluster is still there with the chair in the middle, and I pause idly to take a look.

Just an ordinary, cheap wooden chair. Obviously, one gets up on it and speaks, while the others mill around to form a readymade audience. Must be fellow students, I suppose, probably a year or two ahead of me. Fairly conventional looking. Short hair. Boring.

As I arrive, the last speaker ends his speech and steps down from the chair. The shops are closing and any potential listeners are drifting away. I remember nothing now of his words. All I remember is my own reaction—a few desultory, sarcastic handclaps. That's me, the sort of person I am—cynical, hollow, and a bit destructive.

I hear a voice close by, on my right. One of them is talking to me.

Oh no! You idiot, Norman! Why did you do that? You've reacted! It's what they want, of course—an entrée, an excuse to start a conversation. And you've given them just that. Now you're stuck.

“It's not just a performance, you know.”

Startled, I hear my own reflex reply. “Oh! What is it then?”

You've done it again! Why did you answer? Whatever you do, don't get drawn in. Turn round and walk away. Do anything, whatever it takes to escape from this...this...intrusion, and back into your cocoon.

“Look, I've got to be going. Stuff to do,” I mumble. “Got to get back.”

“Okay, so...where are you staying? Which is your college?”

“Trinity Hall.” Again, it's out before I can stop myself. *Stop this, Norman! Classified information leaking out like through a sieve. Once they know where you live...*

“Oh, really! That's exactly where we're going! Look, we're finished here. We'll walk back with you.”

Without being grossly offensive, there's simply no way out. *You and your big mouth.*

We walk.

Ten minutes later, and I'm back in the college, sitting in a strange room, surrounded by the whole group of them, and being plied with coffee. I'm not even sure how I got here. I've never been very good at saying "No!"—even in those days, my boundaries were shaky. I take the line of least resistance, go with it, and look for an early exit point. It's all a bit of a blur.

I must have let on that I'm studying medicine. I thought that was harmless enough, but instead it's given them another opportunity. Now there's another one they want me to meet—Max. He's not here today. He's also a medic, and they think we may have common ground.

Sorry, I should have said he *was* a medic. No longer! It comes out that a year ago Max switched courses. He gave up medicine and changed to theology...more specifically, Christian theology.

Come on! Religion, okay. I've got no problem with that. In fact, I'm interested even. Ever since I was small, there's always been that fear of death, oblivion, nothingness. It's been there in the background for as long as I can remember. I think, therefore I am. And if I am, I want to continue to be. The idea of not being—no more thinking, no consciousness, just non-existence—terrifies me more than almost anything else I can imagine. Any release from that fear of death would be welcome. Or almost any release. Except one... please, not Christianity!

Two weeks ago I became a paid-up member of the Cambridge University Buddhist Society. I've not attended a meeting yet, but that's the direction I've been planning to go. That's more my sort of religion. Reincarnation. The endless cycle. Freedom from non-being. Nothing too demanding, all suitably vague. More to the point, it's socially acceptable, in fact it's even getting to be a bit cool. We're at the tail end of the swinging sixties, and eastern religion is right in vogue. As a Buddhist, I can hold my head up high in student society. But as for this lot...these Christians...that's something else altogether.

As the price of escape, I agree to a meeting with Max, and flee the room.

At the promised time, I meet with Max in a square, box-like room called H-11 in the South Court of the college. It's not his room—he's borrowing it from another student for the meeting.

Max's family lives in Zambia. His father is a teacher, working in the copper belt. Like me, Max came to Cambridge to study medicine. There the similarity between us ends.

Max seems to be a success at everything, as far as I can tell. He's an international standard rock climber and an accomplished fencer. *Has he ever failed at anything in his entire life? I doubt it. I know his kind from way back. I feel like I've lived in their shadow forever.*

No accidents in Max's university admission, of course—he's here entirely on merit. For guys like Max, it seems to be so easy, so natural. No doubt his medical career would have been one long, uninterrupted triumphal procession, had he gone on with it.

Not like me.

Me, I don't feel like I've succeeded at anything, ever. It's been eighteen long and unremitting years of failure followed by more failure. Even my university admission is probably a fraud. I've grabbed the chance, and I'm giving it my best shot, but deep down I don't really expect much—just another in a long series of humiliating defeats.

I don't normally mix with the likes of Max. One short year since my escape from the stultifying bonds of private boarding school education has seen an alarmingly rapid transition in my life and attitudes. There's a burgeoning counterculture of drugs, hippydom, and hard rock music coming up, and I've been sucked right in. Now, the little microcosm of our student culture is polarized into "them" and "us." I'm trying hard to be one of "us," while Max, with his neat haircut and smartly knotted tie, is clearly one of "them."

Never mind, there's no harm in talking. There's no need for anyone ever to know that I've been talking with a Christian.

Max tells me he came up to Cambridge as an atheist. Then, at some point in his first year, he underwent a Christian conversion that turned his whole life upside down. He tells me the details, probably, but they are quickly forgotten. Anyway, the solid and visible result of his decision was the switch from medicine to theology. I don't really want to be impressed by that, but I can't help it.

For me, concepts such as integrity and idealism are distant adolescent memories, as my life drifts into increasing hedonism. Selfishness is in fashion. These days, I just float downstream with the current, following the line of least resistance. Does talking to Max strike some sort of a chord in a past I've left behind? Perhaps. Whatever, I feel a grudging respect. *A Christian whom I can respect. Now there's a novelty.*

When I look at my own career path and what it means to me, I can see how much it must have cost him to walk away from the allure of worldly success and prosperity. Or should have cost him. Because strangely, that doesn't seem to be an issue for Max. For him, the career switch is just a

minor detail in his life—no big deal. Like he's got his eyes on an altogether bigger purpose, and ditching his medical career is just a footnote in a story of much greater significance.

I'm trying to stay cynical, but still, it leaves an impression...

We debate.

I decide to leave my new-found Buddhism out of it. I don't understand it well enough yet to give a good defense, and frankly, even at this early stage it's already starting to look a bit shallow. I can see the flaws for myself, and I don't need outside help.

Instead I adopt a scientific rationalist stance. I feel on safer ground here. Darwin...the Big Bang...We debate, back and forth. I enjoy arguing. I think I'm quite good at it, but the trouble is, Max is no fool either. He's also got a background in science and seems able to match every argument I can throw up. I can't find a chink anywhere.

It's getting late.

We agree to another meeting, and he gives me a book to read in the meantime. It's *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson. I recognize the title. It was popular in the Christian Union when I was at school. It had a reputation then for being a little bit risqué, a bit outside of the mainstream. At the time I was curious, but I never read it. Now I take the opportunity.

Wilkerson, the Pentecostal preacher who goes to New York to convert the street gangs. Hmm...So what's a Pentecostal, anyway?

Now he's driving through New York, looking for an address where he's due to stay. He's never been to New York before, and he didn't think to bring a street map. *Not clever.* Now he's asking God for directions. *An unusual method of navigation!* He drives on a bit longer, takes a few turns at random, and...he's there! He's arrived right outside the house he's been looking for! *Now that's truly weird.*

New York is a big place, a bit like London I suppose. I imagine driving through London with no map, just a bit of paper with an address scribbled on it, hoping to stumble on the right street by chance. *This makes no sense at all.*

The rest of the book slides by. It's interesting enough, but it's the supernatural street map that really sticks in my mind. It's found the weak link in my armour of cynicism, which is my objectivity, my scientific detachment. I can argue about metaphysics all day and night and be emotionally untouched. But if someone can present me with convincing evidence of God actually intervening, actually *doing things* in the real world of ordinary men and women, then I'm going to find that hard to ignore.

The incident preys on my mind in the days before my next meeting with Max. This is a bit different from the other religions I've looked at, this idea of a personal God actually *involved* in everyday life, talking to people and telling them things.

I've been more at home with vaguer sorts of spirituality—life forces, nirvana, my soul being subsumed into the great beyond, whatever. There's karma, of course—the idea of my wrongdoings in this life rebounding on me in some future incarnation; but even that seems somehow impersonal, faceless, and lacking in reality. As for a God who actually talks to people, well, that's a bit new to me. I'm not sure what to make of it.

I file Wilkerson's experience away at the back of my mind for future reference. It goes in the same box as Max's "call" to give up medicine. Two disturbing events I can't easily account for. Is there a connection? Is there some kind of pattern here? Wilkerson is less immediate somehow, separated by a few thousand miles and a passage of years. In New York, anything can happen, probably. Max is altogether closer to home—sitting right opposite me, in fact.

That was a brave thing to do—giving up a career for God. No play-acting there...It's certainly for real in his life. Does he pray for supernatural street navigation? Maybe he does—who knows? Whatever, it took some guts. Not for me, that's for sure.

I'm starting to feel a certain sense of moral inadequacy here. Not that I feel I've ever really done anything *wrong* as such—but I'm starting to wonder if I've ever actually done anything *right* either.

Not done anything wrong? Well—okay, maybe a few things, but no worse than anyone else. In fact I can think of plenty of people much worse than me. Maybe it's just a question of opportunity. Maybe I just haven't had the chance to get really bad yet. But when I look at guys like Wilkerson and Max, I see morality and ethics taken to another level altogether. Way out of my reach, certainly.

Hold it, Norman. Time to drop those kinds of thoughts. This is the sixties, remember. There's a lot going on out there—parties, women, drugs, music. A whole big world waiting to be explored and enjoyed. You've hardly even started. It's all in front of you, and it's going well. You're making friends, you're having fun—don't let anything threaten that now.

There's a new morality out there. The old taboos are coming down. All kinds of possibilities are opening up. And one thing's for sure, these guys—these Christians—are not a part of it. Look at them! Look at the way they dress! Look at their haircuts, for God's sake!

And then there's something else. Two weeks ago, I never knew these guys existed. But now, with my new-found awareness, I'm starting to hear things around the college that I never picked up on before. A word here, a comment there. And what I'm hearing is not good. These guys are known about, and they are not popular. In fact, no one with any real social standing in the college wants to have anything to do with them. *If people notice me hanging out with this lot, then that's the end. If I seriously want three years as a social outcast, that's the way to go. So far, okay. Any further, I'm courting trouble. Religion is fine, but not Christianity, please!*

Max takes me to a Sunday evening evangelistic service in the University Church. The preacher has been a missionary in Asia—Indonesia, I think. He talks about supernatural events, things he's seen and been involved with that can't be explained on normal human criteria. Miracles.

Oh, no, I'm in church!

At least no one's going to recognize me in here. The problem is those critical few seconds at the end when I have to get out. At least it's dark outside. I can make a dash for it and slink off into the night—probably get away without being spotted...

But that doesn't get me away from what this preacher is talking about. What to make of it? Is he lying? Inventing these stories? But why would he do that? For money? Hardly. Fame? I don't think so.

It doesn't make sense. Unless...unless it's real, you mean? But if these kinds of supernatural interventions are really happening, then that has implications, doesn't it? Implications for my life...

But that's ridiculous! I mean, if this stuff was going on all over the place it would get talked about, wouldn't it? You can't hide it, surely. Everyone would hear about it. I've been around churches all my life, but I never heard anyone ever seriously suggest that God was actually doing stuff now, in the present day. Never heard it till now, that is. I mean, Christianity's just a religion, isn't it? A set of beliefs. Isn't that all...I think?

Mind you, it could certainly make life interesting if he was, couldn't it?

No! No, no, no! Don't even think about it. Blank it out. Get rid of it somehow!

There's something else about this lot. I've always thought of church, religion, and Christianity all as pretty much a single, homogeneous entity, but this is a bit different. As far as I can see, Max and his friends are not actually part of the religious establishment as I've always known it.

The Christianity I've been used to is all about people dressed in strange, outmoded robes from the remote past, following traditions

that seem equally ancient. Not these. I've never encountered this brand before. They're harking back to Christianity as it was at the beginning, when it was all new and fresh and revolutionary, and the traditions didn't exist yet. They see it as something up to date and completely relevant to the present. In some ways they seem to be almost as skeptical about traditional Christianity as I am.

Well—that's okay with me. I was done with church years ago, and as far as I'm concerned, anything with a church connection is strictly out. As for this, I don't know...

Is God calling me? Could this be God intervening in my life? Inconvenient timing, if it is. That's another interesting idea, isn't it—that God might actually be interested in little me down here. A bit farfetched, I think...I mean, no one was ever really interested in me before now. I was just never that significant. All my life I've been overshadowed by others who were bigger, cleverer, stronger, more charismatic, more talented. But if it was really true, if God was really and actually interested in me personally, that could change a whole lot of things. My life, the way I relate, the way I fit into the world. It could change everything, in fact.

But then... Why me, God? Why pick on me? There are lots of other people out there. Why not go for one of them?

A distant memory from a half-forgotten past drifts into my consciousness...

I'm ten years old, on a family holiday in the south of Italy. We've stopped for a picnic lunch by the side of the road. It's an idyllic spot, with blue sky, warm sunshine, and the coast road cutting into the steep mountainside that slopes down to the hazy sea far below. At least, it seems far below to me—I'm only ten, and everything seems big now.

The memory unfolds...

My brother and I go for a walk. Okay—my brother goes for a walk, and I follow. I'm not invited. That's how it is in our family. Everyone doing their own thing.

To start with, everything is fine. I follow him through the gorse bushes, up, down, around a few corners. Just below me there's a farm track cut into the hillside. I jump down. *Will I be able to get back up again? No matter, my brother's just ahead. Or is he? Which way?* I walk on a bit. I thought he was just in front, but I don't see him now. Looks like I'm alone. *Best to get back. Back? Where's back? Up? Down? I don't know.*

Suddenly I'm scared. Reality changes. The friendly hillside is suddenly a forbidding, alien place, and I'm a small boy stuck out on a mountainside a thousand miles from home.

Which way to go? Tears drip down my cheeks. I'm alone and more scared than I've ever been in my life. I'll never get back. I'll wander on and eventually just die out here on this mountain. What to do? Who to turn to? There's no one here, just me. I don't know what to do. Fear. Panic. Terror.

A vague memory from school floats into my mind. God. But I don't know anything about him. I've heard them talk about him often enough. Too much, in fact. Hour after hour of chapel boredom, waiting to escape. But I never really thought about him in any personal sort of way before, much less tried to talk to him or ask him for anything. Never needed to, I suppose. *But out here on this mountain...*

It's worth a try. Anything's worth a try. It's a long shot, but it's the only one I've got. Right now, it's God or nothing.

I pray.

It's the first and truest prayer of my entire life. In years to come I will pray plenty of prayers of desperation, but none of them quite as desperate as this one. Out of options, I'm taking the only course I can think of. I'm going to try and cut a deal with God.

“God, if you will rescue me—if you will get me out of this place and back to my family—in return I will do...anything you ask. You can have anything you want from me. Anything. My life, it's yours...but just get me out of here. Please!”

It's done.

Did he hear? Who knows? No matter, it was worth a try.

What follows is a blur in my memory. I only remember somehow arriving on the beach at the bottom of the mountain. My mother is there waiting, half hysterical. We're all reunited. More tears. And then, it's back to life as usual.

Strangely, we like the place, stay on for a few days, and even decide to come back the following year. Like most childhood traumas, the incident, so intense and vivid at the time, is forgotten almost as soon as it's over, relegated to the depths of consciousness.

And my deal with God? Well...it wasn't a fair deal, was it? I mean, I was under coercion and extreme stress! Anyway, I don't suppose he was listening. *Was he? I hope not.*

And so, life goes on.

But now, eight years later, I'm thinking, *What if he really was there, out on that mountainside? What if he really was listening? What if he heard my prayer, looked at my offer, and in that instant was kind of shaking my hand and saying, “Done! I accept your terms. It's a deal!” And what if he's been biding his time all these eight years, waiting for the right moment? And*

what if he's now saying, "Norman, I did my part all those years ago, got you safely off that mountain. Now it's time for you to deliver on your side. I'm calling you in."

Oh my God! He wouldn't do that, would he? Take advantage of a terrified little kid like that. I mean, that's not fair! It's mean, underhanded!

Would he do that? It doesn't bear thinking about.

Meanwhile, I'm back in H-11 with Max, and my options are closing down. My real problem is that I've always prided myself on my intellectual honesty and believed myself to be a genuine seeker after religious truth. There was nothing phony about my flirtations with Buddhism and reincarnation. It was all genuine. I really wanted to know the truth. I just never really expected to find it—I mean, no one ever does, do they? Isn't that what being human is all about, traveling on hopefully forever, never quite arriving? I doubt anyone ever really got to the point of saying, "Right, that's it! The search is over, I'm there!"

Did they?

Still, I always told myself that if ever I did stumble on the true meaning of life, I'd be happy to embrace it and follow it through to the end, regardless of where it might lead. Of course, I'd always assumed that if I did find it—if it was even findable—it would be something a little comforting and a little comfortable. Not like this. *Comfortable, this is not.*

I don't want it! Not this! I don't want to be a Christian! I despise Christians. I detest the people, and I despise the narrow, outdated, restrictive morality.

I don't want it! I don't want people making snide remarks about me around the college behind my back. Life is hard enough already. But then, what to do if it turns out to be true? The ultimate nightmare.

But then again, why should it be comfortable? From the start I've seen the most gaping flaw in my Buddhist philosophy of reincarnation is exactly that—it's just *too* comfortable. It's so subjective, with so many variations that you can practically make it up as you go along. And isn't that just what I've been doing? Taking a little bit from here, a little bit from there, putting it together to suit myself. Isn't it all about comfort, with no demand or challenge? And deep down, haven't I always had that nagging suspicion that "this is all just a bit too good to be true"?

But now we're going to the opposite extreme. The despised religion of my childhood coming back to torment me. *What to do?*

Max is talking again.

We've discussed pretty much everything I can think of already, and Max is matching me point for point. Question. Answer. Question. Answer. I ask one more question. Something to do with evolution, I think.

"I'm not going to answer that question."

Oh!

"I could, of course. I could give you an answer that would probably satisfy you. And then you'll ask another. And another. And eventually you'll ask a question that I can't answer. That's inevitable, because I don't have all the answers. So then you use that as an excuse to walk away. That's why I'm not answering any more questions. You've heard enough. It's time to make a decision."

Oh, no! He's seen through me at the same time that I've seen through myself. And now? All my life searching for truth. When the other kids were playing with toys, I was pondering the meaning of life. Finally it's confronted me, and it's my worst nightmare. And at this moment, I know it's true.

I know. I can argue with doctrines and ideas, but I can't argue with changed lives. And that's what I've been seeing. Something I never saw in any other religion or philosophy. It's easy for people to say, "I believe this," or "I believe that," when words don't cost much. But when I talk to this guy who's walked away from his whole career for this belief, then, deep down, I know. I can't argue with it.

What to do?

I can walk away too, but the other way. Let it fade. In a few days, a few weeks, the conviction will subside. Give it a year and I'll scarcely remember that all this ever happened. Just a couple of late night chats with a guy I happened to meet and a few interesting ideas...nothing really to take too seriously. Nothing worth interrupting the serious business of life for.

But then I'd be deliberately deluding myself, and that's something I've never done. Do I really want to start now? And then, what about my lifelong search for religious truth? If I've finally and unexpectedly found it, and then walked away because it's not comfortable and I don't like what I've found, where do I go from there? More comfortable illusions? I don't know.

And finally—if it's really true and I blot it out, perhaps I can keep that going for fifty, sixty years, but ultimately, it all ends. Right now, death seems so far off as to be scarcely imaginable, but it's not always going to be that way. One day death is going to be very real. What then? My mental contortions now to hide from what I can see clear and bright in front of me in this moment—how much currency will those have on that day? Not much I fear.

I've decided.

I don't like it. I don't want it. But in this moment I can see that it's true, so I'm going to take it. I'll worry about the consequences of the decision later. Tonight, for just this once in my life, I'm going to do what I can see is right...

Not that I seriously expect it to work. Max has explained to me about being born again and so on. Receiving Christ by faith, the Holy Spirit, all that. Well, maybe that can work for everyone else, but I don't seriously see it working for me. I'll pray to receive Christ, and nothing will happen. Another big zero. Never mind. Worry about all that later.

I tell Max my decision. We lean forward in our seats and pray. Max says the words. I repeat after him. Again, it's blurred, indistinct.

Confess to sin. What sin? I still don't think I'm that bad! Come on, Norman, just say the words. Worry about the meaning later.

I invite Jesus into my life.

In the moments of silence that follow Max's prayer, I add a silent addendum of my own: *Just one thing, God, before we end. If you think I'm going to be like these fanatics, standing up on chairs to preach and generally making a fool of myself, you can forget it! That's not part of the deal. No one else even needs to know about this. It's private, just between you and me.* Perhaps God had a silent smile at that, knowing how comprehensively he would outmanoeuvre me in the years ahead.

Now, Max is prophesying. And it's about me. Something about how God will make me into a burnished chalice into which he wants to pour his love. *Well, that sounds okay. So many strange things are going on around here that nothing surprises me anymore.* It's filed away, another memory to draw on in the dark years ahead. Meanwhile, I'm living the moment. Considerations of the future are temporarily laid aside. Just as well. This is a bit fragile. The lightest touch and I think it could all fall apart.

It's late as I walk back across the deserted courts of the college to my own rooms. I feel a little—what? Excited? Expectant? I don't know. Just a little light-headed, I think. Strangely enough, I have a distinct feeling that, contrary to all my expectations, God actually heard my prayer and something really did happen.

It's done. I'm a Christian.

CHAPTER 2

IN AND OUT OF SLAVERY

London: April 1979

DESPAIR. Nothing new in that, of course—despair has been my constant companion these last few years. Not that it shows on the surface. Well...a few cracks, maybe. To the outside world my life probably looks fine, enviable even. Inside, everything's a mess.

I'm a doctor now. I've moved up in the world.

For the first few months it was almost euphoric. Like the holiday in Rome after I qualified and the stolen passport. The humiliating trek to the British Consulate to report the loss. The bored clerk behind the desk filling out the report...“Name?”...“Date of Birth?”...“Occupation?”...“Oh, you're a *doctor* are you?”

Her attitude transforms. I'm no longer another idiotic, careless tourist who can't be bothered to look after his possessions. Suddenly I'm a responsible professional unlucky enough to have encountered a misfortune and eminently deserving of her help and even of her confidence.

“By the way, I've got this pain in my back every time I turn. What should I do? Do you think it's serious?”

I enjoy the novelty of my enhanced status to the full.

Now I'm in London doing postgraduate training to be a pathologist. I enjoy what I do. It's early days, but my career is off to a good start, and it looks like it can only get better. I've bought my own apartment. I have a

little open-topped MGB sports car to run around town. I have friends, a good income, and a comfortable life. In short, I shouldn't have a care in the world.

But the truth is something far different. The truth is that what happened to me on that November evening in that small, box-like room in the South Court of Trinity Hall changed me forever. That night I met God for the first time, and that moment opened my eyes, irrevocably and forever, to a whole new system of values and changed priorities.

That's not to say that the trappings of worldly success no longer interest me. They still do. But now I see them as just a part of a bigger picture. There's another whole dimension out there, an eternal one. The values and triumphs of this world, I've come to see, are strictly temporary. When they're gone, all that will remain will be what has been built in that other, eternal realm. If ever I'm going to make a truly lasting success of anything, it's there that it will have to happen. That's the one that really counts.

When I first met Max, I was amazed that he could throw away his medical career with such nonchalance for *that*. Now that I've been there and seen it for myself, I understand completely. In fact, it seems like eminent good sense.

Jesus told a story about it—about that eternal place. He said it's like a pearl of great value that a man sees in the marketplace. He knows in that instant that he's got to have it, whatever the cost, so he sells everything he owns to get the money to buy it.² It's obvious really. Compared with knowing God, working in partnership with him, and fulfilling the destiny he's prepared for me, what value can career and worldly success have?

I have no problem with that. Where my problem lies is in this: I've lost that pearl! I bought it, but now it's gone missing. Mislaid, whatever, I don't know. I just know that it's not there anymore. I paid the price—or some of it anyway. I turned my life upside down. I got laughed at, sneered at, lost friends, gave things up, struggled with myself, and suffered heartaches that no one could possibly know. And all that, I really don't mind too much. After all, you expect that. It's a part of the deal. Except for one thing, that when I look round for the pearl, I can't find it. It's gone.

That's right. Christianity is not working for me.

Deep down, I don't think I ever really expected that it would. It all seemed a bit too good to be true. There had to be a catch somewhere. Then for the first couple of years—apart from the odd glitch—surprisingly it did actually seem to work, after a fashion. But now reality has caught up. I've

² Matthew 13:45–46

reverted to form. The patterns of a lifetime have reasserted themselves. Now I've failed at life's ultimate challenge—I'm a failed Christian.

Everything seems to have gone crazily into reverse. I started out with a certain kind of expectation, something I suppose I must have picked up from those guys I mixed with early on. I was looking forward to a world of deeper relationships, a kind of a meaning to life, an inner peace, a release from that haunting sense of hollowness and inner emptiness that dogged me for so long. All those things that make life meaningful and livable, the ones that had always eluded me, I had thought to find in my newly acquired Christian faith.

Instead, it's the opposite. The harder I try in the Christian life, the more these things continue to elude me. And then, when I stop, distance myself from God, and move back towards the old, worldly values I was supposed to be leaving behind, suddenly I find I'm experiencing just that peace and sense of meaning that I'd been looking for all along.

So where has it all gone wrong?

It hasn't been for want of effort, that's for sure. I could have tried harder, of course. There's always more you can do. I suppose I could have prayed more, sacrificed more, resisted more temptations, done more self-discipline. But it's not as if I've taken it lightly or superficially. I feel I've made a real and prolonged effort and done as much as God could reasonably expect of me. One thing I've finally understood is that just trying harder isn't going to turn this thing around. In fact, based on past experience, trying harder can probably only make things worse.

Is God still there for me?

I don't know. How do you ever know? I suppose you can feel him, sense him, have a sort of awareness of his presence. Maybe see him in the things he does. Can I sense his presence? I think I probably can, in a vague, distant sort of way. He's not gone completely, but he's not close either. He's just sort of sitting there on the fringe, impassive and inscrutable. Like it's a game of chess and he's saying, "Your move, Norman."

My move? That's just great! The trouble is, I've analyzed the game position hour after hour. Obsessively, for days, weeks, and years even. I've played through in my head every line, every variation I can think of—time and again. And they all lead nowhere. Every way I go is a dead end, and now I'm out of ideas.

For a time I found a sort of emotional release in evangelism, telling other people about God. I don't know why, but the high, the exhilaration it gave me was almost like being back on drugs. Perhaps it was that focusing on other people's problems rather than my own that gave me

a temporary release from my inner prison. Whatever it was, it doesn't matter now, because even that doesn't work anymore.

Part of the problem is that they can see through me. They're not stupid. They hear my words that speak of life and peace and hope, but they can tell immediately that my own life doesn't bear out the words. I remember a talk I had with a work colleague. I explained everything—God's plan of salvation, how we can respond, how we can meet him. I could sense that God was speaking to her, and I waited for her response. Then it came.

"Norman, I can see the sense in what you're saying, but there's just one problem. I've worked with you over a period, seen you as a Christian, and seen you when you weren't. And to my mind, you don't look any happier now than you did then. In fact, I think you seemed happier before. I just feel that if this thing were really true, it ought to somehow do a bit more for you than what I'm seeing."

Oh no! My guilty secret is out! She's seen right through me. The presentation is flawless, but...it doesn't work for me, and she knows it.

There was nothing more to say. I slunk off into my spiritual darkness to lick my wounds. And then, amazingly, for the first time in years I heard him. Infinitely gentle, the still, small voice of God in my heart: "Norman, I think it would be better for you to leave off this particular drug for the time being. Fix a few of your own problems before trying to fix everyone else's, don't you think?"

With God speaking so clearly, I could only obey. There was no point in doing otherwise, even if I could have faced the idea of being stripped naked yet again. Goodbye, my budding career as an evangelist.

If I supposed that this brief message from God would be the start of a new and more fruitful era of communication between us, let alone the start of some sort of healing process, I was quickly disabused. God returned to his inscrutable silence. And for me, deprived of my evangelistic drug, the pain was, if anything, even worse than before.

Maybe it's a test. Maybe it's like Job. You wait long enough, and then one day God just appears and says, "Okay, Norman, you passed. Now let's move on."

Sure. But how many years do I wait for that? I could wait for my whole life, and then one day I'm dead. And then there's God saying, "Norman, what were you waiting for? You've wasted your entire life, just waiting! Why?"

No, that can't be it. I've waited enough years. There has to be a better way than that. Analyze! Come on, Norman, you've got to understand what's really going on here. There's no point in just saying, "I feel awful!" and leaving it at that.

Feelings don't exist in a vacuum. There's always a root—something underneath, feeding it. Search yourself. Why are you so unhappy? Where's it coming from?

Calm down. Okay, think—work it through, step by step...

For eighteen years, the first eighteen years of my life, I lived without God. Just like millions of others. And it was...not too bad, I guess. If it wasn't all that great either, that was more because I wasn't that good at it, rather than because of anything else. I could pass exams of course, but I couldn't do much more beyond that.

When I was sixteen I read Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It was all about taking control of your life and getting it to work for you. You set yourself goals, figure out a plan to achieve them, and then just get on and work it through. The book helped me a lot. I realized I didn't have to be a failure all my life—it was all in my hands, to choose and to do. That challenge, of taking control of my life and making it work for me instead of *against* me, was the great motivator of my later adolescent years, and by eighteen, it was starting to happen—after a fashion.

That was when I met God, and with that, suddenly it all seemed to come to a shuddering halt. Suddenly there was this great external force trying to plan my life out for me, trying to impose control. And with control ripped out of my grasp, even minor traumas started to feel intolerable.

Helplessness.

Every little pain magnified by the feeling that God expects me just to stand there passively and endure. I'm not allowed to fight back, not permitted to take control of my circumstances...*Am I even allowed to think?* And with that, everything that makes me human and gives meaning to my life is eroding away.

Christians have a phrase for it—they call it “dying to self.” According to the books, it's supposed to give you this great sense of freedom and release, but for me, it's the opposite. For me, it's turning my life into an ongoing nightmare. I lay aside my goal-driven life. I focus on God and try to concentrate on just *being*. And I find myself staring into a black void of nothingness. I was supposed to lose myself, but instead I find myself—find myself falling into an ongoing hell of introversion.

Is this what God wants for me? Somewhere, surely, there has to be a payback, something to make it all worthwhile. You can go so far on faith, on hope, on belief, but somewhere along the line there has to be something real, some kind of substance. Otherwise, the faith and the hope gradually drain away and dwindle into nothingness. And that's where I find myself now, watching passively as the level in my spiritual reservoir sinks lower and

lower. Sometime soon it will reach the critical level, where the turbines seize up. And there's not a thing I can do about it.

Where is God?

I know he's there, of course, just like he's always been there. Only now, he seems different. Now he's hard, demanding, and implacable. The friendship is gone.

But how can God change? He's God, isn't he? God can't change!

What was it that Sherlock Holmes used to say? "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."³ An interesting analytical tool!

So, I strip out the impossibles—and find there's nothing left. After the process, nothing remains. I list the impossibles, write down the things that haven't worked:

Try harder—and see it getting worse.

Wait for God to do something—and wait forever.

Lose myself in Christian work—but it no longer hides the emptiness.

Just give up—forget the whole thing, go back to the world. In some ways, that seems the most attractive option. Have a bit of fun before I die. The trouble is, I tried it before, and I hit a snag...

Six years ago.

I suppose I must have been feeling pretty much the same way I feel now. Originally I planned it as a one-month break, a sort of holiday away from God. It's not easy to walk away from God. You start thinking about hell and judgment, and for a fragile soul that can be a bad experience. I needed a mechanism to overcome that, so I decided to set it up as a short-term, defined duration experiment. It would run for a month. After that, I could go back to God, repent, and set things right. Then I could resume my Christian life. Perhaps the break would take some pressure off me and get me into a more positive frame of mind. Isn't that what holidays are for?

I never really expected that the experiment would run the full duration. I figured that life without God would be so bad that before the month was halfway through I'd be crawling back to him, humiliated and repentant. I don't know why I thought I'd feel that way. After all, I'd had no great problem living without him for the first eighteen years of my life, so why should it be any different now?

And it wasn't.

³ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (London: Spencer Blackett, 1890)

I can still remember those first few days, the glorious feeling of freedom. The exhilaration of waking up in the morning and thinking, *Today I'm going to do what I want to do, not what I feel is my duty to God. I'm in control again! I'm going to live!*

And I did.

The end of the month came and went almost unnoticed. Two, then three months passed, then a year, two years, three years, and four years. For four long years I lived a normal life, just like everyone else. God faded out of my consciousness almost completely. I didn't want to think about him. I assumed he must be pretty disappointed with me, so I just blanked him out.

Strangely enough, at those times when I did think about God, I never really got the feeling that he was angry with me. I thought he *ought* to be angry, and it confused me if he wasn't. It would be many years before I would come to understand the things that *really* make God angry. In those days, I see now, I hardly knew him at all.

It had to end, of course. However much I was enjoying life and however deeply I might have buried him, I knew I was living on borrowed time. I knew God had a purpose for my life. Taking a holiday was one thing. Throwing away that purpose was another, something I couldn't do. Sooner or later, I knew, I would have to go back.

Finally, I did just that. A string of minor life crises had the effect of reminding me of the vulnerability of my situation, enough that one morning I woke up and said to myself, "Okay. Time to go back to God."

So I did.

Wholeheartedly and without reserve, I threw myself right back in. The holiday away from God had left me relaxed and confident. I was feeling pretty good about myself. I thought I could start again with a clean slate, as if all the traumas of the early years had never been. I would leave behind all that accumulated baggage and start again from the beginning.

At first it went fine—for a week or two. And then, gradually, an awful realization started to dawn on me. The faces might be new, the scenery might be different, but the play was still the same. Four years out and nothing had changed. The place I came back in at was exactly the same place I'd gone out at four years previously. The same problems, the same dilemmas, the same intolerable feelings were all there, just like before. Just like I'd left it. Nothing had changed.

As it started to sink in, God spoke: "Can't you see that it has to be this way? You can't bypass a test and move on to the next stage as if it had never been. It could never work that way, it's impossible. It's all

interlinked—like a computer game. You have to win on one level, find the key, and then you can move on to the next.

“How long? As long as it takes. It can be a month, it can be forty years. For your sake, I hope it won’t be forty years. That would be such a waste. But for me, it makes no difference. I’m God. I can wait a long time.”

And that was that. So, there weren’t going to be any more holidays, ever. There was just no point.

The trouble is, since then another two years have crawled by and I’m still searching for the key to the next level. And in the meantime I’m still stuck where I am.

But tonight, I’m sensing something slightly different.

I’ve been reading the Bible. Paul’s letters, not the gospels. I can’t read the gospels anymore, it makes me too depressed. All that stuff about dying to self, hating your own life, forsaking everything, giving away all your money—it upsets me too much. Okay, there’s other stuff in there, it’s not all like that. But whenever I open the gospels, sooner or later I’m bound to run into one of those passages, and then I sink back into despair.

And of course, that just feeds the anger against God that’s eating up my heart...*The God who betrayed me so badly, tricked me into his service with false promises. He promised me life, and now he’s slowly killing me. The God who cheated me.*

If I read the Bible at all now, I read Paul. He can be rough and abrasive, but in his letters I find a little spark of humanity that I can’t find in the gospels anymore. And, more than anything else, a spark of humanity is what I crave.

Tonight I’m reading Paul’s letter to the Galatians, that enigmatic tribe in central Turkey who were among the first converts to the faith.

Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.⁴

How strange. I must have read the letter a dozen times, but I don’t remember ever seeing this verse before. It must have been there. *Funny the tricks our minds play.* Never mind. It’s there now, and tonight it seems to be lodged in my brain. I’m circling round and round it, looking in from different angles and trying to make it make sense.

⁴ Galatians 4:7 [NASB]

Sons. Slaves. You are no longer a slave but a son. What an extraordinary statement! But what does it mean? Is this another one of God's little tricks? Fine words—as if mere words could ever affect the dismal realities of my life.

Okay, maybe I can see it being true for some of the others—the super-Christians, guys like Max. The ones who sail through life without any real problems, scarcely breaking a sweat as they pass one test after another. Prayers answered, blessings showered from heaven. Yes, I can see that God might see them as sons.

But for people like me—the spiritual failures, the also-rans, the ones who never quite made it, never quite reached the standard...I mean, when was the last time God even spoke to me? Years ago, probably. You can talk about sons, but I think that for me *slaves* is nearer the mark. I've never felt like a son.

Never?

Well, maybe right back at the start there were times...but that was way back, in another life almost. A distant memory, another world. Things have changed so much since then.

Things have changed? What things? Go on Norman, say it! Shout it out...All right, God has changed! Does that sound better? Clear enough? God's personality has changed since I first met him. Before, he seemed kinder. Now he's never satisfied. Whatever I do, it's never enough. He wasn't like that before, so he's changed. Okay?

God, changed? Norman, that doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? I mean, he's God. God can't change. Find another explanation. "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Think, Norman, think! You're getting close. I can sense the key. It's there, just over the horizon. Don't let go...

*"You are no longer a slave but a son." You feel like a slave, but it says *son*. And it says *you*. That has to mean *all of you*, not just *some of you*.*

But I still feel like a slave! So could my feelings be wrong? But surely they're the final arbiter, aren't they? My ultimate contact with reality. But what if they're not? What if my feelings have been giving me wrong answers all this time? What if...

Could it be possible that even while I'm feeling like a slave, God sees it differently? Sees me as a son? And could my feelings have turned into a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, where everything gets interpreted through the prism of my own negative expectations?

What if it's not God who's changed, but me? What if the barriers holding God and me apart are not on God's side at all, but on mine?

This could start to get interesting!

I think about Adam, the archetype of the human race, alone in the Garden of Eden with God. He sinned, and what happened then? Did God break contact? No! Adam broke the contact! Adam hid, but God came looking for him.⁵ The barrier was not on God's side, it was on Adam's side. God never rejected Adam—it never says that.

So why did Adam hide? He assumed that God would be angry, probably. But God wasn't angry, not as far as we know. Maybe Adam should have stood his ground, not prejudged the issue, and waited to see how God would actually react.

This could make sense of a lot of things.

When I left God for those four years, it wasn't God who withdrew from me. Any time I looked up, he was always there. It was just that I'd decided not to look up, chosen to cut him out.

Are Adam and I the same on this? Have we both assumed too many negative reactions from God without any hard evidence? Have I misjudged God's character? What if the real problem is not God enslaving me, but my choosing to behave like a slave? Have I spent these years in a futile self-defense against an imaginary slave master who doesn't even exist? And what would happen now if I chose to start behaving like a son?

It's going to be another of those limited duration, one-month experiments. It has to be that way—it's so contrary to all my religious instincts that I can only bring myself to do it if there's a clear endpoint. When you're a slave to guilt and negative feelings, it can be hard to break out; and for the slave deciding to act like a son, it can feel like a very vulnerable situation.

I've thought carefully about the differences between slaves and sons. For slaves, it's all about obedience. If they disobey, they get punished. If they obey and if they're lucky, they may get some inconsequential reward. That's their entire existence, and a pretty good summary of my Christian life up to now.

For the son, the purpose is to grow up into the likeness and to the level of the father. There's obedience, but combined with gradually increasing responsibility. The goal is responsible freedom. And there's room for experimentation. It's encouraged, even. If the son experiments and gets it wrong, that's a learning experience.

For the next month, it's going to be a new, experimental version of God. It has to be experimental—I've so lost touch with the reality of God that I no longer know what he's really like. All I can do is guess. So my

⁵ Genesis 3:8–9

starting point will be: God, as I would like him to be. It's as good a place to start as any. Everything I don't like about the old version of God, I will discard and treat as my own negative imagining. That will leave me with a different kind of God, one who is altogether more congenial in character. I'll try living with that God just as if he really existed and see what happens.

Sound crazy? A bit like wishful thinking? Perhaps it is, but it's only an experiment, after all. At the end of the month, I'll review the outcome. If it's all gone wrong and I'm down one more blind alley, then at least I'll have learned something.

Do I feel comfortable? Not really. Consigning my religious instincts to the dustbin feels almost like blasphemy.

Do I have a choice? I suppose I could keep on waiting and see how it all looks in forty years' time. Apart from that, not really.

And who knows, it might even work...

CHAPTER 3

How I STOPPED SCREAMING AT GOD

London: June 1981

I NEVER WENT back to slavery again—not consciously, anyway, though the slave mentality runs very deep and still tries to reassert itself on an almost daily basis. It's funny how bad we are at understanding the things that make for our happiness. God wants friendship, but we choose subservience, making ourselves—and quite probably God also—miserable in the process. I had planned the experiment to last for a month, but within a day or two of starting, I knew there would be no going back to the old way—not ever. The years of darkness were over.

The idea of running my Christian life as a series of one-month experiments may seem strange to some people, but it's no different from what we all do in everyday situations. Sometimes you have to start in a certain direction, then after an interval you stand back and look at it to see if it's working or not. If it's not, then you go back and start again differently. This is routine for most of us, an entirely good and normal thing to do. Yet strangely, we're reluctant to apply the same process to our Christian lives.

This reluctance may be due to fear. We're afraid that if we experiment and get it wrong, God may get angry. This is far from the case, I've learned. God has no problem at all with our making a few mistakes as part of our learning process. What is far more likely to irritate him is when we don't want to try anything new precisely because of that fear of getting it wrong.

Since I first tried this approach, I've used it in a variety of situations when I've needed a radical rethink of the direction of my Christian life. Sometimes it hasn't worked and I've had to retrace my steps, but most times it's been successful. God is very good at getting us to where he wants us, even when we feel we're fumbling blindly in the dark, if only we just step out and do *something*. When we refuse to move, for whatever reason, then we go nowhere.

Christians are very bad at managing change. Familiarity breeds comfort. Comfort breeds a sense of security that is easily misinterpreted as God's approval. When we attempt change, there's generally some discomfort, insecurity, and vulnerability. Often we interpret these feelings as the voice of conscience or as God's Spirit telling us to retreat. These feelings are only normal human reactions to change. They have nothing to do with spirituality, and we would do well to pay them only limited attention.

For this particular experiment—seeing God as I would like him to be—I framed him in terms of my own ideals of fatherhood and friendship. It seemed at the time like an extreme act of desperation. Now I can see that there was really nothing extreme about it at all—the New Testament itself repeatedly uses these same two metaphors of Father and Friend to describe God, so it was a perfectly normal thing to do. That it seemed extreme to me then, shows just how far I had drifted from what the Bible really says about God.

What I was actually doing, I see now, was going back to where I had first started as a Christian, to the only place where we *can* start. At the beginning, I had brought nothing into the relationship from my side. My understanding of concepts such as sin and repentance had been sketchy. My conversations with Max had focused more on the reality of God than on the moral or practical issues of Christian living. I had come empty-handed to God and had accepted salvation as a free gift, giving him nothing in exchange. On that basis, God had accepted me.

Later on, the basis of the relationship changed. Or rather, *I changed it*. God never changed it. I was the one who started imagining negative things about God that he had never said about himself. I was the one who made demands on me that he had never made. What was needed was to restore the relationship back to its original form, and that was what the experiment achieved.

Many times since, when I've been disorientated or confused in my relationship with God, I've taken the simple step of going back to my starting point. I've said, "God, I'm starting again from the beginning." Then I say again that same prayer that I prayed with Max back in H-11,

and I receive again by faith the same unconditional acceptance that I received back then.

It's a slightly artificial ploy, since the circumstances are different, but it's helpful in restoring the basis of the relationship. It reminds me that the intervening years have changed nothing. The moment of turning to God is eternal and eternally present, and God accepts me today on the same basis that he accepted me then.

I had a letter from a critic recently who accused me of "primitive Christianity," saying I've never moved on from my starting point. He thought that by now I should have moved on to a sort of "advanced Christianity," distinct from the beginner's version. I told him that what he said was true. I'm happy with my primitive Christianity and intend to stay with it—it's all I need!

It's strange how negatively we can look at God's character. We know the descriptions he's given of himself as being the best and most perfect father imaginable, and yet we routinely ascribe to him traits that we would despise in a human father—manipulative, controlling, overbearing, judgmental, and mercenary.

Why we do this in spite of everything he has told us about himself to the contrary is a bit of a mystery. Probably it stems from our own instinctive ideas of what we think a god *ought* to be like—transcendent, remote, and detached. That's the way most human concepts of the gods have been over the ages. The idea of a God who emptied himself, came down among us, and took our suffering, doesn't come naturally to us. It requires a mental and emotional leap. So we mentally note all the things he says about himself, but when they contradict our preconceptions and expectations we filter them out and discard them.

Fear may also play a part. We read the nice, positive things the Bible says about the character of God, but deep down we're afraid that in the end he may turn out a bit harsher, a bit stricter, so we leave ourselves a margin of error. We play down his kindness and forgiveness, and we exaggerate his demands, just in case. We feel safer that way.

In my experiment I was supposed to be starting again with a new and invigorated concept of God's character, but in reality it wasn't quite that simple. It would have been nice to have put behind me at a stroke all the years of anguish and disillusionment as if they had never been, but that was never realistic. I had a lot of deep scars, and they weren't going to heal overnight.

We usually think of the Christian walk as being a healing process, a gradual progression towards health and wholeness. For me, it had been

the opposite. Twelve years of Christianity had left me in a worse state psychologically than before I'd converted. Most of the time I'd been going backwards, not forwards.

In my head I was now committed to a loving Father who accepted me unconditionally, but in my heart I still harboured a deep residue of anger, mistrust, and suspicion. The healing of these negative emotions would take years. Sometimes that healing would be gradual, imperceptible almost. At other times it would come in sudden leaps, like on one summer's day in 1981...

I'm spending the weekend working in the Accident and Emergency Department of a hospital in a small provincial town outside London. Emergency Medicine is a long way out of my field of specialization, but things are not as strictly regulated as they will become in the future, and my general medical training is adequate to cope. They're happy to take me on for the occasional shift, and it makes a welcome change after a week in the pathology laboratory.

It's been a routine day—cuts, bruises, sutures, and minor infections. Nothing serious or life-threatening to deal with today. One more hour, and then I'm finished...

An ambulance draws into the emergency bay, and a new patient is transferred to a trolley and wheeled into the department. While I wait for the nurses to complete the admission procedures and settle her into a cubicle, I check the background of the case with the paramedics who brought her in.

The patient had been driving through the narrow lanes of the surrounding countryside in her small, open-topped Fiat X1-9 sports car when, rounding a blind bend, she had run into a horse and rider standing in the middle of the road. The low front end of the car had scythed through the horse's legs. The rider had been thrown clear and had walked away uninjured, but the mangled body of the horse had flipped up over the front end of the car, slamming down on the unsupported windscreen frame. At the same time, the driver, not belted in, had been thrown forwards, and the collapsing screen frame had raked down the front of her face to cause the disfiguring injuries that are about to confront me.

I walk into the cubicle. A middle-aged lady is lying propped up on the trolley. There's blood everywhere, soaking her clothes, the blankets, everything. Her face is a mass of deep, bloody lacerations. Her nose is partially severed, hanging on by a shred of bloody tissue. The injuries are ugly, but she is in no real danger. The damage is on the surface only,

and her vital organs are unaffected. However, it's obvious that though the wounds will heal, she will carry the scars on her face for life.

Like so many accidents, it's not really anyone's fault—just an unfortunate combination of circumstances. People injure themselves in all kinds of strange ways, and after years of hospital practice I'm largely inured to it.

I focus on instituting the appropriate emergency measures: X-rays, fluids, analgesia, tetanus toxoid. The details of the accident are of limited interest to me. They're a general guide to the sort of injuries I need to look for, but beyond that they don't concern me. My focus is on healing.

As I enter, she is the first to speak: "Doctor, before you do anything, there's something important I need to talk to you about."

I've been half expecting this. Obviously, she's going to want to know about the scars. She knows that things like this don't heal over without a trace, and she wants to know how she'll look when it's all over. Well—that's natural enough, I suppose. Mentally I'm already framing an appropriate response, feeling for the right note. But when she speaks, it's not about that at all. Her concern is over something completely different.

"Doctor, there's something I have to tell you about the accident. I can guess what you're thinking—that I was probably going too fast into that bend, and because of that I swung across onto the wrong side of the road, and that was when I hit the horse. I need to explain to you that it wasn't like that at all. I wasn't going fast, I was driving quite correctly and I was completely in control, but when I rounded the bend there it was, straight in front of me. There was nothing I could have done—nothing anyone could have done—to avoid the collision. So *please*, don't think that I caused this accident. Please don't blame me for it, and please try to believe me when I tell you that it wasn't my fault!" Her eyes are pleading, beseeching, desperate to be believed.

This is bizarre! Lying here, drenched in blood, with your nose hanging half-off, and you want to talk about which side of the road the horse was standing! I mean—explain it to your husband later if you want. Put it in your report to the insurance company if you think it'll get you off the hook. But for me, it's of no interest.

Why should I care whose fault it was? It could have happened to anyone, couldn't it? It could have been me! You think I haven't taken the MG round a few blind country corners in my time? I've just never had to face a horse and rider in the middle of the track on the other side. Not so far, anyway.

And even if it was your fault, so what? Why should I care? Do you think we treat people differently when it's their fault? Are you feeling guilty about taking up our time? Or is it that you're so desperate to be well thought of, so obsessed with other people's opinions of you, that those opinions matter more to you than all the pain, the trauma, and the scars you're going to have to carry with you for the rest of your days?

I think that's it, isn't it? Your need for approval, your need to be justified in the eyes of the world, is so overwhelming that everything else is peripheral.

Then what kind of a life can you have? What kind of a dungeon have you put yourself in to live out your days and nights in that sort of bondage? I can only feel very, very sad for you...

My thoughts remain unspoken as I work methodically through my tasks. Meanwhile, she returns obsessively to the same theme, unable to think of anything else. I listen patiently, perhaps even a little smugly. Sure, I have my share of problems, but in the present company I feel positively well-balanced.

Then my shift is over, and I climb into the MG to go home. I think I'll slow it down a bit today, take my time! It's a beautiful, sunny August evening, and I'm relaxed as I drive past the ripening wheat fields with the wind in my hair. When the sun shines, England has to be the best place in the world.

A voice in my head. It's God, wanting to talk. Since I came out of slavery, dialogue has been restored. Now I'm comfortable talking with God about anything, at any time. *Fine, let's hear it.*

“What are you thinking about, Norman?”

As if he didn't know. “I was thinking about, you know, her—the one in the sports car. That strange behaviour, the way she reacted.”

“I see. Tell me more. What do you make of it all?”

I haven't woken up yet. God doesn't indulge in idle chatter. When he speaks, it's because he's got something to say. He's setting a trap for me, one of his favourite ones. Three thousand years ago he set the same trap for King David through the prophet Nathan, and David fell right in.⁶ Now it's my turn, and I'm heading the same way.

I voice my unspoken thoughts: “Well, to be honest, I thought it was all rather pathetic, that obsession of hers. I mean, when it comes to healing it doesn't really matter whose fault it was, does it?”

“No, Norman, it doesn't. I'm glad you can see that much.”

⁶ 2 Samuel 12:1–14

I warm to my subject, pleased to know that God is listening. "Really, to be so concerned with other people's opinions of her at a time like that. I mean, it's not like she's ever even going to see me again. And why should I be interested anyway? What does it say about her? What's she like with the people she sees every day? What kind of mess must her relationships be in?"

"To live your whole life in that slavery, constantly beholden to other people's opinions of you, it must be dreadful for her. What kind of life can that be? Really, I think she's..." I run out of words.

God steps in to finish my sentence, "...a bit like you, were you trying to say?"

"Like me? No, not at all! I'm not in the slightest bit like that. Quite the opposite. I'd never behave that way. Totally different. At least, I don't think I would, anyway..."

"You're right in one respect, Norman. You're not the same as her. There's a significant difference."

"There is?"

"Yes. There's a difference in severity. Compared to you, she's a comparatively mild case. You're worse—much worse."

Horror! Reality dawns on the carnage in my soul as the light of God's Spirit starts to penetrate.

"Yes. You've told me your reaction to her on a single incident; but what you've heard from her once is what I have to listen to from you every single day. Day in and day out, all I ever hear from you are those exact same words, 'Don't blame me! It wasn't my fault!'

"For years I've wanted to help you, Norman, but I can't get through. Any time I try to put a finger on anything in your life, the shutters come up, and I get the same response, 'It wasn't my fault! It was my parents! It was my school! It was my church! It was in my genes! It was this, it was that, it was them—it was anything or anyone but me!' And yet, what have you just said to me from your own mouth?—'It doesn't really matter whose fault it was, does it?'

"As for her, at least when she'd said her piece, she let you do your job. With you, you're screaming so loud I can't get near enough or hold your attention long enough to do anything at all. For years I've wanted to heal you, but I can't get close.

"Even you have enough compassion to know that healing is more important than assigning fault. Even you! You think you have more compassion than I do? Wake up, Norman! You're not the only doctor around here, you know."

Silence. Nothing to say.

That's how it is when God speaks. Self-authenticating truth. Even if I wanted to, there's nothing to say.

The wheat fields fade from my consciousness. I look through them now to something bigger and brighter—an eternal kingdom and a God who's bigger than I ever dreamed. I thought I knew him, but I'd scarcely scratched the surface. I see him now—more caring, more compassionate, more loving, more forgiving than I ever imagined. And finally I truly understand that he's on my side.

The great physician.

He said it enough times, so why do I find it so hard to believe? All these years I've been erecting barriers to keep God out, defensive walls—I never knew him at all. I just never understood what he's really like.

From now on it's all going to be different. I don't have to try and justify myself anymore, because he's not accusing me. He's on my side!

And after that, nothing was ever quite the same again. That day, I stopped screaming at God—there was no need anymore. After that the healing could begin.

A lot of times, of course, I do have to admit fault to God. But it's different now. I admit fault because if I don't, then my failure to recognize the truth becomes a part of my problem. I admit fault because the admission is necessary for me. God knows where the fault lies already—he doesn't need me to keep him informed. And he has accepted me already, even with all my faults.

There's someone else who has a much greater need to hear my confession of fault than God does, and that's me.

CHAPTER 4

MORE ABOUT ANGER

London: August 1981

WE OFTEN HEARD people talk about the way in which coming to Christ changed their lives. For me, what was striking about my conversion was not so much what changed, but rather how much stayed the same.

True, I knew God now, and that had to make some difference; but in many ways, I was the same person I'd always been. I had the same likes and dislikes. The kinds of people I felt comfortable with, the sort of music I liked to listen to, the things I enjoyed—or didn't enjoy—doing, none of these were noticeably different from before.

It was inevitable that this would lead to tensions, and it quickly did. It didn't take me long to realize that many of the pleasures and amusements my fellow students took for granted were strictly off-limits for practicing Christians. Much later, I would come to understand the wisdom and practicality of God's plan for how we should live, but at age eighteen that was still hidden from me. All I could see was a set of unwelcome rules hemming me in and restricting me.

It wasn't just the rules themselves that irked me. Like any eighteen-year-old, I was desperate to conform and be accepted. The rules defined a Christian culture that set us apart from the rest, and it was that enforced cultural separation that was the true agony for me. I hated having to be different.

I also had to contend with the reluctant nature of my Christian conversion. I hadn't wanted Christianity to be true, and I certainly hadn't been

looking for it. Confronted by the truth, I had decided in a rare moment of honesty and integrity to accept it. But for me, that kind of integrity was very much the exception rather than the rule. I felt at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to people who had become Christians because they had found it attractive and wanted it. To be set up as a lone standard-bearer for the truth in a godless society was the last thing I was looking for.

Had I had the maturity and self-confidence to go back and read for myself in an objective and unprejudiced way the early documents of our faith as preserved in the New Testament, events might have taken a different turn. Perhaps I might have come to a better understanding of God's revelation as he intended it for me personally.

Some hope! As is the case for many new converts, my initial understanding of Christianity was based on my observations of the Christians around me, grafted onto vague, half-remembered impressions of religion inherited from my childhood. This was a disastrous amalgam. I naturally assumed that God intended for me to be like all the others, but thus far I hadn't met any Christian whom I had the slightest desire to be like, at all.

As a result of all this, a lurking anger against God had crept in early on, and with intermittent interludes this had continued to grow and solidify in my life over a period of years. During my four-year break from Christianity, the anger had gone on hold, forgotten or pushed under the surface. I had rarely thought about God from one day to the next, so my anger had ceased to have relevance. It hadn't really gone away, however—in reality it was just biding its time, waiting for the right moment to reassert itself.

Later on, a new factor entered the equation to increase my confusion. In the first couple of years after my conversion, I had been casual in my approach to God. I hadn't made the kind of effort to work out the relationship that I could or should have, and I was well aware of it—my woes were clearly to a large extent self-inflicted. In the subsequent years, however, I felt that I had made a real, sincere, and prolonged effort to make Christianity work. I had given it my best shot, yet still it had all fallen apart, and I had been at a loss to understand why. I had racked my brains interminably but had come up with no explanations. I was confused, disillusioned, resentful, and *angry*. I felt the inner conflicts of an abused child. I had wanted God, wanted to love him for who he was, but at the same time, I almost hated him for the things he'd done to me. So it was that, after the break, my hidden anger had resurfaced with redoubled fury, particularly when everything started to fall apart again so quickly.

After the events related in the last two chapters, I had moved into a new kind of relationship with God—one based on friendship rather

than servitude. All my dark imaginings about him were banished. Now he was my friend, committed to me, walking alongside me, helping me, and asking nothing in return beyond what I chose freely to offer him. There was really nothing left to be angry *about*.

But anger doesn't always disappear simply because its original object or trigger is removed. It takes on a life of its own, feeding on itself. It becomes a habit, a reflex reaction triggered by the slightest real or imagined slight. So it was that even as my relationship with God was healing, the anger was still there, eating me up and wearing me down in a never-ending cycle—much like it is, I've discovered, for millions of other Christians around the world.

Anger is exhausting. Often by the end of the day, my mind would be drained, washed out, and scarcely able to function, shattered by endless cycles of self-recrimination. It couldn't go on this way forever. Or could it? That was the scary thing: perhaps it could.

I remember the day I decided to stop being angry with God. All right—the day *God decided* it was time for me to stop being angry...

It was another one of those beautiful, sunny summer afternoons. Did winter never come in those days? I was in my backyard tinkering with the engine of my beloved MG—changing the head gasket, I think. I almost had the head off the engine block, when suddenly...CRACK!

Oh no! Turn the clock back, please! Replay that last minute of my life again. I want to do it differently. But I know life doesn't work that way. Events roll on relentlessly. There's no way back.

Think, Norman! Take stock!

I survey the scene. The cylinder head is held onto the engine block by eight heavy steel bolts screwed into holes drilled in the top of the block. They're torque bolts—they have to be tight to hold the engine together. I've been unscrewing them one by one to take the cylinder head off, but with the last one I must have been careless. Whether I pulled it off line or tried to force it too hard, I don't know, but for whatever reason, the bolt has snapped in two. The hexagonal head, where the spanner fits on, is lying on the ground. The fractured shaft is sitting tightly embedded in its hole, looking smug and self-satisfied.

I need to get the broken bolt shaft out before I can replace it with a new one, but with the head sheared off, there's nothing to grip on. I put a wrench on the smooth outer surface and try a few desultory tugs, but it's hopeless. The wrench simply slips.

No way forward, no way back. Isn't that the story of my life? Isn't that the way it's always been?

Anger floods in. “Typical! Where were you, God? You’re supposed to be looking after me, protecting me. You could have stopped it, but no! You just don’t care! All those promises that mean nothing. If it was anyone else but me, you’d be in there helping. But for me—of course not! You’re not interested. You’re never interested. You’ve always treated me badly. You’ve always treated me worse than the others.” That was how I was most of the time in those days. It probably happened half a dozen times a day, but this was worse than usual.

I go indoors to make a cup of tea, sit down, and ponder my next move. Then I hear it. That voice again. *Oh no! Please, not now, of all times!*

“Look, God, I’m tied up! Right now I’m not in the mood! Can’t you see, I’ve got a problem on my hands? I’m tense. I’m irritated. I can’t talk about spiritual matters in this frame of mind—it just doesn’t work. Please—can’t you come back later when I’ve calmed down a bit?”

On the other hand...I do have a problem. This may not be the most sensible time to cut God out of the frame. What if he wants to help? Maybe he wants to talk about the car, make some suggestions. I’d better hear him out.

With ill grace, I detach from my circumstances as best I can and try to listen.

“No, Norman, it’s not about the car. It’s something else. I want to talk to you about anger.”

Oh no! Well...we’ve started now. Better see it through. It can’t be any worse than thinking about that broken bolt.

“I think you know what I mean, Norman. The anger you feel towards me. The anger that eats you up, wears you down, drains your whole life dry. The anger that erupts any and every time any little thing doesn’t go just the way you want it. Like now, for example. It’s time—my time—to call a halt and sort this out once and for all.

“Now, I know you like things logical and systematic, so that’s how I’m going to lay it out for you—clearly and concisely. From here on out and for the rest of your life there are just three directions that we—meaning you—can go on this. Out of those three options, you’re going to have to choose one, because there are no others.

“Actually there are only two, since the first one is not an option at all—I’m only putting it in for completeness, and in case you should be tempted to think that it actually exists, when it doesn’t. I know what you’ve been thinking, that perhaps I may change. You’ve been hoping that perhaps I’ll come to you and say something like, ‘Norman, I’ve been thinking things over, and I’ve realized I’ve been a bit too tough on you in the past. I’ve not taken sufficient account of your special problems and

your emotionally fragile state. I've been unfair. I'm sorry. From now on, I'm going to treat you better.'

"Obviously, that's your preferred solution. But it's not going to happen. I'm God. I don't make mistakes, and I have no intention of changing, ever. I'm also very patient, and I can wait a lot longer than you can. So you can stop dreaming and forget about that one."

"The second option is a simple one. You change. You make the decision that you've wasted enough of your life on this anger, and then you just lay it aside. First you decide, and then you stop. It's as easy as that."

"The third option is that we go on the way we are for the rest of your life. You stay angry, and you allow that anger to gradually eat you up, bit by bit. You know that I will never leave you. My commitment to you is unwavering, and it always will be. But you must understand that when someone is bent on self-destruction, there's a limit to what even I can do to protect them from their own choices."

"So, there you have it. I change. You change. Or we carry on the same way forever. Three futures, two of which are possible. Choose. Now!"

Silence. High noon. Reality has spoken.

Maybe it's not him at all. Maybe it's not really God, and I'm just imagining it.

But it doesn't really matter, does it? What matters is that it's true. God or not God, it's self-evident once you see it. There's nothing to argue with. How come I never figured it out for myself before now? It's obvious, isn't it? Common sense.

Did I seriously think that God was going to change, admit he'd got it wrong all these years, and suddenly start treating me differently? Of course he wasn't. But in that case, what's the purpose of the anger? Isn't the whole purpose of getting angry to make people behave differently? And if you know before you start that it can't possibly work, then what's the point? Why bother?

Then there's the third one. Go on this way for ever, being eaten up by a futile anger that can never achieve any purpose. In my mind's eye, I see it stretching on into the indefinite future, year after year, until the end. And then... does it end there? What if it doesn't? What if it goes on the same on the other side? The misery, the futility, the sheer exhaustion of it! It's too awful to think about. I can't!

So if two options are out, there's only one left. Decide to change. Decide to stop being angry. Just like that. It sounds impossible. It's become so automatic, so uncontrollable. But if this is really God's moment, the moment in eternity that he's chosen to deal with it once and for all, then it can't be impossible, so...

"Okay, God, I've decided. It stops here, now. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Right now, in the middle of this current mess, with that engine lying in pieces on the grass outside, now we make the change."

So how? Well...if this is the first moment of the rest of my life, then...

Haltingly and deliberately I marshal my thoughts, grit my teeth, and speak to him: "God, about that bolt. I broke it. Not you, me. I could have done differently. I could have been more careful and more disciplined. If I hadn't pulled so hard, it wouldn't have broken. I created the problem, and I have to take responsibility for it. I have no right to blame you or be angry with you for what you didn't do. I'm sorry. I was wrong. I retract my anger."

Peace floods in, a kind of peace I've almost forgotten, it's been so long. It's the first small step in the rest of my life. Suddenly the world looks a brighter place, the future less daunting. I'm not sure the anger problem is necessarily fixed once and for all, but if God can take me through this moment, then he can take me through all future moments.

I think about my crippled car sitting outside in the sunshine. Perhaps I can push my luck with one more prayer. "God, about that bolt—if you could just, you know...do something..."

"Oh, that! Don't even think about it. It's served its purpose now."

I finish my cup of tea and walk outside, in a very different mood from half an hour ago. I clamp the wrench onto the shank of the bolt a second time, and without rushing I apply a gentle torque. I think angels must have greased it while I was indoors—it turns immediately, and moments later the broken stub is out.

An hour later, the engine is back together again and I'm back on the road, in time to drop the roof and enjoy the last of the late afternoon sunshine.

I never got seriously angry with God again. After all, what's the point? I understand now—it's never going to change anything, so why bother?

I was expecting a long war of attrition. The habit had been there so long, I didn't expect it to let go without a fight. Strangely enough, the war never happened. As so often, once I decided—*really* decided—the enemy just fled without resistance.

I've had my fair share of disasters and heartaches over the years since then. Many of them have been far worse than a silly little broken bolt. Some have been of my own making, while others have been outside my control. It makes no difference—either way, God has been happy to use them for his own purposes. I don't get angry over them anymore.

In fact, I've tried to go a step further and learn to welcome them and be grateful for them. Isn't that what life is all about—problems? Isn't that all a part of our crown in glory? I wouldn't want it any other way now—not in my better moments, anyway.

CHAPTER 5

GETTING HONEST

Amsterdam: March 1988

GOD, YOU DON'T really want me to write about that, do you?" "Why not? Well, there are a couple of reasons. In the first place, I feel there may be some people who won't like this book. They may think I'm advocating a form of easy, effort-free Christianity, where anything goes and the reality and destructive power of sin are relegated to a minor role. You know, 'Love God and do what you want.' That sort of thing.

"You know how some people react against that kind of thinking, and in a way I can understand why. They've spent whole swathes of their Christian lives mired in suffering, sacrifice, and self-denial, thinking they can earn your favour that way; it's not surprising they get upset when someone comes along saying, 'Actually, God's given me everything for free!' Come to think of it, I can remember reacting a bit that way myself when I thought other people were getting an easier ride than I was. It's natural, isn't it?

"So in a way, I'd be more comfortable leaving out anything that could even remotely be interpreted as suggesting that Christianity gives you a license to do whatever you want. Not that I'm trying to say that, or anything like it. It's just that, you know, some people might misinterpret it that way.

"And the second reason? Well, it doesn't really portray me personally in a particularly flattering light, does it? You're not too concerned about either of those?...Okay, let's get on..."

Perhaps it was inevitable that when after all those years in darkness and slavery I finally broke out into the light, my life would overshoot in the opposite direction.

I'd made the decision to concentrate on the parts of Christianity I found attractive and appealing and to play down the rest. Obviously there were dangers in this. If I'd thought it through a bit more deeply, I might have understood that when God gives us guidelines on how to live our lives, he does so for good reasons. He takes no pleasure in making rules, and when he does make them they're usually for our benefit, not for his. He understands where our long-term interests lie.

Perhaps I should have taken more notice of what Paul had written about the tension between law and grace in God's economy. He had after all thought about this tension carefully, and had referred to it repeatedly in his letters. I'd read the letters many times, but the real import of his comments had never really sunk in. Perhaps I'd been reading through the prism of my own preconceptions, seeing only what I wanted to see. Maybe I'd seen things there that I didn't like and had chosen to ignore. Whatever the reason, I'd failed to take Paul's message on board, and God was going to have to shout a bit louder to get me to take notice.

For Paul, a man who delighted in free grace, but at the same time recoiled from any thought of sin or licentiousness, the issue was a key one—he saw clearly the dangers inherent in getting a wrong balance. He saw how God had put himself in a vulnerable position by choosing to give salvation as a free gift. If it was really free, then the gift would inevitably be open to abuse. People could sin in the full knowledge that they could come back to God for forgiveness afterwards, and there wasn't much God could do about it. If he changed the rules to prevent them, then salvation would no longer be free, which would defeat the original purpose. So he decided to accept the risk and stay with free grace, and if people chose to abuse his generosity, then so be it.

Paul was the one given the job of preaching that message, and his position was equally vulnerable. He was wide open to the mocking accusations of critics, who parodied his teaching thus: "Let us do evil so that good may come."⁷ In other words, if God really is in the forgiving business, let's sin more! That will give God greater opportunity to do what he seems to enjoy most, which is forgiving sins.

⁷ Romans 3:8

This line of argument appears to have been widely used in Paul's lifetime by opponents wanting to undermine his teaching.⁸ Paul clearly found it irritating, but he also found it difficult to refute directly. In fact it is difficult to refute, because like all good lies it contains a kernel of half-truth. The gospel of grace does indeed open up the possibility of sinning more in the knowledge that forgiveness is freely available, and I suspect that all of us, if we are honest, would have to admit that we have done exactly that from time to time.

If Paul is struggling to refute the technical legal validity of the argument, he is at least able to highlight the pitfalls that lie in wait for those who choose this path. In the first place, he explains, sin has an intrinsically destructive quality to it:

If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh.⁹

Paul is not saying that God sends corruption on us as a punishment for sin. It's the other way around—God is trying to protect us. He knows how destructive sin can be, so he tells us not to do it.

The second problem we encounter on this road is that *sin is addictive*. We start off sinning in our innocent naivety, and all goes well for a little time, but then the destructive power of sin starts to assert itself. Eventually, this destructiveness becomes so obvious that we see it for ourselves, and we may try to reverse the process. This is when we find that going back is not as easy as we expected. Uphill is a lot harder than downhill. Ultimately, we may find ourselves unable to go back, however much we want to. That's the nature of addiction.

When Christ died, Paul tells us, he did so not only to give us forgiveness of our sins but also to free us from sin's destructive power and to allow us to avoid that addiction. If we choose to take the forgiveness and leave the rest, we're missing half of what Christ has for us, and we're setting our lives up for one huge mess.

Paul warned his readers very clearly about all of this. I'd been in no mood to listen, but fortunately God stepped in to make the point before it was too late.

Where were we again? Amsterdam...

My career has taken an unexpected turn. After a rather shaky patch, and through a series of coincidences that I've come to recognize as a hallmark

⁸ See also Romans 6:1,15

⁹ Galatians 6:8

of God's providence, I've been offered a lecturer post at the University of Amsterdam Medical School in Holland. I know little about the country, and I don't speak their language; but if God doesn't see these things as obstacles, then neither will I. I take it as a gift from God, and like all of God's gifts, it's completely unexpected, brilliantly conceived, and perfectly matched to my time and circumstances. The perfect job in the perfect place. He never misses, does he? Ever since I stopped trying to *earn* his favour, he's showered his blessings on me from all directions.

In Amsterdam I spend many happy hours exploring the historic backstreets and the arterial canals and waterways that crisscross geometrically through the city. I revel in the exquisite canal-fronted houses and converted warehouses from the seventeenth century golden age of Dutch art and commerce.

And then there's the other side of Amsterdam—the pleasure capital of Europe. Some Christians feel oppressed by the atmosphere of license, the drugs freely offered for sale in the coffeehouses, and the scantily-clad girls selling sex in the street-front windows. But for me, it's not a problem. In fact, I find that I enjoy the relaxed and carefree "anything goes" ambience of the city. I've never been a great one for moral indignation about the sins of others. Even in my most legalistic phases, I've generally applied that legalism only to myself, figuring that people without God don't have a lot to look forward to in the long term, so if they want to have a bit of fun along the way it's not for me to get too upset about it.

As for my own life—well, if I'm honest, I have to admit my standards have slipped a bit. Oh, I have my reasons of course. I could make a list as long as my arm of reasons why I should be excused from the standards of behaviour set down by Jesus and Paul. It's not something I would really want to talk about with anyone except God—others probably wouldn't understand. The main thing is that God understands. At least, I think he does. At any rate, he's not actually *saying* anything, and I guess if he were really upset he'd say something, wouldn't he? So all in all, if he's not saying anything, then presumably it's not an issue for him, right? And let's face it, I'm not the first, and I certainly won't be the last.

But still, I've been feeling a bit restless these last few months. Not about *that*! Not at all. More just a case of one of those periodic spiritual slowdowns that can leave you feeling a bit dry and trigger a need to somehow move up a level and know God a bit better.

I've always had a lurking sense of spiritual ambitiousness, of not wanting to miss out on anything that God may have for me. Perhaps it's a feeling that if I can just succeed in Christianity, that may cancel out a

few of my other failures. And I do genuinely want my life to count for something on the eternal scale.

And then sometimes I find myself remembering those talks with Max in H-11, and I almost break out in cold sweat, thinking, *What would have happened if he hadn't bothered? What if Max hadn't been obedient and available to God at that moment? What if he'd been too caught up with his own life and concerns to make the time to follow God's leading and share that message with me? There's no one else I would have listened to, that's for sure. It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime sets of circumstances that God had been preparing for years in advance, I can see that now. And if Max hadn't done his part? Where would I be now? What kind of life would I have had?* I shudder—it doesn't even bear thinking about.

But I do think, and the thoughts lead relentlessly on, one to another. *And what if there's someone else out there, waiting to hear, and I'm the one God has planned to use? And what if it doesn't happen because I'm too caught up in other things or otherwise unavailable or whatever? Will I be ready? Will I be fit for it? What if it's already been and gone and I missed it? What effect might that have, unbeknown to me, on some other life that's just as important as my own?*

I try to push the thoughts aside. I feel loved by God. I feel he accepts me as I am. Yet still, there's a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction. To counteract it, I've started trying to spend a bit more time with him, talking and listening, and trying to give him the opportunity to move me on in the right direction.

Then one day I ask God a question I've never asked him before. Why then, I don't know—it just happened. "God, you know my lifestyle in this city. You've never said anything about it, so I've always just sort of assumed that it doesn't bother you too much. But I've never discussed it with you directly, so tell me now. What do you *really* think?"

To start with, nothing happens. Then over the course of a few days I notice that as I read the Bible, verses jump out, jarring on my consciousness. They're all talking about the same things—sin, judgment, God's utter and uncompromised revulsion at our wrongdoings.

I try to ignore it, pretend it's not happening. *There are plenty of nasty judgmental verses in the Bible. If you read long enough, sooner or later you're bound to hit a few just by the laws of chance. You can't take them all personally, or you'll drive yourself mad. Ignore it! Keep reading! There's bound to be something nice and comforting further down the page.*

But it won't go away. All the nice, comforting bits have temporarily gone into hiding. I jump from book to book, New Testament to Old, and back again, but it makes no difference. Finally, I have to accept that God

is speaking. He's answering my question in a way that leaves no room for ambiguity. The answer brings me little comfort: sin is something that he hates and detests with all his being.

The implication of God's message starts to sink in. I feel devastated, and more than that, I feel *confused*. For years God said nothing, and now suddenly, this! Right in my face!

I'd known in my heart that things weren't right, of course, but I'd always managed to avoid facing the knowledge. Maybe I'd convinced myself that I was a special case, or that it was just minor, small print stuff. I don't know. Probably just blanked it out altogether and refused to think about it. But now, suddenly, I'm faced with the inescapable reality of how God sees sin. And it's not minor after all. It's major.

By degrees, my devastation gives way to a sense of shock at the sheer depth of my self-deception. And God allowed it! That's what really shocks me. All those years he stood back and said nothing!

He's given me one honest answer, and maybe he can give me another. "Why, God?" I ask. "You could have told me about this years ago. Instead, you've let me live in this comfortable fantasy and said nothing. Why?"

The answer comes immediately: "You never asked."

"What do you mean, *I never asked*? What's that got to do with it? That's not the point! The point is that I needed to know, and you could have told me, but you didn't. You left me living out this...this dream! You didn't have to wait for me to ask. What if I'd never asked at all? I could have gone my entire life in ignorance. I could have died, never knowing! Then what?"

"You really don't get it, do you, Norman? Before, you got upset because you thought I was trying to control your life and make a slave of you. Finally, I thought I'd managed to get through to you that I have no interest in slaves. I've made you a son. I've put you in control. I've given you total responsibility for your own life. It's all in your hands—everything. Just the way you wanted it. And now, you're getting upset because I refuse to interfere!"

"Let me spell it out for you. If you invite me into any area of your life, I'll come into it gladly. If you deny me entry, I'll stay out. It's that simple. Everything in your life—your time, your money, your career, your warped moral values—they're all yours until such time as you choose freely to give them up. Without an invitation, I will not interfere."

"As to what would have happened if you'd never asked—that's a hypothetical question, and I never answer those. You did ask, and you got a clear answer. That's all you need."

The interview is over. There's nothing more to be said. God speaks, and the universe falls silent.

My little world has been turned upside down again and is looking decidedly disheveled. The responsibility for my life is firmly back on my own shoulders. I didn't want slavery, but slavery had its advantages. Then God showed me that I wasn't a slave, but a son, with all that sonship entails. Now I find that as a son I'm expected to grow into adulthood, making adult decisions and taking adult responsibility. It's a little frightening.

Why is he doing this to me? Why do I have to grow up anyway? Does it have to do with being an heir? Because the heir has to inherit, and for that he has to grow into a total person? You mean that Paul actually meant all that stuff?

I think of the frustrations and anger of past years, my chafing at the bit and my resentment of God's imagined yoke on my shoulders. How could I have misunderstood so completely what God was all about? The truth is more glorious, and at the same time somehow more frightening. I ponder the years that have passed. Pieces of the jigsaw that never quite seemed to fit begin to drop into place. A lot of things are suddenly starting to make sense.

Climbing out of my moral morass was not the work of a single day, more the ongoing work of a lifetime. The transformation in my understanding of God's ways, however, was immediate and dramatic.

When I went back to the Bible, I found that there really is nothing new under the sun. It was all written there, but I'd just never seen it—or never wanted to see it. From the prophet Isaiah, I read a passage so offensive to modern ears that most of us ignore it and pretend it's not there. This, in spite of its being quoted no less than six times¹⁰ in the New Testament—more than any other single Old Testament passage:

And he [God] said [to Isaiah], “Go, and say to this people:
 Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
 keep looking, but do not understand.
 Make the mind of this people dull,
 and stop their ears,
 and shut their eyes,
 so that they may not look with their eyes,
 and listen with their ears,
 and comprehend with their minds,
 and turn and be healed”¹¹

¹⁰ Matthew 13:14–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26–27; Romans 11:8

¹¹ Isaiah 6:9–10

God would never deliberately dull people's minds to keep them from coming to him for healing or salvation, of course—that would nullify his entire purpose. Except perhaps in one situation. If they'd already made that choice for themselves, then he might. If they had determined already for themselves to block their ears and shut their eyes, then I suppose God could choose to respect that decision and accept it. And then, in due course, I suppose their choice would become their destiny.

The responsibility we bear for our lives can be frightening.

CHAPTER 6

SELF PITY

Saudi Arabia: February 1993

WHEN LOOKED AT on the map from the relative safety of London, Gizan seemed alluring. The capital of the eponymous southwestern province of Saudi Arabia, Gizan lies close to the Yemen border on the narrow coastal plain between the Red Sea and the mountain ridge universally known as the Escarpment. Here the mountains rise almost vertically from the plain, as the western edge of the Arabian tectonic plate tilts crazily into the sky, and the eastern edge drives remorselessly ever deeper under the Iranian landmass. The humid sea air forced up over the Escarpment condenses into spectacular thunderstorms and torrential rain, to give an almost Mediterranean climate to the plain below, strikingly different from the arid desert that makes up the rest of the subcontinent.

Fascinating. Just the place to spend a year and satisfy my lust for adventure. I've already worked in Jeddah, the historic seaport for the pilgrimage city of Mecca, but it's a bit too westernized for my taste. Gizan, 500 miles down the coast, promises to be much more interesting. I've heard stories of ancient cultures and lifestyles preserved in the remote mountains. This should be a real experience.

There's been a recruiting campaign in London to get staff for the Gizan hospital, and it's come at a convenient time for me. Why not give it a try? It's not a conventional career move, but so what? With God on my side and looking after me, who needs to worry about that? He's taken me this

far. He's always given me the best of everything, and I know he always will. Secure in this knowledge, I feel I can take a few risks...It's difficult, though, to know quite what to expect in such a remote place...

Anyway, there were a fair number of interested candidates at the interviews in London, and if only a few of them take up the offers, it could make for an interesting little community. As for the work, I'm looking to broaden my experience and take on more responsibility, and this could be just the ticket.

Admittedly, I didn't come out of the interview with a very clear impression of just what kind of set-up they have down there. They weren't exactly evasive, but they weren't particularly informative either. Not that it really matters. Pathology is the same the world over, so I'm not expecting any nasty surprises. They seem enthusiastic to have me—keen to get me out there as quickly as possible in fact—and overall the indicators are looking good for an interesting and productive year of work.

I decide to fly to Jeddah, where I still have friends. From there I can drive the coast road down to Gizan—it's a journey I've long wanted to make.

In Jeddah I renew old acquaintances, buy an old and battered four-wheel drive, and take to the road, heading south. Everything is running like clockwork. Wonderful how the pieces fall into place when God is in control.

Beautiful. The weather in Arabia has been unusual this year. There's been more rain than usual, and the normally arid desert has sprung into life. Seeds that have lain dormant in the desert for years or even decades, waiting for a year of freak weather such as this, have germinated into a profusion of short-lived flowers and grasses. The normally desert landscape has been transformed into a prairie, shimmering fields of green stretching to the horizon.

What a privilege to see this. Some people spend years out here and see nothing but sand... As I gaze at the landscape, I feel that this flowering of the desert is a show that God has laid on especially for me. It's his providence for this moment, something to encourage me and reassure me that everything's all right, and that this is where I'm supposed to be.

God has brought me here, I know it! I don't know why, but it's all part of his plan. I feel a deep sense of reassurance, of inner peace, as I empty myself and give myself to the moment.

At the end of a long day's drive, as the sun sinks towards the western horizon, I arrive in Gizan. The town is an unprepossessing collection of squat, rectangular, single-roomed dwellings lit by bare fluorescent tubes.

It's functional, squalid, and devoid of any kind of charm. I look in vain for signs of the traditional Arabic architecture so well preserved in the old quarter of Jeddah—the coral brick buildings with their wood-slatted balconies, where the women in former times would sit unobserved and watch the world pass by outside. Nothing. If it ever existed, it's now long gone.

Never mind. Undeterred, I drive on to the hospital, a few miles outside the town. This is to be my home for the next year.

The welcome is cordial enough. I take a day or two to settle into my apartment and start to look around. The hospital staff is the usual Middle Eastern mix of Indians, Filipinos, Egyptians, Sudanese, Palestinians, and a few local Saudis. I'm looking around for the other interview candidates from London, but so far I don't see any. *Too bad—I'd enjoy the opportunity to sit and talk with people from my own background, to exchange impressions and ideas. No matter, they must be around somewhere. Give it a few days...*

In the evening, as I stroll around the hospital compound in the sticky heat, I finally meet a fellow Englishman. We exchange greetings, and momentarily my spirits rise. Then he gives me a strange look. "But why have you come?" he asks. "Why Gizan of all places? Of all the places you could have worked, why pick somewhere like this?"

I find out he's been working with the hospital administration. His two-year contract is finished, he's packing up to leave, and it looks like he can't get out of Gizan fast enough.

It can't be that bad, surely! Never mind. If there's one Westerner here, there must be others—if not in the hospital, then surely in the town.

I ask him.

"There used to be a few guys with the electricity supply company a hundred miles up the coast. I've not heard from them for quite a time, but I suppose they might still be there."

That's it? You mean it's just me? No matter...at least the work should be interesting. That's what you're here for, remember? Get started, and soon you'll be so busy that the time will just fly by. You'll see! And remember, God's here with you. Everywhere he's ever taken you, it's always turned out to be the right place and the right time. It'll be the same here. Give it a chance! Trust him, it'll all work out fine in the end.

The next day I start work. At the interview in London, I hadn't asked about staffing levels—they were so keen to get me out from England as quickly as possible, I assumed that they must be short. I assumed wrong. I'm welcomed into the department by four other pathologists, all from

India. The most recent arrived a year ago, while the senior has been in Gizan for most of his working life.

The welcome is, on the surface, friendly and cordial, but I can see they're not overjoyed to have me there. Why should they be? It's a small hospital with a comfortable workload for two of us at most. Even with four there's not enough work to fill the day, and five is ridiculous.

We cram into two small offices. I share with the senior man, a dapper cricket-loving fellow in his last year before retirement. In the months that follow, the two of us relieve the boredom by spending hours shuffling doors, walls, and windows on the architectural plan he's working on for his retirement home in India. There's little else to do. The days are long, and the hospital director is unhappy if we so much as stand up from our desks during working hours. Every day the five of us scrap for a share of the small amount of work available.

Why have they brought me here? It makes no sense.

The hospital is built to a standard architectural plan, identical to other hospitals in major cities of Saudi Arabia. I'm familiar with the design from my time in Jeddah, and I know what's around every corner before I get there. Room for room and corridor for corridor, they're all the same. The others all have a single pathologist. Why should they want five here?

The reason, when I finally discover it, turns out to be simple. There's been a corruption investigation into the health administration of Gizan Province. Abuse has risen to such a level that the authorities in Riyadh can no longer turn a blind eye. Our Director of Health Services is now reputedly the richest man in the province, though the money is rumoured to have been farmed out to family members and relatives to make it less traceable. Now he's under suspicion, and questions are being asked not only about money, but also about the poor quality of medical care.

To establish credibility, the Director needs something to show the inspectors, so he's put out a directive to recruit Western-trained medical staff and health workers. Our function is to be trophies. We can be displayed to the inspectors from Riyadh on their periodic visits as evidence of the rising standard of care in the province. Our professional skills are irrelevant.

Later, I meet an American dental technician who sits in an office day after day doing nothing at all, with no materials and no patients. That's all they want from him. After a few months of doing nothing, he's on the verge of breakdown and flies home. Compared to him, I'm fortunate—at least I have some work to do. Not much, but a little.

So where are all the others? There must have been more than a dozen for interview in London. Was I the only one idiot enough to fall for this?

Granted, the interviews were an exercise in uncontrolled chaos. We had to wait for three hours because the Director was out shopping and had lost track of time. Then when he finally appeared, reeking of whisky, he could hardly stand up. It's not surprising that some people were put off. *But surely not everyone! Everyone except me, that is.*

Then it finally hits me. There's not going to be anyone else. It's going to be just me, alone here for the next twelve months. The work, which was to have been my lifeline, hardly exists. The town is dingy beyond description. And on top of all that, I'm going to have to come to terms with the local brand of Islam. It's not like in Jeddah, with its large and cosmopolitan expatriate population, where Westerners are left in peace to live their own lives. Here, we're in the Arabian heartland. Here, the religion is uncompromising, unrelenting, and all-pervasive.

I walk slowly back to my apartment in the residential compound. On my right there's an area cut off from the rest by a high, forbidding fence. The only access point is a military-style gatehouse. Next to the gatehouse is a large billboard bearing the words "YOU ARE BEING WATCHED." This is where the nurses and other female staff from India and the Philippines are housed. Every day at the end of their shift they are escorted back behind the fence, where they are confined until it's time to be marched back to the hospital the next day. Once a week there's a supervised shopping trip to the local supermarket. Apart from that, it's a prison.

There's a swimming pool in the compound—forlorn, empty, and waterless since the day it was completed. Originally it was built as a recreational facility, but it was seen as a symbol of the decadent West and was quickly abandoned. Next to the empty pool is a tennis court. Here the men can play tennis, but only in long trousers. Uncovered male knees, it seems, are a moral hazard.

Back in the apartment I lie down on the bed, and for the first time in years I let the tears flow. I don't hold back, thinking perhaps it'll make me feel better. If it does, the effect is short-lived.

Can it get any worse? Think of the nurses shut in behind that fence. Compared to them, I'm privileged. But at least they have the company of their own people. Me, I'm on my own. That's the worst thing.

Think it through, Norman. You came in faith. Yesterday everything looked bright and optimistic. Today it's an unremitting and dismal gloom. Yesterday

you didn't doubt that it was God who brought you here. Are you going to doubt that now? Has anything really changed?

A distant memory from some half-forgotten church meeting. How did it go? "Don't doubt in the darkness what you learned in the light."

Can that be it? There's nothing random with God. Everything has a reason. One day you'll look back on all this and laugh...

And in the meantime, look for the lesson. The sooner you win on this level, the sooner you get to move on to the next. Think it through, step by step:

One. God has brought me here.

Two. So there's a reason and a purpose. And there's a way through.

Three. If God has a reason and a purpose, then that's not something I can refuse. If I try to bypass it, he'll bring me back to it by another route, again and again, until I pass the test.

Four. So I'm staying here. If God thinks I can make it, I can make it.

Five. So how? Step by step, moment by moment. Focus on the present.

Six. And there's one more thing. There's an old friend who can't come on this journey. He's going to have to stay behind. My faithful companion through the years, Self-pity. Yes, him. My friend. The one faithful friend who's always there to comfort me when the going gets rough. The one who says, "Yeah, I know, Norman. He's a mean old God, isn't he? Always giving you a hard time. You deserve better! Look—give yourself a break. Indulge yourself a bit... You've earned it." Him. My comforter. My other Comforter.

But it won't work here, I can see that. Not in this place. Everywhere I've been before, there's always been an escape route, some sort of mental or emotional way out. Not here. Here there's no safety valve, no quick release from the pressure. Here self-pity can only make the pain worse.

Without self-pity and with God's help, I think I can just about make it. If I start feeling sorry for myself, even for a moment, I'll be finished. Victory can be painful, but defeat is worse.

So, decide. Right now. Make the decision, and move on. It's that simple.

That day, I waved goodbye to my long-time friend and companion. I booted him out, sent him away, and consigned him to history. I can't say that I've never felt sorry for myself again. He's always on the lookout for opportunities to creep in through the back door and renew our friendship, but he's a spent force now. The tyranny he once had over me is broken.

The battle, when I faced it, was over almost before it had begun. Like most of the tigers in my life, when I faced him down he was only paper after all. I made the decision and moved on. And that was it.

There's a simple principle that God has made clear to me in many of my struggles: "*Norman, if you have the will, then I have the power.*" That's been the crux of much of my spiritual journey. When I reach the point of truly *wanting* to be changed, then God can step in and change me almost in the blink of an eye, effortlessly. The problem is in getting to that point. That's where all the pain and misery leads me, to that point where I finally say, "Enough! It's just not worth it. Change me!" Like the prodigal son in his pigsty, I finally wake up to the fact that there's a better place to be.

Was that the reason why God took me to Gizan? I don't know. It seems a long way to go to learn such a small lesson. It seemed small to me, but perhaps God saw it differently. Perhaps it was big to him. Perhaps that was the only place we could do it. To be in that remote place where God could so comprehensively block my emotional escape routes as to make me finally face my problem. If that's the case, then perhaps for God it was a year well spent.

A few days after I made the decision, life got easier. As usual, once I gave God what he wanted, the pressure was taken off. I ran into a Greek-American called Mike who was running the hospital laundry. He'd been there before I arrived, but somehow God had kept him out of sight until he'd got his lesson across to me. Over time a few others trickled in, and eventually we had a small and rather ill-assorted expatriate community of eight or nine.

The two I remember best are Mike and Ed. Both had a Christian past. Mike had been a used car salesman in South Carolina. A girlfriend had introduced him to the Saudi Arabian prince whose company had the contract to manage the Gizan hospital, and the two of them had formed an unlikely friendship. Mike was looking for a change of scene after a bitter divorce and custody battle precipitated by his drug use and womanizing. The prince offered him a job in Gizan and he gratefully accepted.

For a man who'd never been out of America before, Gizan was a baptism of fire. Occasionally, when the heat got too much, Mike would fly up to Riyadh for the weekend to relax in the prince's palace, exchanging one cultural extreme for another.

Ed was a Welshman, working as Director of Nursing. Years before, he told me, he'd had a dramatic conversion to Christ, and in those early days had often given public testimonies. He'd chosen a career in nursing, but

then the twin temptations of sex and alcohol had ravaged his life. When we talked I could still see the divine spark in him but buried deep, and his life had become a shadow of what it might have been.

I'd like to be able to say that the three of us, exiled in that remote place and brought together by God's providence, grasped the opportunity given us to carve out something productive, but we didn't. Whether or not God had some further purpose for us that we simply missed, I have no idea.

Over the subsequent months Ed's marriage disintegrated, and he returned to England with his two young sons, who seemed well on the road to a delinquent future. Mike moved to another hospital laundry job on the East Coast of Saudi Arabia, taking his demons with him.

As for me, I survived. I moved on shortly before the year was up, taking with me some strange memories and one small—or not so small—lesson.

And sometimes now, I look back on it all and laugh.

PART 2

ME AND THE CHURCH

CHAPTER 7

CHURCH

Cambridge: 1970

I ALWAYS HATED church.

My family was Roman Catholic, but the nearest good school was Protestant, so they sent me there. This meant that I got ample exposure to the two main western Christian traditions. I reacted against them both in equal measure, but in different ways.

At school we went to church—we called it chapel—six times a week, Sunday through Friday. On Saturday there was a singing practice for the next day's service, when the whole school would unite in deliberately singing wrong notes to inflame the volatile temper of the music master. The weekday services were short, consisting of a hymn, prayers, and a Bible reading. Sunday was a full sixty minutes, which to us seemed like an eternity. There were hymns, psalms, canticles, the creed, prayers, and worst of all, the sermon.

What those sermons were about, I cannot say. I must have listened to more than 300 of them, but none left a lasting impression on my mind. Were they trying to share a message of salvation that I was unable or unwilling to hear? Did they have any real message? From this distance in time I can no longer judge.

Looking back, I can see that there were indeed some genuine and committed Christians in the school and the community where I grew up. I think that some of them, in their own way, tried to share their faith with us, but this never extended to any kind of meaningful explanation of the

gospel that I could understand. The idea of a personal relationship with God eluded me, and Christianity remained simply a religion, nothing more or less.

Would I have responded had the message been presented in a more direct or effective way? I don't know. Perhaps it simply wasn't God's time for me. In the meantime, I occupied my mind during the sermons by playing mental word games and ticking off the minutes until it was over for another week.

For the eight months of the school year, my experience of Christianity revolved around the mind-numbing rituals of those chapel services. All I took away with me when I left school was some appreciation of the musical heritage of the Christian church; a glimmer of the role of Christianity in the formation of western civilization; and a deep and long-lasting aversion to organized church services in any shape or form—something that has never entirely left me since.

The other four months of the year I was a Catholic. If anything could be worse than those interminable Sundays in the school chapel, it was the Catholic Mass.

In the first place, the Mass was in Latin, so I couldn't understand a word of it. My brother and I were learning Latin at school, and we would use this to try and understand a bit of what was being said, but it didn't work. School Latin was the language of war, and the cohorts and siege engines of Julius Caesar's Gallic campaigns had little in common with the religious language of the Mass. *Qui tollis peccata mundi* rang through our ears week after week, but the meaning of the words remained a mystery to me, then and for years to come.

Then there was Sunday school and preparation for First Communion. One day, the priest asked me to stand and recite the Lord's Prayer in front of the class. *This is easy! I can do this one with my eyes closed. We've said it hundreds of times at school.* "Our Father, who art in heaven..." The first few lines went well. "And lead us not into temptation..." I moved confidently into the final doxology. "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory..."

Pandemonium broke loose. I had recited the longer, Protestant version that I'd learned in school. I had no idea that Catholics used a different and shorter one, leaving out the last two lines. While the priest made frantic phone calls, I struggled to understand the significance of the furor.

If Protestantism bored me, Catholicism terrified me. I remember listening to stories of priests being tortured to death rather than reveal the secrets of the confessional. The stories were presumably intended to

give reassurance, but they only succeeded in filling my young mind with macabre and ghoulish images of death and suffering.

I struggled with lists of forgivable and unforgivable sins. Young as I was, I knew enough to understand that it could only ever be academic. If they were really serious about it, then I'd amassed enough unforgivables already to leave my situation hopeless. Even now I shudder at the religious images imprinted on our young minds.

When I left school in the winter of 1968, I breathed a sigh of relief and mentally consigned my entire Christian experience, both Catholic and Protestant, to history.

When I became a Christian—albeit a reluctant one—late the following year, I supposed that my reaction to organized church worship might change as a result. It didn't, or not much anyway.

My discussions with Max prior to my conversion had revolved primarily around the reality of the Christian God and the possibility of a one-on-one personal relationship with him. Church had entered these discussions only in a marginal, peripheral sort of way. In accepting Jesus as Saviour, my attention had been entirely focused on the present moment. I was hardly even expecting the conversion prayer to work, let alone thinking about what came next. Thoughts about my future relationship with the church never entered my mind.

I was vaguely aware that Max and his friends were effectively running their own church outside of—and even to some extent hostile to—the mainstream Christian denominations. For me this was an advantage. My dislike of organized Christianity was so great that any suggestion of a connection between this “new” Christianity and the traditional church would have switched off my receptivity completely and made my conversion impossible.

I can see now the extraordinary care with which God orchestrated every detail of these early encounters—the people, the timing, the circumstances—to give me the best possible chance. This was just as well. Even with all that help, my conversion was very much a touch-and-go affair. Without it, I would have had no chance.

After my conversion, my induction into Max's church community was taken for granted, and I started attending their meetings. My friends from before, who were an arty bunch, had greeted the news of my conversion with considerable derision. This was not entirely unexpected, but it was nonetheless a big problem. They were the only friends I had, and they were important to me. A breakdown in the old relationships—or at least

a drifting apart—looked to be on the cards, and I needed to explore other avenues. The church provided an alternative social network, and I decided I had to give it a chance.

The Cambridge New Testament Church, as they called themselves, was one of three separate congregations grouped under the authority of a self-styled “apostle.” Nowadays this sort of autonomous church is quite common. Back then in England it was distinctly unusual—at least it was entirely new to me. Our congregation was about thirty people. They were mainly students and—reflecting the composition of the university at that time—for the most part male.

It wasn’t long before the problems started. When they came, I can see now, they had little to do with God and a lot more to do with the social structure of the church. At the time, this distinction was lost on me, and God ended up getting the blame.

At this point in my life I was in most respects pretty much like any other normal eighteen-year-old, with the same drives, ambitions, and aspirations as everyone else. I wanted to belong, to be accepted, and to be popular. I wanted to establish an identity, to be able to express opinions, and have people listen to me with some kind of respect. I wanted to make a mark in the hot-house of our narcissistic and competitive student society. I didn’t want to be the sort of guy that people walked across the room to avoid when he came through the door.

With this kind of an agenda, joining a church—any church—was about the worst thing I could possibly do. The Christian community in the college, I quickly found out, was a profoundly unfashionable social group, regarded with total disdain by the rest of the student body, or at least by those aware of its existence. This was social suicide!

If I’d found something in the church to compensate for what it looked like I would be losing, things might have been better, but I hadn’t. In the secular college environment, we were all competing on a more or less equal basis. Roughly, we were all the same age, came from similar backgrounds, and had had broadly similar experiences of life thus far. The playing field was level, and I felt I had a chance.

In the church, it was different. There I was surrounded by people who all seemed hugely knowledgeable about Christianity and the Bible, whereas I knew next to nothing. I came to the meetings, listened vaguely to what was being said, and then went home. I had no real opinions of my own, I received no encouragement to form any, and I doubt anyone would have been interested to hear them if I had. I was a passive bystander, and church, just like before, was still church.

I can't say I was unwelcome there—far from it. They had few enough converts, and they were definitely anxious to hang on to the ones they had. As a convert I was a trophy, but as a human being I felt I didn't exist.

While my non-Christian friends might have regarded my new-found faith as something of a joke, at least they were interested enough to try and persuade me out of it. They actually liked me for who I was. This was a type of affection that was strikingly absent in the church. There, if they liked me at all, it was for something they hoped to turn me into, and certainly not for who or what I actually was. An inner tension was beginning to develop.

A big part of the divide between me and the other church members stemmed from the sort of people they were and the image they projected. For the most part, they were conservative and conventional. Their hair was short and neatly groomed, and they wore buttoned-up shirts with ties, and trousers with creases down the front.

For me—as was the case for most of my friends—the months that had elapsed since leaving school had witnessed a serious sartorial revolution. My hair flopped lazily over my shoulders. The highlight of my wardrobe was a pair of extraordinarily tight, patterned trousers, with one leg red and the other leg an iridescent gold. Above this I wore a short-sleeved Afghan coat. My role model was Jimi Hendrix.

I didn't wear those trousers every day, of course. They were so tight that it took fifteen minutes just to get into them. And once they were on, I could barely sit down, in constant fear of the seams splitting open. But they were my pride and joy, and they epitomized the way I saw myself and wanted to be seen by others.

Nowadays, student culture may be more heterogeneous, and these kinds of issues may seem trivial, but back then they were important. I suppose every generation has to establish its own identity, and ours did this to a great extent through the clothes we wore and—even more—the length of our hair. These things really mattered. They defined who you were, your social norms, and where you saw yourself in the entire order of things.

Not that anyone in the church was telling me to get my hair cut—they weren't. It was just that I was different from the others, and the difference was there for all to see, a yawning cultural chasm between me and the rest of the church.

The differences went deeper than mere externals. As it is for most male eighteen-year-olds, much of my waking life was dominated by thoughts of one thing—sex. In this I seemed alone. Malcolm, the student

who pastored our little church, had a fiancée somewhere. Max, ever the perfect Christian, had the perfect girlfriend, a theology student who would later become his wife. Their relationships gave the appearance of perfect and platonic propriety.

Most of the other church members were unattached, but they appeared untroubled by impure or lustful thoughts. They were the archetypal “eunuchs for the kingdom” that Jesus spoke of.¹² The issue that so dominated the waking thoughts of every other male student in town seemed not to exist in the lives of the church members.

At the time, I naively assumed that these people lived on a higher spiritual plane than I did, and that their sexuality had been sublimated into spiritual activity. Looking back, I doubt this was the case. I’m sure that they were individually going through exactly the same struggles as all the other students, but it was kept private and not talked about. Whatever the reality, the effect on me was to make me feel like a complete freak. My sense of alienation from the rest of the church was growing deeper by the day.

In the spring they put me into a weekly Bible study group, reading Paul’s letter to the Philippians. I persevered to the end, but in terror, hardly speaking a word through the entire series. Years later I would learn to love Paul’s letters; then, I understood nothing.

The only other beginner in the group was probably as ignorant of spiritual matters as I was, but he had one major advantage—he had had a classical education and spoke ancient Greek. They loved this. While the rest of us read the translation, he could read in the original language and provide linguistic insights. It gave him a natural niche, and he integrated well. They discussed minutiae and nuances of Greek word meanings with enthusiasm. For me it was obscure enough even in English. I hovered at the margin, quivering.

Max was concerned about my lack of spiritual progress and arranged for me to join a friend of his for a morning “quiet time” of prayer and Bible reading. It was made clear to me that this extra coaching was not a normal practice for new converts, but rather a particular concession to me, on account of my spiritual weakness. The friend was a bland, self-effacing, nerdy character from Belfast named Kevin, the sort that I normally avoided like the plague. Max I respected, but this one...

Our meetings lasted a couple of days before they petered out. I hadn’t even figured out how to pray by myself, let alone out loud and in front

¹² Matthew 19:12

of others, and my unfortunate mentor's prayers alternated with long intervals of silence.

The importance of the morning quiet time as the mark of a truly committed Christian was constantly impressed on me. Without it, you were second rate. I've never been a morning person, and it was never likely to work for me. I've since learned that there are many other ways to organize a prayer life apart from before breakfast. At the time, however, a sense of guilt and inadequacy developed, which was to haunt me for years to come, as it has many others I've met since.

They encouraged me to start reading the Bible on my own. In those days, everyone was started on the Gospel of John. Of all the New Testament books they could have given me, they had chosen the most complex, mystical, and abstract of the lot. The advice I was given was simple—and disastrous. They told me that if I read a passage every day, then as I went along, things would "jump out" at me. That, I was told, is how God speaks to us.

I remember vividly those first few days of Bible reading. I looked at the first verse in the passage. Was it jumping out? No, nothing was happening. I moved on to the next, but that didn't jump either. By the end of the passage, I admitted failure. Nothing had jumped. I persevered for a few more days. By then it was becoming clear that there wasn't going to be any jumping out, and I gave up. The Bible went back on the shelf to gather dust, and remained unopened for the better part of the next two years.

Of all the disasters of those early months, there's one that especially stands out in my memory. It was entirely well meant, but probably did more long-term damage than any other single incident.

The church was planning a door-to-door visitation campaign around the town, distributing copies of the dreaded John's gospel, and they decided I should join them. My heart sank. From the start, this had been the one thing I had feared most, my vision of hell. Now it was about to come true. I was still at the stage of automatically assuming that the church's plans for me must be God's plans also, and I didn't have the courage or self-confidence to defy God—which was how I understood it—by refusing. Reluctantly, I agreed to join.

The week crawled by as the appointed Saturday afternoon drew near. My sense of dread was increasing by the hour. I could think of little else. Finally, the day arrived.

No! I can't face it! However angry God might be at my disobedience, I just won't do it. I'm not going!

In panic I shut myself in my room for the whole day to avoid any possibility of a chance encounter. My mind was a ferment of guilt and resentment—guilt at having disobeyed God (as I saw it) and resentment at his having tried to force this thing on me. The day lasted forever, each minute an hour, as I cowered behind the barricades, waiting for darkness to cover me.

This single incident soured my relationship with God for years to come. I blamed it all on him, though he had no hand in it. I had started my Christian life with hope and optimism—albeit combined with a certain wary reticence. Now my worst fears had been realized.

Nothing's free in this life, you know that. All this talk about God reaching down, the free gift unearned and freely given. It sounds great on the surface, doesn't it? But you know, life's not really like that. There's always a catch somewhere, and this was never going to be any different.

And now it's come. My worst nightmare—to spend my Saturday knocking on strangers' doors, giving out bits of the Bible. And this is what God is demanding of me. Some free gift! More like payback time. Face it, Norman, he set you a trap, and you fell right in.

It was a significant turning point in my life with God. Nothing would be quite the same again. God had betrayed me. I responded to that betrayal with an anger against him that would grow and grow, consuming and dominating years of my life. With hindsight, I see clearly now that God had no part in this thing. It was the work of a group of well-meaning but ultimately fallible fellow students. At the time, however, the distinction was lost.

I survived, but only just. Now everything was changed. A part of me continued to reach towards God, while another part of me moved into a siege mentality. I felt that God was trying to impose his will on mine by brute force, and I cast around desperately for a defense.

The university year moved inexorably on, and my Christian life stumbled from one disaster to the next, a morass of guilt and inadequacy. I had failed at church, failed at prayer, failed at Bible reading, and failed at evangelism. Was there anything else left? Not much, it seemed.

In late summer I went through water baptism.

There's a grassy meadow near the centre of Cambridge, fronting a couple of pubs on one side and bounded by a bend in the River Cam on the other three. It's a popular place for students to lie out and relax on sunny summer days. At the river's edge, the grass slopes gently into a sandy

verge, giving easy access to the water. It could almost have been created with baptisms in mind. For maximum public impact, it was ideal.

The chosen day dawned warm and sultry, and it seemed the whole city was out there enjoying it. There were just three of us to be baptized. Each of us had to say a few words of testimony and then walk into the water to be immersed, one after the other. I was the last.

The first baptism attracted little attention. Then the second candidate stepped forward. She was an attractive and buxom girl of about sixteen, wearing a simple white baptismal dress. She said a few words and stepped down into the river. A minute later she reemerged, dripping wet. The thin, white dress, soaked through and now virtually transparent, was glued by the water to every nuance and inflection of her finely-contoured body.

All across the meadow, conversation stopped. Books were laid aside and girlfriends ignored as every eye riveted on this voluptuous Venus arising from the waters. If the purpose was to attract attention, it succeeded unintentionally well.

I struggled unsuccessfully to focus my mind on spiritual matters, and then I took my turn in the water. My words of testimony were stuttering and insincere, and my silent prayer was a simple one, "Please, God, let there be no one here to recognize me!"

By the second university year my spiritual decline was established, inexorable, and seemingly irreversible. Max had graduated and gone back to Africa, and my one lifeline was gone. He was the only one for whom I had a real respect, and the one who could usually get me back on my feet after my increasingly frequent spiritual collapses. With the others I had no real bond.

I severed contact with the Cambridge New Testament Church. As I saw it, my Christian life had ceased to exist. I still didn't understand the difference between church and God, and when I broke with the church there seemed nothing left. By now I had completely lost touch with my starting point. My first prayer to accept Christ had had nothing at all to do with religion, churches, or organizations, but somehow, in the mess I had lost touch with this basic fact.

As I walked away from God, I naturally assumed that God had likewise finished with me. In reality he was only just starting—I had given him an opening into my life, and now that he had that toehold, he had no intention of relinquishing it. He was just working on a

different timescale than I was—he was in no hurry and had no problem waiting.

I drifted back to my old life. My non-Christian friends had watched the whole saga with wry amusement, and now they welcomed me back. For them it was a temporary aberration from which I had recovered.

But the old life was no longer so simple. I could throw myself back into the pursuit of pleasure, but I couldn't shut out what I knew. There was no way back to ignorance. I knew the truth of God, and I couldn't undo that knowledge, however much I might have wished it. I felt that I'd cut myself off from the ultimate source of good in the universe, and logic now demanded that I move to the other extreme. The middle ground didn't seem to make much sense. Before, I'd experimented with drugs, more out of curiosity than anything else. Now I started again, but this time it was more as a means of escape. It didn't work. Nothing I did could shut out my sense of guilt, and that guilty conscience was pulling me further and further away from God.

Paradoxically, at this time I made my first real Christian friend. Edmund was from a Baptist background. He had had a peripheral involvement with the Cambridge New Testament Church before withdrawing, disillusioned. If anything, he was even more mixed up about the whole thing than I was. For most of the year we were inseparable, spending much of our time together plotting half-hearted spiritual comebacks that never quite got off the ground. Looking back, I can see now the infinite kindness of God to us both in that friendship, but at the time, as with so many of his undeserved blessings, I saw nothing.

Soon, two years of my university career had gone by. I was angry, guilty, and depressed. I was living for the moment, my mind filled with dark imaginings as I tried unsuccessfully to shut out the truth. I was on a slippery downward slope, and I knew it. But the further I slid, the wider the gulf became. The idea of going back and trying again was intolerable. My memories were just too negative. I had reached a complete impasse.

The future looked dark and hopeless. But even as I languished in that nadir, entirely unbeknown to me God was planning an intervention from a new and totally unexpected direction.

CHAPTER 8

THE CHILDREN OF GOD

London: 1971

THE YEAR OF the Jesus people, of Arthur Blessitt carrying his cross round the world, of Hell's Angels carrying Bibles, and—the Children of God.

I saw them first on television, when I was home for the summer break at the end of my second academic year. I almost switched channels, but at the last minute some inner voice told me to watch, and I did. There they were, on a nice-looking ranch in Texas, enjoying the swimming pool and apparently having a great time.

There had been a lot in the media that summer about God moving in the alternative culture, and this was a part of it. I was vaguely interested, but it was all a long way off, and I gave it no more thought.

By late July I was back in Cambridge. The university ran an extra four-week voluntary term in the middle of the long summer break for students wanting to do additional courses or just catch up on their studies. I always went back. The atmosphere was relaxed, the academic pressure was off, and it was a good time to enjoy university life at its best.

One evening, Jim, a Christian friend in the college, invited me to go with him to a meeting. He was from a mainstream denomination rather than from the New Testament Church, and he was a bit less intense than the others. To my surprise, and probably to his also, I agreed to go. Just curious, I suppose.

It's them! The ones from the Texas ranch.

My memory of the meeting is hazy. I vaguely recollect them up on a stage, singing, dancing, and giving testimonies.

Looks like they've got some pretty checkered backgrounds—drug problems and the like. Interesting...

At the end of the meeting Jim left, while I stayed behind to talk. Then I made an impulse decision. At the time it seemed obvious. I'd known all along that somewhere, sometime, I would have to find a way back to God. It was clear that it wasn't going to be through the Cambridge New Testament Church or any other church I'd thus far encountered—I was too alienated from all that now to even give it a chance. Here I was seeing God in a totally new context. It was the best chance I'd seen for a long time, it looked as if it could just work, and it seemed too important to ignore.

Late in the evening, I went back to Jim's room and told him my decision. I was leaving, giving up the university. I was going to join up with these strange people, give it a try, and see what happened. He was shocked and tried to talk me out of it. This wasn't what he'd had in mind at all. It was no good. I'd made the decision and my mind was set. Questions about the future didn't cross my mind. All I could see was a possible escape route from an impossible morass, and at that moment nothing else mattered.

In the morning I packed my stuff and left. I was riding a wave of euphoria, and university, degree, and career didn't seem relevant. I went home, mumbled something to my family about spending the summer at a Christian work camp, took the train to London, and presented myself on the doorstep of the Children of God colony in Bermondsey.

They took me in gladly. Years later, I found out that they figured a Cambridge University medical student was quite a catch. For me, at that point, I was just happy to be accepted. I was starting a whole new life.

Later I found out that in the Family—the new name we adopted as the notoriety of the Children of God spread—nothing was ever quite as it seemed. Even the luxury Texas ranch I'd seen on television had been borrowed for the day from the television evangelist who was sponsoring the group at that time. In reality, they were living on a rundown property nearby, while the evangelist and his family occupied the luxury ranch. At the time, however, there were no clouds of doubt on my horizon. Along with the other new recruits, I accepted unquestioningly the Children of God mythology that was fed to us.

The myth was straightforward. David Berg, our leader—we called him Moses or just Mo for short—had been called by God to be the leader of his

end-time church. Mo would be our pilot, appointed to lead us through the seven-year Great Tribulation foretold in the book of Revelation. This time of unparalleled suffering and persecution for God's people was expected to start some time in 1986, with Jesus returning in glory seven years later in 1993 to usher in the end of the world as we knew it. In 1971 this was sufficiently far off in the future as to seem entirely plausible, and we had no difficulty in accepting it.

Berg, we were told, had originally been pastor of a small church in the Midwest. He had been expelled from this position by a congregation hide-bound in the past and incapable of appreciating the unique role to which God had called him. No matter, it had all been for the greater good—all a part of God's master plan to take his church out of the world.

God had finally tired of the older generation of Christians, with their formalized and conventional church worship, their materialism, their compromise with the devil-inspired world system (Babylon), and their worship of conventional education (Moloch)—the god into whose fires an entire generation of young people was being sacrificed.¹³ God had decided to start again from scratch with a community drawn entirely from the new, young generation. These were to be God's new chosen people.

In God's new plan, parents were disposable—they were part of the old, rejected generation. They were serving the world, Babylon, or *the System* as we called it. Those within the System were *systemites*. To be a systemite was considered the ultimate opprobrium. Education, personal possessions, and working for money were all rejected—and after all, with the end of the world just a few years down the road, what long-term relevance did these things have anyway?

Our model for the new Christian society was the early Jerusalem church, where the members pooled their possessions and lived communally.¹⁴ The long-term failure of the original Jerusalem model was conveniently ignored. This radical vision of the new church was tacked onto a conventional theology of personal salvation—salvation by grace, through faith, as a free gift from God, consequent on repentance, or turning to God. Personal holiness, loving others (within the Family at least), dying to self, and evangelism as an imperative were all emphasized.

¹³ *Moloch* or *Molech*, an ancient Palestinian deity whose worship was probably associated with child sacrifice. The linking of this to the modern education system was a fanciful Children of God addition.

¹⁴ Acts 4:32–35

This package struck an immediate chord with many disaffected young people, and the group grew rapidly. After all, most of them had no argument with God himself. They'd just been turned off by the church stereotype. A personal encounter with God, when presented in this countercultural way, was a highly attractive option.

Giving up personal possessions—we called it *forsaking all*,¹⁵ using the terminology of the King James Version of the Bible as we did for everything—presented no real problem to young people, often drop-outs, who had almost nothing in the way of possessions in the first place. Many of them had no inclination towards working for a living. They were frequently alienated from their parents already. So, a God who affirmed and legitimized many of the lifestyle decisions they'd already made on other grounds was both convenient and popular.

The community had started in California, settling for a time in Huntington Beach, a suburb of Los Angeles. They had preached to surfers and hippies on the waterfront and attracted a core following, before heading off as a motorized convoy to establish a new headquarters in Texas. A few months later, Berg had decided that it was time to expand overseas. That summer of 1971, a group of eleven or twelve disciples had been shipped over to England as the first wave—the Cambridge meeting had been one of their first forays out of London. And thus it was that, a bare few weeks after their first arrival in England, I became a part of this embryonic and self-styled “God’s end-time church.”

Life in the Family was different from any form of Christianity I'd ever encountered before. I'd grown up seeing Christianity as a pillar of conventional society. In the Children of God, by contrast, we completely rejected these traditional values. Christianity was presented not as a pillar of society, but as the ultimate revolution, a radical rejection of worldly values.

The similarity to the little group of fishermen who left their boats to follow Jesus out on the road was real and compelling, and one of which we were frequently reminded. Like them, we had been given the job of building a new society based on an entirely new set of values. Rejecting work, conventional family, money, and possessions, we lived on the discarded food scraps left behind as the street markets close for the night.

We all got new names from the Bible. David Berg was Moses, his son was Aaron, and his son-in-law Joshua—big names for the big people. For

¹⁵ From Luke 14:33

the little people, the names were more obscure. I was named Jezreel, after a place rather than a person. I looked it up and found it to be the name of the flat, wide valley cutting across the centre of Israel and flanked to the south by the dome-shaped hill of Megiddo, or Armageddon, as it is better known.

In one respect we were totally conventional—our sexual morality was above reproach. This was in marked contrast to the way in which things would evolve in the future, and in contrast also, it would later emerge, to the personal behaviour of the senior leadership.

The real and more sordid truth behind the Berg myth would emerge gradually over time, long after I moved on. Berg had been engaged in long-term, incestuous sexual relationships with his own daughters since their childhood. His expulsion from the Midwest church had not been because they didn't understand his spiritual vision. It had been because they were starting to understand him all too well.

Later on, isolated in his seafront villa with a small inner circle of female acolytes and a few adopted “grandchildren,” Berg’s vision of Christianity would degenerate into a bizarre experiment in misplaced sexuality. The rest of the Family would ultimately be encouraged to follow him into rampant promiscuity. Prostitution would become a primary tool for evangelism and recruitment, and paedophilia would be elevated almost to the status of a religious sacrament, a pathway to God. But by that time, most of the early believers would have long since left.

For the moment, this future was hidden from us. We never saw Berg, who stayed hidden, communicating only by letter. The explanation given was that his physical presence would interfere with the purity of the spiritual communication conveyed through these “Mo letters.” The more likely truth was that the myth was simply too fragile to survive a face-to-face encounter.

In the meantime, for us foot soldiers the propriety was absolute. Marriage was sacrosanct, families were inviolate, and the sexes were strictly segregated at night. In any case, we were kept so busy maintaining the community, foraging for food, and preaching on the streets that there was no time left for anything else. At night we dropped exhausted into instant sleep on rows of mattresses on the floor, and in the morning we woke to another round of ceaseless activity.

For me, life in the Family was a hard struggle. I’d come out of a life of total self-indulgence. I’d been accustomed to doing what I wanted, when I wanted, with no thought for anyone but myself. Using drugs had caused my attention to become focused inward, onto my own feelings

and sensations. In effect, I had turned into a totally selfish person. It had all been about me.

In the Family I was forced to the opposite extreme. Life was completely regimented and free will virtually nonexistent. Self was forgotten. From morning to night we followed orders from the leaders. That was the system. You became a part of it, or you crept out by a back door and didn't come back.

Many people left. Usually it was no surprise—the signs were obvious well in advance. You saw the alienation, the questioning, and the rebellion in their faces, and then one day they'd be gone.

Somehow I hung in. It was awful, but I managed to keep going. In spite of all the hardship, I felt for the first time in my life that I was a part of something I could believe in. In the Cambridge church, Christianity had seemed like a watered-down version of the world with all the spice taken out. Here it was something new and exciting, something worth suffering for. Here, I'd found a community of people I could relate to. We'd all been through the same kinds of things in the past, and we all thought the same way. Now we were going through the same trials and the same withdrawals, and we could feel for one another's hardships. If they could make it, I told myself, so could I.

I made a few friends amongst those who had joined around the same time as me. Theophilus was a thin, lanky youth of an academic bent. He had had a bizarre introduction to God. Alone in his room and high on LSD, he had picked up a Bible and read the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Somehow as he read, God had penetrated his drug-induced stupor and had spoken to him deeply. A few days later, a week or so before my own encounter, Theo had also encountered the Children of God and had dropped everything to join them. He told me, "As I read Ecclesiastes under the influence of the drug, it seemed to me the wisest, most profound commentary on human existence I'd ever read. I knew I was face to face with truth." Whenever I now hear people question why Ecclesiastes, a book so full of nihilistic fatalism, should ever have been included in the Bible, I always think back to Theo and his unconventional path to God.

Theo's speech was slow and deliberate. He had frequent flashbacks from years of LSD use. Many years later our paths would cross once again. By this time, long since departed from the Family, he would have a Cambridge PhD and be teaching theology in a respected academic institution.

Samson was a gentle, red-haired giant of a man. His father was a wealthy Christian industrialist who, as we outgrew the cramped

Bermondsey premises, allowed us to live in a large, unused factory he owned in the south London suburb of Bromley. Samson's brother also joined—later he would leave and spend many years in conventional missionary service in West Africa.

Sadly, Samson never got out. He stayed a part even after the original Christian roots became distorted almost beyond recognition. Years later I heard of his visiting England, limping from a failed suicide attempt. Even then he was unwilling to break the ties, and he remains to this day an active member of the cult.

Gabriel was a mustachioed, dark-haired, and distinctly unangelic former art student. Most of the others had been converted directly off the streets, but Gabriel came from a church background, and like me he struggled with some of the radical anti-church teaching we received. I had no real fondness for the Cambridge New Testament Church, but they had brought me to Christ, and I could scarcely doubt that they were indeed Christians. To hear them denounced as enemies of God presented me with a real problem.

The Family theology regarding other churches was a mass of contradictions. We were taught that Christians in other churches than our own were all out of God's perfect will and were living in an imperfect revelation of Christianity. Looking at Max and what he had done to lead me to Christ, this didn't seem to make a lot of sense. The teaching disturbed me mainly because it sowed seeds of doubt in my mind about the claim of our leaders to be infallible. This claim was a big part of the glue holding the organization together. If they could be wrong about this, I reasoned, what about other things?

I was not able to discuss this with Gabriel directly—any sort of analytical conversation of that kind would have been an act of rebellion. No one apart from the two of us would have known about it, but we would nonetheless have felt the guilt of our perceived sin. Most of the censorship in those days was internal and self-imposed. Although we couldn't talk about it, I sensed that it was, if anything, even more of a problem for him than it was for me.

Gabriel and I had another shared problem. October was approaching, and with it the start of the university term. Up to now there had always been a door open to the old life, a way back. Come October, that door would close. For the former street kids and hippies there was no issue—most of them had nothing to go back to. For us it was real, and it was getting closer.

Life in the Children of God at this time revolved around getting out onto the streets to preach the gospel. No one was spared. People with special skills might be seconded to particular specialized ministries, such as setting up a print shop to print literature—a priority at this time—but when it came to street evangelism, there were no exclusions. We all had to do it, usually for several hours a day.

Every day of that summer, we would be bussed into central London and sent out to places like Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square, where the young and aimless congregated. In those early days, perhaps fortunately, we had no literature to distribute. It was all about talking, explaining the gospel to people directly. We always went in pairs, one talking while the other prayed or just listened, picking up ideas that they could use themselves later on.

The message was a simple one—Jesus Christ crucified for your sins. Salvation, meaning a spiritual rebirth now and a passport to heaven after death, was offered as a free gift—you decided you wanted it, and then you asked for it. It was a simple and effective message, and we saw many lives changed by it. I took it to heart then, and I have stayed with it ever since, seeing no reason to change.

For the many who accepted Christ, there was the invitation to leave the world, forsake all, and join our community. Some joined, and some did not. There was no particular pressure on them to join—the primary emphasis was always on salvation, bringing people to a personal knowledge of God.

All this compulsory evangelism was a huge help to me personally. In the Cambridge church I'd more or less been a passenger, watching others doing it all. It had never seriously crossed my mind that God could use me, too. Now I found out that God could touch other people's lives through my words as much as through anyone else's, and this went a long way to restoring my sense of self-worth, which had been shattered by the steady disintegration of my spiritual life over the previous two years. Finding in the Holy Spirit a source of power that could be channeled through me to touch others gave my Christian life a sense of excitement and exhilaration that has endured—apart from a few hiccups—to this day.

As that summer drew to a close, we were out in the streets and parks of London every day, and people were turning to God by the hundreds. These were the most unlikely Christians imaginable, the last people one would ever expect to see in church. I was learning another valuable lesson that would stay with me long after the Children of God mythology exploded. These people had no argument with God, personally. They

might have a problem with dry and sterile worship, repeated rituals, boredom, and conformity to traditions, but with God himself they had no issue. In fact, for many of them the drugs and rebellion had actually been an attempt to find God, to transcend the mundane world and get in touch with the supernatural. Once they were confronted by the true God, in a form detached from all the negative images they had of the traditional church, they were only too happy to be “found” by him. As I watched this extraordinary activity of God’s Spirit, I was starting to understand that God and the church are two distinct entities—intertwined but separate.

The summer ended. October came and went, and Gabriel and I were both still hanging in. It seemed that our bridges were burned for good. It had been a strange summer, almost surreal in its intensity. As a church, the Children of God was definitely unusual. The roots were rotting, but the branches, for the moment at least, were flourishing and bearing fruit.

For me, it was a painful and traumatic time. But the rigid and unrelenting discipline, unpleasant though it often was, was working wonders on me. After a few months I was a different person from the one who’d first joined. I was more confident, more disciplined, and freed from my addictions. And I had a deep sense that there was no limit to what God could achieve through any willing servant, including me. In fact, it was just what I needed at that point in my life—which was, of course, why God had put me there.

CHAPTER 9

BACK IN THE WORLD AGAIN

Brussels: 1971

IN NOVEMBER I receive exciting news. The Bromley factory has been filling up fast—we've gone from about twenty people to well over a hundred in just a few months. Now it's time to expand into continental Europe, and I've been selected as a part of the first group to go. I'm off to Brussels.

Actually it's not quite such an honour. For a time now, they've seen me as a bit of a weak link. I'm always struggling with something or thinking too much, and they think I'm at risk of walking out. Putting me in a foreign country with no money makes it harder for me if I seriously decide to escape.

I'm not complaining. It's a historic milestone in our development, the next step in God's master plan. Everyone's excited, and for whatever reason, I'm to be a part of it. Fantastic! The long-term significance of leaving university is starting to hit me now, and this new adventure helps take my mind off it.

We arrive in Brussels in the depths of a freezing winter. The Bromley community has become more impersonal as it has grown bigger. Now with just seven or eight of us, it's like the early days again. This suits me better.

The biggest fly in my ointment is our colony leader, Tyrus. He's a large, bearded, and muscular former surfer from California. He met the Family on the waterfront back at Huntington Beach, accepted Christ,

and dropped everything to join. By any criteria, he and I are complete opposites, and we've eyed one another with suspicion from the start. In fact, I'm terrified of him, feeling like a naughty ten-year-old back at school. For him, my university background emphasizes how deeply I've been inculcated with the values of the world. His piercing dark eyes seem to look right through me, as if to say, "You're thinking again, Jezreel, and I don't like it."

From the Family's point of view, that's my basic problem—thinking. In the Family we're not supposed to think, we're supposed to obey. Thinking is a sin. Thinking is from the flesh. We're supposed to be dying to self, we are reminded constantly, and thinking is a part of the old self, the old man. It's a self-indulgent luxury that has no part in the Christian life. God decides what's best. He tells the leaders. The leaders pass it down the line to us, and we do it. That's the model. Simple—no thinking required.

Thinking too much has never been a problem for Tyrus. For him, thinking has never gone much beyond having to decide which wave to ride next. For me it's not that easy. I've been thinking all my life, and I'm not sure I can stop just like that.

I have another thinking problem that goes down like a lead balloon—I believe in evolution. There's not much I can do about it. I grew up believing in evolution, and nothing that has happened since has caused me to change my mind. In the end you believe what you believe.

If I'm Harry Potter, then Tyrus is my Professor Snape. He assigns me to remedial anti-evolution classes, one-on-one with himself. We go through prepared anti-evolution texts written by Moses-David, as Berg is now calling himself. Tyrus has no background in the subject, and all he can do is read out the words in front of him while I follow dumbly. I try to believe, but I can't. It's hopeless. The arguments are weak, full of holes, and have the opposite effect on me than the one intended. *Is this really the best they can come up with?*

The evolution issue doesn't bother me in and of itself. The problem is that the leaders take a rigid and inflexible stand on it, and this inevitably links to wider questions in my own mind about their authority and infallibility. *If they're wrong on this, maybe they can be wrong on other things too, and that's a worrying thought. What if the world doesn't end in 1993 after all? I've given up my career for this! If it doesn't happen then I've got a problem.*

The Brussels winter is icy cold. We're not getting the same results with evangelism that we were getting in London. At this time of the year

people are not loitering in the streets and parks as they did in the summer. Meanwhile, the authority issue is festering in my mind, undermining my faith in the whole organization. I have another nasty run-in with Tyrus, and harsh words are spoken. I'm all set to walk out, when Tyrus comes to find me and apologizes. I can see how much it costs his pride. It's the most Christian thing I've ever seen in my life, and I decide I can hang in for a bit longer.

In December there's a change of policy. Up to now, they've done everything possible to keep us isolated from the world and to break down family ties. Now suddenly, Berg sends out a letter saying everyone with a family in reach should go home for Christmas. If they don't want to come back after that, then they needn't. This is a total U-turn! Everyone feels confused, but there it is. Berg speaks for God, so it must be right.

I go home to my family in England for the week. It's a tense encounter. In spite of all the hardships, the Children of God is where I feel at home now, where I belong. For the first time in my life I feel wanted, even valued. Even the ill feelings between Tyrus and me reflect in a perverse way the fact that he's interested. Within his own frame of reference, he'd really like to see it working in my life. In contrast, my real family feels like a group of total strangers, and I have no hesitation about returning to Brussels at the end of the week.

When I get back, there's a shock. Gabriel had come over to Brussels in November shortly after me. Like me, he went home for Christmas, and now he's failed to reappear. New Year's Day comes and goes, and it's becoming increasingly clear that he's not coming back.

How could you do this to me, Gabriel? I mean, this is our family, isn't it? Well, I thought it was! How can you even think about integrating back into society after everything we've been through here?

Obviously he thinks he can.

From this time on, a new idea starts by degrees to take root in my mind. *If he can do it, then there's no reason why I can't do it. Not to give up of course. I believe in what we are doing. I've learned so much, and I'd never want to throw that away. It's just that...does it have to be here, in this organization? Can't I take what I've learned here and live it out back in the normal world? It's just a thought, but it stays with me.*

In January I'm on the move again, this time to Amsterdam. We have a building right opposite the Central Station, on the edge of the red light district. Years later it will become the international headquarters of Youth With A Mission, but right now it's our new Family colony.

Finally I'm away from Tyrus, and life takes a turn for the better. Winter is fading, and the days are getting longer. Most of the Amsterdam colony members have come straight over from London, so coming from Brussels, I'm regarded as a bit of a European veteran. Discipline is more lax than I've become accustomed to. Sometimes there's even time to think.

One day, Berg's daughter Faith and her husband Joshua come for a brief visit. There's great excitement. Berg and his family are remote figures, almost never seen outside their own inner circle. Some of the American veterans know them from the early days at Huntington Beach, before they withdrew into seclusion, but for us Europeans it's a rare privilege. I remember Faithy that evening, poised and elegant, seated on a barstool with her guitar and singing gospel songs with passion.

But let me live just one more day in service to the King
My pride I lay before his feet, a broken heart I bring

Years later I will hear of her as a sad and disillusioned figure battling with alcohol addiction. Back then, for us she was an icon. In those innocent days, the Berg family aura was intact and unsullied.

Shocking news arrives from London. Aaron, Berg's eldest son, is dead after a fall in the mountains. It's painted in heroic terms—a man too good for this world, called home by God; but quickly the rumour spreads that it's no accident, that he's taken his own life. Maybe he just knew too much and couldn't live with the knowledge. Amazingly the Berg myth survives with scarcely a scratch. Our faith in our mission and our leader is so strong and unquestioning that it seems nothing can touch it.

And then I'm on the move again, this time to Utrecht, a historic city an hour's drive from Amsterdam. There, we live in a bright yellow bus, where we eat, sleep, and do almost everything. Every few days we go to the public municipal baths to clean up. Life on the bus is predictably chaotic—the rigid discipline of the fixed colonies is impossible in this environment. I'm almost enjoying myself now.

I feel stronger emotionally, spiritually, and in every other way. And yet at the same time that I feel more settled in the lifestyle, I also feel myself starting to outgrow it. *I've gained so much, but do I really need to be in this thing any longer? Why in this place, and why with this particular group? Gabriel thought he could survive outside—why not me?*

And then suddenly one day I realize I've made the decision. From now on it's just planning, times and places. I've kept a little money hidden away since the Christmas trip, just in case. There's no point in telling anyone

that I'm going. I know I'm not strong enough to withstand the barrage of brainwashing that it would provoke, so I just keep it low key.

One afternoon, while the others are waiting in the front of the bus, I'm in the curtained-off area at the back, ostensibly changing clothes. I grab a few belongings, slide the catch on the back exit door, slip out, and walk away. I never look back, and I never see them again.

I take the boat back to England. It's done. I'm out. I've been in the Family for just nine months, but it seems like a lifetime. I'm back in the world again. I'm disorientated and dislocated, but more than that, I'm *changed*. For nine months I haven't opened a newspaper or seen a television screen. Every conversation I've had, every word I've spoken, has been about God. Every free moment has been spent in reading, rereading, and memorizing the Bible. While I've been away, wars have been fought and new nations created. I feel like an Amazon tribesman dropped into the middle of New York City.

Not that I feel any sense of deprivation for all that. After all, if God is the centre of everything, I reason, then what could be more natural than a life entirely focused on him? I've come to regard the single-minded intensity of the Family as normal. Coming back into the world again, it's the others who seem dislocated, not me. I'm the normal one.

In Cambridge I visit the New Testament Church. The experience is uneasy and disturbing. In the Family I've been taught that any thought, speech, or action that God is not explicitly a part of must be sin. If it's not from the Spirit, then it must be from the flesh. Here, at the end of the formal meeting, it's as if a switch is flipped, and the room fills with a babble of worldly conversation. God is nowhere! How can these people jump from flesh to spirit to flesh with such total nonchalance? It all seems shallow, carnal, and uncommitted. I can't help but think that way—it's the way I've been changed.

Alone and not sure what to do, I decide to look for Gabriel. It's a long shot—I know his real name but not much more. Miraculously I manage to track him down in west London, where he's living with a couple of others in a converted coach house. I join them and find a summer job locally. He's been through the same kind of withdrawal that I'm going through, and he knows what's going on in my head—it's a lifeline in my confusion.

Gabriel is back in his old church and has reintegrated reasonably well. I join him there a few times, but for me it doesn't work. It's too much like the one in Cambridge. I remember Bromley and the hundreds

of disaffected youths who accepted Christ so eagerly. In comparison this seems hidebound, stultifying, and boringly conventional.

I may have left the Family, but there's so much that's brought me healing there, and I want to hang onto that. The sense of community, the camaraderie, the total commitment to a cause, the exciting and radical otherworldliness that for me has become the core of knowing God—all these I want and need. I just want to leave behind the negatives—the exclusivity, the “infallibility,” the obsessive separation from society, and the dubious mythology.

Meanwhile I have to think of the future. 1993 is a long way off. I'm still expecting the world to end then, but that leaves me with twenty years to fill. Also, I'm not quite as convinced of this apocalypse as I was, and I need to cover my options. For lack of a better alternative, I decide to take up where I left off before joining the Family. The university agrees to take me back, and I return to Cambridge to finish my degree.

So it was that October found me back in university again, eager and optimistic to restart my studies. Max was also back in Cambridge again, starting a theology doctorate, and after talking with him I decided to study theology for my third and final degree year. I would return to clinical medicine later on.

Spiritually I felt in good shape. I was back in a place that I loved, with the opportunity of a course of study that seemed intriguing at the least. Finally I could think again with a clear conscience. Further down the road was the prospect of a stable medical career. The future was looking good.

Reality turned out differently. Though I didn't know it then, I was sailing straight into another shipwreck. It started slowly and gathered momentum with the passing months. My final year in Cambridge would turn into the worst year of my life, and by the end of it my spiritual life would once again be in ruins. What made it worse this time around was that, try as I might, I simply couldn't figure out how and why it was all going so wrong. It would take me another two decades to work that one out.

Looking back, it's easy to point to some minor and relatively peripheral contributory factors. I arrived back in Cambridge to find that all my former classmates had graduated and moved on, and I knew almost no one. I tackled the theology course as best I could, but my scientific background had left me poorly equipped for such a different

discipline. Later I would be grateful for what I learned then, but at the time it was a struggle.

These things, however, were surface issues. They were challenges that on their own could have been faced and overcome. The real problem was more fundamental and spiritually based. It revolved around my relationship to the church.

I had emerged from an exciting, faith-based community that was preaching and living a radical and power-filled brand of Christianity. I was returning to a Christian culture that was more moderate, cerebral, and conformist. There, we had gloried in our hippy-orientated lifestyle. Now, I was surrounded again by a Christianity that was safe, boring, and conservative.

My intention had been to hold onto as much as possible of what I had learned in the Children of God and to discard only a few of the more outlandish beliefs, along with the sectarian exclusivity and the intolerance. Had I had the strength of character to stay with this intention, perhaps the outcome might have been different. But I didn't. Instead I found myself gradually being drawn into the ambience of the Christian culture that now surrounded me.

In fairness, no one was pressuring me in any way to conform to any particular lifestyle or pattern of thinking. The pressure came entirely from within me. It started, of all places, with my reading of Paul's New Testament letters, and in particular, an injunction of Paul to the Philippians:

...in humility regard others as better than yourselves.¹⁶

I took that verse—or half-verse rather—and started to apply it literally and uncritically to my own situation. I began to defer to the attitudes and opinions of others, even when my own spiritual instincts and convictions indicated another way.

Gradually and almost imperceptibly, I laid aside my own spiritual vision—the one, I can see now, that had been given to me by God—in favour of secondhand ideas from other people. I was being sucked back into the church again. And I was allowing it to happen for what appeared to be the best of all possible motives—it seemed the humble, Christian thing to do.

¹⁶ Philippians 2:3

Had I read the other half of Paul's verse, I might have noticed that his application of the principle was rather more restricted than the way in which I had taken it.¹⁷ But I didn't. My failure here was more than a simple failure of exegesis. It was a result of reading the words through spectacles tinted by ingrained habits of thinking from a previous life, habits which God had spent the last year painstakingly trying to erase. It was this failing, as much as the actual words of Paul, that made disaster inevitable.

The fallacy is clear to me now, but for many years it was entirely hidden. Old, destructive character traits were coming to the surface. The gentle assumption of inferiority, the comfort of being a follower rather than a leader and innovator, the tranquility of conformity—all these traits from the old me, finding a convenient Bible verse to latch onto, were now reasserting themselves.

My motives were genuine. My decisions were well-meant and sincere. But I was no longer following God; I was following a culture and, increasingly, a religion. God had rescued me, but now I was diving right back in. The result was predictable: I became increasingly unhappy and frustrated, my relationship with God became cold and distant, and eventually I slipped into legalism.

The legalism was my response to my own unhappiness. Failing to understand the real nature of the problem, I interpreted my growing separation from God as a consequence of sin and disobedience. I responded by redoubling my efforts to please him. I lost sight of the simple understanding of salvation as a free gift and started trying instead to earn the favour of God—a God who felt more remote and withdrawn by the day. I still preached the message of free grace to others, but in my own life I had lost sight of it.

As the year went on, free grace turned into “grace plus works,” then into “works plus grace,” and finally into a full-blown but ultimately doomed attempt to earn God's favour by ever more heroic acts of spiritual sacrifice. By then God had withdrawn, and I was left alone in my misery.

There's an irony in this. My problem was indeed rooted in disobedience to God—but not at all in the way that I understood it. I was seeing obedience in terms of more prayer, more self-discipline, and more rigid control over every aspect of my behaviour. God was seeing obedience

¹⁷ The complete verse reads, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” Humility here is the counterbalance to ambition and conceit, rather than a stand-alone absolute.

in terms of my laying aside negative thought patterns from a previous life and becoming the complete and whole human being he had created me to be. We were at cross purposes, but I couldn't see it. I was turning into a Pharisee, though I scarcely knew what a Pharisee was in those days—but I'm getting ahead of the story...

The end of the academic year was a merciful release. I'd been the despair of my Director of Studies all year, but in the end my grades came out better than expected. When the postcard with the results came through, it had a scribbled note at the bottom in his handwriting—"Congratulations! I expect you were surprised too!" A small mercy from God in a landscape of unremitting gloom.

I can see now that God was doing his best to rescue me from the developing disaster. That summer I read Keith Miller's book *The Taste of New Wine*. The message? That you can be a Christian and still be a human being at the same time. Christianity is supposed to make us more human, not less human.

The message came too late. It was just too easy and too simple, and I couldn't grasp it. It would have rendered meaningless all the misery that I'd been going through, and that was more than I could face up to. I was addicted again, this time caught on the treadmill of trying to earn God's favour by doing things and following rules. There seemed no way off—it was too far to jump. Really I needed to drop everything, go right back to the beginning, and start again, but instead I struggled on, more and more deeply ensnared.

In September I moved down to London to resume my interrupted medical studies. I tried a couple of churches in London, but it was too late. I'd lost the capacity for meaningful communication with God, the church, and other Christians. I could no longer relate on any level to any of them. It was over. How it had gone down so far and so fast, I couldn't imagine.

For the second time in my life, I walked away from God, the church, and Christianity. The first time, I could see my own blame. The second time, it was a complete mystery. The disillusion and sense of betrayal would haunt me for years to come, an ongoing and festering sore.

CHAPTER 10

RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP

London: 1979

FACES. HUNDREDS OF them, all around. I don't like this. It's like walking in on someone else's party, a complete stranger, there by accident. What to do?

In the world I've learned to cope. Set a goal, define a strategy, and then just go for it. Focus on the end point, the reward. Anything to get out of yourself, to escape your insecurities, and to function, for a few precious moments at least, as a real, interacting human being.

In the world I've learned to survive, after a fashion.

But now, back in church again, I just can't do it. Here it doesn't seem right somehow. It was supposed to be different here, wasn't it? And it is different—it's worse, much worse.

Set a goal. But I can't play that game! We're in church, remember? I can't go back to the old rules.

But then I look around...

Seems it's just the same old social bazaar that we had out there in the world. It's operating on the same old rules as before, and it's run by the same people as it ever was. You know the ones—the articulate, the talented, the self-confident, the dominators. Yes, I know them all too well—I've lived in their shadow all my life. I thought it was supposed to be different in church, but they're still here, running the show. It's the same old show. Only the name has changed.

I freeze. I can't relate. I want to communicate, but I can't. I want to share the way I feel, be understood.

Once again, I've torn my life apart. I've thrown my cannabis plants in the dustbin. I've turned my back on the whole hospital social scene, the parties, the casual encounters. It wasn't easy, but it had to be done. Now I need something to put in its place, and I'm not finding it.

In many ways I like this church. The pastor speaks well. He's a Cambridge mathematics graduate, thoughtful, intelligent, and well-informed. More to the point, he knows God, I can tell that, and when he speaks it's from the crucible of experience. His preaching lifts and inspires me. But now he's increasingly in demand for outside speaking engagements, and when his assistants preach, it's just a dry, second-hand religion. There's no way of knowing the program in advance; otherwise I could just stay home...

Anyway, now the church is trying something new—home groups. *Could this be the thing that finally helps me connect? Fellowship with a human dimension, instead of this endless sea of faces? Is this where I can at last make some real human contact?*

The meetings begin. The first week goes well. Our leader is employed as a fire safety officer, and just as we're about to start, he's called out on an emergency. Leaderless, we extemporize. Everyone joins in as we organize ourselves. People are connecting, and at the end of the evening, I feel more optimistic than I have for a long time.

Then the next week, our leader is back in charge, and suddenly it's church again. Just like Sunday, only on a smaller scale. *This isn't what I want or need. I feel utterly alone.*

I've discovered that church can be the loneliest place on earth. I want to scream, "I'm here! I exist! There's a human being in here! I'm not a singing, praying, listening automaton! I need to relate, to talk, to be listened to, to feel there's someone out there who's interested in me, who maybe even respects me. God does, so why can't you?"

But I know it's no good. This is church. Any display of inappropriate emotion, and you can be a marked man. If ever they figure you as a bit unstable or, even worse, rebelling against God, you'll never be taken seriously again. The label can stick for years. There's no reality allowed in this church. You're supposed to be living in victory—no problems allowed! Problems mean you're obviously resisting God or disobeying. Don't expect any sympathy for that!

I'm caught in a vicious downward spiral. I need to be respected and even appreciated if I'm to gain the self-confidence to start functioning normally. That would then enable me to move into the sorts of qualities that might in turn merit that respect and appreciation. Since I don't get

those things, my behaviour is becoming more neurotic and dysfunctional by the day. I can't see a way to break out of the spiral—it's turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And yet it's only in church that I have this problem. At work, everything's fine. I have a job to do, I'm respected for doing it, and that respect in turn gives me the confidence to keep moving forward. I think God understands that. That's why he's always been so supportive to me in my work—he knows the spin-off value it can have.

How can God and the church be pulling me in such opposite directions?

A big part of the problem is the hierarchy. There's an official part to it, and there's an unofficial part where the dominant personalities muscle through and take over, the same as everywhere. Either way, there's a pyramid. And just like always, I'm stuck firmly at the bottom.

What makes it so much worse in church is that people are using God to cement their rank. They force their way through to the top, and when they get there, they claim it was God who put them there. Then the ones at the bottom are told that they're there because that's where God wants them also; that way it's set in stone. To question the hierarchy is to rebel against God. It's no longer, "Norman, you're just inferior." Now it's, "Norman, God says you're inferior."

I can see the end approaching. It's just a matter of time. *But then what? What comes after? Give up again? Walk away from God, abandon the whole thing? We've been there before—it's a dead end. Or keep going, spiraling ever further downward. Carry on, watching my self-esteem being drained ever lower? Or find some completely new way—but what? What other way is there?*

And then, why is God not talking to me about this? Why isn't he telling me what to do? Surely God's got a plan for every situation, every contingency. However badly we fail, doesn't God always have a new plan, one that starts from today and leads on into a bright new future? Why is it that just when I need to hear from him the most, he always seems to go quiet?

Show me, God! I need answers here! What happened to the still, small voice? What am I missing?

A glimmer of light...I'm listening for voices again. Sure, God speaks—but not at my command! At a time and place of his choosing, not mine! And in the meantime...when he's not speaking, then what?

When God's not speaking, then I suppose I follow the principles. Learn from the saints of old. There must be people in the Bible who went through this sort of stuff. It's not like I'm the first one ever...

Follow the principles...First, find the principles! So...where to start? First we define the problem, clearly and precisely. Then we start reading and see what comes up. Look for a few clues.

Define the problem. It goes a bit deeper than just personalities. It goes to the root of what God intended, and intends, for his people. After all, I started ten years ago with a simple prayer, asking God to come into my life. And he did. And that was all very simple and uncomplicated. So how is it that now I find myself tangled up in something completely different?

I'm enmeshed in an organization with a rigid hierarchical structure. It's run by people who claim to be representatives of God. Spirituality is defined largely in terms of obedience to these people and the system they represent. If you do what you're told and follow the rules, then God is pleased with you—they say.

So, I started with a relationship, and I ended up with a religion. And that leads to the question: Is this the way God designed it to be? Did God always intend that you start with the relationship as a first step, and then by degrees that evolves into the serious business of religion?

Or is the religion a sidetrack, a deviation from God's real purpose? Is God's real purpose for us the same now as it was on the day we first met him—a simple and uncomplicated ongoing relationship?

Start reading...

I decided to start with the story of King David. After all, the Bible describes him as a man after God's own heart,¹⁸ and no one else gets that sort of accolade. It seems that whatever it was that God was looking for in human hearts, he found in David. With that kind of a role model, I figured I couldn't go too far wrong.

Before starting to read, I framed a few specific questions to use as reference points and keep my mind focused. The first flowed naturally out of my situation: What was the balance between religion and relationship in David's life?

Thinking about David's unique accolade, it seemed important to understand what it was that made David so special in God's eyes. So my second question was: What was it about David that made him, more than any other man, to be a man after God's own heart?

My final question was a bit more speculative. I didn't expect to find a direct answer, but I hoped I might find a few clues. It was: If David had

¹⁸ 1 Samuel 13:14

been faced with the kind of situation that I'm facing now, how would he have dealt with it?

Holding these three questions in my mind, I started to read. Almost immediately the answers started to emerge, as the pattern of David's life became clear. *It's so obvious! How did I never see this before?* I suppose every revelation has its perfect timing.

The first two questions seemed to flow into one. David was a man without an ounce of pretense. He lived life from the heart and lived it to the full. He loved life and enjoyed the very human pleasures of good food, wine, sex, music, and so on. There was nothing terribly introspective about him. He had no agonies of soul-searching that we can discern. He just got on with the business of life.

The single characteristic that set David apart from others was that whatever he did, he did in the company of God. God was his best friend. God had been his only companion in those lonely childhood years out on the hills with the sheep. Ever since, they had been inseparable.

Was David a religious man? That depends on what you mean by religious. He took a close interest in the visible instruments of religion, certainly. He wanted to see the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God made his abode on earth, honoured and revered. He delighted in the house of the Lord. He loved to worship, and did so with an abandon that others sometimes found unseemly.

But was he *religious* in the sense that it would be understood by a modern Sunday morning church-going Christian? I doubt it. David would have been happier out on the battlefield fighting his enemies than sitting in the pew of a modern-day church. His concern for the Ark and the other symbols of religion comes across as being motivated more by a sense of outrage at seeing God dishonoured than by any real interest in encountering God through the medium of organized religious activities.

When I looked at David in the light of those qualities that seem so highly prized in the church today—conformity, obedience to authority, a subservient and non-contentious spirit, political sensitivity, and the like—it was hard to find a single point of contact.

David was a man who followed his heart. He had little interest in following traditions and accepted codes of practice. If he had an idea, he would trust in his own spiritual intuition and run with it. This didn't always work, but often it did. There were times when God had to rein in the wilder side of David's nature. And yet—almost the most

extraordinary part of the whole story—even when David was at his worst, with Bathsheba and over the matter of the census,¹⁹ God was able to take that dark side of David’s nature and bring lasting good out of it.

So what was it about David that set him so far apart from other men in God’s esteem, as to make him a man after God’s own heart? It wasn’t his religiosity. It wasn’t his ability to fit passively into hierarchical authority structures. It definitely wasn’t the purity of his sex life. It doesn’t appear to have been the quality of his prayer life or the constancy and faithfulness of his spiritual walk—his lapses were spectacular, messy, and extended.

What made David the man he was, was the decision he made early in life to take God as his best friend. That’s what God appreciated so much in him, that’s what endured, and that’s what made him a man after God’s own heart.

Looking at that simple and intimate friendship between David and God, I couldn’t help but be reminded of another whose relationship to God had that same quality. Jesus could hardly be described as religious in any modern conventional sense. His occasional recorded visits to formal places of worship seem to have been more with the intention of stirring up controversy than anything else. The powerhouse of his ministry was his friendship with God; and he seems to have been just as much of a maverick as David was, and in similar ways.

Interesting...So...what would David have done in my position?

Well...David was no anarchist, certainly. Saul represented the God-appointed authority of his day, and David respected his position and gave him a fair chance. But when the time came that Saul’s conduct became a threat to David’s welfare and life, David did what was necessary to protect his own interests. He loved and valued himself too much to do otherwise.

David saw no magic in the system. God had invested some authority in Saul, but it wasn’t all-embracing and didn’t cover every eventuality. While the system worked, David would work within it. When it ceased to work, he stepped outside. When he had to, he packed his bags and walked away.

I can see it now. I can’t stay. God is leading me in one direction, while the church is channeling me in another. The church is no longer bringing me closer to God. Now it’s a stumbling block, pulling me away. The church has ceased to be a force for good in my life.

I can see now what David would have done. I can see what David did. When he felt he had to, and to safeguard his legitimate interests and protect

¹⁹ 1 Chronicles 21:1–30

his sanity, he moved outside. And God went along with him. David went his own way, trusting in God alone to keep him on the path.

So it's not original. It's been done before. And I see now that I have to do the same. There's nothing personal in it. These are genuine and sincere people, probably doing what they believe to be right. I bear them no ill will—not now that I've decided, anyway.

Actually, I believe in church. I believe in the Christian community. One day I may even be strong enough, secure enough in God, to come back and be a part of it. But for now it's going to have to be the wilderness. I'm not strong enough to live in the church, so I have to go. I'm not looking forward to it. I can foresee a long and lonely time ahead, but no lonelier than my life in the church. I've left the church before, of course, but this time it's going to be a bit different. This time I'm taking God with me.

And that was the end of that, for the next five years. Reading about David took a huge weight off my mind and gave me the assurance that I needed. I see now that it needn't have been David—I could equally well have read about Elijah, Abraham, Moses, Paul, or indeed almost any other major biblical character, and come to the same conclusions. None of these men could be described as *religious* in any conventional sense. They were ordinary men who loved to be alive, but who wanted to be alive within the friendship of God, not outside of it. How far we've strayed!

I left the church and went back into the world. The only spiritual link I kept alive was the one with God. That one I had no intention of giving up.

Out in the world, I started to notice something that I hadn't expected. Everywhere I went, I seemed to meet people in the same or similar situations as my own—Christians who had left the church. Their stories were eerily familiar. Usually they were people with relatively low self-confidence levels who had come to Christ and joined the church with the expectation of finding themselves accepted and valued. Once in, they had looked up to find themselves gazing into the faces of the same old hierarchy as before. Sick of being sucked dry to feed the egos of those above, they had eventually left the church for their own self-preservation. I couldn't believe there were so many. There seemed almost to be more Christians outside the church than inside.

Often as I talked to them, I saw a major difference between their predicament and mine. They had failed to make a clear distinction in their minds between God and the church, so they blamed God for the things that had happened and had been done to them. They couldn't see

that God might hate these things just as much as they did. Because of that, when they had left the church, many of them had at the same time cut God out of their lives also. It had never crossed their minds that God might have been happy to come with them, so they left without him, alone. As for me, I was leaving, but I was taking God along with me.

What can I do to help these people understand that leaving the church doesn't have to be the end? It can be a beginning...

But that's for the future. For now, there's still too much water to flow under my own personal bridge. Too many things to sort out in my own life. Maybe one day...

CHAPTER 11

FINDING A WAY BACK IN

London: 1984

WHEN YOU JOIN a church, you join an organization. As with any organization, you have to carve out a life for yourself within it. That can be more about social skills than about spirituality, and for some people it's easier than for others. Some people are naturally well-equipped to function as part of a conglomerate. Others do better self-employed. We're all different.

For me church was always going to be a problem. I've never had the kind of face or personality to inspire confidence in the corporate environment. I would always get steamrollered by the more articulate, self-confident, and charismatic personalities. In a competitive social environment I would inevitably gravitate to the bottom of the pile.

In the world this might not matter so much—the world is a big enough place that everyone can usually find a niche somewhere. If your peg doesn't fit in one hole, there'll always be plenty of others to choose from. Church is different. It's smaller and offers a narrower spread of alternatives. In church, if you don't fit in, you've got a problem. In church, there's nowhere to hide.

When I left the church, it was because I knew myself well enough to know that I was going nowhere. I was watching every negative thought I'd ever had about myself being gradually reinforced. I could never go through all that and emerge intact, so I had to leave.

This may come across as a lack of humility on my part... “So what if you're stuck at the bottom? Come on, this is *church* we're talking about!

It's not about being upwardly mobile. You're a Christian—you're supposed to be happy accepting a humble station. That's your privilege. You're not supposed to be advancing yourself!" Such an argument can seem superficially convincing, and in fact I'd already tried applying it to myself on numerous occasions; it was through these attempts at application that the fallacy of it had become clear to me—on several counts.

In the first place, deferring to others constantly in church meant that I was now listening to other people more than to God. It may have been humble, but it wasn't biblical and it wasn't Christian. Paul tells us that our view of ourselves needs to be based on a sober and realistic judgment—that is, neither too high nor too low.²⁰ If we think too little of ourselves, constantly deferring to others, we are putting others in the place of God and denying our primary relationship. It's every bit as bad as thinking too highly of ourselves.

There's also a psychological reality to be considered. Larry Crabb summed it up this way:

I want to be respected. I long to know someone sees something in me that's valuable, that my existence is important because I'm capable of making a difference. The longing is legitimate. I want to be respected because I was built to matter. When I perceive that I'm disrespected, I react in my soul just as my toe reacts when a heavy-footed person steps on it. I hurt.²¹

This hurt is the torment of many souls in our modern, ultra-competitive society—just as it is in many of our churches.

"But surely that's just your fallen nature. It's a weakness to be turned away from and ignored, not something to be given in to." Crabb finds this response too simple. He goes on:

The fact that I long to matter reflects both

1. My Creator's wisdom and kindness in designing me with freedom, and
2. Separation between God and me introduced by sin. If we had never sinned, we would live with a wonderful realization of our part in God's world rather than a desperate desire to find meaning. My desire for respect is tied both to my fallenness and to my humanity.

It's a bit of both, fallenness *and* humanity. There may well be an element of fallenness in my need for respect and self-esteem, but that

²⁰ Romans 12:3

²¹ Dr Larry Crabb. *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988)

doesn't necessarily mean that my desire for respect can be run over roughshod. If anything, fallen people may need to be treated with more care than would perfect ones. Defenses, even when they are the products of a fallen nature, have to be dismantled brick by brick, painstakingly, from the inside. They can't simply be bulldozed from the outside.

When we join a church for the first time, we instinctively feel that this is a place where it should be safe to lay aside our defenses and make ourselves a bit vulnerable. This may be good and even creditable; but in relaxing our boundaries in this way, we can also make ourselves more susceptible to hurt when things go wrong.

Abuse by hierarchy is a reality in the church, just as it is in the world. It stems from the evil in men's hearts, and you don't have to be a practising Christian to understand the "heart of darkness" that resides within each one of us.

This evil was portrayed vividly by William Golding in his Nobel prize-winning novel, *Lord of the Flies*. The story follows a group of schoolboys stranded on a remote, tropical island during World War II. Isolated from the world and freed from normal social constraints, the boys rapidly revert to a primitive form of tribal society, in which the strong rise to the top and the weak are ruthlessly abused. Golding understood very well the depravity that lurks within each one of us.

In truth, what makes the story so shocking is that it is written about children rather than adults. (Golding deliberately increases the sense of dislocation by including a group of choirboys, who turn out to be the worst of all.) Had the story been about adults, we would scarcely raise an eyebrow, since we all know well that *Lord of the Flies* is an apt description of the adult world.

In civilized societies, most people keep the dark side of their nature under at least partial restraint. This restraint may be internal, due to conscience—that is, our innate understanding of right and wrong—or to an ingrained deference to the values of the society in which we grow up. Or it may be imposed on us from the outside—because most secular institutions recognize the potential pitfalls of power and build in checks and balances to control them.

In church and in religious institutions in general, there can be a number of factors that work against these restraining influences. When people start to believe that their innate desires have been instilled in them by God, this can become an excuse to lay aside normal inhibitions and give free rein to that darker side. This can happen in any religion and is certainly not exclusive to Christianity. It is, however, something to which

Christians are not immune. Belief in God—any god—can bring out the best, or the worst, in each of us.

In churches in particular, the situation can be aggravated by the fact that the checks and balances of normal secular institutions are often laid aside on the grounds that the Holy Spirit alone is seen as an adequate safeguard against abuse. Normal internal and external auditing procedures may be rejected by churches as being “unspiritual” and taken as evidence of lack of trust in God’s ability to order our affairs. This is unfortunate. As Christians we should have, if anything, a heightened awareness of the human soul’s capacity for evil. This should lead us to an increased understanding of the need for rigorous safeguards and controls within our organizations. But this is often not the case, and lack of these controls opens the door to abuse.

There’s a further hazard that needs to be considered here. This concerns the creation in some churches of an excessively result-orientated structure, as a direct consequence of our desire to bring the Christian message to as many people as possible, in as effective a way as possible. This can result in a two-tiered church membership in which the most talented and articulate members of the church are fast-tracked. They are seen as having more usefulness to the cause than have other, less talented members, and they are preferred accordingly. Meanwhile, the less talented are left to languish.

This is understandable from a human perspective, but it runs counter to God’s stated aim for the church. Spreading the gospel is important, but it is not the most important thing. More important—and probably more effective in the long run—is the creation of a community that truly reflects the character of God. A system that gives pride of place to the most talented and able does not do this.

God’s heart for the church, the Bible tells us, is altogether different from this. Paul understood it clearly, just as he understood in an extraordinary way the psychological and spiritual needs of his church members. He spelled out the vision of both God and himself for the church in his letters to Corinth.

Every Christian, Paul tells us, has a vital ministry in the church. Each person has a unique, God-appointed role to play in the shaping of the community.²² It’s not just a matter of providing an efficient framework for getting the church’s work done. God wants far more than that. He wants every individual to be—and to feel—an integral and important part of the whole. It’s a psychological necessity for a healthy community.

Paul turns the worldly understanding of hierarchy on its head to bring this about. In the new society, sweeping the floors is just as important

²² 1 Corinthians 12:12–26

as preaching the Word, perhaps even more so.²³ We are instructed to recognize this as a fundamental truth and incorporate it into the roots of our value system. This turnaround may seem remarkable, but it shouldn't come as any surprise. After all, Paul is only repeating what Jesus himself had already said in slightly different words.²⁴

Why do Paul and God give greater honour to those with the less glamorous ministries? One reason is simple—because they need it more. Paul's audience was not a group of worldly achievers. They were the dregs of Corinthian society. These people were not the kind of people who were going to feel naturally that they mattered. They needed to be affirmed and reminded of how important they really were in God's eyes. The ones in the glamorous ministries were getting enough affirmation already through what they were doing—that was all they needed.

Paul's radical vision of the church, sadly, didn't last long. As G.K. Chesterton would later put it, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried."²⁵ Within a few short years this particular Christian ideal would be forgotten, as the Christian churches switched to a structure that, for us today, has much in common with a corporate business model. Perhaps more tellingly in its historical context, the switch was to a model based on, of all things, the Pharisee synagogues of the first century. The radical new vision was to end up as just another version of the old, corrupted system, under a new name.

After five years outside the church, I felt that the time had come to attempt a reintegration. Of course, from God's point of view I had never been outside the church at all. For God there has only ever been one church, that is, the sum totality of all believers. I was as much a part of that as anyone else. I was just no longer a part of the corporation.

For five years I had been living a secular life. I could see that this had compartmentalized my life in a way that was obviously unhealthy. There was the me that the world saw, and the me that interacted with God. I knew that in the long run I had to find a way of bringing these fragmented parts back into a single whole, and it was clear to me that peace with the church would ultimately have to be a part of that process.

In spite of this inner tension, in many ways my five years outside the church had left me in a better mental state than before. I was no longer angry with God. I had come to know him much better now, and many

²³ 1 Corinthians 12:22–25

²⁴ Matthew 20:25–28

²⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World?* (London: 1910)

of our former misunderstandings were now resolved. I could trust him more and felt comfortable with him. Now it was time for the next step.

It was clear that the church wasn't going to change for my benefit. I had learned enough about God to know that he would probably throw me straight back into the same problems I had left to escape. This time I would have to find a way through—there weren't going to be any shortcuts. But I was stronger now, and also I felt that this was God's time, a moment he had been preparing me for. Finally I took the plunge.

I started with a large and anonymous conservative evangelical church in the West End of London. I wanted to go somewhere where I could slip in quietly at the back and slip out again unnoticed at the end. That was okay for a few weeks, but at the same time it was bypassing the real issue of integrating into the community. I needed to find a way of relating more actively. The most obvious way to do this seemed to be by joining a home group, so I started attending a central clearing meeting in the church that was designed to channel new members into appropriate groups.

At this point all the old problems came to the surface again. The hostility and defensiveness that had been left behind when I was living a "normal" secular life came flooding back. It wasn't something I could hide. I received a long and politely worded letter from the senior cleric. The message behind the diplomatic language was clear: I wasn't wanted.

There was little point in staying in the church under such circumstances, so I decided to try another one. Down the road another large evangelical church was gaining a national reputation for its outreach courses, and I decided to give it a try. Unfortunately, by now my anger and alienation against the whole Christian establishment were back in full flood. The result was as bad as before and the rejection equally emphatic.

I was unsure what to do next. I could move on again, but the outcome would probably be the same, so I decided to stay where I was in spite of the problems. I could slip in and out at the back quietly and anonymously, and in the meantime regroup my emotional resources.

And then God chose to throw me a lifeline. This is something he rarely does. Usually when I feel I have reached rock bottom and I am entitled to have God rescue me, he does nothing. Eventually I get tired of waiting, recognize that he has no intention of intervening, and start digging myself out the slow, hard way. Sometimes as I dig, I become aware that he's there, helping.

On this occasion, unusually, God decided to intervene more directly. In a chance conversation at the back of the church with Edwin, an executive from the London Patent Office, I mentioned the difficulties I'd been having

finding a home group—though probably not the exact details of why none of them wanted me. He and his wife were running a group, and unaware of my shaky record, he invited me to join. It was a small gesture, but for me a life-changing one.

In Edwin's group I found myself for the first time in many years unconditionally accepted, just as I was. I didn't need to put on a religious act or pretend to be what I was not. Transposed into this welcoming environment, I found myself changing with startling speed. My defenses came down, and my hostility started to melt away. Suddenly I was turning into a normal person.

Over a few short weeks everything changed, and that change became permanent. There were many more problems to come, but now I was on my way. From that tiny, spontaneous gesture of acceptance, my Christian life had gone from a steady backward drift to a bright, forward-looking optimism.

Unconditional acceptance. Can such a tiny gesture of acceptance turn a whole life around?

It seems it can.

And if it worked for me—what about others? Could it work for them? What about all those angry, alienated Christians I've been meeting everywhere I go? They're hostile to the church, angry and disillusioned with the Christian life, and blaming it all on God. The church may call them ex-Christians, former Christians, or even backsliders, but I see now that God doesn't see them that way. For him, they're still sons and daughters. For them, as for me, God's faithfulness and commitment never waver. We may have turned away from him, but he never turns away from us. We may have stopped thinking of ourselves as members of his family, but has he? I don't think so.

It was unconditional acceptance that healed my rift with God, and now unconditional acceptance by others—people imitating God and treating other people in the same way that God treats them—was finally starting to heal my rift with the church.

Could this be the wider key to unlock the door for all those others? If the church could drop its posturing and moral indignation and say to them, "We accept you and love you, just as you are."—could that be an answer? A key to unlock their situations?

I'd like to try it one day, just to see what happens.

CHAPTER 12

EMOTIONAL CRIPPLES

Amsterdam: 1990

I FEEL I'M finally on my way back. That helping hand that reached out to me at the back of the church has changed my life. A simple voice of unconditional love and acceptance was able to trigger the passage into a positive upward spiral. Accepted by others, I can now accept myself better. I can relax my defenses and move towards more normal patterns of behaviour and relationship. Sanity is returning to my life. I'm finally breaking out of the vicious cycle of rejection and defensiveness that has characterized my Christian life for so many years. I'm not completely there yet, but it's a start.

My whole attitude towards life is more relaxed now. My confidence in God's ability and willingness to look after me in any and every circumstance has given me a new freedom. I've taken a long break from my career to travel and relax. Now I'm refreshed and ready to work again; and true to form, God has found the perfect job for me in the perfect place. Those who've spent the meantime chained to the grindstone can only look on with envy.

Not only do I love living here in Amsterdam, but also I can see that this can be the perfect place for the *experiment*—the one developing in my head over the last few years since I left London. A simple act of unconditional acceptance brought about a transformation in my own life, both personally and in the church. Now I want to find out if it can work for others.

My plan is to gather a small group of Christians who for one reason or another struggle to fit into the church institution and who, as a result,

have problems that spill over into other areas of their lives. Together we'll try to create an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance, and just see what happens.

Can it do for them what it did for me?

I've been biding my time, waiting for the opportunity, and now I think it may have come.

While I was outside the church, I was struck by the number of refugees from the church that I found there. Since I've been back in, I've discovered something else. They haven't all left the church. Some are still there, hanging in against all the odds. But whether they've left, or whether they're still there, hovering on the margin, the problem is the same.

What to make of these "refugees within"? They're mostly fairly ordinary people—as if anyone could be called "ordinary" in God's sight. They're ordinary in that they're not high achievers in the worldly sense, though some of them have done all right. Often they work in mundane, unglamorous jobs, looking for meaning within a fairly limited horizon, and struggling to make their way in a not altogether friendly world.

They may lack confidence or social skills. A few have issues over sexual orientation or other things that set them apart from the mainstream. They can be labeled eccentric, odd, or worse. These are not the movers and shakers of the world—the movers and shakers by this time are running the church and having a fine old time.

Many of them have found the world a rather hostile, unwelcoming place. They came to church looking for something different. In the church they often hover on the fringe, uncommitted. The church has never accepted them on an equal basis, often thinking of them as "problem" cases, and they, for their part, have never felt a part of the church.

The reaction of the church to these people is fairly predictable—*blame them!* If they got right with God, the story goes, they'd quickly be healed, commit fully to the organization, integrate in and play a full part, and everything would be all right. Since they haven't done that, they obviously can't be bothered. If they've chosen to stay on the fringe and not make a full commitment to God, then that's their responsibility, and there's nothing anyone else can do about it.

In any case, since they're limited in talent, they don't have much to contribute, so from the overall perspective of the church it doesn't matter too much. In the meantime we have to move on and fulfill the church's historical commission, so we leave them there, out on the fringe.

But as I talk to these people, I find they have no basic problem with God. They're no less interested or committed than anyone else. In many

cases their commitment to God, sharpened through suffering, can actually be deeper than that of those who have lived easier, more fulfilling lives. If they do have a problem with God, it's because they judge God by the church; and from the cold, distant church that they've experienced, they have the idea of a cold, distant God, so they're a bit wary of him also.

In Amsterdam I join the Anglican Church and quickly find that, like churches everywhere, it has plenty of such people. Amsterdam is that sort of a place—a strange, alienated city, with plenty of alienated Christians, and the traditional Anglican toleration of diversity brings them in. It could be the perfect place for my experiment. *Is this one of the reasons why God has brought me here?*

Of course, it's not quite that straightforward—I'm not entirely problem-free myself, and although much improved, I still struggle with the same sorts of issues I want to address in others. I'm going to need the cooperation of the church, and that in turn will require a level of trust I've never yet had. So for two years now I've been on my best behaviour to try and build the trust and credibility that could open the door for the opportunity I need.

In the meantime, I'm trying on my own and in a limited way to put my new principle into practice in my relationships with others, and the first results are encouraging. It's helping me anyway—focusing on other people's problems rather than my own is helping my own healing process. But that's not really what I'm here for, and so far there's no sea change, just a few encouraging signs.

Now an added complication has appeared. Even while I plan the experiment, I'm starting to pick up tentative signs that God is leading me to leave Holland and go to the Middle East. I'm keen to go, and it looks like the door is open. There's just one thing holding me back—the unfinished experiment.

By now it's an issue for me. I need to know! There's a whole fringe group here for whom Christianity just doesn't seem to work, or not very well anyway. For myself I've found a way, and my life is functioning reasonably well, but I want more. I need to see for myself that it can work for others, too. Sometimes it seems to work the best for those who start with the least number of problems, while the more disturbed you are, the less effective it seems to be. It shouldn't be that way, but that's what I see, and it bothers me. *How far do I want to go with a religion that works the best for the people who need it the least?*

I'm not happy with this, God! Of course, I'm happy with what you've done for me, personally. I'm happy to see the misery receding and a more fulfilling

existence gradually emerging—for me! But what about these others? I still haven't seen it working for them.

I suppose you could say that if I've made it this far, then that proves it can be done; and if I can do it, then so can they. But that's not enough. I need more. I need actually to see it working—really working—for these others, including the neurotics, the outcasts and the maladjusted, with my own eyes. More than what I've seen so far.

Images of the eclectic mix of people who make up our church run through my mind. Inevitably, I find myself thinking of—Rina.

She's a tall, intrinsically not unattractive girl in her late twenties. But more often than not she looks about fifty, careworn, and washed out. Like many Dutch people, she comes from a strict Reformed Church background, and she's been taught that it's a sin to try and look good. Since that teaching agrees with the image she already has of herself, she accepts it. She can't believe that God or anyone else could find her attractive, so the church's teaching simply reinforces what she already knows.

Rina's clothes are shapeless and drab—dreary shades of grey and brown. Her haircut is equally shapeless, middle-aged, and outdated. Her face radiates a sort of resigned misery. For years she's been a chronic church-hopper, never able to settle or stay in one church for long. Now she's with us, but no one's sure how long she's going to stay.

Rina has been coming to our evening Bible studies. Her behaviour is angry, dysfunctional, and attention-seeking. Sometimes she'll stand up halfway through the meeting, march across the room, and without saying a word walk out and go home, slamming the door behind her. On one occasion, halfway through the meeting, she pulls a magazine from her handbag and ostentatiously starts to read. She wants to provoke a reaction—any reaction—just so we know she exists. She's angry and full of frustration. The church would like to help her, but they can't figure out how.

I have no difficulty understanding Rina's behaviour—I've been there myself and done much worse things than any we're seeing. I can see that she doesn't want or need help—offers of help just reinforce her crippled status. What she wants and needs above all is to be *valued*. She doesn't want well-meant psychological advice about how to be a better-adjusted person. She just wants to know and feel that she *matters*.

And of course she does matter—she matters to God. In his eyes she's infinitely important, like any one of his children. But how far does *our* attitude, the attitude of our church, reflect God's attitude towards her? Not very far. The message we send her is different. It says, "You need to change, Rina. We don't like you the way you are. You need to become like

us, and then we'll accept you." In short, our attitude is one of *conditional acceptance*, and it's the complete opposite of how God works. God accepts us just as we are, with all our faults and hang-ups. It's one of the basic and fundamental truths of our faith.

Rina knows all this, of course. She's an intelligent girl, she's been through plenty of churches, and she understands the theory very well. And because she knows she's not loved as she is, she's trapped, unable to change.

I'm in a quandary. Arabia is calling—but what's the point? Before I go, *I need to know*. To go half way around the world with only a weak, powerless religion to sustain me...If that's it, why bother? Finally, in desperation, I issue God a challenge: "So God, you want me in Arabia? That's fine. But first, before I go, there's one thing *I* want. I want to see this experiment through. I want to see that Christianity can work for everyone, not just for those who come into it secure and well adjusted. I want to see that it can work for—Rina.

"If this can work for Rina, then it can work for anyone, anywhere. If that's the case, then I'll go. If I can't see that happening, then I'm not going anywhere. There's just no point. No point in anything, in fact..."

I mean what I say. If it can't work for everyone, it can't work for anyone. And that's where I leave it, in God's hands. Until a few days later, when things start to happen.

I talk to Jean. The vicar's wife is organizing home groups for the year ahead, and I share with her my vision of putting all the most problematical personalities in the church together in one group. To my astonishment, she agrees to give it a try. Rina agrees too. In fact, she's enthusiastic. A few others come in, and we begin.

We run on the single, simple principle of unconditional acceptance. Because God has accepted us and called us valuable, therefore we accept and value each other. Because God's Spirit is available to each of us in equal measure, so our thoughts and opinions must be of equal value. Each one of us has something worth saying and something worth hearing. We try to follow Paul's teaching that the least of us should be given the most honour. Rina is given pride of place.

Our name invents itself, the Emotional Cripples Group. Jean hates it, but the name sticks. We're all crippled to varying degrees, and no one wants to pretend otherwise. Since we're committed to accepting one another just as we are, there's no pressure to change—you can stay crippled for as long as you want, no one minds. That's God's way. He never hurries anyone, and we can do the same. The pressure to conform is off. No one has to act a part. No one has to be a stereotypically successful church Christian.

I'm watching Rina to see how she's faring. She has a few tantrums in the early weeks, but she hangs in and stays with the group. Then after a month or two, she begins to change. I notice it first in her clothes. She's been shopping—the drab greys and browns are replaced by bright blues, reds, and yellows. Then the fifties haircut is revamped into something more modern. She starts to smile occasionally. Suddenly she's looking like someone who believes in herself.

One Sunday morning after the service, I notice Rina has begun a kind of "newcomers' ministry." She looks around for first-time visitors and introduces herself, trying to make them feel welcome. This is exciting! I've often wondered if maybe Rina knows God much better than any of us suspect. I know how much this ministry is costing her, as she drags her focus away from herself and onto the problems of others, if only for a few minutes. It's a sort of dying to self. *Underneath all the problems, there's a real desire to be God's person, and now it's starting to come out.*

We run the experiment for a year. After that, my deadline for Saudi Arabia is up and the door is about to close. I have to make a decision. Rina has changed the most dramatically, but she's not the only one. Others have progressed also. I've seen enough, and for me the evidence is clear.

The formula is a simple one, to accept and love people as they are. Paul understood it. Jesus did it all the time. Why do we so easily lose sight of it? Why do we always try to change people, to mould them into something else? Jesus never did that. Once they feel accepted as they are, they start to change themselves.

So simple!

God has done his part, now it's my turn. I pack my bags, say sad farewells to Amsterdam, and board the flight for Saudi Arabia.

A year later, I return to Amsterdam for a visit. On a grey, wintry day, on an unfamiliar street, I recognize the grey, wintry face coming in the other direction towards me. It's Rina. The old one, not the new one. The monochromatic clothes are back, and the old pudding-basin haircut. I stop and try to talk. She recognizes me, glares, and with silent anger on her face, walks past me and off into the distance without stopping.

Getting healed is one thing, staying healed is another and often harder thing. I don't know why she went back. I know God kept his bargain with me. He made it work, and I saw it work. I've seen what he can do, and I can't complain.

What comes after—I don't know.

CHAPTER 13

LETTING GO OF EVERYTHING

Singapore: 2002

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER town...another church. God, will it never end? And then, why do you always have to hit me on my weakest points? Don't you know how hard it's been? Spending what seems like my whole life moving from one city to another, putting down roots, making friends, finding a bit of stability, and then just when I'm settled in, suddenly we're up and back on the road again.

Okay, in some ways it's been great. There've been good experiences and interesting places, and I wouldn't have missed them for the world. But there's another side to it, one that leaves me angry and frustrated. You know that my deepest desire has never been for good experiences and interesting places. It's been to do something really worthwhile with my life, something to endure into eternity. And right now, not to mention the last couple of decades, it just has not been happening.

So, I come to a new place and a new church. And to start with, they look at me as if I were an alien from outer space. Then, after a couple of years, just when I've established a bit of trust and credibility and it's looking as if I can start to make some sort of real contribution—we're off to somewhere new, and it starts all over again.

The end result is that I never get to do anything of value at all. I feel so...underutilized!

There's a recurring nightmare that haunts my imagination. In it I die, and finally it's my turn to appear before the judgment throne, to give account. It's the big moment, the one where every hidden thing gets to be revealed, down to the tiniest detail. So I walk up to the throne, and there he is. I hear him speak, and it's, "You know, Norman, it's all very well, and I'm not going to fault your motivation or your good intentions, but let's face it, you haven't actually *done* very much, have you? All those years you've had down there, and lots of plans and ideas and dreams, I'm sure. But while others were getting on and getting the job done, you never quite got around to doing anything at all. Frankly, with all the advantages I gave you, I was hoping for a bit more."

"Yes, of course you can come in. That's free, not something you have to earn. But I'm afraid you're going to have to live with the knowledge that, overall, I'm a little bit disappointed with your performance."

That's my nightmare, God. Coming closer with every year that passes.

Of course, I know it doesn't actually work that way. People like to add up numbers, quantify performance goals and so on, but God probably does differently. But even so, it's still nice to look back and feel that you've achieved something worthwhile.

What makes it worse is that I can look back on times when it looked for a moment as if it could really take off. Like with the Emotional Cripples—I thought, *this can grow and grow*. But then circumstances change, new times and new places, and now it's just a memory. One more false start?

So...do I get an answer? No, I didn't think so. You never do, do you? Never mind, I just thought I'd mention it, that's all.

After that, things just get worse.

First, I develop a chronic eye condition that leaves my eyes inflamed and painful whenever I go under fluorescent lights. The ophthalmologists can't figure it out and can't offer much help. It's more of an irritation than anything else, something I can live with. But I end up having to wear wraparound sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat every time I go into a lighted room. It can be pretty inappropriate sometimes.

In my workplace, the reaction is extraordinarily gracious. If anyone finds it odd, they keep it to themselves. Everyone behaves as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

In the church, predictably enough, it's a different story. My strange appearance is taken as evidence that I'm a neurotic, attention-seeking exhibitionist. Any chance they might take me seriously is gone. I'm

permanently marginalized. I'm welcome to come on a Sunday, sit in the meetings, and give money, but that's it. I'm out in the cold again.

Next, I join the church men's fellowship group. It starts well, but then that gradually turns sour also. It's run by a closed inner circle that calls itself the "core group." A new, younger one, Rayland, comes in and quickly insinuates himself into a dominant role. He's an ethnic Chinese, brought up in America. For me, his character combines all the most negative traits from both cultures, while taking none of the redeeming graces from either. A certain manipulative deviousness is combined with an unswerving conviction of the absolute superiority of his own way.

Rayland is a master of church politics, and an out-and-out hierarchy man. He treats those above him with obsequious deference and those below with a condescending air of superiority. He has an unerring instinct for playing the system to his own advantage. He's come far, fast, and now he's manoeuvred himself into the top slot.

Believing himself to have been appointed by God as our leader, Rayland sees himself as the sole arbiter of Christian truth and biblical interpretation. He'd be happiest with a group of beginners who hang on his every word; the last person he wants in the group is someone like me. He's sincere and convinced of his own anointing. Anyone who thinks otherwise is in rebellion against God. Above all, he has an overriding need to be in control.

Antipathy develops rapidly. Over the course of a year, I get accustomed to being shouted down every time I speak. It reaches the point where I hardly need open my mouth. As soon as I signal my intention to speak, even before a word is out, he's shifting in his chair and preparing his counterblast.

Ultimately he wants me to acknowledge his rightful place as the most spiritually talented member of the group, but that's not a part of my agenda. I could pretend of course—act the part, live the charade, and make peace that way, but the thought leaves me uncomfortable. I would be acting out a lie, and however convenient that might be for both of us, I won't do it.

The stand-off continues. Spiritually I'm confused. I just want to be who I am, be normal, be a part like all the others; but sometimes it seems even God is a part of the conspiracy to keep me down. Time passes, and my frustration grows and grows.

One day I get it into my head to read John Milton's seventeenth century classic poem *Paradise Lost*. I've never been particularly interested in poetry, but the thought persists, and eventually I go out and buy a copy.

I don't get very far with reading it—the language is archaic, the structure obscure, and I'm quickly worn down. After a few pages I'm ready to give up, but before shelving it I read the biographical notes in the appendix at the back. Here I find more to interest me.

Milton, I find, went blind in his later years. Not only that, he wrote a short poem in which he talks about his problem and his reaction to it. The sonnet, called *On His Blindness*, is only fourteen lines long, a lot less daunting than *Paradise Lost*, and it's there in the appendix. This is more my sort of scale, and I decide to give it a try. At this stage I don't expect to have my whole life turned upside down. The poem reads:

WHEN I consider how my light is spent
 E're half my days, in this dark world and wide,
 And that one Talent which is death to hide,
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, least he returning chide,
 Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd,
 I fondly ask; But patience to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
 Bear his milde yoak, they serve him best, his State
 Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and waite.

Even these scant fourteen lines take some effort to decipher, but I read it a few times and it starts to make sense. After that it takes root in my brain, and then it won't go away. For weeks, it comes back to haunt me at unlikely hours of day and night.

In the poem we find Milton frustrated by his blindness. Well, that's no surprise—who wouldn't be? But for Milton, beneath the obvious frustration, there's a second and deeper layer, related to his Christian faith. He wants to be of service to his Maker, but his blindness severely limits the possible avenues. Not that his desire is entirely altruistic—it stems in part from a need to forestall criticism when he has to confront his Maker. He's afraid that when he submits his life accounts, God may chide him for not having done more.

*You mean, writing *Paradise Lost* is not enough?*

The second half of the poem moves from conflict and frustration to resolution and inner peace. First, he is gently reminded that God

doesn't actually *need* his or anyone else's help in getting his work done. God has unlimited resources at his beck and call, should he choose to use them.

Then it dawns on Milton that God's definition of service is somewhat different from his own. If God says to stand and wait, doing nothing at all, then that standing and waiting is as much service to God as would be preaching to thousands. In fact it's more. It's the best possible service.

This is so weird! It's me, almost down to the last detail!

Like me, he's worried about meeting God and having nothing to show for his life. Mind you, he's got a better excuse than I have—he's blind. That obviously makes it more difficult. But that's not really the point, is it? The problem is the same, and the human reaction is the same.

So presumably the answer must be the same as well. But of course there is no real answer. Like so many things...

Is there?

They also serve who only stand and wait.

Well, okay, call that an answer if you must. But that's obvious! We all know God doesn't count achievement as points on a board, or numbers of souls saved, or whatever. I figured that one out years ago.

Didn't I?

In my head, sure. But in my heart? In my motivations?

And if I really understand it, then why am I always looking for quantifiable achievements in my own life? And why am I so scathing and judgmental about those who use these kinds of arguments to justify their own lack of results?

So what is it really? Isn't the real truth that my deep desire has been to stand before God and say, "Look God, see all these things I've done, all these people I helped, all those souls saved...I did all right, didn't I? Not bad at all..."

Of course, deeper down even than that, I've probably always known that we're not really supposed to think that way. But then no one can have perfect motives all the time. Get too introspective about your motives and you end up doing nothing at all. Anyway, it's only a little thing, not worth worrying about really...

A voice in my head.

"Only a little thing, did you say?"

Did someone speak? It's him! Excellent! Just what I wanted—I've got a few things I want to straighten out with him, now that he's listening. Overdue issues to get off my chest.

“Only a little thing?”

There it is again! Right, let's go for it.

“Yes, that's right. It's only a little thing, not something worth getting too bothered about right at this moment. But now you're listening, I do have a few other things here that I've been wanting to talk to you about—more important things. As for the other, well it's pretty minor. Maybe another time, like next year or something...”

“That's good, Norman, very good! You've figured out that it's only a little thing. That means you shouldn't have too much of a problem putting it right, should you?”

Oh no! I'm not sure if I like the way this is heading.

“Well—yes, it is only a little thing, but it just so happens that for me personally it's a slightly sensitive issue. Not important as such, just—sensitive.”

“I see.”

“You do? Good! Now, about those other things...”

But he's gone. No arguments, no discussions, just said his piece and then turned and walked away. Never even a glance behind.

Well, that's just great, isn't it! Typical! Never even gave me a chance. And with so many more important issues waiting to be discussed. Honestly, talk about trivia!

Mind you, I suppose he does have a point. If it's really such a little thing, why am I so sensitive about it? Why do I find so many excuses not to even look at it? And why do I get that nagging void in the pit of my stomach every time I look at that poem?

They also serve who only stand and waite.

Yes. There's a lot of stuff in there, Norman, that you've never quite wanted to look at. “Well, look at old Norman! Did okay in the end, didn't he? Left his mark. Well, well, well!” Yes. Quite.

And now I can hear him more clearly, what he's been coming to for a long time: “It's time, Norman—my time. Time to let go of all that.”

And I don't like it, at all.

The days pass, and it's becoming clear that this is not going to go away. God has decided what he wants. Now he'll wait until I give it to him—for years, if necessary. Now that he's decided, he won't compromise, ever.

If it's such a little thing, why is it so painful to deal with?

Finally, I surrender.

"God, all these years I've been stuck in the background while others have taken the glory. And all that time I've been dreaming that finally one day my time would come. I've dreamt of the day when finally it would all come good, and I'd get some recognition, some appreciation, even some satisfaction for what I've done.

"Now you're saying, 'No!' You're saying that you want me to let go of all that. Permanently. You're saying that if all you should ever require from me should be to stand and wait, then so be it. I stand. And I wait.

"Okay—you win. Take it, it's yours. If you want me to stand and wait for ten, twenty years, a lifetime even, I accept it. Don't ask me to feel good about it, because I don't. But I'll do it anyway. I accept your terms."

I feel numb, empty, like my soul has been ripped out. I'd like to feel that God is pleased, but I feel nothing—just emptiness.

And then after a few days, quite suddenly, I hear God speaking to me again. "That's good, Norman. Now, I've got some things I want you to do." And then he's gone again.

I understand that I don't need to push or search for opportunities. I don't need to know or do anything. Just stand and wait. God will open the doors and make the opportunities as and when he chooses. The striving for achievement is over.

To start with, things get worse. Rayland's attitude hardens into outright hostility. Inside I feel dead, drained, and angry, pondering violence. But I've made a commitment to God, and I have to stand by it. I know he's watching to see how I react. My feelings are feelings, and I can't dictate them, but my actions are voluntary, and those I can control.

They also serve who only stand and wait.

Silently I repeat it over and over again—a mantra. It's an act of will.

Then after a week or two, things start to change. One day I find myself trapped alone in a tropical downpour with one of the other leaders of the group. He's always been a bit hostile to me, but I decide to ignore all that's happened between us. I find myself sharing with him some of the problems I've had in the church, asking his advice. His attitude transforms—suddenly he's helpful and friendly, and from that day on he becomes my staunchest supporter.

After that, the whole situation starts to turn around. At the same time my own negative reactions are softening. Now that I no longer need them, opportunities to be more involved start to open up for me. When,

a few months later, Rayland tells us he's leaving to return to America, the problem has melted away so far that I scarcely notice.

God, you're so strange! I still feel like it's a little thing! I still feel there are much bigger issues in my life, which you seem content to ignore. I'll do what you say, but I won't pretend to understand.

I never got to finish *Paradise Lost*. I think I got about halfway through the second page. It's still there on my bookshelf. Some day, I tell myself, I'll sit down and read it properly. Or maybe I won't. Maybe I don't need to. I thought I was buying it to read, but God had another purpose altogether, one that I never could have guessed.

Just like always.

PART 3

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

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CHAPTER 14

UNHAPPY CHRISTIANS

IMEET A lot of unhappy Christians.

Perhaps there's something about me that acts as a magnet for them, or perhaps God has ordained that our paths should cross. There might be some truth in either or both of these, but I suspect the main reason is simply that there really are an awful lot of them out there.

On the face of it, this is rather surprising. In fact, it's one of the arguments I often hear people use against Christianity. They say, "How can it be true? If it was true, and if it was as good as you claim it is, surely you'd be the happiest people alive! Everyone would be Christians!" Sometimes I'm surprised at how much non-Christian people seem instinctively to know about Christianity, even without being taught. They know how it ought to be—or rather they know how we ought to be—and they recognize immediately if we're not.

I've never come up with a convincing answer to this argument. It leaves me feeling uneasy, because deep down I know they're right. We should be the happiest people alive, and often we're just not.

So inside myself I continue to wonder. After all, the very word "gospel" means good news. I wonder about the ones who've chosen not to accept it, and I wonder about the ones who have accepted it but find it more of an ongoing nightmare than a joyous release. It's supposed to be good news, and yet for many Christians, it's anything but.

Then I look at the lives of non-Christian men and women around me, and I feel humbled, and even a little embarrassed, to see just how well they seem to

get along without God. They live in a universe that is, from their point of view, ultimately meaningless. Even the good things in their lives are temporary and to a great degree illusory. Youth is destined to evolve into old age. Health gives way to ill health and disease. The deepest and most meaningful relationships are torn apart by death and bereavement. The grandest of human achievements crumble into dust. For most people, life is at best a minefield with potential disasters lurking around every corner, and at worst, an ultimate nothingness interspersed with a few strictly temporary consolations.

People know all this, of course, and yet most of them do a surprisingly good job of coping with it. Despite all the common sense evidence to the contrary, they find a cheerful optimism to convince themselves that somehow, in spite of everything, life makes sense. They find meaning in their lives, relationships, and daily activities, and with that they move on undaunted into an uncertain and hazardous future.

An old friend of mine from student days recently lost his sight after a long illness. At a stroke, he has seen his career, his financial aspirations, and many of his hobbies and interests wiped out. Now he lives in permanent darkness, dependent on his wife and friends for even the smallest of things. For most of us this would be the ultimate disaster, as bad as anything we could imagine. Yet when I talk to him, I find him cheerful and even optimistic, as he painfully begins to restructure his life to make some sense out of the new environment.

There's an indomitable quality to the human spirit that keeps people going in the face of all the misfortunes that fate can throw at them. The opening lines of a well-known nineteenth century poem by William Henley sums it up perfectly:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

That's how people are. Not all of them, of course, but many. They have unconquerable souls. They have a resilience that in adversity can unmask all sorts of hidden depths and resources. They have an extraordinary ability to make the best of their lives in the most difficult of circumstances. And all that without God!

If you add God into the equation, you might think that we Christians would go through our lives floating on the clouds. Take those strictly human resources, add in everything given to us on top of that, and consider

what we now have to sustain us. We've found God! The universe and our lives within that universe have in an instant ceased to be arbitrary, random accidents. Our eyes are now opened to see these things as what they really are—totally and ultimately meaningful.

As we explore further, we find that God, the omnipotent creator of that universe, has committed himself unreservedly to our welfare, with a depth of love that we can only begin to imagine. He has adopted us into his family. He has taken on himself the role of father, while Jesus, the son to whom he has devolved a great part of his power and authority, has welcomed us as brothers and sisters.²⁶

This God has told us that anything we need, we have only to ask for and it will be given us.²⁷ Then we find that this new and meaningful life that we have been given here on earth is only a short prelude to another life, one that goes on forever, with no pain, tears, or unhappiness—the total fulfillment of all our deepest needs, aspirations, and dreams.

I could go on. I could talk about the forgiveness of sins, about the Holy Spirit who is our guarantee of the future and guide through the present. I could talk about crowns, kingdoms, rewards, and so on—but there's no need. *We know all of this.* It's our birthright in God, familiar territory to every Christian. And we all know that by any objective standard of accounting, it's a pretty extraordinary package.

If so many people living without God can find happiness, fulfillment, and even meaning in their lives, then surely we, with the addition of all these God-given resources and blessings, should be the happiest people around. And yet still I meet unhappy Christians everywhere I go.

They must have started out on the Christian path with optimism and a hope for the future, but somewhere along the road it all went wrong. They must have looked at God's offer and found it attractive once, but now they find it hollow and void, the promises of God dry, empty words. They must have wanted God then, or they wouldn't have started. But now?

Some of them have left the church. Some of them have left God. Some are angry, bitter, and disillusioned. Many drift through their Christian lives in a state of passive non-being, waiting for something to happen. They dream of God intervening to turn it all around, but somehow he never does.

I've met a few Christians who walked away from God because they decided they wanted other things more, but this is unusual. Most people who give up Christianity are people who wanted it to work, who would

²⁶ Hebrews 2:11–12

²⁷ Matthew 7:7–11

still like it to work, and who are genuinely perplexed and confused that it hasn't worked. The third and final part of this book is written primarily for people like these. It looks at the reasons why Christianity goes so wrong for so many well-intentioned people and then at some of the ways to put it right.

We can start by looking at the rest of William Henley's poem. As a child Henley was diagnosed with tuberculosis. In Victorian times this was difficult or even impossible to treat. He had one leg amputated early on, and then in 1874 he was readmitted to hospital, where he was to remain for the next two years, undergoing more than twenty surgical procedures to try and save the second leg. In hospital he was visited by Robert Louis Stevenson, who used him as the model for Long John Silver, the one-legged pirate in his novel *Treasure Island*. It was in the midst of the traumas and disappointments of his hospital stay that Henley wrote his famous poem, which he called *Invictus*, the Latin word meaning "unconquered."

The poem goes on like this:

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

The final stanza gives us the key to Henley's attitude toward life. Externally his circumstances may have been beyond his control—disease and failed medical treatments are things we can do little about. But internally there was always room for manoeuvre, a place in which he could make choices and say, "No! I will not be defeated by these circumstances! I will not bow down to fate! No matter what the adversity, inside myself I can be the victor. I am, and will remain, the captain of my soul."

It was in this knowledge that Henley found the determination to keep going through adversity—the knowledge that as a human being he had free will, and the right and freedom to make choices.

This is the point at which as a Christian I can be in danger of losing out. I can feel that my soul has been hijacked. In becoming a Christian I can feel that I have surrendered control of my life to the “higher power,” represented by God. I’m no longer the captain of my soul. I’ve abrogated that authority to God (or to the church!). And in doing so, something inside me has died. The indomitable spirit has been expunged. There’s nothing left for me now but to be washed along by the tides of fortune and what is loosely interpreted as being “God’s will.”

An analogy from the medical world illustrates how this thinking can leave us weakened and vulnerable, liable to be knocked flat by the slightest breeze of adversity.

It has become a common practice in modern hospitals for patients needing relief from severe acute pain, after surgery for example, to be given analgesic drugs through self-administration infusion pumps. This wasn’t always the case. In the old days, when the pain became intolerable, patients had to call for a nurse to administer the drug. Now it’s different. They are hooked up to self-administration infusion units, and when the pain gets too much for them, they can flip a hand-held switch. The pump starts, the morphine flows, and they have instant pain relief.

When self-administration was first proposed back in the seventies, many doctors were against it. They thought that giving patients this sort of freedom would be inviting abuse—that patients would take larger and more frequent doses than were necessary or sensible, and the consequences would be disastrous. In fact, experience quickly showed the opposite to be true. The patients with hands-on control over their own dosage ended up taking less narcotic overall, while those who had to call a nurse every time were using more.

What was happening was that the patients who knew they were in control derived from that knowledge an inner strength that enabled them voluntarily to endure a higher level of pain than they otherwise would have. Knowing they had the freedom to switch on the pump at any time enabled them to make the choice of leaving it switched off.

For those who were dependent on the nurse, the situation was different. They never knew quite how long she might take to come, and what decision she would make when she did come. They had no control over their situation—someone else was making the decisions. As a result, they felt anxious and vulnerable, their pain threshold dropped, the intervals between doses got shorter, and the doses got larger.

Many Christians find themselves in a similar position. The Christian life obviously does involve a certain level of suffering at times. But what

causes many Christians to wilt under this suffering is not the pain itself, but rather the sense of helplessness that comes from having lost control over their own destinies. They're bombarded from all sides by admonitions and instructions, lectured from the pulpit on Sundays, and subjected to hierarchical authority systems that are backed up by the implicit authority of God. Any questioning is interpreted as rebellion against him.

They see choices taken out of their hands, and like the suffering and powerless patients they become anxious and vulnerable, and their pain threshold drops. They start to feel powerless in the hands of God, and pretty soon they may start to imagine him as a harsh and judgmental tyrant. Their spirit is gone, and they collapse.

William Henley was a victim of circumstances outside of his own control—and in the face of disease, medical pronouncements, and so on, we are all pretty helpless. But Henley determined that no matter what hit him from the outside, on the inside he was going to stay in control. No matter how dreadful the circumstances that might befall him, he would remain, to the end, the master of his fate and the captain of his soul.

It's just at this point, this issue of the captaincy of our souls, that the process of life can become so insidious and destructive for many Christians. It's in our *inner being* that we let go. We are instructed to "Surrender to God." and "Let go and let God take over." And these things, when correctly understood, are fine, but if we are not careful, or misunderstand their true meaning, they can become a recipe for a slump into mindless passivity.

Henley's mindset, as expressed in the poem, is the exact opposite of mindless passivity. It can be challenging to us personally, and it can also present a challenge to those who have to deal with it in others.

I think many modern Christian pastors might be uneasy with Henley's poem, just as they might be less than enthusiastic about pastoring a church full of William Henleys. They could point to his not being a Christian, and they might even try to use him as an example of an anti-God mindset, the man who relies on his own strength rather than leaning on God. This would be to misunderstand the man. Christian or not, Henley was created in God's image, and his indomitable spirit reflects more of the divine spark of God's creation than it does of the fallen nature of man.

We need only to look back to the example of King David in the Old Testament to see the way in which God is able to harness for his own glory the qualities that motivated Henley so effectively. David, the man after God's own heart, had not a trace of mindless passivity in his character or in his approach to God. Henley would have identified with him well.

The inner strength shared by these two men, and their commitment to confronting their circumstances rather than being controlled and dominated by them, contrasts starkly with the state of impotence to which many Christians are reduced as they rail against their circumstances in frustration, self-pity, or simply resigned despair. It is in this state that they live out their lives, day after day and year after year, hoping and waiting for the intervention from God that somehow never seems to come. It is from this that we seek release.

Subsequent chapters will look in more detail at three specific areas in which Christians²⁸ can find themselves trapped in passivity and helplessness, as well as at possible escape routes. For clarity and convenience, I have listed the three areas here, summarized in note form:

“I don’t like what God is doing to me.” (Chapters 15–16)

I feel helpless under the weight of all the circumstances that come on me and for which I hold God responsible. One thing after another, it’s like an avalanche. I’m being crushed!

“I don’t like what God is *not* doing for me.” (Chapter 17)

It’s nothing specific that God has done to me—rather it’s what he’s *not doing*. I seem to spend my whole life just—waiting! I’ve given up a lot to get this far, but when I look around to see what I’m getting back in return, it seems like nothing. I ask, but nothing comes. I wait, but nothing happens. It’s like a desert, and in the meantime, my frustration mounts.

“I don’t like the church.” (Chapters 18–26)

I have no problem with God himself. My problem is with the church. It’s not what I thought it would be. It’s not what I think it ought to

²⁸ I use the word *Christian* here to include two groups of people: those who call themselves Christians, and those who have given up and no longer call themselves by that name. It is God, not man, who defines who is and who is not a Christian. The labels that we put on ourselves are of marginal importance. God is the one who has adopted us into his family, and having done so, he won’t relinquish his toehold lightly, and certainly not in response to our saying something as trivial as, “I choose not to call myself a Christian anymore.” For the rest of this book, the word *Christian* includes struggling Christians, inactive Christians, and former Christians of all shades and hues. That’s how God sees it.

be. In fact, it's the complete opposite. And I'm powerless. What to do? Struggle on or just walk away? I'm confused!

In real life these three areas cross-infect one another. Anger and frustration become detached from their original roots and reattach onto other, unrelated issues. You start off angry about one thing, and before long, you're angry about everything. However, for simplicity, we will deal with the three as if they were separate and unrelated.

I've listed them here, and deal with them in the book, in order of their relative complexity—that is, starting with the easiest to understand and resolve, and ending with the most difficult.

CHAPTER 15

GETTING THE RIGHT MODEL: “I DON’T LIKE WHAT GOD DOES”

WHEN I FIRST started in medical practice, I looked after a patient who had been born with a genetic abnormality that rendered him unusually prone to developing bowel cancer. We could do nothing about the underlying abnormality, so every six months he came into hospital for an uncomfortable screening procedure intended to detect any precancerous changes at an early enough stage to be treatable. In spite of this, it was almost inevitable that at some point in his life, a cancer would develop and he would require major surgery to treat it.

I was curious to know how he dealt emotionally with his situation, so I asked him. “I only ever worry about things that I can control,” he replied. “This is outside my control, so I don’t waste my time thinking about it.”

In the face of such wisdom, I felt humbled. But really, he was only expressing what most sensible people have long recognized as a sound formula for happiness. In life, things happen. Accidents, random events, illnesses—we all face them from time to time, and there’s little to be gained from griping about it or asking questions like, “Why me and not someone else?” It doesn’t change anything.

The young son of our pastor developed acute leukaemia. For the next two years, while his friends were out playing, he was in the hospital having repeated courses of chemotherapy. This was something outside of any human control—we can’t reliably predict who will and who won’t develop leukaemia. We do, however, know how many new cases there will be across the nation in any one year, since the figures are stable from one year to the

next, and from this we know that if it's not in our family then it will certainly be there in someone else's. We understand some but not all of the reasons why leukaemia happens. One day we may understand enough to intervene and prevent it, but right now we can't. Illness strikes from a clear blue sky.

Most well-balanced people understand this, and they also understand that getting angry or resentful about it changes nothing. It's a part of the world we live in, and we accept it as one of life's vicissitudes with good grace and make the best of it that we can.

Until we become Christians, that is. Then it all changes—or it did for me at any rate...

“God, this is *your fault!*”

“God, I'm holding you responsible—for *everything!*”

And with that, any possibility of a happy and balanced life is lost. We become fragile, vulnerable, thrown off course by the slightest breeze of misfortune that blows our way. Then come anger and self-pity, and soon we can be locked into a downward spiral of misery that is very hard to break out of. Several years of my early Christian life were wrecked in this way.

How can we avoid this problem? The answer, when I finally discovered it, turned out to be straightforward. We can't change the facts. What we can change is the eyes through which we view and interpret the facts. To put it another way, we can *change our model*.

Let me explain.

MODELING GOD

A model is an approximation to reality, a sort of mock-up. Scientists use models all the time. When our understanding is limited and incomplete, which it is most of the time, we have no option. We can't see the full picture, so we take the limited information available to us and use it to construct an approximation or *model* of what we think the reality may be like. Then we test the model. That is, we apply it to a set of real-life circumstances and see if it gives us a sensible result.

A good example of scientific modeling familiar to most people is climate change. The idea is simple. You take all the available data about rainfall, temperatures, present and future trends in atmospheric gases, and so on. Then you feed them into a computer and ask it to predict what the climate is likely to do in twenty or fifty years' time. The computer analyzes the data and comes out with some sort of prediction.

We don't expect the model prediction to be exactly right, because our data, our knowledge of climate mechanisms, and our computing power are

all limited. What we hope for is something close enough to reality to give us a useful basis for our future planning. That’s what the model is for.

The key points, then, of a scientific model—or any other sort of model for that matter—are these:

- A model is not wholly and literally true, but it’s not untrue either. It’s a simplified approximation, based on limited knowledge.
- A good model should be sufficiently accurate to give us answers that are close enough to the truth to be useful.
- However, since the model is only an approximation, there will inevitably be some situations where it will give wrong or unhelpful answers.
- A particular model may work better in one situation and be less helpful and reliable in another. It’s up to us to select a model that is appropriate to our situation, one that leads to a reliable and meaningful outcome.

These are the essentials of models, and it’s important that we understand them, because as Christians, we use models constantly when we think about God. Unfortunately, most of the time we do it without realizing. Why do Christians use models? We do it for a similar reason that scientists use models of the climate—because our understanding of God is incomplete, and when understanding is incomplete, there’s no alternative to using a model.

Why is our understanding of God incomplete? For several reasons. First, God is a lot bigger than we are. We can only ever see and understand a small part of him. Second, God is Spirit, while we are predominantly flesh, and the flesh is not good at grasping things in the spiritual realm. The third reason is the most important. It is that God wants it this way.

God doesn’t want us to know everything. That was never his plan. Right from the beginning, his purpose for us was that we would walk by faith and not by sight. When we see everything, know everything, and understand everything, then we are walking by sight. When it’s dark and we can’t see clearly, then we’re forced to walk by faith. Since this is what God wants, he makes us walk in relative darkness a lot of the time. In the dark, we see some of the picture, but not all. For the rest, we have to rely on models.

Paul understood this very well. Writing to the church in Corinth he put it like this:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.
 Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been
 fully known.²⁹

In the words of the King James Version, we see “through a glass, darkly,” but *mirror* is a better translation.

In Paul’s day, mirrors were very different from the ones we use today. They consisted of a flat sheet of copper or bronze with a highly polished surface. The reflection gave some kind of an image, but the quality was poor. You could just about see your face and straighten your hair, but that was all.

Nowadays we use the mirror metaphor to emphasize the accuracy and quality of an image. Paul does the opposite. For him, the mirror emphasizes its deficiencies and limitations. He is telling us that we can’t see God and the spiritual realm very clearly. The picture is hazy, distorted, and incomplete. It’s an approximation. It’s a *model*.

Many of the great Christian thinkers of the past understood this very well. They understood the limitations in our understanding of God, and hence our need to have models. Augustine, writing in the fifth century, was particularly fond of constructing models. One of his best known is his model of the Trinity, in which he compares the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to the three points of a triangle.

Is Augustine saying that God is triangular? Of course not! He’s giving us a model. The model gives us a loose guide to something that is essentially beyond our understanding. We can’t see God’s nature, but we know about triangles.

We start constructing models of God from the first day we become Christians. We can’t avoid it. We take the limited facts about God that we have at our disposal and put them together as best we can. Then we use our imaginations to fill in the gaps. Since our knowledge at this early stage is very limited, the models we come up with may be pretty inaccurate. In the first part of this book, I have tried to show how my early, wrong models of God led me into repeated disasters. I think I have better models now, but they’re still only models.

Why do we so easily forget that our understanding of God is approximate and not exact? We may instinctively resist the suggestion that God’s revelation of himself is in some way incomplete, seeing it as an implied criticism of God. Or we can take it as implied criticism of ourselves, that we are not able to see God perfectly.

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:12

Whatever the reason, the best antidote is to remind ourselves that the real reason why we see God imperfectly and have to rely on models is that *this is how God wants it*.

APPLYING MODELS

Later on, we will use models extensively to look at different aspects of God’s working. Now we will look at three illustrations from life that shed light on the answers to two key questions, which are:

1. To what extent might our conflicts and misunderstandings with God be a consequence of our using wrong or inappropriate models of his character and his ways of working?
2. How might choosing more appropriate models help to resolve some of these conflicts?

1. Whose responsibility?

Whilst living in Holland, I was walking one weekend in the countryside outside Amsterdam with Katarina, a dear Dutch friend and member of our church. Katarina has the kind of soft and sensitive heart that reacts intensely against suffering in any shape or form. She gets upset by the pain and injustice that is so much a part of our world, and she blames these things on God. This feeds into an undercurrent of anger against God that periodically breaks through to the surface.

Obviously the anger changes nothing, and it certainly doesn’t cause God to behave any differently. God is immune to that kind of emotional manipulation. The only person who suffers is Katarina herself. However, that’s the model of God that she’s chosen to use, and now she’s stuck with the consequences.

Strolling down a path in the sunshine, we came to a field in which a bull was tethered to a post by a chain. The chain was attached to a metal ring through the bull’s nose. The ring looked to be causing the animal some discomfort. Seeing this, Katarina’s latent feelings of hostility towards God came to the surface. She chose to hold him personally responsible for the bull’s suffering.

Her mental process was so obviously destructive that I decided to challenge her. “Then tell him!” I said. “You’re angry with God, so say it! Speak it out and clear the air. Who knows, maybe he’ll even give you an answer.”

To my surprise, she took up this challenge, and we stopped for a few moments while she closed her eyes to pray. I waited to hear the outcome. I didn't expect much—Katarina is one of those people who always look for natural explanations to rationalize away God's interventions, which makes it hard for her to hear when he speaks. But not today!

"He spoke to me!" she told me, "—he just said, 'I didn't do it.'"

And that was that. God never wastes words. He says what he has to say, and then leaves it up to us. Had he wanted to spell it out more clearly, he might have said something like this: "Katarina, you're using the *wrong model*. You're using a model that holds my providence responsible for every single thing that happens in this world, good and bad alike. It's not helping you. Try another model, one that leaves room for free will and personal decision-making. Don't hold me responsible for every wrong thing that anyone, anywhere in the world, may choose to do. Farmers make choices too, you know!"

God was inviting her to lay aside a model that was not helpful to her in that situation and to adopt another, more appropriate one. Had she done so, one effect would have been to sweep away the foundation of all the anger with God that she had accumulated over many years. If God didn't do it, then there's no ground for anger. If you want to get angry, get angry with the person who did it, not with someone else.

I don't know whether or not Katarina was ever able to apply that lesson. Letting go of anger is not easy, and sometimes we find it more convenient to hold on to it. Anger has its uses. So we stay with the old model and keep blaming everything on God. This allows us to stay angry with God all our lives. In the process, we get a lot of pain, heartache, and frustration which God would much rather spare us.

2. Random or controlled?

Many will remember the tragic story of Charles Carl Roberts, the man who in October 2006 walked into an Amish Christian community schoolroom, shot to death five schoolgirls, and finally turned the gun on himself. In the suicide note he left for his family, he said that he was "angry with God."

The incident has a background. Several years before, Roberts' wife had given birth to a premature infant who did not survive. Roberts was devastated by the death and chose to hold God personally responsible. This planted the seeds of anger with God in his heart, and that anger grew over the years and finally came to rule his life. "I am filled with

so much hate,” the note continued, “hate towards myself, hate towards God, and unimaginable emptiness.”

That’s how bad it can get.

Our specific concern here is with the model of God that Roberts chose to use, and how this model affected his reactions. This model is in some ways similar to the one that Katarina used, in which God is held responsible for anything and everything that ever happens; but here it’s not quite so simple. It’s easy to understand why God might choose not to accept responsibility for the ring in the bull’s nose—after all, someone else had put it there. Responsibility for the premature birth and death of Roberts’ baby cannot be so conveniently allocated. Like the bowel cancer and the leukaemia, it was one of those apparently random events that “just happens.” Miscarriages and premature births occur sporadically at all stages in pregnancy, and they always will. Death from prematurity is, and will remain, a fact of life.

It’s tempting in this situation to do as Roberts did—blame it all on God. It’s easy to find biblical support for God taking responsibility for bad things that happen to us,³⁰ so the model is a valid one. But might there be an equally valid but more helpful alternative model—one that could have avoided the anger and the resulting tragedy?

One possibility would be a model that allows for a universe created by God, but in which random events still occur. God has set it in motion, and now he allows it in some respects to run on its own. It’s difficult to argue against the validity of such a model, since so many events in our daily lives bear witness to it. I only need to toss a coin in the air ten or twenty times and see how it lands to know that the laws of randomness do in fact apply. God could presumably manipulate the process if he so wished, but we all know that in practice he doesn’t. Random events are a fact of our daily experience.

Some Christians may be uncomfortable with a model of God that allows for random events, feeling that it calls into question God’s power to control his own universe. They don’t need to be. God’s power to control is not in question. Presumably he could control everything if he chose so to do; but the fact that he *can* doesn’t necessarily mean that he *does*. He may have the power to control, but choose not to use it. He may instead choose to allow random events to occur.

This model is the one that most non-religious people take for granted as being correct. Children work it out for themselves at a young age—no

³⁰ For example, “I form light and create darkness, I make weal [prosperity, happiness] and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.” Isaiah 45:7

one needs to teach it to them. Most of us, when we become Christians, are coming *from* this kind of model. It's our starting point. But many of us, when we become Christians, shift *to* a different model. Now we start expecting God to take responsibility for everything.

We don't have to make that shift. Both models are valid, and we are at liberty to apply either one in any given situation, according to whichever we deem to be the most helpful and constructive. Roberts chose one, and the outcome was tragic. Had he chosen the other, the outcome for him and for the many others involved might have been a happier one.

3. Multiple Models

Sometimes in the Bible we find several different, and apparently contradictory, models applied to the same situation. These models are often presented side by side, with no apology. Though they may appear contradictory to us, to the writers who wrote them this was clearly not the case.

A good example of this is the oft-debated subject of predestination versus free will. The predestination model states that God determined right back at the beginning who would go to heaven and who would not. This is clearly stated in the Bible on several occasions.³¹

Then there's another thread running through the whole Bible from start to finish, clearly implying that every person has the right and responsibility to choose his or her own destiny, to accept God or reject him. This is also spelled out clearly on a number of occasions.³² The Bible jumps freely between these two different views without the slightest embarrassment or hint of inconsistency.

The paradox is resolved when we see these as models and not as absolute statements of fact. They are both imperfect reflections of a greater truth, one that is beyond our intellect or experience to understand. It doesn't have to make sense to us. The models don't need to dovetail perfectly into a simple whole.

Having more than one valid model for any situation is something that can work to our advantage, as a third and final example shows:

I mentioned earlier that for a number of years my life has been restricted by a chronic medical problem involving my eyes. The problem

³¹ e.g. Romans 8:29–30; Ephesians 1:4–5

³² e.g. Ezekiel 3:18–21

is not likely to go away any time soon, so I have to find a way of living with it, and living with God, at the same time—and without getting angry at either. That’s self-preservation.

The obvious first step would be to look at all the relevant available models relating to God’s sovereignty in relation to disease and disability and find one that makes sense of my situation. That would be a good start, but can I go one better? What about having two models and switching between them according to need and circumstance?

So, most of the time I choose a model that takes my problem as being a gift from God, sent by God to benefit me in ways that may not necessarily be immediately apparent. This is how Paul dealt with his own chronic medical problem, his “thorn in the flesh,”³³ as he called it. This model keeps my outlook positive and checks any temptation to be resentful of God. But when my ophthalmologist calls me to say, “Norman, I’ve got a new treatment here which might help you. Are you interested to try it?” then how do I reply?

I suppose I could answer, “Thanks for the call, but I take this thing as coming from God, and so I prefer to accept it quietly without a fight. Let’s just leave it as it is.” But I don’t. I tell him, “Get me an appointment, and I’ll be right down. Let’s get started!”

Now I’ve switched to another model. Now my disease is a random molecular accident with no particular spiritual significance, aberrant proteins fighting for supremacy in my eye socket. If there’s a drug or therapy that will get them back to their proper function, then I’ll take it.

And what if the new treatment doesn’t work? Then I’ll go back to the first model. I’ll see my problem as being a gift from God and look at all the potential spiritual benefits that can flow out from it—until the next time.

So I have two models—two equally legitimate models—and from these two I choose the one that is most helpful in my current circumstance. There are other models, equally valid, that I could use, but usually choose not to. For example, if I was going for healing prayer, I might find it helpful to see my problem as the work of Satan. It’s a useful model, easy to understand, and—since it transfers the blame for the situation onto another, malevolent power—a useful antidote to anger with God. For Roberts, with his overwhelming anger, it might have been a good one to use. For me, since I’m not angry with God, I don’t need it right now.

The model I use most of the time—the first, “gift from God” model, not the second, “random molecular accident” model—is actually similar

³³ 2 Corinthians 12:7. We don’t know the nature of Paul’s problem, but a medical condition of some sort is the most likely.

to the one that Roberts used. For me it works well, so I stay with it. For Roberts, it led to anger and hatred, so it was a bad choice. It comes down to who you are and how you react.

For anyone still confused by the apparent contradictions of multiple models, Paul's discussion of his own problem is worth looking at:

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!³⁴

In this short passage, Paul starts by describing his thorn in the flesh as a gift from God for his spiritual benefit. Immediately after, he describes it as a device of Satan, intended to torment him. Both these, side by side without a hint or a suggestion of contradiction—and all that in a single sentence!

CHOOSING OUR MODEL

With this understanding of the principles of modeling God, we should be able to make some sense of our original problem, which was, "I don't like what God is doing to me." For those for whom this is a real problem—and there are many—I suggest the following simple steps:

1. Start by understanding that your unhappiness with God exists within the framework of a particular model of God's providence and way of his working, and get clear in your mind exactly what model it is that you are using.
2. Look at the various alternative models that can be applied. God, Satan, and blind chance can all draw biblical support as the authors of our misfortunes, but with a little thought and imagination it's not difficult to come up with other equally valid models.
3. Decide once and for all before God that you will not make an idol out of your own unhappiness.
4. Lay aside the model that is leading you into so much grief, choose another one that cuts away the legs that are supporting your unhappiness, and with God's help, go with it.

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:7 [NASB]

When we finally meet God face to face, we will understand that everything he ever did or allowed was right and just and perfect. Until then, we may struggle to make sense of the things that happen. We don’t necessarily have to lose that struggle. We can win.

My early anger with God is gone now. God hasn’t changed, and neither have I (very much). What *has* changed is that I’ve finally figured out some sensible models to use, and with that, I’ve found out that there’s really nothing left to be angry *about*.

CHAPTER 16

SURVIVING HEAVEN AND HELL

CHOOSING APPROPRIATE MODELS for God's activity in the world can help us to avoid much of the anger and frustration that afflicts many Christians. God will not change, but we can change—change the eyes through which we look at him.

This may not be easy or painless, particularly if we have grown comfortable with our anger and resist change. In my own case, I had started to develop a vested interest in my suffering. Like Job, I wanted to believe that if I could hang on for long enough, then finally some kind of logic or meaning would emerge from it. If the pain could somehow turn out in the end to have been “for God,” then it would all have been worthwhile.

In finally letting go, I had to face up to the fact that much of my suffering had been meaningless and unproductive. It had been rooted squarely in my own wrong perception of God and had contributed nothing to the building of God's kingdom—if anything, it had been an active hindrance.

Facing this realization was painful. In fact, it was probably more painful than the original anger and frustration to which it related. That's why I was tempted to cling to the delusion that my suffering had some sort of ultimate spiritual meaning. But sometimes pain has to get worse before it gets better, and there was no shortcut through this one. I had to let it go. Once I did, my negative feelings towards God melted away without any real effort on my part.

“GOD, THE VENGEFUL TYRANT”

There is one particular area of negative feelings towards God that can overshadow all others for many Christians and that can remain a problem even when the others have been dealt with. This can be a source not only of anger, but also of outright fear. This is the problem of hell.

The dialogue can go something like this: “All right, I can admit that *up to now* God has never mistreated me or done anything unfair or unreasonable. Not so far! Not in this life, anyway! But what about in the next life, what happens then? What about the judgment? Isn’t that when the kid gloves come off, and we get to see the other side of God’s character, the side he keeps carefully hidden? What happens to me then?”

For many Christians, this kind of thinking constitutes a very real source of anxiety. It can be a daily blight on their lives, an ongoing, inner torment that precludes any real growth into a trusting relationship with God. However good and kind he may appear to be in this life, there’s still an underlying fear that what we are seeing now is a temporary façade of gentleness; later, after we die, our worst fears will be realized when we come face to face with “God, the vengeful tyrant.”

A part of the problem is that the Bible leaves the whole subject of life after death shrouded in relative mystery, and our imaginations are only too willing to step in and fill in the details. True, there are a number of passages that talk about the joys of the coming kingdom, as well as some—though rather fewer—that allude to the fate of those who are left outside. In both cases however, the descriptions are couched in terms of imagery and symbolism, and we are given no exact or literal picture of either one.

This use of imagery is unavoidable. Language is a limited medium when it comes to describing new and unfamiliar concepts. It works mainly by making comparisons with objects already familiar to us. So, heaven and hell are usually described by taking some everyday event or object that we all know well and then saying, “It’s a bit like this,” or “It’s a bit like that.” But heaven and hell are both very different from anything we have yet experienced down here, and probably different from anything we are capable of imagining; so the value of these comparisons is limited.

Another way of expressing this would be to say that the descriptions we have been given are *models*, rather than precise representations. They are approximations based on limited data—reflections in the poorly reflecting mirror, and probably very hazy ones at that.

For heaven³⁵ we are given images of a golden city, a tree-lined river, wedding parties, thrones, strange mythological beasts, even a sea of glass and a river of fire. The images are vivid and at the same time disturbing. When I first read about them, I found them quite problematical. I've never cared much for weddings, and the idea of heaven as a long and never-ending wedding reception didn't appeal to me at all. I like rivers and trees, but not every day, forever. And that's really the problem—there's nothing I can imagine doing forever and ever without lapsing into mind-numbing boredom. Then I saw that the images were just models, and the problem went away.

In context, the models are excellent and vivid. For the Galilean peasants who surrounded Jesus, the wedding feast image would have struck the perfect note. The wedding feast was a time of joyous release from a life of grinding toil and poverty, a high spot in an otherwise drab and monotonous existence. It's no wonder that Jesus took this as a primary model of the kingdom. But for modern men—or for some of us at least—it can fall a bit flat.

Then there's hell, as the New Testament *gehenna* is usually translated. *Gehenna* is originally a Hebrew word and translates literally as "the valley of Hinnom." This was the locality on the outskirts of Jerusalem where the municipal rubbish dump was situated. Jesus' descriptions of worms and eternal fire³⁶ can sound horrifying now, but for many of Jesus' Judean listeners they would have described familiar realities. The smoke rising day and night from the smouldering rubbish might even have formed a literal backdrop to Jesus' words, while the worms and maggots that flourished in the decaying organic waste provided a vivid real-life picture requiring little imagination. The metaphors bring the image vividly to life in day-to-day terms, but they tell us little of substance about the true nature of the spiritual *gehenna*.

Before we get to our ultimate destination, there's another scary prospect we have to face—our final judgment before the throne of God. For

³⁵ Christians like to talk about heaven as the place where we go when we die. Jesus didn't, or not much, anyway. He preferred to speak about the *kingdom of God* (mentioned fifty times in the first three gospels), which is used interchangeably with *kingdom of heaven* (used thirty-two times in the first three gospels). On the few occasions when the word *heaven* is used on its own in the New Testament, it either just means "sky" as in "and Jesus looked up to heaven..." or else it's a shorthand abbreviation for "the kingdom of heaven." We might avoid much confusion and misunderstanding if we followed Jesus' example on this, though in discussion here and occasionally elsewhere I have followed the popular usage.

³⁶ Mark 9:48

the judgment, not surprisingly, most of the models revolve around legal processes. Law courts feature prominently, with prosecuting attorneys, defense counsels, and witnesses being called on both sides. These are not literal descriptions. They are human, worldly metaphors, designed to convey concepts such as justice, accountability, transparency, and the like. The reality remains beyond our current experience or understanding.

What then emerges from all these images?

We learn that heaven is a positive and joyous experience, a place from which suffering has been banished, and where we enjoy unbroken communion with God. We learn that hell is an irredeemably destructive experience with nothing to commend it. And we learn that each of us will have to face a future moment of reality when all illusions are stripped away, all secrets are revealed, and the unvarnished truths of our lives are laid bare for all to see. That is all we are told. Perhaps that is all God wants us to know.

“HEAVEN STARTS HERE”

For those who, like me, find some of these images more off-putting than helpful, there’s another, slightly more sophisticated model of heaven that is extensively featured in the New Testament, but often gets overlooked. It goes something like this:

Heaven starts here! Our life on earth and our life after death form a single, seamless continuity. When you become a Christian, you enter God’s kingdom. When you die, your life goes on in that same kingdom. The scenery changes, the feelings are different, but in essentials it’s the same thing. Death is an insignificant blip in the eternal continuum of our lives with God.

Jesus liked this model and used it a lot. The first recorded words of his ministry in the Gospel of Mark are saying exactly that:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.³⁷

Finally after all the waiting, Jesus is saying, heaven has arrived. God has entered the world of men. The kingdom prophesied and promised

³⁷ Mark 1:15 [NASB]

hundreds of years before in the Old Testament is here at last. That's the good news—the gospel that Jesus proclaimed.

Of course, we all know that in its final and fullest sense the kingdom is not yet here. The world, the flesh, temptation, and suffering are all still very much with us. The more extravagant promises of the kingdom are yet to be fulfilled. However, the fundamental change has now taken place, and we now have one foot planted firmly in heaven, even if the other foot is rooted equally firmly down here on earth.

Paul uses a very similar model, but for him the coming of the kingdom is equated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. For Paul, the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church and to individual believers is heaven coming down to earth in a very real sense. It's the first installment of heaven, and the deposit and guarantee³⁸ of our future inheritance.

It's like putting down a deposit to buy a house. You don't get full possession of the property until later; but once you pay the deposit the contract is irrevocable, and you are committed to paying the full price on completion. That's how it is with God and us, Paul says. When God gives the Holy Spirit to someone, that gift is the deposit that guarantees the rest of the payment at a later date. The Holy Spirit now—a taste of heaven here on earth—guarantees us the totality of heaven when we die.

This model should take much of the fear out of death and judgment. It tells me that if God, through the Holy Spirit, looks after me down here, then he will also look after me up there when I die. The one guarantees the other. My future is assured, and I have nothing to worry about.

Some people do manage to find a darker side to the model. "You mean *this is it?* This is *heaven*—this ongoing misery that makes up my life from day to day? I'm not sure I care for that too much!"

Well, in a way, yes, it is. We like to think of heaven in terms of everlasting happiness, absence of suffering, total fulfillment, and so on, which is understandable; but probably we would do better to define heaven less in terms of pleasurable experience, and more in terms of being in the presence of God. We hope for the happiness, the end of pain, and all the rest; but these are by-products, consequences of being with God. They are not ends in and of themselves. The true end is being with God. If I know God, then I'm in heaven, whether it's a pleasurable experience or not.

³⁸ Paul uses this picture of the Holy Spirit on three occasions: 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13–14.

This model should give us reassurance that there are no nasty, unanticipated surprises waiting for us on the other side. If people ask us how we can be so sure of going to heaven, we can explain to them that the question is meaningless. We're there already—we don't have to go there! Life on this earth may not always be fun, but it's still heaven if we're walking with God.

This should also free us from the misconception that God's character may somehow be different on judgment day from what it is now. God never changes. He never has, and he never will. He's the same now as he has always been, Old Testament times included—gentle and kind to those who choose to be a part of his family, stern and unrelenting toward those who choose to stay outside. And he's the same to us here on earth as he will be on judgment day and after.

UNDERSTANDING JUDGMENT

"That's all very well, but aren't you overlooking one thing? The Bible does talk about judgment, and it does talk about punishments; and it states clearly that judgment is not just for those who reject Christ but for everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike. If that's the case, then I really do have a cause for concern. My fears are indeed justified."

A final model may help to resolve this, the paradox of judgment and free grace in the life of the Christian.

We start from something Paul described in one of his letters, the experience of a man—presumably Paul himself, though this is not explicitly stated—who fourteen years previously had been

...caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body
I do not know; God knows...was caught up into Paradise and heard
things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.³⁹

The experience that Paul describes here can come across as being almost surreal, on an altogether different level of experience from that of most "ordinary" Christians. To understand it this way is, however, a misconception. Experiences of this type are in reality neither uncommon nor exceptional, and should probably be regarded as a normal, if occasional, part of the Christian life.

Most Christians periodically meet God through their senses, through feelings of varying intensities. These feelings of peace, joy, love, or simply of

³⁹ 2 Corinthians 12:2–4

a profound awareness of God's presence, are an integral part of our religious experience. They are not marks of superior spirituality, just gifts from God for our encouragement. If anything, they are more common among recent converts (who need them more) than among older Christians (who are supposed to be learning to walk by faith rather than by feelings).⁴⁰

Once or twice in a lifetime, these sensations may come to any of us in a particularly vivid form. These are times when God's presence is so real to us that we feel we could almost reach out and touch him. The veil of unseeing that most of the time hides God from our sight is temporarily drawn aside, and we look directly into the heavenly reality. We catch a glimpse of what Paul, for lack of better words, calls "the third heaven."

The Bible describes similar events in the lives of a variety of characters, including several Old Testament prophets. Isaiah's experience is particularly interesting.⁴¹ In a vision, Isaiah is taken up into the heavenly realm, and there enters into the presence of God himself, seated on his throne. The narrative goes on to describe two distinct ways in which Isaiah reacts to being in God's presence.

His immediate reaction is a cry of anguish:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.⁴²

For the first time in his life, Isaiah sees himself as he really is. Up to that point, he has had a pretty good opinion of himself. Hadn't God picked him out and elevated him to the prophetic ministry? Surely, that had to make him a bit special, didn't it?

No.

In the awful and penetrating light of God's presence, Isaiah confronts reality. He's not what he thought he was. He's not even close. He's worse, much worse, than he ever could have imagined. That's the cry of anguish in Isaiah's words: Unworthy! Unclean! Tainted by the fallen nature and more sinful than I ever knew.

That's what happens when we come into God's presence—any of us—you, me, Paul, anyone. There's no other reaction that we can possibly have when we are confronted by the direct vision of the holiness of God than to say, with Isaiah, "Woe is me!...I am a man of unclean lips."

⁴⁰ The experience Paul describes here probably took place around AD 41, roughly eight years after his conversion.

⁴¹ Isaiah 6:1–13

⁴² Isaiah 6:5

It happened to me just once, in the middle of the afternoon, a few days after I joined the Children of God. It was sudden and unexpected, not triggered by anything in particular. I was enveloped by an overwhelming sense of being in the presence of the glory of God. It lasted a minute or two before it faded away, the four walls reappeared, and my surroundings returned to normal. Then I was alone again, but changed—changed both by the experience and by my reaction to it.

When I looked into the holiness of God, I was conscious of two things only. One of these was God himself, and the ineffable glory that surrounded his person. The other was the tawdry reality of the life that I had so recently been living. In that moment, nothing else existed. Like a splash of brilliant red paint dropped on a pure white canvas, I saw my sad, pathetic human pleasures. The sensual delights, the cravings for success and acceptance—those things that had seemed so real, so important, so solid. Now in the light of God they were revealed as worthless, evanescent travesties of the true joy. In the presence of God's glory, I saw who and what I really was, and I could only think, "What a blind fool I've been, to have chosen *that* when I could have had *this*!"

My reaction to all of this was a heart-felt prayer—a prayer of thanks and relief that God had shown me the truth while there was still time to change, and not at the end when it would be too late.

I thought with horror of how it could have been, to have lived all my life in that blindness and then to die and see the reality for the very first time. Then the dawning horror of realization... Too late! God had been building his kingdom. He had invited me to be a partner in that, but other things had seemed like more fun. And then to hear God's answer to my plea for another chance, "I'm sorry, Norman, but there's really nothing I can do. You see, it's finished now. The kingdom is complete. There's no more work to do. You could have been involved. You should have been involved—that's what I wanted for you. In fact, I had a unique purpose in it for you. But now..."

"You're welcome to come in, of course. There's no price on salvation. You're a beloved part of my family, and nothing can ever change that. But as for the opportunity that I gave you...it's passed now—gone forever. I can't change the choices you made."

And then into eternity. Redeemed, saved, and sanctified—if a bit belatedly. But going into eternity with the knowledge of having missed forever my spiritual destiny.

This explains Isaiah's second reaction. After he has been exposed, brought to repentance, forgiven, and purified, he hears God speaking again, "Now, I've got a job that needs doing. I need a volunteer." And who's the

first in line, shouting, “Me! Here I am! Send *me!*”⁴³—Isaiah of course! He’s got a second chance, an opportunity to work in partnership with God, and this time he’s not going to let it go. He understands the true value now.

How does this relate to our fear of God’s judgment? Simply in this. We don’t need God to pass judgment on us in an active, deliberate sense. When we see God, we do it for ourselves. God didn’t say that Isaiah was a man of unclean lips. Isaiah said it. God didn’t judge Isaiah. All God needed to do was show himself. Isaiah did the rest. When the Bible talks about God’s judgment on Christians, it may be referring to a process similar to this—the automatic self-judgment that comes from being in the presence of God.

It’s useful to see judgment in this way—our automatic and inevitable reaction to our own sinfulness when confronted by the holiness of God. We see then that there’s little that God could do to avoid that judgment, even if he wanted to. Not even God can turn wrong into right or tell me I’ve lived a useful and productive life when the truth is that I’ve wasted it. If he could do these things, he would no longer be God.

I suspect this is the true nature of the judgment to come. God is not by nature judgmental. He takes no pleasure in judgment and would far rather forgive.⁴⁴ The process of “natural justice” outlined here seems far more in keeping with his character than does the courtroom model that so often springs to our minds.

There’s a hint of the truth of this in the frequent sayings of Jesus and Paul that speak of a future in which all the things done in secret will be exposed to public view.⁴⁵ All the illusions and delusions will be stripped bare. The hidden motives and hidden consequences will all come to light. When this happens, judgment will be automatic and inevitable.

Of course, judgment is still judgment, whether it’s being done to you or whether you’re doing it to yourself, and the one may be no more pleasant than the other. But if we can understand judgment in this way—as something we do to ourselves, rather than as something that is imposed on us as passive or impotent bystanders—we may be able to see God in a more positive light. And we may be able to contemplate the prospect of our own judgment with more equanimity and responsibility, rather than as something from which to cringe in terror.

⁴³ Isaiah 6:8, paraphrase

⁴⁴ e.g. Ezekiel 33:11

⁴⁵ For an example from Paul, 1 Corinthians 4:5 says, “(when) the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” From Jesus, see Luke 12:2.

CHAPTER 17

GOD'S BOUNDARIES: "I DON'T LIKE WHAT HE DOESN'T DO"

London: 1987

AT LAST! After years of study, my final pathology exams are finished. Now it's just waiting for the results. It seemed to go okay, but you just never know...

Our governing body, the Royal College of Pathologists, has a peculiarly arcane way of giving out the results of its exams. I don't think it's changed in a hundred years, and I doubt it will in another hundred. On results day, they pin up two lists on a notice board in the headquarters building in the West End of London. To get your result, you have to go in person to the building and check which list you're on. Telephone inquiries are not accepted. Otherwise, you wait for the letter through the post, but that can take days. It's all very civilized, very British—and very frustrating.

Anyway, now the waiting is almost over. *Tomorrow's the day the lists go up, and I'll be there first thing in the morning, waiting for the door to open. At least I think it's tomorrow. Should I ring and check? Stupid to get there and find it's the wrong day.*

I pick up the phone. "It's not tomorrow, it's today! The lists are up now—we've had people coming in all day. You must be the only one who hasn't been!...Yes, you can come now but you'd have to hurry. We close at six o'clock sharp, and no exceptions."

I look at my watch. I've got twenty minutes. *Twenty minutes from my suburban flat to the heart of the West End in the middle of the evening rush*

hour? It can't be done. But then again, what else do I do? Just sit here all evening, thinking about it? May as well give it a try. I run down the stairs, jump in the car, and pull away from the kerb—into a solid gridlock of cars, bumper-to-bumper, as far as the eye can see.

Well—what did you expect?

Then I pray.

“God—I don’t actually *need* this. It’s not going to change anything. There’s nothing to stop me from going in the morning. It’s just that I’d sleep better for knowing. So, if you could just sort of...you know...do something.”

The effects of the prayer are dramatic and instantaneous. Cars in front turn off left and right, and the traffic melts away to leave a clear road stretching ahead. One after another, red lights turn to green as I approach. I hardly stop the whole way. I turn into a quiet Mayfair cul-de-sac and draw up outside the college building, checking my watch. One minute to go.

No time to park. Leaving the car askew in the middle of the street, I jump the steps in twos. *Too late!* The heavy oak door is swinging closed. I get a foot in and block it. The liveried doorman is glaring at me through the crack, but I hold my foot firm. And then, unaccountably, his features soften a little. Not quite a smile, but something close. He gives an exaggerated sigh and says, “All right, I know what you’re here for. Well—come in, but make it quick!”

The door swings back the other way. I’m in.

Five minutes later, I’m back in the car and driving home with a deep joy in my heart. Some of it comes from knowing that finally, at the third attempt, I’ve passed the exam. Another part of it comes from the knowledge of a God who takes such an interest and pleasure in my happiness as to intervene in an event so trivial and ultimately insignificant as this.

Probably most of us can look back on certain answers to prayer that, for one reason or another, have a particular meaning for us. For me, this is one. Others might find the story irritating. “It’s ridiculous! You’re just using God! He’s not there to satisfy your whims. It trivializes the whole religion!”

In a way, they have a point. God’s answer to my prayer was a sheer luxury. It had nothing to do with my real needs. In the overall scheme of things, it was completely unimportant. It was trivial—and that’s precisely the reason it means so much to me.

I love to watch God fulfilling his promises to me and supplying my needs. But then again, what choice does he have on that? He’s made the promises. He’s committed himself in public to looking after me. Short of making himself a liar, he has no choice but to deliver. But it’s when he goes beyond anything he’s ever promised that I can feel loved beyond imagining.

It can be over things that have a value to me that only he, who knows me so well, could ever understand. That's when I see the true character of God.

HE DOES AND THEN HE DOESN'T...

And yet, it's just this kind of experience of God's kindness that can leave us all the more perplexed. Because at other times there are things that seem to us really to be important, things that really do matter. So we pray, and we pray, and *nothing happens*.

I remember a conversation with a friend I'd known for several years. I knew all about his longstanding struggles with self-acceptance, sexual orientation, and other issues. "You know, Norman, I get a lot of answers to prayer. Yet somehow, they all seem to be related to peripheral, unimportant things in my life. When I pray for answers on the big issues, I could be talking to a brick wall. No answers, just silence. It's hard to know what to make of it sometimes."

I felt sympathy for him. Looking back on my own life, I could see a similar pattern. Over the years I've seen hundreds, thousands even, of specific answers to prayer, but many of them have related to issues that, in the overall context of life, are not actually very important.

For example, there's my irritating habit of constantly losing things around the house. I'm all set to leave for work in the morning, and then my car keys have gone missing, or my house keys, so I can't lock up. The sort of problems you really don't need first thing in the morning.

Generally there are a few minutes of frustrated and fruitless searching before I remember to turn to God for help. Then I pray, and usually the lost objects suddenly reappear, often in remarkable ways. Sometimes they've been right in front of me, and I've been looking straight through them. Sometimes they're in crannies so obscure that they could have lain undetected for weeks. Sometimes the answers come before I've even finished the prayer. Occasionally, God answers before I've even started the prayer—apparently the intention alone can be enough.

It's all relatively trivial of course, though it's important enough at the time. But it's been going on for years and shows no signs of dying out, and it's always been a big encouragement to my faith.

One time, I thought to take it a step further. I prayed that God would transform me into the sort of person who no longer loses things. I wanted the kind of disciplined mind that would put things down somewhere sensible and then remember where they were. I prayed, but nothing changed. The prayer seemed completely ineffective.

So I continued to lose things, I continued to go to God for help, and God continued to find them for me. If he ever felt any impatience over my lack of progress in this area, he never showed it. He seemed—and still seems—happy to keep on finding things for me—in fact sometimes I wonder if he deliberately hides things, just to get me to pray more.

If God was happy, I was feeling uneasy. Why was he comfortable in answering my rather superficial appeals for help, while ignoring my pleas for a deeper, more fundamental change?

To put it in a more general way: I'd learned by now to accept the things that God did and allowed, but I still struggled to make sense of the things he *didn't do*. I had models to help me with the first of these, and now I needed a model to help me deal with the second.

This second type of model was a little more difficult than the first. Then, the issue was one of perception, finding a better way of looking at the facts. Now, it's not a matter of perception, it's for real. There really are things we have hoped for, longed for from God, prayed about fervently and repeatedly, sometimes for years on end, and they just don't happen. It's real, it's universal, and it leaves many Christians confused, disillusioned, and distrustful of God.

I needed a model that would make sense of this apparent reticence on God's part, and I found one that relates to the voluntary limitations that God has chosen to impose on himself—the areas in which he does, or does not, choose to take responsibility. These voluntary limitations are *God's self-imposed boundaries*.

GOD'S BOUNDARIES

Much has been written in both secular psychology and in the field of Christian counseling on the subject of boundaries. Briefly, ego boundaries are the lines or frontiers that we draw around ourselves mentally and psychologically to define our own spheres of authority and separate them from those of others. Within our boundaries, we have the duty, the right, and the responsibility to make decisions and carry them through. Outside of those boundaries, we may need to defer to the desires and decisions of others.

Correctly positioned boundaries are essential for anyone wanting to live a healthy and well-balanced life. Without them, we wreak havoc on ourselves and on those around us. Most people understand the need for boundaries, though they may express that need in different language. However, what is less well understood is that we are not the only ones with boundaries—God has them too.

Here are a few general points about boundaries as they relate to us and to God:

1. Boundaries are shared

Someone else is living on the other side of the fence. Every boundary has two sides, an inside and an outside. Whatever lies outside my boundary must of necessity lie inside someone else's. That someone may be my neighbour, it may be a government agency, or it may be—God.

2. Boundaries are reciprocal

This means that when I move my boundary, someone else's boundary has to move also. If I move my fence to expand my territory, my neighbour's territory gets smaller. If I contract my boundary, and if my neighbour leaves his unchanged, that creates a no man's land in between, where the grass never gets cut and the weeds flourish unchecked. Every boundary is of critical interest to two parties, not just one.

3. This explains why God has boundaries

From this, it follows that if I have a boundary with God, then clearly God has to have a boundary with me. It can't be any other way.

4. God is obsessive about boundaries

The boundary concept runs through the whole of Scripture—we just need to recognize it. This is equally true of boundaries between mortals, and of boundaries between God and man. Here is an example of the former from the Ten Commandments:

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.⁴⁶

There is a boundary between what belongs to you and what belongs to your neighbour, God tells us. What is yours is yours. What is his is his. The principle is clear—God cares about boundaries and takes them seriously.

⁴⁶ Exodus 20:17

5. Does this infringe God's rights?

But surely, everything belongs to God! He made the universe and everything in it, so surely the only legitimate boundary is the one running round the whole of everything and demarcating it as belonging to him.

This would be true, except for one thing. God has chosen, voluntarily, to move things from his side of the boundary to ours. He's contracted his boundary and expanded ours. In other words, he's chosen to give things away.

God is generous with his boundaries—sometimes too generous for our comfort, as we shall see. Sometimes he gives us ownership of things we'd rather he kept for himself, since with ownership comes *responsibility*.

OUR BOUNDARIES WITH GOD

There are two types of boundaries that we have with God. I've called these "voluntary" and "obligatory." The first type relate mainly to my *rights*, while the second relate mainly to my *responsibilities*.

Voluntary boundaries are set by me. They are voluntary because I choose where to position them. They include the usual sort of interpersonal boundaries with which most people are familiar, and they are essentially defensive. "No, you can't come in!" "It's mine! You can't have it!" I defend them tenaciously, only relaxing them slowly and with great caution.

These boundaries surround what I call my *rights*. With God, I'm setting them constantly—"So much of my time, and no more." "This much of my money, and no more." And so on. God is comfortable with this. He wants only what I give him freely, out of love, while things extracted under duress have no value to him. So, he gives me the freedom to position the boundaries where I choose.

My natural inclination in setting voluntary boundaries with God is to set them as wide as possible, to protect my own interests. That may not be where God would ideally like to see them, but he respects my right to position them, and unless I choose to relax them and invite him in, he will not cross them.

Obligatory boundaries are set by God. He puts them where he wants them, and he gives me no choice in the matter. They usually demarcate not my *rights*, but my *responsibilities*. Given a choice, I would probably choose to set these boundaries rather narrowly, and many of us try to

do just that. "But it's *your job* to make me happy, God! To give me the things I want, to sort out all my problems for me."

But I don't have that choice. God doesn't give me that choice. For my side of the boundary to contract would require God's side to expand, and that's something God will never agree to. If anything he's more interested in the opposite—contracting his own side and causing my side to expand. That's part of his plan for my spiritual growth. If my plan runs contrary to this, he won't accommodate it.

I can try to force the issue by drawing my boundary inwards unilaterally, but this is liable to be disastrous. It leaves an unfilled void in the middle where nobody takes responsibility. This causes all kinds of problems, as we will see.

Refusal by me to accept God's definitions of my responsibilities leads to a situation in which decisions go by default. I'm not making them, and God certainly won't step in and make them for me. So, we end up with a sort of rudderless drift. This can go on for years. If we don't recognize the true nature of the situation, we may interpret this state of non-decision-making as being God's purpose. The longer it goes on, the more random and meaningless the non-decisions are likely to become, and the more arbitrary and capricious God will appear to be.

Failure to understand the nature of God's boundaries is a frequent source of spiritual disillusionment. Many of us don't even grasp that these boundaries exist, let alone have any concept of who should be placing them, or where. Yet it is these that largely determine the way that God responds to our requests. To understand why God sometimes grants our requests and at other times doesn't, we need to know where these boundaries are positioned.

When I first became a Christian, I naturally assumed that God would be trying to expand his boundaries at the expense of my own. That was the way my world had always worked, so why should it be any different with God? The idea of a God who might want to contract his own boundaries in order to expand mine didn't come naturally to me. I've had to relearn, and that has been a slow process of laying aside intuitive expectations and moving out of deeply entrenched comfort zones.

Many of the problems and disasters recounted in the first half of this book stemmed directly from my total failure to understand either of these two types of boundaries. They are vital to understand, since they are relevant to all kinds of different situations that we face in the Christian life.

Here are a few examples of how the principle of boundaries can be applied:

1. Heaven, Hell, and God's Boundaries

We start here with what is really another slant on the subject of the last chapter. It's useful to look at the question of heaven and hell as being essentially an issue about boundaries, since it provides a good illustration of two important points. The first is how uncomfortably wide the boundary around our own responsibilities can be when God places it. The second is how rigid and uncompromising God can be when it comes to enforcing this kind of boundary.

C. S. Lewis summed up the issue of heaven and hell in this way:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in hell choose it.⁴⁷

This is the ultimate boundary, the one defined by God's respect for our decision over our eternal destiny.

God takes no pleasure in excluding anyone from his kingdom. Ideally he'd like to have everyone in. The obvious thing to do would be to drag them in by force. They might resist initially, but once they got there, they'd quickly see how good it was and be grateful for it. But God won't do that. Instead, he places the responsibility for the decision firmly on our side of the line. “It's your choice,” he says. “Heaven or hell—it's up to you.”

That means that it's up to us to investigate and weigh the evidence. It's up to us to make the decision. And it's up to us to bear the consequences of that decision. God has set our boundary wide and given us a massive responsibility and a huge freedom. That freedom may seem initially to be good news, but it can also be very uncomfortable.

Many people don't like this. They think it's unfair that God should have assigned us so much responsibility for such an important decision. There's no real answer to that. It's what he's done, and we have no choice but to accept it. It's a part of his definition of adulthood.

2. The “Mind Control” Boundary

Anyone who has read the Harry Potter books will be familiar with the idea of “memory modification.” Briefly, what happens is this: When ordinary people stumble by accident or carelessness into the parallel but hidden world of wizarding and see things they're not supposed to see,

⁴⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945)

the offending memories are magically erased by a simple wave of a wand. The entire episode is deleted from their minds, and life continues as if nothing had happened. A quick and easy solution to a knotty problem.

I enjoy reading Harry Potter and find a lot of interesting Christian symbolism in it, but memory modification always leaves me feeling a little uneasy. This is because it runs counter to another of God's sacrosanct boundaries. God will not invade our minds and tamper with them. They are inviolate.

This particular boundary relates to an unanswered prayer that I mentioned earlier—when I asked God to make me the sort of person who no longer loses things around the house. I understand better now why nothing happened. What I was actually looking for in that prayer was a wave of God's magic wand and a bit of real-life memory modification. I wanted God to come inside my brain, identify the faulty circuits, and rewire them. I realize now that the request fell outside his boundaries and inside my own. It was my responsibility, not his.

The problem had originated in years of laziness and lack of self-discipline earlier in life. Over time, this had turned into the kind of automatic pattern of negative behaviour we call a bad habit. The key to changing bad habits lies in replacing them with good ones. More disciplined choices over a period of time implant new and better habits, and eventually these supplant the old ones. It's not as convenient as having God wave a wand, but it's his preferred solution.

When I woke up to the fact that God wasn't going to do it for me, I started trying to put some better systems of organization in place, and over time, it's improved (a bit). But I still lose things, I still have to go back to God and ask for help, and he still finds them for me. If it doesn't happen quite as often as before, then maybe he did answer the prayer after all—but in his own way.

3. The "Passive Dependency" Boundary

Scott Peck's description of passive dependency can scarcely be bettered:

Once while working with a group of patients, all with passive dependent personality disorder, I asked them to speak of their goals in terms of what life situation they wanted to find themselves in five years hence. In one way or another each of them replied, "I want to be married to someone who really cares for me." Not one mentioned holding down a challenging job, creating a work of art, etc. The notion of effort was not

involved in their daydreams; they envisioned only an effortless passive state of receiving care.⁴⁸

Passive dependent personality disorder is the most common of all personality disorders. It's particularly common among Christians. Passive dependents take to Christianity like ducks take to water. The allure of having God carry them passively through the pitfalls of life is well nigh irresistible, and they have little problem accepting Christ and committing their lives to him.

That's when the problems start. When passive dependents come to Christ, they enter the new life as passive dependent Christians. The euphoria of conversion may temporarily obscure their problem, but it always resurfaces sooner or later—and usually sooner.

Passive dependents are always looking for help. They try to set their responsibility boundaries narrowly, and they look to others, and to God, to set their boundaries correspondingly widely. They're always looking to export their responsibilities onto others.

One common way in which passive dependents seek for external support is by linking up with people who have the opposite, and complementary, problem—those who are known as “codependents.” Codependency has been defined as “an inordinate and unhealthy compulsion to rescue and take care of people.”⁴⁹ For the passive dependent, linking up with one of these people in a codependent relationship can seem like a heaven-sent answer to their problems. In the short term, it may even appear to work.

Codependency is rife in Christian churches. Church leaders are usually very happy to have passive dependents in their congregations. These people work hard and without complaint, and give unstintingly of their time and money. In return they require only a little attention and some occasional words of praise. Often they are the backbone of the whole organization, doing all the unglamorous, behind-the-scenes work that keeps the church running.

As for the pastor, a desire to “rescue and take care of people” may have been what brought him into the ministry in the first place, so it's not surprising that codependency can be beguiling, and in the short term, highly productive. Neither is it surprising when the fundamentally unhealthy nature of the relationship gets conveniently forgotten.

⁴⁸ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978)

⁴⁹ Pat Springle, *Codependency—A Christian Perspective* (Houston: Rapha Publishing, 1990)

Before I became a Christian, I had like many people a slight latent tendency towards passive dependency, though I didn't know it by that name. I think I probably instinctively understood the danger that it posed, and I recognized the need to resist and actively compensate for it. That was why reading *How to Win Friends and Influence People* had helped me so much—it was a totally anti-dependency, stand-on-your-own-feet sort of book.

When I became a Christian—I can see now, looking back—that latent dependent streak in my personality quickly came to the surface and started to take control. Why was this? Probably because I picked up on the Christian teaching about "depending on God" and misinterpreted its meaning. There's a healthy dependency and an unhealthy dependency, and I failed to recognize the difference. Instead of fighting the unhealthy dependency, I now embraced it as a positive spiritual virtue. I was using my religion to affirm a very dark side of my personality. I had found a recipe for complete disaster.

Eventually I started trying to form a codependent relationship with God. This is something that can't be done. It's impossible. People can be cajoled or manipulated into unhealthy relationships of all sorts, but God cannot. God will never consent to being a part of a relationship that requires an abnormal, neurotic response on both sides. I doubt he's even capable of it.

As an example of this, I remember one early period in my Christian life when I found myself deeply isolated and without any real friends. So what did I do? I prayed and asked God to solve the problem. And what happened? Nothing, of course! That was never going to work. If you want friends, you have to get up, go out, and meet people. Pray as well, but don't just pray! Dale Carnegie could have told me that much, but by now I had decided that his simple, practical ideas on how to make friends had no place in the world of Bible-believing Christians, and I had discarded them.

Looking back, it all seems obvious now, but then it wasn't. I thought I was taking the high, spiritual road. I thought that this kind of dependency on God was what he wanted. When it failed, I felt he had utterly betrayed me. It would take me years to learn what God *really* wanted and where he was setting the boundaries in our relationship.

God is on our side.

What he wants for us, most of the time, is the same as what we want—or should want—for ourselves, including firm and secure boundaries. This is true of our relationship with him, just as it is of our relationships with other people. It's also true, as we will look at next, of our relationship with the church.

CHAPTER 18

“I DON’T LIKE THE CHURCH”

ARE YOU A Christian?”
Embarrassed pause. “I’m afraid I gave up going to church a long time ago.”

I’ve had this conversation, in one form or another, more times than I care to remember. It’s one of the saddest conversations I know, made all the more sad by its being so unnecessary.

The problems start in our relationship with the church. We allow these problems to poison our relationship with God, and pretty soon that too is crumbling. There’s nothing quite like a sense of guilt to wreck a relationship with God, and failure in church is a frequent source of guilt.

It doesn’t have to be that way. If there was just a single message in the final section of this book it would be this: We will have problems in the church, but this shouldn’t prevent us from having a happy and fruitful relationship with God. God and the church are two separate entities—related, but separate. We can be right with God, right with the church, right with both, or right with neither.

We’ve looked at some of the problems we can encounter in our personal lives with God. These can be difficult and painful, but they can all be solved. The solutions lie in our own hands, once we understand how God works and what he’s doing, and once we align our wills with his. It’s not always easy, but it’s always possible.

We can rebel, of course, and choose to reject his purpose for us, but plain, simple rebellion against God is probably rather unusual. After all, we made the initial decision to trust him even before we knew him. As we come to know him better, we should find no reason for disappointment. If we trusted him then, why would we turn away from him now?

No, usually we turn away because somewhere along the line we’ve misunderstood what he’s trying to do. We may have misunderstood his boundaries, or our own, and so interpreted his inaction as a lack of concern. Then we get angry or disillusioned and turn away. Rebellion by Christians against God is mostly the result of misunderstanding.

I hope this doesn’t sound too simplistic or trite to those who have spent years in spiritual misery and conflict with God. I don’t want to suggest that it’s *easy* to resolve these conflicts—just that it’s possible. All problems with God can ultimately be resolved.

Problems with the church are different. Churches are run by people. People make mistakes, misjudge situations, mishear the voice of God, and confuse their private agendas and motivations with those of God. They misinterpret Scripture, and they behave in selfish ways. God never does any of these things. Some church problems can, like problems with God, be rooted in misunderstanding and miscommunication, but others have a more solid base—they are the consequences of other people’s wrong behaviour.

Some church issues may be resolved through discussion, or by one party or the other admitting fault and agreeing to change, but often this doesn’t happen. Some people are incapable of admitting fault. Wrong, manipulative, or otherwise abusive behaviour can be ongoing, with no end in sight, and we may have to find a way to live with it. This can be very hard. When people admit fault and apologize, it’s easy to forgive—anyone can do that. But when people continue to do the same things with no insight or remorse, forgiveness is more difficult.

All this means that solving our church problems is likely to be a lot more difficult and complicated than solving our God problems. For many of us it will be a life-long battle, an ongoing part of the Christian life.

The first key step in fighting this battle is learning how not to allow our church problems to negatively affect our relationship with God. This is something that doesn’t have to happen, but unfortunately, it often does. We struggle and often fail to maintain a firm boundary between our church problems and our God problems. We allow the one to infect the other, and the two relationships slowly disintegrate in tandem.

The life of the prophet Elijah serves as a good model to illustrate a healthy boundary between the God relationship and the church relationship. Actually, a variety of Old Testament figures could serve this purpose equally well, since many of them had to learn the painful lesson that faithfulness to God sometimes requires a distancing from the church.⁵⁰ After all, confronting the religious establishment was a large part of what being a prophet was all about!

ELIJAH

Elijah lived in the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC, during the reign of King Ahab. This was a time when true religion was in serious decline. Following the lead of Ahab and his wife Jezebel, almost the entire population had abandoned worship of the true God and turned to the worship of the demonic false god Baal. Most of the spiritual leaders had gone along with this trend, and only Elijah and a few others were left to resist the move and uphold the banner of truth.

Ahab himself was not an unashamedly evil man, but he was weak. He allowed himself to be dominated by Jezebel, who was adept at playing on his insecurities to manipulate him. In this way she was able to exercise effective rule over the kingdom in his name.

Jezebel meanwhile was truly evil. She was the prime mover in abandoning the worship of God and embracing the cult of Baal. In this, she led astray not only her husband but also most of the prophetic community. These prophets should have been beacons of truth for the wider society, but instead they had walked away.

A small number of prophets had stayed faithful to God and, like Elijah, had gone into hiding to avoid being killed. The majority, however, had followed the lead of their queen and switched to Baal worship. Now they were prophets of Baal rather than prophets of God, willfully embracing the moral degradation and perversions that went with that cult.

Most of the lay people also took the easy road and accepted the new doctrine being passed down by their leaders. They didn't have to, but

⁵⁰ Here and elsewhere, I have used the word *church* (Greek *ekklesia*, simply meaning “called out ones”) in a broad sense to include not only the New Testament covenant people of God but also God’s Old Testament community. The original meaning is equally applicable to both. The problems they faced were similar, and God’s answers haven’t changed.

they chose to. Elijah confronted them and challenged them to make a stand for God and for the truth, but he was met by a sullen silence.⁵¹ They couldn’t justify their decision to follow Baal, but neither would they back down and repent. Their silence gives the impression of a sense of uneasy guilt, as if they knew deep down that their behaviour was not right, but they were going to do it anyway. They were happy just to be swept along.

Why were the people so passive here? Why were they so unwilling to make a decision?

Most obviously and understandably, there was fear of retribution. Jezebel was a ruthless woman, with no qualms about killing those who crossed her. Integrity could carry a high price. Then there was the twisted spiritual logic that said, “Better to do nothing. As long as I do nothing, I can’t be doing anything wrong. If I make a decision and get it wrong, then I’m in trouble.” Doing nothing can give the illusion of safety.⁵²

In addition there’s the instinctive obedience to authority that has contributed so much to the carnage of human history—the comfort and security that come from following a leader and being part of a crowd. “Following orders” is a convenient way of abrogating responsibility and shifting it onto those above us in order to justify our actions. We tell ourselves that as long as we remain in the mainstream, everything will turn out all right.

These are worldly patterns of reaction, seen in people everywhere, and not peculiar to the religious environment. In the church, however, these pressures and influences can be greatly magnified. In church, we may find ourselves confronted by a systematic theology of hierarchy telling us that unquestioning obedience to those higher on the ladder than ourselves is a part of God’s plan. Thoughts of sin and judgment can magnify our fear of stepping out of line. The desire to conform and be accepted is every bit as strong—and often more so—in the church as it is outside.

One can imagine similar pressures operating in the lives of the Israelites in Ahab’s time. Probably the prophets of Baal pushed the same message of unquestioning obedience that is often seen in the church today. “God has appointed us to lead. Your job is to follow and obey. Asking the wrong questions is rebellion against God. Don’t *think*, just *follow!*”

⁵¹ “The people did not answer him a word.” See 1 Kings 18:20–21.

⁵² Jesus was critical of this thinking, as shown, for example, in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–29. However it remains popular in the church today.

It's not surprising that, when faced with the sheer power and momentum of the Baal movement, almost nobody was prepared to stand against it—except Elijah.

Elijah was one of those larger-than-life characters whose lives are recorded in the Bible as examples for the rest of us. He comes across as a reluctant hero, fearful, full of self-doubt, and prone to depression. Probably he would have been happy to settle for a quiet and uncontroversial life, but the circumstances didn't allow it. He knew too much. He knew the truth, and that knowledge polarized his options. He could flow with the religious mainstream and join the prophets of Baal, or he could stand for the truth and face rejection and ostracism. There was no middle path available to him.

Elijah chose the truth, and in consequence found himself driven out of the community and forced to flee for his life. For several years he was a fugitive, moving from place to place to keep ahead of Ahab's agents who were scouring the countryside trying to kill him. He was a refugee in a desolate, famine-ridden land, uncertain of his next meal or the next roof over his head. Rejected by the religious mainstream as an eccentric misfit or—even worse—as a heretic, Elijah found himself forced into an isolated and lonely lifestyle.

When we look at the problems Elijah had with the church of his day, we can draw some comfort. Church problems are not new. They've been around for as long as people have been meeting together to worship God.

When I first became a Christian, I expected that my life would get easier. I thought that I had done God a big favour by converting and that he owed me something in return. Since he was asking me to live a better life, I thought he would use his inside knowledge of my weaknesses and vulnerabilities to shield me a bit. Knowing the areas where I was most prone to fall, he could spare me from excessive temptation in those areas.

It never occurred to me that God might do the exact opposite, that he might deliberately engineer circumstances that would systematically target my weakest points and clinically expose my failings. I soon found out!

Elijah had to find out the same thing. On Mount Horeb, alone, insecure, and depressed, he was confronted by an unsympathetic God who reacted to his self-pity in God's characteristic way—by completely ignoring it.

God speaks only to the real, not to the imaginary. He never gets into dialogue with the subjective imaginings we conjure up inside our heads. For Elijah, who by now is contemplating suicide as a way out, God has only one message: “Forget it, Elijah—that stuff doesn’t work on me. I’ve given you a job to do, so just get on and do it, *please!*” It sounds tough, but God knew it was the therapeutic response that Elijah needed.

At his lowest points, Elijah’s isolation was intense, but God never left him quite alone. Help came from the most unexpected sources. A destitute peasant woman fed and sheltered him. Obadiah, the head of Ahab’s household, became an unlikely ally. Even the scavenging birds in the desert were enlisted to bring him food. God may take from us a lot of the natural supports in our lives, but he knows we don’t function well when isolated for too long. He takes things away, makes his point, and then gives them back.

Ultimately, Elijah’s faithfulness was rewarded with victory, and the prophets of Baal were defeated. Afterwards, those who had blindly followed the false teachings fell on their faces saying, “The Lord indeed is God! The Lord indeed is God!”⁵³ It says much for the extraordinary kindness and mercy of God that he accepted them back without demur. They were forgiven and restored to grace—but what an opportunity they had missed! What a chance for true spiritual glory! Any one of them could have laid hold of it, but they chose not to. By default, the victory went to Elijah alone.

What made Elijah so different from the prophets who had turned away? After all, the prophets of Baal were sincere in their beliefs. When they met Elijah on Mount Carmel, they truly believed that Baal would intervene to save them. They were sincere, but they fell into a trap—they allowed themselves to be led astray by a powerful authority figure claiming a superior revelation.

Why did they do this?

The prophets of Baal failed to understand the fundamental truth that God and the religious institutions are separate and distinct entities, and when their paths diverge—as they often do—our primary responsibility is to God, not to the institution. They couldn’t see that. They tied their destiny to the mast of religion, not to God, and when that turned out to be wrong and hit the rocks, they sank together.

Elijah was not a natural rebel. He accepted the validity of human religious structures—what we now call the church—but he did so

⁵³ 1 Kings 18:39

conditionally. The church held no mystical significance for him. It was an instrument with a function. It was there to bring people closer to God. It needed to be evaluated objectively and dispassionately on that criterion, and if it was failing in that, then it was worthless.

Elijah set a boundary for the church. He defined a limit to its authority according to its faithfulness to its purpose. When it stepped over that boundary and claimed an authority in its own right, one that was not a reflection of God's will or truth, Elijah rejected that authority and turned directly to God. Simple in theory, but not necessarily easy to practice.

There's a certain inevitability about Elijah's victory. When a man is fixed as uncompromisingly on God as Elijah was, it can hardly be otherwise. Even so, Elijah was never restored to full respectability. He was never entirely trusted by the establishment and remained a permanent outsider, an isolated maverick. That was the price he paid for following God. But when his time came, he was able to pass his mantle on to his successor with the vision still intact. The chariot came, and he went home to his true reward.

The distinction between God and the church should be obvious, but we lose sight of it easily. We can be browbeaten by those who claim to be the stewards of God's truth. We can feel guilty about forming our own opinions, and we can start deferring to majority views. Issues of church politics and our standing in the community can start to cloud our judgment. The pressure to conform can be intense, even overwhelming. Gradually our own unique, personal relationship with God, which is our lifeblood, can be squeezed out. Relationship is replaced by religion. We lose touch with our starting point, and soon we're left with a dry, empty shell of religiosity. And we blame it all on God.

In such times we need to stand back a little and make room for Elijah. Surviving the church can be a hard, lonely struggle. Elijah found that out, and it's a lesson every prophet of God needs to learn.

STRATEGIES FOR CHURCH SURVIVAL

The final chapters of this book deal specifically with strategies for church survival and the tools available to help us. For maximum clarity, I've included here a short summary of the main points to be covered and where to find them.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

1. We need to be firmly grounded in the eternal realities of the Christian faith. This is sometimes called “theology.” Many Christians don’t like theology. They think it boring and even “unspiritual,” and they prefer a more intuitive approach that requires less mental effort. But theology can’t be avoided. We all have a personal theology—the only question is whether it’s a right and good one, or a bad and distorted one. Good theology is a key defense against manipulation, and we need it. Without it, we are left in a hopelessly vulnerable state. (**Chapter 19**)
2. Our personal relationship with God needs to be at the centre of everything. That relationship is governed by the contract that he has given us, and we need to understand exactly what that contract says. (**Chapter 19**)
3. We need to understand clearly what the church is and what it is not:
 - i) The church exists for our benefit. It is here to facilitate and improve our relationship with God. We do not exist for the benefit of the church. (**Chapter 19**)
 - ii) The church is a functional compromise run by flawed individuals for the benefit of other flawed individuals. It does not represent God’s ideal for the human race. (**Chapter 20**)
 - iii) From Adam onwards, a streak of evil has co-existed with the church, infecting and polluting it. This is the Pharisee Principle. We have to understand that it exists (**Chapter 21**), and we have to learn how to recognize it. (**Chapter 22**)
 - iv) We need to consider and understand the true nature of human depravity. There are no good people. Not us. Not our pastors. Not Billy Graham. No one. Jesus said it clearly. (**Chapter 23**)
 - v) Hierarchy and human authority have a very limited role in God’s original dispensation of the church (as opposed to what it evolved into later) (**Chapter 19**)—God’s ideal is the priesthood of all believers. (**Chapter 25**)
4. We need to learn to make honest and dispassionate judgments, and have the confidence to trust them. This includes objective judgments on the strengths and weaknesses of our local congregation. For this we trust in God’s Spirit working through our own

individual priesthood, and we reject the false humility that might lead us into a false and excessive deference to the opinions of other people. (Chapter 24)

5. We need to examine carefully, and if necessary redefine, our own boundary with the church. This involves studying God's principles concerning boundaries—where he places them, and how he respects them. The line around our rights and responsibilities is sacrosanct. God respects it and so must the church. So:
 - i) Where God refuses to trespass, the church has no right to trespass either. (Chapter 26)
 - ii) Like Elijah, we look first to God for the answers—not to any human agency. (Chapter 18)
 - iii) It is never God's purpose for us that we should surrender our wills to any person or institution. (Chapter 24)
 - iv) Neither are we to become over-dependent on church approval. The only approval we need is from God. Peer pressure can be a real problem. (Chapter 24)
6. The basis for all these truths is to realize that we have one primary teacher—God himself. Look at church teaching through critical eyes. All teachers are wrong about some things, some are wrong about everything. (Chapter 19)
7. We will, inevitably, be called upon sometimes to defend our boundaries and repel invaders. As much as possible, we do this politely and peaceably, but also tenaciously and without compromise. (Chapter 26)

Paradoxically, in the long run all this may very well improve our church relationships. As we come out of dependency and form strong, healthy boundaries, a healthy church will instinctively grasp who we are and respect us for it. This should not, however, be our primary objective. Our primary objective is a whole and healthy relationship with God.

CHAPTER 19

UNDERSTANDING OUR CONTRACT WITH GOD

ALL RELATIONSHIPS NEED rules. This is true of families, marriages, workplaces, communities, nations, and even our everyday friendships. Without rules you get chaos, misunderstandings, and, worse than that, exploitation and manipulation.

Marriage is a good example. No woman wants her husband turning to her after five years of marriage and saying, “But I never thought you would expect me to remain *faithful!* That was never a part of the deal!” So when you marry you make a contract. It lays out the rules, like: “forsaking all others till death do us part.”

Contracts are a routine part of our daily lives. When you start a new job, you get a contract. It tells you two things—what your employer expects from you, and what you can expect from your employer. That way you both know where you stand.

It’s the same with God. God likes contracts and uses them all the time. The Old Testament is full of contracts between God and various individuals or groups. Abraham, Moses, and David all had them, sometimes for themselves and sometimes held by them as leaders on behalf of the community. Apart from these well-known ones, there were many lesser ones as well.

When we become Christians, we enter into a contract with God. This is given to us for the same reasons as any other contract. It defines the relationship, tells us the rules, gives us security, and avoids misunderstandings.

It's not always fully understood that Christian conversion involves the entering into of a contractual relationship with God. One reason for this is that Christians tend not to use the word "contract" with its worldly and materialistic connotations. More often they say "covenant," which is simply an old-fashioned word meaning the same thing.

Although we have a contract with God, we don't have a contract with the church—at least not one given by God (some churches like to impose their own contracts, but that's different). It might save us a lot of trouble, but that's not God's way. He gives us a few broad guidelines and then leaves us to get on and work out our own structures and relationships according to the one overriding principle of love. God is not a controlling personality, and he has no interest in imposing specific structures on us. This can be inconvenient and uncomfortable for us at times, but it's the way he wants it.

This doesn't mean our contract with God is of no help in defining our relationship with the church. On the contrary, it's actually very useful. This is because many of the issues here—as in all relationships—revolve around the question of boundaries, or spheres of responsibility. The boundary system involves three parties—me, God, and the church. If I can understand God's boundaries with me and with the church, and if I can understand my boundary with God, then correct positioning of my boundary with the church becomes much easier. Our contract with God helps us to do this, so we need to have a clear understanding of what it says.

OUR CONTRACT WITH GOD

The contract we enter into with God when we become Christians is usually referred to as the *New Covenant*, though *New Contract*⁵⁴ would do equally well and probably convey the meaning better. It's not actually new at all. It's about 2,700 years old, but back then it was new. It's the most recent of God's contracts with his people, and it supersedes and replaces all the ones that went before. It's also the final one. There will be no more contracts after this one, since this is an everlasting one that has no need of replacement.

The complete text of this New Contract is found twice in the Bible, once in the Old Testament and once in the New. This is how it goes:

⁵⁴ In this chapter I have used the term *New Contract* to emphasize the true nature of the document. Elsewhere I use the more familiar *New Covenant*. This is not intended to convey any nuance of meaning—the two terms are identical in meaning, and interchangeable.

“The days are surely coming,” says the Lord,
 “when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
 and with the house of Judah;
 not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors,
 on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land
 of Egypt;
 for they did not continue in my covenant,
 and so I had no concern for them,” says the Lord.
 “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after
 those days,” says the Lord:
 “I will put my laws in their minds,
 and write them on their hearts,
 and I will be their God,
 and they shall be my people.
 And they shall not teach one another
 or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’
 for they shall all know me,
 from the least of them to the greatest.
 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
 and I will remember their sins no more.”⁵⁵

THE CONTRACT IN DETAIL

The New Contract starts with the words, “The days are surely coming, when...”

It was written in the future tense, looking forward to a time that had not yet arrived. The prophecy was given to the prophet Jeremiah in the seventh century BC, and he wrote it down. It spoke of a time in the future when the old contract, given to Moses on Mount Sinai (which even in Jeremiah’s time had been in use for more than 800 years), would be replaced by this new one.

The timing of this future event would have been a mystery to Jeremiah and his contemporaries, but to us it has been made known. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ himself is the mediator of the New Contract, and that his resurrection ushers in the new era. Thus, the New Contract is the contract of the New Testament, and when we become Christians this is the contract that we enter into with God. It defines much of our subsequent relationship with him, so we need to understand it well.

⁵⁵ Hebrews 8:8–12, quoting from Jeremiah 31:31–34. There are minor differences in language between the two versions, but the meaning is the same.

The contract falls neatly into four sections, with a short preamble. We will look at these sections one by one. For clarity, we take them in a different order from that found in the original document.

We are going to see that the contract is not an evenly balanced one. Like all God's contracts, it's very one-sided. It's heavily weighted...in our favour. God is giving us a lot more than we are giving him. We shouldn't be surprised by this. There's always an imbalance in our relationship with God. He has far more to give to us than we have to give to him—we bring little or nothing to the game. If we think we can have an equal, balanced relationship with God, then we fundamentally misunderstand our position.

The preamble deals with the essential question of who, exactly, are the "signatories" of this contract. We are told that it is between God on the one side and the houses of Israel and Judah on the other. In this context, *house* refers to the various original tribes of the Jewish people and their subsequent mutations. These tribes had started as large extended families composed of blood relatives. Over time, the composition changed as outsiders were adopted in, some tribes were wiped out completely, and others fused into larger blocks.

Later on, in the New Testament era, the change was accelerated and more dramatic. Huge numbers of Gentile Christians were grafted in. Many of the original tribal members opted out. Hebrews makes it clear that the *house of Israel* and the *house of Judah* now refer to the family of God in its newer, wider sense—in other words, the Christian church.

When we read the contract, we find it includes two distinct types of element. There are "family" elements, describing a corporate contract between God and the whole church as a unit, and there are "individual" elements, describing a personal contract between God and each of us as individuals. We will have to disentangle these two as we go through.

1. "I will be their God..."

"...and they shall be my people," God says of us. This is the only clause in the whole contract that is reciprocal, in the sense that in return for God's commitment to us he expects something back. The nature of this return obligation is deliberately left open-ended. God is looking for a family commitment, and this can't be easily defined in terms of rules and regulations. God is saying, "You are to be a family member, with whatever that may entail."

2. “I will remember their sins no more”

The offer here goes beyond simple forgiveness. There can be degrees of forgiveness. We may say, “Well...I forgive you, but I won’t forget. I’m filing it away for future reference in case I want to bring it up again in the future.” That’s human forgiveness. It’s not really forgiveness at all, more a form of probation—forgiveness, but with conditions attached.

People do this all the time, but God never does. When God forgives, the slate is wiped clean. It’s unconditional. Our sin is erased from the record and forgotten about. God will never dust it off and use it against us in the future. We may sin again and again, but each time it’s as if it were the first offence. That’s the nature of God’s forgiveness, as expressed in the New Contract. There will be no further accounting. It’s gone, forgotten, finished for all time.

3. “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts”

The first two clauses have shown the generosity of God in our adoption and our forgiveness. Now he takes it to another level. It’s a direct supernatural intervention in our lives, leading to a once and for all moral transformation of our deepest nature.

From now on our morality, our understanding of right and wrong, is to be internal, flowing from our hearts, rather than something externally imposed. This goes beyond mere knowledge—it touches our desires and motivations. “I am changing your nature from the inside,” God tells us. “From now on, you will have a nature to think like me. From now on, doing good will come naturally to you. Loving people will come naturally. You won’t need to strive and struggle to do the right things. It will just happen.”

Of course, in reality we quickly find that it’s not quite so simple. The old nature is still around, ready to reassert itself and even drown out the new nature completely, if given the chance. Nonetheless, the change has been made. The new nature is now in place and is fused into our deepest selves.

With this knowledge, we can relax a bit and see the Christian life in terms of learning to be ourselves (our new selves, that is, not our old selves) rather than of being turned into something that we’re not. We stop striving, and learn to let the new nature flow out from our hearts.

4. “And they shall not teach one another...”

This is the final and most revolutionary clause of the contract—though in fact it follows logically from the one before. If God is writing his laws directly into our hearts and minds, where does that leave the role of the teacher?

Teachers exist to teach us things that we don’t know. At school we have geography classes to teach us about life in other countries. But if later we get the opportunity to visit those countries for ourselves and see them firsthand, then the lessons become superfluous. We say, “Hey, that teacher missed half of it! I’ve been there myself, and I’ve seen more than he ever knew!”

When we become Christians and come to know God personally, he takes on the role of our private tutor. In our new environment, second-hand knowledge *about* God is replaced by direct personal encounter *with* God. This may not necessarily make the teacher entirely redundant (we will return to this in the next chapter), but he is reduced to a supporting capacity, while God himself takes the primary role.

That’s the essence of the New Contract. It’s quite a package: Two clauses on what God has done *for* us, by adopting us and forgiving us; and two clauses on what he has done *in* us, by giving us a new heart like his own and a direct communication channel for personal instruction.

It’s a comprehensive and central statement of what it means to be a Christian, as God sees it. It’s our heritage in God and the basis for how we structure our lives with God. And it’s a key reference point for looking at our relationship with the church.

THE NEW CONTRACT AND THE CHURCH

As we’ve seen, the contract contains a mixture of individual and community elements. It starts as an agreement between God and his people as a whole, but the emphasis quickly shifts from the community to the individual. All the significant clauses are addressed to us as individuals. It is as individuals that we are to be forgiven, have God’s laws written on our hearts, and be his people. It is as individuals that we are to know God, be known by God, and be tutored by God.

This applies to every one of us—to *all...from the least of them to the greatest*. There are no exceptions. There is no place here for “important people” with a special, privileged access to the mind of God, nor for “lesser people” who are depending on those above for knowledge. God says he

will deal with each and every one of us on an equal basis. The personal knowledge of God is made available to all of us in equal measure.

So where does this leave the church, with its teachers and its hierarchies?

To understand the correct balance between God, the individual, and the church, the analogy of the human family is a useful one. It's also a model that Jesus and Paul used frequently to convey their understanding of the various interrelationships involved.

The analogy of the church as a family is simple and straightforward. God is the father. The rest of us Christians are his children, and brothers and sisters to one another. In comparison to the wisdom and experience of God, we're obviously rather young children, though clearly there's a range. For us younger ones, the church institution can then be our nursery or playroom, where we play our games, act our parts, and go through the process of exploration and experimentation that is a necessary part of growing up.

Our father is naturally of the very wisest sort. He doesn't mollycoddle us, but rather gives us the space we need to fall over a few times, make some mistakes, and learn from our experiences.

Within any family group, a dynamic is likely to emerge, in which those who are a bit older take on a guiding role for those who are a bit younger. In that little world, six seems like a lot older than four, even if from an adult perspective none of them know very much of the real world. What little the older ones know, they share with the younger; and as likely as not the four-year-old will look up to the six-year-old with something akin to awe and reverence, such is the perceived depth of his or her knowledge.

But when the door opens and the father steps into the room, everything changes. Suddenly, all eyes are on him, the games stop, the play-acting comes to an end, the roles are switched, and we come back to reality—or as much of a reality as our childish eyes are able to understand. Our mentors are revealed for what they really are—other small children, slightly older than us, but children nonetheless.

This is the spiritual reality of the Christian church. In God's eyes, we're all beginners. That's all this life is for us, a beginning. What we call spiritual maturity, seen from God's perspective, is like a six-year-old showing his little sister how he's finally learned to tie his own shoelaces and giving her a few tips. It's a wonderful thing to do—but we need to keep it in right balance. Paul tells us that if we think we've even learned to stand up, we're heading for a fall.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." 1 Corinthians 10:12

There's no harm in our listening to teachers—perhaps they really can help us tie our laces better. But our real tutor is God, and in comparison to him, all human teachers, even the best, are limited, fallible, and often just plain wrong.

Applying the family analogy to the story of Elijah, we find there someone who is part of a family unit that has effectively disintegrated. The kids are running wild, out of control. They have disowned the father and barricaded the playroom door to keep him out. He could force his way in, but he won't do that. He has decided that they're old enough to take the responsibility, make the decisions, and accept the consequences.

Elijah wants no part in it, so God pulls him out and takes him off on his own. It's a hard and lonely time for him, but his Father's company is sufficient to see him through, and he grows up quickly. It's good to have a family, but sometimes you're better off not having them around the whole time.

When families fall apart in conflict and acrimony, it can be very hard on the younger ones. Children blame themselves for conflicts in which they have no real part. If they're abused, they may assume it's something they've brought on themselves or even deserve. It's a downside of their natural, instinctive respect for authority.

The same thing can happen in church. If we find we don't fit in, our first reaction may be to blame ourselves. It may be our fault, of course, but equally it may not be. To grow into maturity and fulfill our spiritual potential, we have to grow out of this child-like tendency to self-blame and learn to make more objective and impartial judgments. Sometimes we will have to admit to being wrong, but other times we will be right, and we need to recognize that without apology.

The New Contract puts a high value on our individuality and personal uniqueness. My own parents, who were far from perfect, had an irritating tendency to refer to my brother, sisters, and myself as if we had a sort of collective group consciousness, as opposed to being four separate and unique individuals. It was always, "The children, this," and, "The children, that." Sometimes I wanted to scream, "Hey, I'm *me*! I exist! Sure, I'm part of this family, but I have my own attitudes, ideas, and opinions! I'm not just a cog in a machine!"

Later on when I joined churches, I found a similar process of identity suppression at work. My unique individuality was always being subordinated to the collective good of the community as a whole. Not surprisingly, I reacted badly to this.

God's approach to his family is very different. He never allows his feeling for the family as a whole to cloud his appreciation of our individuality. Emphasis on the supreme importance and value of the individual is a big part of the legacy of Christianity in Western society—though most people have long forgotten where it came from. It's clearly enshrined in the New Contract, but it regularly gets lost in church—and particularly, as we've seen earlier, in mission-orientated churches with a high premium on quantifiable results.

If we rely on a worldly paradigm to build our church, then we may be successful in building an organization, but that organization may be one that has ceased to reflect God's values. We also deny a central tenet of our contract with God, under which every individual *from the least of them to the greatest* has an equal, and probably infinite, value. It's a contract of equality of opportunity and ability. God has given it to us, and we owe it to ourselves to stand by it.

When I started my apprenticeship in medicine many years ago, I looked at the senior medical specialists in the hospital where I was training as all-wise, all-knowing, almost God-like figures. I think we all did. Three decades later, I've been there and done it for myself, and now I can look back and laugh a little at my earlier naivety. Now I know how very ordinary they can be.

My perception was a delusion. It was a normal and entirely natural delusion, one that most of us have experienced at some time in our lives. It may have been a healthy delusion and a necessary delusion. But it was a delusion nonetheless, since the perception did not accurately reflect the reality. I had to grow out of this delusion, just as those men, in their time, had had to grow out of theirs. To spend my career languishing in their shadow would have been to stunt my own development and sell myself short. I had to grow up.

Every one of us, in our own process of growing up, has had a day of shocked realization when we had to face the fact that our parents were mere mortals—ordinary, fallible human beings. If we had older brothers or sisters, we may have gone through a similar process with them.

When I first became a Christian, I put our “apostle” and some of the senior church members on a pedestal. I truly believed that they were like Moses, that they could practically speak with God face to face. Time and experience again revealed the truth to me.

We grow up in our workplaces, we grow up in our families, and we have to grow up in the church. Sadly, it doesn't always happen. Many

church members show no interest in growing up...ever. And some pastors are likewise happy to keep their flock in a state of child-like dependency forever.

This state of affairs can simply be a reflection of the institutionalized codependency that afflicts so many churches. However, it can also be a reflection of something altogether more sinister. This will become clearer in the next two chapters, as we move on to explore the underlying nature of two fundamental limitations that are intrinsic to that very limited and imperfect instrument known as the Christian Church.

CHAPTER 20

UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH—PRACTICALITY OR PERFECTION?

I WAS READING the autobiography of Jim Bakker.⁵⁷ He and his wife, Tammy, ran a well-known and successful television ministry for several years. This ended when Jim was convicted of financial irregularities and given a long, though subsequently reduced, prison sentence. In prison, he had plenty of time to think. He read the New Testament over and over, looking for clues to help him understand the catastrophic collapse of his ministry. Had he missed or misunderstood some vital part of the gospel message? If so, it had to be in there somewhere, and he was determined to find it.

Specifically, Jim made a detailed study of the moral teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, looking for clues to his own shortcomings. And he came to a provocative conclusion. He had always felt that on the behavioural standards laid down by Paul in his letters, his life measured up reasonably well. But when he looked at the more rigorous and demanding standards set by Jesus, he found that he fell far short.

That set me thinking...

Interesting. An idea I've never really considered before. Two different standards of behaviour, side by side in the New Testament. One from Jesus and one from Paul. Could that really be possible?

At first the idea seemed extraordinary, but when I reread the texts in the light of this new idea, I had to admit that it had substance. There really did seem to be a difference.

⁵⁷ Jim Bakker, *I Was Wrong* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996)

For years I'd loved the letters of Paul, the firebrand preacher. His naked emotions and outrageous overstatements had for me a visceral appeal—I'd thought he was about as radical as you could get. But when I reexamined the teachings of Jesus, trying as best I could to peel away the veneer of bland familiarity that so easily neutralizes their impact, I was faced with an uncompromising extremism that astounded me. It left Paul's writings looking bland, pedestrian, and conservative.

So, from Jesus we hear:

Go, sell all that you own, give to the poor, and come, follow me.
 Call no one on earth father, for you have one father, your father in heaven.
 Do not be called teacher, for you have one teacher only, the Christ.
 If your right hand makes you sin, cut it off.
 Be the servant and the slave of those you lead.
 Hate your own life.⁵⁸

Jesus spoke in the most extraordinary extremes of language. It goes on for page after page, with sayings that often have no direct parallel in the letters of Paul or in those of any other New Testament writer.

What did all this mean? To start with, I was perplexed, but gradually the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, and a model emerged that made sense of the contrasting styles of teaching.

JESUS

Although Jesus' teachings can come across to us now as having been original and innovative, for an educated Jew of his generation they would have been instantly recognizable. Both the style and much of the content fell into a long tradition of prophetic ministry that stretched back in time for a thousand years or more. The roots can be seen everywhere in the Old Testament.

Jesus walked in that prophetic tradition. His concern was not to come up with new teachings, but rather to cut through to the truth behind the words spoken by the ancients centuries earlier, and to pinpoint the spirit that had motivated them. This he did better than anyone else, bringing in a new, imaginative, and unique slant of his own. Time and again, he

⁵⁸ Paraphrased from Mark 10:21; Matthew 23:9; 23:8; 5:30; 20:27; Luke 14:26

would pick up on well-known sayings from the Law and the Prophets and draw out of them nuances of meaning that had never before been properly understood.

Jesus rarely taught anything completely new. This should not surprise us. God's moral truth is eternal and unchanging, and God gave it to the world a long time before Jesus was born. There was nothing imperfect about it. How could there be? It came from God! There are no "new" truths, and we need to be wary of teachers who claim to teach them.⁵⁹

Jesus' message was essentially the same as that of the prophets who went before: *You've missed the point! Through your slavish adherence to a narrow, legalistic understanding of the Law, devoid of love and compassion, you've missed out on the true heart of God. You've ended up with something that's the complete opposite of what God intended. Now turn back, before it's too late!*

The primary focus of Jesus' teaching was to convey the absolute moral truth of the universe, and in so doing, to explain to people the ultimate character of God. People needed to know what God was really like. They needed to understand the huge gap between God's eternal standards of right and wrong and their own fumbling towards the light. They needed to understand his compassion for a suffering humanity, and they needed to understand his holiness, as expressed in his eternal standards of right and wrong. From this starting point, they would then be in a position to understand their need for God's grace and to turn to him for help. This proclamation of the eternal, unchanging, and uncompromising truth of God was a big part of the prophet's job.

It's important to understand here what Jesus was *not* doing. He was not trying to build an organization. He was not working on a long-term strategic plan or thinking about the consequences of his teaching five hundred or a thousand years hence. Prophets didn't think that way. Jesus' mind was firmly rooted in the present, speaking with the Father, listening to the Father, and proclaiming the eternal truths of God's nature and his

⁵⁹ The German theologian Joachim Jeremias has argued that the only completely innovative feature of Jesus' teaching was his encouragement of his followers to address God as *Abba*, the intimate family term of address of a child to his father. This really was new. It has no parallel anywhere in the Old Testament or in Jewish thought of the time, and it would have been shocking to a traditional Jew of Jesus' (or any previous) generation. If this was his only "new" contribution, then it's a big one. (Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1971)

standard of perfection—the ultimate truth, if you like, that lives forever in the heart of God.

PAUL

Paul's mission was something completely different. His concern was to create a lasting, functioning community in the real world of flesh and blood. His churches were designed around the realities of human nature. They had to be. He knew the limitations of his audience, and he had to set the bar at a realistic level.

Paul could have taken the moral teachings of Jesus as they stood and said, "This is the basic, minimum standard. If you can't reach this level, then forget it and go home!" In that case the Christian church would probably have stopped at a few dozen members and never grown into the worldwide movement it is today. That was not at all what Paul wanted, and it wasn't what God wanted either.

We sometimes think God deals in perfection. Actually, he deals in *realities*. He knows our limitations, meets us where we are, and takes us forward step by step. His approach is *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*. He wants to bring people in, not keep them out. The final goal may be very high, but the entry level is deliberately set low to bring in as many as possible.

So when Jesus tells us,

Go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor...and come, follow me.⁶⁰

for Paul this becomes,

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn [as a collection for others].⁶¹

It's realistic, practical advice for ordinary working people. If Jesus is proclaiming God's ultimate standard of perfection, then Paul is doing the spadework of creating a real community for real people.

Does this make Jesus' teaching an irrelevant fantasy? Not at all—it really can work. Every so often in history you come across individuals who have chosen to take the teachings of Jesus literally and live just the way he said to do. Some, like Mother Theresa or Francis of Assisi, have

⁶⁰ Mark 10:21 [NASB]

⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 16:2

become well-known, while many others have remained anonymous and unsung. And it works—these people have proved that by their lives.

But most of us are not ready for that level of commitment, so we set limits. We pledge percentages. We let God into some areas of our lives but not into others. God has no problem with this. He only wants from us what we give willingly and joyfully. The rest has no meaning for him. He accepts us as we are, with all our limits and limitations.

JESUS, PAUL, AND THE NEW COVENANT

Let's now see what happens when we take these contrasting motivations of Jesus and Paul and apply them to that familiar passage of Scripture, the New Covenant.

We find that the New Covenant has much more in common with the teachings of Jesus than it does with those of Paul. It's a covenant of perfection. In fact, it's so perfect that if we read only the version given in Jeremiah, we might easily think that we were reading a description of heaven, or of a future post-apocalyptic kingdom of God. It's only when we read the commentary on it in Hebrews that we find out that it's not intended as a description of some future event, but that it relates clearly to the everyday experiences of Christians in the here and now.

The covenant describes a situation in which every Christian is living in perfect communion with God, hearing perfectly from God, and receiving teaching from the Holy Spirit directly, perfectly, and without hindrance. It sounds wonderful, and so it is. Unfortunately, it's also a bit different from what most of us experience most of the time. It tallies well with Jesus' proclamation of the ultimate realities of the kingdom of God, and rather less well with the pragmatic, down-to-earth recipes for church life given to us by Paul.

An example makes clear the close parallel between Jesus' teaching at its most uncompromising and the words of the New Covenant. From Jesus:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students...Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.⁶²

If this sounds familiar, so it should—we've seen it before:

⁶² Matthew 23:8,10

And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.⁶³

It's clear that Jesus was not only familiar with the Old Testament version of the New Covenant, but was also comfortable to adapt it for his own teaching. It spoke of the same ideal that he was seeking to put across to his listeners.

There's another, perhaps deeper, level to this contrast between the prophetic ideal and the practical, everyday reality. We see this in an episode from the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers. It took place while the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land—never quite getting there, but getting into all sorts of trouble along the way.

In the story, God takes the prophet Balaam to a mountaintop. As Balaam gazes out over the shimmering desert, God gives him an idealized vision of the Israelite encampment on the plain far below:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
 Your encampments, O Israel!
 Like palm groves that stretch far away,
 Like gardens beside a river,
 Like aloes that the Lord has planted.
 Like cedar trees beside the waters
 Water shall flow from his buckets,
 And his seed shall have abundant water."⁶⁴

It goes on like this for several more verses, superlative on superlative. It sounds wonderful, and so it is. But what was *really* going on in the Israelite camp? We find that out in the next chapter, where the description is rather different:

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.⁶⁵

⁶³ Hebrews 8:11 quoting the New Covenant from Jeremiah 31:34

⁶⁴ Numbers 24:5–7

⁶⁵ Numbers 25:1–2

What's going on here? Two descriptions of the same people, more or less at the same time and in the same place; but the descriptions could scarcely be more different. Which one is true? The only possible answer we can give is that they're both true, but in different ways.

In Balaam's prophecy, we find a description of how God sees his people, reflected in the mirror of grace. He sees them clothed in his own righteousness (or the righteousness of Christ, as we would understand it now). This is the permanent vision in the heart of God, in which God sees in his people only the best and the most positive. Is the vision true? I think it must be. If God says that's how he sees it, then that must be how it is—God has no delusions!

And what about the description of the Israelites indulging their lusts and going after false gods? The description is clear and unambiguous—clearly that must be true also.

So we are given two different and contrasting views of God's people, both true in their own ways. One is true on the ground, while the other is true in the mind of God.

This is a useful concept to grasp when we are trying to understand God's dealings with us. When God sees us in the mirror of grace, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, it's not an illusion. It's what we *are*, in a very real sense. If that's how God sees it, it must be real—perhaps even more real than the ordinary, flesh and blood kind of reality.

This helps to explain why God often has a far higher view of us and of our capabilities than we ourselves have. When God looks at us, he doesn't see that earthly portrait, with its inadequacies and our insecurities. He sees the other one, the one with the cedars and aloes planted by the river. That's the one he speaks to, and that's the one he always calls forth, because for him, that's the real one. That's the true centre from which he calls us to live.

That's why when God meets Elijah on Mount Horeb and Elijah says, "God, I'm so depressed! Go away and let me die in peace!" God brushes the words aside as if he never heard. They don't even merit a reply. God is perfectly aware of Elijah's inner feelings, but he's looking at the other Elijah, and this is the one he speaks to. For God, this is the real Elijah. The first Elijah, the depressed one, is illusory, not real. He exists inside the prophet's head, where he's been conjured into existence by the prophet's imagination, but nowhere else.

In these two stories, of Balaam and of Elijah, we see illustrated in different ways the two parallel and real but competing images of man—the ideal and perfect vision that God has of us when he observes us through

the prism of grace; and the mundane, earthly reality of insecure, fallen, disobedient, and doubting men and women that confronts us every day.

THIS TENSION IN THE CHURCH

If there is indeed a constant tension between God's ideal and the practical reality of man, then surely this tension exists not just in our own lives, but also in the life of the church. Jesus and the New Covenant give us the ideal of church perfection—God's children together in a single family, all hearing from God directly and being taught by God perfectly. Paul on the other hand is dealing with something that has to work in a real, fallen world.

Paul knew exactly what he was doing with his teaching. He didn't ram God's ultimate standard down people's throats—he didn't want a legalistic nightmare in which people were crushed under a constant pressure to perform. He wanted a realistic church that would be accessible to ordinary men and women. In short, he wanted a church founded on grace.

I doubt there's ever been a church founded solely on the literal teachings of Jesus Christ. If there were, it would as likely as not end in chaos. Most of us are just not up to it. If we could all listen to God perfectly and infallibly, then, as Jesus suggested, we wouldn't need human teachers. Since we don't and we can't, we still need teachers. In the ideal, we wouldn't need teachers; in the reality, we do.

Paul loved the idealized, prophetic vision of God's church, and in his earlier letters in particular, we do sometimes see him attempting to apply it literally in his churches. Writing to the Corinthians, he sees the church community as a single family under God. Everyone has a unique role, a different function in the body, reflecting his or her individual gifts. We see a God who shows no favour—when he speaks to the church, it's as likely to be through one person as through another. His Spirit is happy to manifest in and through anyone and everyone, without exception and in equal measure.⁶⁶ When Paul thinks this way, he's coming as close to the New Covenant vision as we are ever likely to see on this earth.

It may be that it couldn't have lasted, and it didn't. By the end of the New Testament era the tone is subtly changing. In the later letters we find a gradually increasing emphasis on hierarchies. Bishops, presbyters, and authority structures start to appear. Now some people in the church are telling others what to do. Some are seen as more important, and others as less important. The churches are starting to take on the same

⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 12–14

organizational forms as the Pharisee-dominated Jewish synagogues that they were supposed to replace. The process would continue and even accelerate in the post-apostolic era.

But in the background, God's dream is always there, never quite dying. As Jesus said, it's like yeast that has a leavening effect on the whole.⁶⁷ God's ultimate truth is constantly floating to the surface somewhere, before being pushed down again by the harsh exigencies of reality.

HOW SHOULD THIS AFFECT US?

We need to understand and always be aware of the tension that exists, and always will, between God's ideal as taught by Jesus and the practical reality of the church. We live in the church with all its human limitations, but we strive constantly towards God's ideal.

The church does *not* represent God's ideal for humanity. It's a functional compromise, engineered by flawed individuals who listen to God intermittently and hear from him imperfectly, at best. Churches everywhere always have, and always will, fall short of God's ideal. Our ability to understand that, and to apply that understanding, is a major key to church survival.

This becomes all the more important in the light of a second big stumbling block we will inevitably encounter—knowingly or unknowingly—in church. This follows on from what has been discussed here, but is of an altogether more sinister nature, both in its spiritual origins and in the subtlety of its malign influence. I call it the Pharisee Principle, and it's the subject of the next chapter.

⁶⁷ Matthew 13:33

CHAPTER 21

UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH— THE PHARISEE PRINCIPLE

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets...Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.⁶⁸

IF ASKED TO summarize in a single sentence the key content of the New Testament gospels, most interested people would probably respond in one of two ways. Either they would point to the Sermon on the Mount as being the crowning legacy of one of the world's great moral teachers; or they would focus on the narratives of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection as being the key passages in understanding the true meaning of his life.

It is unlikely that they would bother to mention—or even pause to think of—a thread of high drama that weaves through the gospel stories almost from beginning to end. This motif provides the dominant dramatic backdrop

⁶⁸ Matthew 23:29–31; 34–38

to the story of Jesus' life and ministry and is instrumental in the buildup to Jesus' execution. Including related dialogue, it has been estimated that it takes up more than one third of the entire gospel narratives,⁶⁹ yet usually we either ignore it altogether or sideline it as being of marginal importance. This is the vicious and vindictive warfare that raged between Jesus and the two dominant religious institutions of his day, the scribes and the Pharisees.

The scribes and the Pharisees—most of them, at least—hated and despised Jesus, and he in his turn had almost nothing good to say about them. There were a few exceptions, individual Pharisees who took time to listen to and ponder Jesus' teachings, and whom Jesus liked and respected; but with the group as a whole, there was a relationship of mutual mistrust and antipathy.

Considering the centrality of the scribes and Pharisees in the New Testament story, it's surprising how little coverage they get in most churches today. We know about them, of course, but we relegate them to the background as a historical curiosity with little or no relevance to the present day. This is unfortunate, because Jesus didn't see them that way at all.

Jesus saw the scribes and Pharisees not as a historical one-off, but as part of an ongoing movement that had been around in one form or another since the start of human history. He saw them as irredeemably evil and deeply subversive. They had been there from the beginning, and they would be there till the end. For Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees took centre stage in the pantheon of iniquity.

JESUS, THE SCRIBES, AND THE PHARISEES

The passage at the head of this chapter is taken from Jesus' extensive criticisms of the scribes and Pharisees, which Matthew has conveniently grouped together into chapter 23 of his gospel. Jesus is saying (in loose paraphrase):

There is a strand of evil running though all of human religious history that is diametrically opposed to the truth of God and persecutes and tries to destroy that truth. It masquerades as true religion, pretending to represent God's truth, but it's not. It's evil, pretending to be good. It's from this pretense that it draws much of its destructive power—not from enticing those who seek evil, but from seducing and ensnaring those who are sincerely seeking after truth.

⁶⁹ Ronald N. Hesser, *The Pharisee in Us All* (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2006)

He goes on to expose the earliest roots:

You Pharisees, you've been there right from the beginning. Even back in the time of Adam and his sons, Abel and Cain, the first two generations of humanity. Abel was the first righteous man to be killed for his righteousness. And Cain, his murderer, was a Pharisee by another name.

And that was just the start. From that time on, the struggle has continued, with corrupt religious establishments seeking to destroy or neutralize God's prophets and holy men, claiming all the while to be acting as God's servants even as they do it. Look at Zechariah, the prophet stoned to death during the reign of King Joash for challenging the religious corruption of the day.⁷⁰ Was that any different? Of course not.

And your crowning hypocrisy is this. You give lip service to the ongoing struggle between truth and lies, good and evil. You acknowledge the historical facts of it, and you even build elaborate monuments to commemorate those righteous prophets who were killed and persecuted. And you say, "Of course, if we'd been there we would have defended them." Why, you're so deluded you probably even believe it yourselves!

But who was it who killed Zechariah? Your very own kith and kin! The ones you're so proud to be descended from. Your very claim to be a part of the chosen race rests on your descent from these villains!

This is the Pharisee Principle, as Jesus saw it. It stretched back in time, and he expected no different for the future. "The time is coming," he warns his disciples, "when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God."⁷¹ The fate that befell Zechariah would inevitably befall Jesus' followers in their turn. This is the Pharisee Principle in action—men so totally deceived in their own motives and in their understanding of God that they can kill God's messengers with a clear conscience and think they're serving God by doing it. It's real, it's religious, it's totally sincere, and Jesus tells us that it's still going on.

It should be clear now why it's so important to understand the Pharisee Principle. It's a permanent part of religion. The reason it's permanent is because it's a reflection of the evil in men's hearts, and that evil never changes. The name may change, but the nature stays the same. On this side of heaven, there can never be a church or a religious

⁷⁰ 2 Chronicles 24:20–22

⁷¹ John 16:2

establishment untainted by it. The question is not, “Is it there?” The question is, “Can we recognize it when we meet it?”

Pharisaism comes disguised as true religion. It doesn’t build its own religious structures from scratch, preferring rather to take over the real achievements of godly men and women, infiltrate them, and over time subvert their structures to serve its own ends. It does this by stealth, playing on the good, tolerant, and charitable side of our Christian natures. By this means, it is able to take over the credibility of the institutions it has subverted and use this credibility as its own umbrella. In this way it can more easily present itself as God’s truth and be believed as such.

Once it has established its new identity as mainstream Christianity, it is well positioned to embark on the process of undermining the faith of individual Christians and seekers, and even of whole populations. For this it doesn’t rely on the ordinary and obvious temptations that can lure people away from God. It’s much more subtle than that—in fact, it’s the complete opposite.

Pharisee religion often doesn’t try to make itself look attractive. It can deliberately do the opposite and portray itself as unattractive. That’s a part of its strategy. People, seekers after truth, look at it and think, *If that’s what God is like, then I’d prefer to have nothing to do with him.* Some may see a place for themselves in the Pharisee structure, embrace it, and decide to become a part of it. For most others, however, the effect is to turn them away.

Often these are people who have had a glimpse of God along the way, even before they arrive at the church door. They’ve seen a little of what God is really like, and their expectations have been raised. When they encounter the Pharisee church, the disillusion hits them all the harder. Disillusion can turn to anger and alienation, and millions of Christian lives are over almost before they start. It’s an extraordinarily successful strategy for turning people away from God, perhaps more so than any other.

Since the Pharisee Principle is active in every generation, we will all encounter it sooner or later. If we want to avoid being deceived by it, we need to learn to recognize it. This is the hardest part of the battle, and it is to this that we turn our attention now.

We start with the historical scribes and Pharisees of the gospel era. They make a useful subject of study because we have Jesus’ own appraisal of them in the gospels. He told us exactly what he disliked about their teachings, and in so doing gave us an unambiguous benchmark for evaluating our own religious institutions.

In the next chapter, we will look in detail at what Jesus had to say about the scribes and Pharisees, but first, it's useful to have some understanding of their place in the religious world in which Jesus lived.

THE SCRIBES AND THE PHARISEES IN HISTORY

The scribes and the Pharisees were two different groups. Today, they are often lumped together as one, for convenience and simplicity. There's no harm in this—in fact, Matthew's gospel often does the same thing. Luke is always careful about detail, and he generally distinguishes between them. In this chapter we will describe them separately. Later on, we will make the distinction only where the differences are significant, otherwise dealing with them together.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

At the time of Jesus, Judaism was split into a number of different denominations in much the same way as the Christian church is today. Now we have Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists, and so on. Back then they had their own equivalents. This is not surprising. Judaism was simply the church of its day, and the same principles were at work then as now. The Jews split into denominations then, for exactly the same reasons that Christians do now.

Then as now, relationships between the denominations varied from uneasy co-existence to outright hostility. Each group thought that its own way was the best and most complete revelation of God's will. The others were at best flawed or incomplete, at worst deluded and heretical. Nothing changes!

The three denominations we know the most about are the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees. Most likely other, smaller ones existed but are long since forgotten.

The Sadducees were mainly from the wealthy upper classes. Although small in numbers, they wielded great influence due to their powerful political connections. Today we would call them liberals—they didn't believe in life after death, and they played down the importance of the supernatural. At the time of Jesus, the Sadducees had a virtual monopoly on the High Priesthood. Caiaphas, the High Priest who sent Jesus to the cross, was a Sadducee.

The Essenes were a mid-sized denomination. We know a little about them from contemporary history, and a bit more from the Dead Sea Scrolls,

which probably formed one of their libraries. Today we might call them fundamentalists. They were expecting the coming of the Messiah and the final and complete fulfillment of Old Testament prophesies in their lifetimes (the idea is not a new one), and they had withdrawn from society to wait for these things to happen. In the meantime, they lived in isolated and remote communities in the desert, with little outside contact. They put great emphasis on spiritual purity, and used extensive water rituals and symbolic washings akin to baptism. Some people believe John the Baptist may have been an Essene before leaving to start his own ministry.

The Essenes are never mentioned in the Bible, and they are only known from outside sources. This is probably because their communities were so isolated. They kept to themselves, and most city dwellers would never have met one, unless they sought them out in the wilderness. For this reason they had no direct influence on New Testament events.

The Pharisees were the largest denomination. They represented the “mainstream” of Judaism at the time of Jesus. They had first appeared in the second century BC, about 150 years before Jesus was born. Since that time, their influence had waxed and waned periodically in step with the political climate of the day. In Jesus’ lifetime they were firmly on the way up, and they continued to climb for another forty years after his death.

Of the three denominations, the Pharisees were the only ones to have widespread popular support. The Essenes lacked influence on account of their isolation, while the Sadducees lacked mass appeal on account of their narrow class base and were gradually eclipsed. Meanwhile the Pharisees went from strength to strength. Ordinary people—but not Jesus—looked up to them as models of piety and godliness.

The Pharisees were actually quite ordinary people, set apart only by their decision to join a Pharisee community and adopt its rule. Most were city dwellers holding ordinary secular jobs. Most were based in Jerusalem, where their sophisticated religious practices were most at home.

In theory, anyone could become a Pharisee. The candidate would have to be accepted by one of the Pharisee communities, learn the rules, study the accepted interpretations of the Law, and then go through an extended probationary period to demonstrate his commitment and faithfulness to those rules. After a successful probation, he would be admitted as a full member.

In practice, however, the Pharisees were an exclusive elite. For the rural peasants who made up most of the population, the Pharisee lifestyle was not a realistic aspiration. They didn’t have the educational background to understand the complex rulings involved, and in any case, peasant

life was all about economic survival. Food was scarce—if they could eat meat once a week they would be doing well. They were tied to the land from dawn to dusk, eking out a subsistence living. The elaborate rituals and washings of the Pharisees would have been hopelessly impractical for them. A weekly visit to the synagogue would have been the limit of their religious observance.

Even if the Pharisaic lifestyle was something beyond their reach, the country peasants still looked up to the Pharisees, seeing them as role models and paragons of religious virtue.

So while the peasants looked on in awe, the Pharisees enjoyed their elite religious status. They were happy to make whatever sacrifices were demanded by the rule of their communities, if this allowed them to earn God's approval (as they saw it) and the respect and approval of society in general. They were devout and committed men, scrupulous in their adherence to the standards set by their community leaders.

The standards to which the Pharisees aspired were, in their turn, based on the teachings of the scribes.

The Scribes

The scribes were much more ancient than the Pharisees. They dated back to the post-exilic era, when, after seventy years in Babylon, the Jews returned to their homeland and started reconstruction. This was in the sixth century BC, 500 years before Jesus' birth.

Ezra, who wrote one of the books of the Bible, was a scribe. This fact shows that, early on, at least some of the scribes were true servants of God. By the time of Jesus, they had gone far astray and long since ceased to be a force for good. Instead, they had become an obstacle, separating people from God rather than bringing them closer. Their steady downward course is a good example of the Pharisee Principle, by which a formerly good organization is infiltrated, infected, and gradually corrupted into an empty religious shell.

The scribes were the teachers of the Jewish Law. They were an elite group of educated people who had taken time out to go through several years of intensive theological training. Many were Pharisees, but not all.

A trainee scribe would be attached to a teacher for several years, and under his tutelage he would study the Jewish Law—but not just the Old Testament Law as we know it today. His primary concern would be with the large body of interpretations of the Law that had accumulated over generations, the work of all the scribes who had lived before. Later

on, at the end of the second century AD, this would all be written down as the *Mishnah*; but in Jesus' time it was an oral tradition, passed down from one generation of scribes to the next, and getting larger and more complicated all the time.

The teachings in the *Mishnah* were all about earning your way to God by doing things—legalistic religion carried to the extreme. There's nothing there about the grace, love, and compassion that are so central to God's character. Instead, it's all about following rules.

In the gospels, Jesus refers to the teachings of the scribes as the “tradition(s) of the elders.”⁷² As we will see later, he was highly critical of these traditions, seeing them not as a gateway into the kingdom, but as an obstacle, keeping people out.

Because ordinary people had no direct access to the Scriptures, their entire understanding of God and religion depended on the scribes' teachings. The scribes had an effective stranglehold on the flow of information. They tried to pretend that their oral tradition stretched back to the time of Moses and had originally been given in oral form by Moses himself. This was untrue, but it was a useful fiction for raising their prestige and cementing their power.

When the trainee scribe had completed the required period of study, he would be officially accepted as a member of the company of scribes, a sort of professional body of which they were all a part.⁷³ This gave him many privileges. He was now entitled to be addressed as *rabbi*, a title that carried great prestige. He could wear a special type of robe that made him instantly recognizable. He could act as a judge in civil and criminal courts. And—most important of all—he could make decisions on matters of interpretation of the Jewish Law, decisions that would become a part of the ever-expanding body of the oral tradition. He was now an important and respected person in the community. People would make way for him in the streets. His pronouncements and opinions carried weight. To the ordinary people, he was a figure of awe.

By the time of Jesus, the Pharisee Principle had done such a good job of perverting the truth that most people believed that the scribal teachings represented ultimate religious truth. Lay people knew little or nothing of what the Old Testament actually said. The spoken language of the time was Aramaic. Just as the medieval church would later fight to prevent the translation of the Bible from Latin into English and other

⁷² Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3–5

⁷³ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (trans. F.H. Cave, London: SCM Press, 1969)

spoken languages, so the scribes had fought successfully to prevent the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic. Even if they knew how to read—and most probably did not—ordinary people still wouldn't have understood. For Aramaic speakers, Hebrew was like Latin, a foreign language. Cut off from the original Scriptures, their only sources of religious teaching were the traditions handed down and propagated by the scribes.

This explains why the scribes had such immense power over people's lives. It also explains why the Pharisees, who based their lives on the scribal teachings, were held in such high regard by the populace. It's not surprising that Jesus, who saw these teachings as an obstacle rather than a gateway to religious truth, got so upset with the scribes and the Pharisees.

The Priests and the Scribes

The priesthood is not strictly relevant to this discussion and will be discussed in a later chapter. It is mentioned briefly here only as a source of possible confusion. The priesthood was the system set up by God, because that was what he wanted. The scribes formed part of an alternative system, put in place by men and not by God.

Unlike the priests, the scribes and Pharisees had no Scriptural mandate for existing at all, though most people would have been unaware of this. In reality, their entire existence was a sophisticated bluff.

IN SUMMARY

These were the main religious groups of Jesus' day. They weren't necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, you could be a priest and a Pharisee at the same time. Most of the later High Priests were also Sadducees. Paul was probably both a scribe and a Pharisee.

Pharisees saw themselves as being spiritually superior to the rest of the non-Pharisee Jews. They prayed more and were more careful in their religious observances than those outside. They probably saw themselves as being the true Israel of God (the Essenes saw themselves in this way also). They were devoutly religious, sincere in their beliefs, and deeply committed to living lives pleasing to God. They had a deeply ingrained morality, which they observed with great care. They were, without a doubt, very religious people.

It's fortunate that Jesus took the trouble to tell us exactly what he thought of the Pharisees. Without this, we could easily find ourselves

looking at them, at their lives, their ideals, and their commitment, and being impressed by these things—just as many people were back then. In fact we could even find ourselves asking, “But surely...Isn’t that what we’re *supposed* to be doing? Isn’t that what the Christian life is all about?” It’s time to look a bit more deeply at what it was about the Pharisees that got Jesus so upset.

CHAPTER 22

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING A PHARISEE ANYWAY?

THOSE TWO QUESTIONS posed in the final paragraph of the last chapter: "But surely...Isn't that what we're *supposed* to be doing? Isn't that what the Christian life is all about?" point us towards two important conclusions. The first conclusion—from the fact that we should even think of asking such questions—is that to a greater or lesser extent we are all Pharisees. This is unfortunate, but inevitable. Pharisaism represents the natural religious evolution of ordinary people. It originates in our hearts and reflects our fallen, unregenerate attitudes and desires. All "religious" people would probably end up as Pharisees if they were left to their own devices. Even when God is helping us, the old nature constantly reasserts itself and brings out the latent Pharisee within us.

The second conclusion is that we can have a real problem distinguishing between pharisaism and true godliness, both in our own lives and in the lives of others (and in the church). This is not surprising—since pharisaism always comes disguised as true religion, we shouldn't expect it to be easy or clear-cut.

Our starting point for recognizing the Pharisee Principle in ourselves and in the church needs to be the teaching of Jesus. We need to know what Jesus said about the Pharisees, and we need to understand why he found their attitudes and lifestyles so offensive. From that base we can start to understand the way in which pharisaism insinuates itself so easily into our own lives. After that we can look at the Pharisee Principle in the church, how it affects us, and how we deal with it.

JESUS' CRITICISMS OF THE PHARISEES

FALSE AUTHORITY

The Pharisees were hierarchical in their thinking

The Pharisees stratified people according to their perceived level of importance. They craved recognition, respect, and status. They saw themselves as being a spiritual elite, and they were addicted to their own sense of self-importance:

They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.⁷⁴

Jesus found this deeply offensive. He recognized it for what it was—not just an isolated moral failure, but the very root of how they saw themselves in relation to God.

God's people are, and always have been, a community of redeemed sinners with nothing intrinsic to commend themselves to God. Their only merit is that which is imputed to them by God as an undeserved gift of grace.

Hierarchy-builders lose sight of this. They see their elevated status as a sign of God's favour, a deserved reward for their own virtue, and reason from this that they must be better than others. This is the worst thing we can possibly do. It puts us in a false and deluded position before God and undercuts the very basis of our salvation.

In the heart of God there are no human hierarchies. Leaders are to be the servants of those they lead. The most menial people should receive the greatest honour. God sees us not as an organization but as a family. Limited hierarchy may be needed in practice to avoid chaos, but it's not the ideal for which we strive.

They had an exaggerated view of the importance of teachers

The Pharisees saw themselves as the paragons and role models that others should emulate. Jesus countered this attitude decisively:

⁷⁴ Matthew 23:6

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.⁷⁵

John Wesley commented on Jesus' adaptation of the New Covenant like this:

The Jewish rabbis were also called father and master, by their several disciples, whom they required,

1. to believe implicitly what they affirmed, without asking any farther reason;
2. to obey implicitly what they enjoined, without seeking farther authority.⁷⁶

Wesley is careful not to undermine the teaching structure of the church here; but he sees the teacher not so much as an instructor, rather as one who points the student back to God. The job of the teacher is to teach the student how to hear from God directly.

John the Baptist shows us the right attitude of the teacher. Although a notable spiritual leader in his own right, and the one to whom Jesus came for baptism, he could say of Jesus, “He must increase but I must decrease.”⁷⁷ He understood that the ultimate goal of the teacher must be to work himself out of a job, to bring his students up to the level where he himself is eclipsed.

The scribes and Pharisees did the opposite. Their goal was to cement their own authority by making themselves indispensable. They thought they enjoyed the unique favour of God as the sole authoritative repositories of his truth, and they wanted to keep it that way. Teaching was an instrument of control rather than a means of liberation. Questioning was discouraged, and disagreement was seen as rebellion against God.

They were bullies

Most of us have a latent bullying tendency, perhaps stemming from our innate and near-universal feelings of insecurity and lack of self-worth. By demeaning, belittling, or hurting others we are enabled to feel better about

⁷⁵ Matthew 23:8–10

⁷⁶ John Wesley, *Wesley's Explanatory Notes*

⁷⁷ John 3:30

ourselves. It's often most clearly seen in childhood. Perhaps children live a bit closer to nature than we adults do, lacking our acquired veneer of "civilization" and morality.

As we grow into adulthood, most of us lay aside or at least suppress our bullying instinct. There may be an element of pragmatism in this, as we come to understand that often it doesn't pay—the long-term loss can outweigh the short-term gain. We may even start to see it as wrong. For whatever reasons, we become socialized and modify our behaviour. But the bullying tendency is still there in the background, waiting for the event or circumstance that will remove normal social constraints and allow it to rampage unchecked.

Among the forces that free us from constraint and allow our bullying tendency free reign, one of the most potent is—*religion*. Religion allows us to bully with a clear conscience. Our exaggerated sense of hierarchy tells us that God has positioned us as the arbiters of other people's behaviour. We no longer see our bullying impulse as an evil to be resisted, but rather as something implanted in us by God. From here, it's only one short step before we start to see bullying as our *spiritual duty*.

This is what the Pharisee Principle is all about—taking our own darkest natural desires and impulses and expressing them under the guise of religion. It runs deep in most of us. The Pharisees were bullies *par excellence*, and this explains much of their behaviour.

FALSE TEACHING, FROM A FALSE VIEW OF GOD

They shut others out of heaven

The Pharisees not only excluded themselves from the kingdom of God, but they shut others out also. This explains why Jesus was so angry with them:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Matthew 23:13–15

When people choose not to enter the kingdom themselves, God is saddened. However he accepts it nonetheless, since he respects absolutely our right to make decisions about our own lives. When we hinder others from entering by misleading them or denying them the information they need for a proper decision, then he gets angry. This is exactly what the scribes and Pharisees were doing.

The Pharisees blocked other people's access to God by portraying the kingdom of heaven as a reward given to those who had achieved a certain level of obedience to God's laws. The truth is the exact opposite. Trying to earn God's favour by good behaviour is the ultimate obstruction to the flow of God's grace. If we think we've earned it, we're excluded from it. If we recognize our inability to earn it and ask for it as a gift, we get it.

The scribes and Pharisees couldn't understand this. Thinking they could earn it, and teaching others the same, they blocked the road into heaven for themselves and for everybody else. In this they aroused both the anger of Jesus and the enmity of God.

They had an exclusive rather than an inclusive view of the kingdom

Pharisees deliberately set high and forbidding barriers to admission. Their communities had long periods of probation, with rigorous exams and audits prior to admission. They wanted an exclusive club.

This is not God's way. God is always inclusive—he wants to have as many people as possible involved in what's going on. To this end he sets the barriers to entry as low as possible.

When we read the accounts of Christian conversion in the New Testament, we find that they are almost always sudden, spontaneous, impulse decisions, often made in the heat of emotion. People are going about their daily tasks, and suddenly there's a flash of spiritual insight, a glimpse of heaven, and an on-the-spot decision, "Right, I'll take it!" God loves it this way. It's powerful, it's dramatic, and it's life-changing. It's not the fruit of human wisdom but the work of the Spirit of God. Pharisees, not surprisingly, hate it.

For Pharisees, this is much too easy. It upsets the exclusivity, and it also undermines their concept of the church as a hierarchy based on spiritual merit. After all, if there's no place for earnest human endeavour in coming to know God at conversion, then how much legitimate place can it have in subsequent attempts at climbing the church ladder?

Many modern-day Pharisees pay lip service to the concept of “salvation by grace as a free gift from God”—as Bible-reading Protestants, they can’t escape it. But they then hedge this around with so many restrictions and conditions that its real meaning is nullified or diluted almost out of existence.

Some Pharisees will even actively discourage potential converts from committing to Christ, presenting them with lists of negatives, and emphasizing the hardships of the Christian life before they’ve even had a chance to meet God. This makes no sense. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to change and the will to change, but normally these come after, rather than before, we accept Christ. We should not expect to find a heartfelt desire for holy living in people who don’t yet know God. God meets us where we are and as we are. He tries to make himself as accessible as possible and as easy to meet as he can. Pharisees try to make it more difficult.

They had two standards—one for those on the inside and another for those on the outside

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.⁷⁹

There’s a problem with setting a high entry standard to the kingdom. It can be awkward for those already inside, including yourself. Obviously a higher entry standard for *getting in* should translate into a higher standard of behaviour for *staying in*. This can be inconvenient, so a double standard becomes necessary.

So for example, a Christian with an alcohol problem may be treated with understanding and compassion. After all, it could happen to any of us. Meanwhile, a non-Christian with an alcohol problem may find his problem treated as an unrepented sin and therefore made a barrier to conversion. This kind of double standard may seem shocking, but it happens—a lot.

If we are to have a double standard at all, it would be better that it be the opposite—a higher standard for those inside (who through the Holy Spirit have access to both the power and the motivation for change) than for those outside (who have access to neither). But really, no double

⁷⁹ Matthew 23:4

standard is required. We come in by grace as a free gift, and we stay in on that same basis.

Expecting people to deal with their sin *before* they can become Christians is a denial of what the faith is all about. For Pharisees, however, this approach is valuable in maintaining exclusivity and safeguarding their own prestige and self-esteem.

FALSE MORALITY

Jesus' understanding of moral behaviour and the way we are called to live our lives and interact with society was disarmingly simple. It was expressed in a single sentence:

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.⁸⁰

Paul was equally explicit:

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."⁸¹

For the Pharisee, this is a bit too simple...disturbingly so. After all, if that's all there is to Christian behaviour, who needs teachers anyway? The monopoly is again under threat. Surely, there has to be a bit more to it than that!

What makes Jesus' and Paul's understanding so revolutionary is that for the first time, morality is seen as existing not so much for God's benefit as for *our* benefit. Sin hurts people, whether it is others or ourselves. That's what makes it sin. If it didn't hurt people, it wouldn't be wrong. The Pharisees, who over-spiritualized everything, could never grasp this one. It's from this failure of understanding that the rest of their false morality stems.

They were unable to distinguish between big sins and little sins

You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!⁸²

⁸⁰ Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31

⁸¹ Galatians 5:14; see also Romans 13:9; James 2:8

⁸² Matthew 23:24

The Pharisees put exaggerated emphasis on avoiding little sins, while completely overlooking the big ones. This was quite clever. By pointing to a whole series of little sins that they were *not* committing, they could appear much better than they really were, while at the same time continuing with the big ones.

A lot of people misunderstand this area...“Surely, a sin is a sin! There are no big sins and little sins. We sin, we offend God’s law—that’s all there is to it.”

That’s not how Jesus saw it. Little sins are still sins, and they need to be dealt with like any other. But not all sins are equal. When we see sin as Jesus saw it—that is, as a failure to love—then it becomes obvious that a sin causing severe damage to others is worse than one that causes minor damage.

Jesus made the distinction clearly:

You tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others.⁸³

Yes, you should tithe mint, he told them (since that was what the Old Testament Law taught). But, he says, it’s not as important as other things, such as justice, mercy, and faith. Justice is more important than tithing mint—it’s *weightier*, since failure of justice causes more damage than does failure to tithe mint.

The Pharisees believed and taught that God was, at heart, a legalist who made rules because that was what he liked doing. He was a dictator who set store on uniformity, conformity, and blind obedience. In other words, they saw God as being fundamentally selfish in character. They couldn’t understand that the opposite is true. Everything God does, he does for us—even when he’s making rules.

Why did they think that? Probably because that was how they were themselves, and they fashioned their notion of God’s character in their own image. They then drew on that false notion of God to feed and reinforce their own dark side. This is the vicious downward spiral we get into when we embark on the Pharisee road, a religion that simply reinforces its own prejudices. This is why religion, which is supposed to make us better people, can so often have the opposite effect and make us worse.

⁸³ Matthew 23:23

They gave “loving God” precedence over loving other people

This is very dangerous, because it’s so superficially convincing. It’s also attractive, since it allows us to lay aside the arduous—because more quantifiable—job of loving other people, in favour of loving God. This is less quantifiable, more open to subjective interpretation, and therefore potentially less demanding.

The Pharisees saw no connection between loving God and loving other people. It was irrelevant to them that something might be damaging or mindlessly burdensome to others. If God wanted it, then that was all that mattered.

Jesus demolished this argument repeatedly. It’s impossible to do the one without doing the other, he said. To say that you love God, when you are not acting in the best interests of others, is not what God calls love. God is not interested in that kind of worship.⁸⁴

God didn’t invent Christianity for his own benefit—he did it for us. There’s not much in it for him apart from a lot of suffering that he could easily have spared himself. We’re the ones who benefit. That’s his nature, caring for humans, and if we want to be like him, then we have to be like that, too.

They redefined sin according to their own convenience

This is common among Pharisees, old and new. This is how it works:

First, you make a list of temptations that for you personally are never likely to be a real problem. Not everyone is tempted by everything. For me, alcohol and gambling have never been a temptation. Other things such as abortion or euthanasia are rendered irrelevant by my sex or circumstances. That doesn’t make me a good person! There are other temptations that assail me daily and leave other people cold.

Then, once you have a list of sins to which you are relatively invulnerable, you cultivate a mindset that says, “For God, these are the big ones. These are the ones that really matter.” The other ones, the ones where the temptation for you is very real, you label as “minor sins, not so important.”

Put this way, it sounds absurd. Who would be naive enough to fall for such a transparent self-deception? I, for one! I catch myself doing it almost every day. It’s remarkably easy to do, and the payoff is enormous.

⁸⁴ This is clear in, for example, Jesus’ postscript to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:45.

At a stroke, sin ceases to be a problem in my life. Without even having to change, I can fool myself into thinking that I'm leading a virtually sin-free life, simply by changing a few definitions.

The scribes and Pharisees did this all the time. This was a big part of what the scribal teaching was all about—changing the definitions. They knew all about *love your neighbour as yourself*—it was clearly written down in their own Law.⁸⁵ Jesus and Paul read it in Leviticus and understood what it really meant. The scribes and Pharisees read it, redefined it, and then forgot about it.

They had a highly developed sense of moral indignation

Moral indignation, or “righteous indignation,” means reacting to other people’s weaknesses or sins with a sense of outrage, disgust, or revulsion. In the gospels this characteristic of the Pharisees comes up time and again. The Pharisees refused to associate with those they considered sinners, constantly criticizing their behaviour and avoiding places where they were likely to be.

Moral indignation is usually dressed up in spiritual terms and presented as a virtue. It’s often seen as a characteristic of an advanced godly character. We tell ourselves that the outrage or disgust that we feel in the presence of sin is a reflection of God’s similar feelings and represents the work of the Holy Spirit within us. If others don’t feel it, they’re obviously not as much in tune with God as we are.

There’s one big problem with this view of moral indignation. Jesus himself was far more in tune with God than any of us, but he doesn’t seem to have felt this kind of moral outrage in the same way that we do. If we look at the usual targets—adulterers, homosexuals, fraudsters, terrorists, prostitutes, abortionists, and so on—there’s no record of Jesus being shocked or disgusted by any of their activities. On one occasion, he gently reproves an adulterer and tells her not to do it again.⁸⁶ Apart from this, and his assault on the money-changers in the temple, there was only one group who ever really precipitated moral indignation in Jesus, and that was...yes, the Pharisees!

Jesus was the exact opposite of the usual religious stereotype. While the Pharisees avoided the company of sinners like the plague, Jesus was comfortable and relaxed in their presence. If he had to choose between

⁸⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁸⁶ John 8:11

the company of sinners and the company of religious people, he generally preferred the sinners. Perhaps he found among them a refreshing honesty that was absent elsewhere.

A clue to the reason for the Pharisees' overdeveloped sense of moral indignation is found in a definition given by the writer H. G. Wells: "Moral indignation is jealousy with a halo."⁸⁷ This definition rings true. God hates sin, but he reacts to it with a calm objectivity rather than a blind fury. He expects us to hate it too, and to deal with it firmly—when the guilty party is us. But excessive concern about other people's sins is never a part of God's agenda for us.

Excessive concern and outrage over other people's sins is a key Pharisee characteristic, and any time we encounter it, we should be on the alert. If we find it to be pervasive in the Christian church, well... perhaps so is pharisaism.

We've all struggled with sin and had to let go of things, often at high personal cost. When we see others apparently getting away with those same things, the temptation to react with indignation can be very great. But if our moral indignation is jealousy in disguise, then we need to recognize it as such, for our sin may then be greater than theirs.

Jealousy is deeply rooted in all of us, and letting go of it will never be easy. But simply to label it as divine jealousy and see it as a virtue rather than a vice is not helpful.

FALSE APPEARANCES

No discussion of the scribes and Pharisees can be complete without this one. The Pharisees were excessively concerned with the external appearances of righteousness, less so with inner purity. How they appeared to others was all-important. Jesus said:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ H. G. Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (London: Macmillan, 1914)

⁸⁸ Matthew 23:25–27

Jesus called it hypocrisy, and he hated it. The word comes originally from the ancient Greek theatre, where actors appeared on stage wearing masks, thus concealing their true identity. That's hypocrisy—trying to appear as something other than what you really are.

Hypocrisy was a unifying thread that tied all the other Pharisee sins together and made them possible. The Pharisees craved status and respect, so they bought it with a false appearance of godliness. They craved power over others, which could be bought in the same way. Their moral indignation and their redefinition of sin to suit themselves helped to maintain the myth.

For us, hypocrisy can seem like a small thing, partly because it's not easy to quantify. For God, it's a big thing, because it goes to the root of our self-delusion. The danger is that after a while you can end up believing your own propaganda. That's what happened to the Pharisees.

André Gide described a hypocrite as “one who ceases to perceive his own deception and lies with sincerity.”⁸⁹ The Pharisees didn't see themselves as sinful people. They truly and genuinely believed in themselves, in their own morality, and in their own lifestyle. That was what made them so dangerous, and that's what continues to make them a danger to themselves, to us, and to the church.

⁸⁹ This is widely attributed to André Gide, though I have been unable to establish the authenticity or original context

CHAPTER 23

FACING THE PHARISEE WITHIN

As (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone”⁹⁰

A TRIGGER FOR DESPAIR...?

FRANKLY, NORMAN, I enjoyed reading the first 22 chapters; but when I came to chapter 23...Can't you just leave it out or get rid of it somehow?”

That was the reaction of a friend who read an early draft of this book. Unfortunately, that's not possible. If we look at the Pharisee in others without looking at the Pharisee in ourselves, we are in danger of replacing one evil with another that's equally as bad.

The verses at the head of this chapter are taken from the well-known story of the “rich young ruler” in Mark’s gospel. The story concerns a rather self-confident young man who comes to Jesus with some questions about eternal life and getting right with God. Jesus is happy to answer his questions, but he has picked up a misapprehension implicit in the man’s words, and he decides to deal with that first... *Why do you call me good? God is good, but no one else is. Not even teachers and rabbis!*

⁹⁰ Mark 10:17–18

There's an irony here. In calling Jesus good, the man had spoken truly, but he'd done so entirely by accident—a right conclusion based on wrong reasoning. Of course, Jesus had not the slightest interest in whether or not people recognized him as "good"—defending his own reputation was never his priority. However, the man's words presented Jesus with the perfect opportunity to correct a common misconception, so he took that opportunity to set him (and us) straight.

Jesus reiterates a fact that should be well-known to all of us, since it underlies the entire basis of our faith. It's also one we constantly forget. It's simply this, that *there are no good people*. There are bad ones and worse ones, but no good ones.

It's that simple.

I think many of us struggle with this one... "Okay, I can see that can be true on an abstract theological level when dealing with our standing before God and so on. But I can't go through life constantly looking at everyone around me as evil. It just wouldn't work! And besides, the Bible tells me to see the best in everyone."

This argument may have some validity. However, Jesus isn't saying that we are not capable on occasion of doing good things for right motives. Clearly we are, and that makes it entirely appropriate that we try to see the best in people. He's saying that although we may do good things sometimes, that doesn't make us into good people. It just makes us into bad people who occasionally do good things. To put it another way, Jesus is saying that we're all a lot worse than we like to think we are.

This can be a difficult subject to talk about. It's wide open to misunderstanding, and it can provoke a variety of extreme reactions. Rightly understood, it can lead us into a sense of glorious release, but for many people, it's more likely to be a trigger for despair and depression.

A typical reaction might go like this: "Look, I'm trying! I'm doing the best I possibly can, to be the best person I can possibly make myself. Now you tell me that even that's not enough. You think I wasn't discouraged enough already before you opened your mouth? Thanks for nothing!"

I have deep sympathy for people who think this way. I've been there myself, and I know how it feels. I remember all too well the black despair and sense of hopelessness of some of my early Christian years as I sought to live up to the imagined demands of a seemingly implacable and never-satisfied God. But sympathy cannot obscure the fact that people who think this way are on a dead-end road. It leads nowhere. They need to stop, retrace their steps, and start again in a different direction altogether. To think of Christianity in terms of *effort*, that if we try hard enough we may

just succeed in making the standard, is a disastrous misunderstanding. Just to *try harder* will never make us better Christians, and we do well to face that right at the start.

In trying and failing to make ourselves better people by dint of rigorous self discipline and sheer effort of will, we are actually making ourselves into “failed Pharisees.” What we’re really saying is, “I’m trying to be a Pharisee but not succeeding very well.” It’s tempting to reply, “Better a failed Pharisee than a successful one!” But really, it’s better to abandon that whole approach and look for a better way.

...OR A GLORIOUS RELEASE?

Fortunately, there is another way, one that allows us to react to our own sinfulness and inadequacy in an altogether more positive way. It goes like this: Change your entire way of approaching God. Relax, accept yourself as you are, and allow God to accept you as you are. Recognize that your best efforts fall far short, and accept from God, as a free gift, what you cannot possibly earn as a reward for merit or good service. Change the whole basis of your self-image. Find your identity not in the quality of your good works, but in the love of God and in the fact that you have been adopted into his family.

If you do this, then when God reveals to you new depths of failure in your life, instead of sinking into despair and inadequacy, you can say, “Yes, and I’m sure there’s a whole lot more in there as well. But thanks be to God for getting it out onto the surface where I can see it for what it is, acknowledge it, and then pass it back to be dealt with by him and not by me.”

Most of us understand that salvation is a free gift from God. What we easily forget, however, is that it’s not only salvation that’s free, but also everything else that God has for us. We earn nothing from God. Whatever is offered us, we receive as a gift, or not at all.

C. S. Lewis gave the analogy of a small boy going to his father and saying, “Daddy, give me a shilling so I can go and buy you a Christmas present!” The father is naturally delighted to receive the present, but no one would suppose that there is any real value transfer from father to son in the transaction. This giving back to God of what came from God, Lewis reminds us, is the true nature of all our interactions with God.⁹¹

This is where we can find that sense of glorious release. In understanding that all our best efforts fall short, and that no matter how hard we

⁹¹ CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1952)

try we can never meet God's standard or even come close, we can finally learn to relax. We can come to God, admit our inadequacies, and enjoy listening to him as he tells us, "Yes, I know that. But don't worry about it—I accept you as you are anyway, with all your faults. My righteousness is enough."

After hearing this, we can move on in freedom, feeling loved and accepted rather than pressured and condemned. Now we may even be able to do something to help advance the kingdom, since now we're doing it for a new motive. We do it because we've understood how easy it is to be a passive recipient of God's love; and when we experience that for ourselves, we also see what it might do for others. It's a great truth and a great release—and a potential deathblow to the Pharisee within us.

GOING DEEPER

A lot of Christians like to write short notes on the inside covers of their Bibles, to remind them of thoughts or insights they have found particularly helpful. I have just one in mine, inside the back cover. It's taken from a book by Roy Hession, a British speaker and evangelist from the post-war period. It goes like this:

To go deeper in the Christian life, is simply to realize that we are bigger sinners than we ever thought, and that Jesus is a bigger Saviour than we ever conceived him to be.⁹²

I don't know of any other truth more profound than this regarding the Christian faith. Hession says that we don't move forwards in the Christian life by ever greater acts of self-discipline, by trying harder, or by more rigid self-control. We move forwards by recognizing a little more of who and what we really are.

We thought we were doing all right. We thought we were in control, strong enough to deal with anything thrown at us. Then something happens, some temptation, insult, or humiliation, and we find to our surprise that we don't react in the way we expected. We thought we would react in a Christian spirit of forgiveness, fortitude, and generosity, but we don't. Before we have time to think, we've retaliated, taken revenge, or given in to temptation.

In a few minutes or hours, we've had time to think the situation through and figure out the "correct" textbook Christian response to

⁹² Roy Hession, *My Calvary Road* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978)

the situation, the way we *ought* to have reacted. But by then it's too late. We've already done the opposite, and it can't be undone. And even if it can be undone, even if we are in a position to go back and do the "right" Christian thing, it would only be an act. It's not the real me. It's me pretending to be the man of God, pretending to be a better Christian than I really am. In other words, it's me the Pharisee. The real me is the way I acted the first time.

For Hession, the fundamental truth is this: *the real problem is not what I do, but what I am*. This is what makes me so much worse than I thought I was. I can control—to a certain extent, at least—my actions, my external façade, what people see of me on the surface. What I can't control is what goes on under the surface—the jealousy, the vindictiveness, the anger, the self-righteousness, the pride. I can control what I do, but I can't control what I am.

Jesus made the point repeatedly in his attacks on the Pharisees:

It's not what comes out of a man that matters, it's what's inside!

There's no point in putting a fresh coat of paint on the outside of the tomb when the bones are still rattling around inside!⁹³

This doesn't mean our behaviour doesn't matter. It does matter, for at least two reasons. First, our external actions influence our inner development. Every time we give in to temptation, we strengthen the temptation for the next time around; whereas if we repeatedly turn away from it, we may weaken it or at least stabilize the situation.

Secondly, if we believe in *love your neighbour as yourself*, we will soon recognize that external actions are usually more damaging to others than internal thoughts. Sexual fantasies when kept to ourselves may be harmful to us, but they have limited capacity to harm others. If these fantasies translate into reality, however, they have the potential to harm others also, and the damage is that much greater. So our external behaviour matters a lot. We can fall into the trap of thinking, "I've already thought about it, so I'm guilty already. Nothing I do now can make things any worse, so why stop here?" This is a patent falsehood. We can always make things worse—much worse!

What we do matters a lot—it's just not our central problem. Our central problem is in what we are, and it's on that level that we are always much worse than we think we are.

⁹³ Jesus' words paraphrased from Matthew 15:11; 23:27

SUCCESS THROUGH FAILURE

Most of my Christian life has been a failure.

There's a pattern to it. God sends me tests and challenges, one after another. And one after another, I fail them. Occasionally I pass, but that's unusual. For a long time I found this disturbing as well as frustrating. The Pharisee in me was still thinking in terms of passing the tests, impressing God, and having him look down on me and say, "Hey, look! Isn't he doing well!" When it didn't happen, I felt inadequate and guilty, as if I must be a big disappointment to him.

Finally, I saw the light and came to understand that God's purpose in all this testing was the complete opposite of what I had first thought.

When God planned a test for me, he would start by assessing my likely breaking point, the point at which my resistance to temptation was likely to crumble. Then he would set up the test, carefully placing the bar just one step above that level. Almost inevitably, the result would be another failure. Then he would cycle me through the same test again and again with slightly different circumstances. This would result in further failures.

Then sometimes a strange thing would happen. I would come to a point where I knew at last that I was capable of passing that test, and I'd wait in eager anticipation for it to come around again so I could prove the point. And I'd wait, and wait, and...nothing. No test! It was frustrating to see the chance of victory snatched away like that, but God would respond, "*What's the point? You know you can pass. I know you can pass. So why waste both our times to prove something we both know already? Let's move on.*"

Then he would move on to something else, another area of my life, and another kind of test. And even before I'd realized it had started, I'd be flat on my face again, into another cycle of failure.

I'm exaggerating a bit—it hasn't always been quite that bad. Occasionally God gives me tests I can pass, if only to stop me from getting too discouraged. A general principle has, however, emerged: We don't learn much from passing tests, but we can learn a lot from failing them.

When I pass a test, the only thing I learn is a bit of pride in my own achievements. I start to think, *Hey, maybe I'm not so bad after all! Maybe I'm finally making some progress here!* In other words, I learn how to be a better Pharisee. When I fail the test, then I learn the important lesson, the one that Hession had to learn, that I'm a bigger sinner than I thought I was. I thought I was good enough, strong enough, to deal with that one. I thought after all these years I'd finally moved beyond that. Now I find different. Now I find the weakness more deeply rooted than I ever knew. It's not just the same old me—it's worse!

This is the point, with this inner realization and confession of failure and inadequacy, at which God is finally able to come in and do something. That's when he is able to change me. And that's when I experience again the second part of what Hession says—the realization that Jesus is a bigger, more all-embracing Saviour than I ever knew.

I still try to pass the tests. When we fail God's tests, we inevitably end in sin, and sin is always a serious matter. The fact that we sin in response to a temptation that God has countenanced and allowed doesn't change either the fact or the guilt of it. I still have to do the best I can to pass the test, but now I don't get so discouraged when I fail. I try to look at it as an opportunity for God to work more deeply.

If God's only concern was that I should sin less, he could easily bring that about by setting easier tests and protecting me more, but that's not his chosen way. He wants me to go through this purifying process, and if that means I sin more than I otherwise would, then it's a price he's prepared to pay.

When I finally understood this, it helped me to understand something else that had perplexed me. I had noticed that the times I felt closest to God and had the greatest awareness of his presence were often my times of deepest failure, when I felt I'd let him down the most. That was when God seemed to come down and meet me. Then there were other times when I felt I was doing well and living up to the standards I'd set for myself, but I felt a creeping sense of spiritual emptiness, of distance between me and God. It seemed the wrong way around, until I came to understand that many of my so-called successes were really just triumphs of pharisaism, and my failures were the real moments of truth in my life. After that, my feelings made a bit more sense.

I've come to think that this cycle of failure and restoration is a normal part of the Christian life. I'm a little suspicious of Christians who claim to live in permanent victory. Often there's a sort of hardness about them, almost an element of inhumanity. Through rigid self-discipline it may be possible to achieve a steady state of "right living," in the sense of living up to the standards we set for ourselves, but I suspect this has little to do with true Christianity and more than a little to do with the religion of the Pharisees. For myself, I continue to fall flat on my face; I continue to remind myself that *love covers a multitude of sins*;⁹⁴ and I continue to have God reach down to put me back on my feet again.

⁹⁴ 1 Peter 4:8

I had thought at this point to write about some of the Pharisee traits I still encounter in my own life. I see now that to do that would be simply to write the previous chapter over again, since I'm guilty of almost all of them—not occasionally, but regularly. I hate them when I see them in others, but when they're in me they don't seem quite so bad. In others I find them indefensible, but in me I can usually find an excuse.

I firmly believe that the biggest and most central sin of the Pharisees—the one that underlies most of the others—is the attempt to be justified before God by following rules, rather than as a free gift to be accepted. In spite of this belief I still catch myself on an almost daily basis trying to do just that; and the more "Christian" I aspire to be, the worse it seems to get. I don't get depressed about it anymore. God accepts me as I am, and that's all that really matters. Knowing that, I can start to accept myself also; I no longer need to pretend to myself that I'm any different or any better than I really am. It's all there in me and probably always will be, since it reflects a fallen nature that will never in this world be entirely defeated. I try to be honest in self-appraisal and then get on with life, secure in the knowledge that God knows it all and still accepts me.

I haven't reached the point where I think I've overcome it all, and I hope I never do. If that day ever comes, then I'll *really* have a problem!

CHAPTER 24

APPRAISING OUR OWN CHURCH

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampshades. I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.⁹⁵

AS I WRITE this book, a Christian drama is being played out in the Singapore law courts, with attendant publicity. It concerns a dispute over doctrines and authority between the leadership of a local Presbyterian church and one of the church members, and it provides a useful case study of the way in which Pharisee-style attitudes and authority structures can operate in the church today.

The leaders of this church hold to the belief that the seventeenth century English translation of the Bible commonly known as the King James Version is a perfect and flawless translation of the original and carries the exclusive authority of God. All the other more recent translations, they believe, are seriously flawed. They say that these have no divine sanction and are devices of the enemy designed to sow confusion. These leaders believe that for those who have come into this insight, it would be a sin to use any other Bible translation than the King James Version.

⁹⁵ Revelation 2:1–2

Mr. Lim, a businessman, former student of theology, and member of the church, questioned this belief and requested a public debate in the church over the issue. His request was refused, and as the controversy progressed, he found himself denounced in church bulletins and sermons as "an evil and sinister enemy" and likened to Satan.

Lim filed a civil suit against the church leaders, alleging character defamation. Ironically, the dispute between these committed and fervent Christians was placed under the jurisdiction of a Malay Moslem judge, whom the authorities thought would be best placed to render an impartial judgment. At the time of writing, the judge's repeated attempts to broker an out-of-court peace agreement have failed, and the dispute is scheduled to move to a full trial.

For a church crisis of this kind to end in the law courts is unusual, but the types of issues involved crop up regularly in churches everywhere. The case shows the way in which the authoritarian style of church management, common in Pharisee churches everywhere, can end in repression of basic rights of free speech that are taken for granted elsewhere in society.

A detailed examination of the church's position sheds light on the nature of the pharisaism that is rife in many churches today. For this reason, some of the comments of the church leaders recorded in the written court depositions⁹⁶ are worth looking at:

It is the teaching of the Bible that any attack on the members of the church and the pastors would be seen as a satanic attack, as Satan is the mastermind behind all disturbances within the church.

Mr. Lim is alleged to have

broken his vows to the church to submit to the leaders and not raise divisive issues.

In situations of this sort, the pastor was required

to shield his flock from incorrect, divisive doctrines.

These statements tell us a lot about the sorts of attitudes and beliefs that are prevalent in many church hierarchies today. Most of us are likely to encounter these or similar attitudes and statements of belief at some

⁹⁶ *The Straits Times* (Singapore, 28 August 2006)

point in our church lives. We need to learn how to step back and make a calm and objective appraisal of the internal dynamics of such church structures, so that we can react in an appropriate manner. In the rest of this chapter, we will look at some of the specific issues in Mr. Lim's church to illustrate how such an appraisal can work.

Repressed Opinions

Mr. Lim is an angry man. This is not surprising. He has been told not just that his opinions are of no importance, but also that he is not even entitled to form opinions, let alone share them with others.

All normal human beings hold opinions. Forming opinions is a fundamental part of being human, and to prevent people from forming opinions is an abrogation of their humanity. It reduces them to the level of mindless automatons and implies that they are incapable of analyzing issues for themselves or of making any kind of valid, rational judgments.

In a Christian context, it's worse. It's a denial of what God has promised us in the New Covenant, the heritage he wants to lead us into. As we have seen, this contract defines a communication channel between God and the believer for relationship, flow of knowledge, and teaching. God is to be our primary teacher, and we should be forming opinions as a direct outcome of the teaching process.

A godly pastor should encourage his members in this, helping them to learn how to hear from God directly, and so to bring the New Covenant into reality in their lives. When a pastor sets himself up as the only legitimate channel of God's truth, then he's doing the opposite. He's acting as an obstruction to God's stated aim for his people.

Mr. Lim's anger is not only understandable, it's also inevitable. To deny someone the right to form opinions on important issues directly affecting their own lives is a transgression of their legitimate, God-ordained boundaries. Boundary violations of this sort inevitably provoke anger. No normal person in such a situation could realistically react in any other way.

Overbearing Hierarchy

This repressive attitude stems from an erroneous view of God's character. It sees God as being a God of hierarchy, whose preferred way of operating is through a corporate structure akin to that seen in the world of business and commerce. In this model, a centralized leadership formulates

corporate strategy and makes the decisions for those lower down to put into effect.

Such a model may have proved itself effective in other walks of life for maximizing profits and getting results, but it's the opposite of what Jesus has told us of God's character and his plan for his church. In fact, Jesus holds this model up as an example of how *not* to do it:

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”⁹⁷

Take the worldly model, Jesus says, and turn it on its head. Our example church in Singapore has taken the worldly model—and exaggerated it.

Facts or Opinions

The kind of hierarchical structure seen here is, inevitably, a minefield. The timing and extent of the resulting explosions will vary, and will depend on the quality of the decisions and judgments handed down. Although the process of central decision-making in church is innately flawed, if the decisions made are sensible and reasonable, then the outcome may be relatively benign. When the judgments are extreme, erratic, or unsound, a more destructive explosion is inevitable.

In our example, the church leaders have taken their stand on an extreme and unorthodox doctrinal position. They have stated as a matter of dogma that the King James Version is the only truly inspired translation of the Bible. This raises a problem. The King James Version is a much-loved Bible translation, widely regarded as being substantially accurate and reasonably dependable. It is entirely possible that God *could* have intervened in a special way to ensure its reliability (and even conceivably refrained from doing the same for subsequent translations). To suppose this to be the case might perhaps be an entirely legitimate *opinion* to hold. But as to whether God *did* intervene in this way, that could never be known for certain.

The problem comes from taking what are just opinions—however vehemently held—which can never be demonstrated to be true, and

⁹⁷ Matthew 20:25–28

propagating them as facts, which need to be demonstrably true. Since the exclusive inspiration of the King James Version cannot be proven true, it has to remain in the realm of opinion, not fact.

This failure to distinguish clearly between fact and opinion is a widespread failing of churches and Christians everywhere. It's the root of many of our church conflicts. For some reason we struggle to accept that our opinions are just opinions. We tend to think that as long as we are led by the Holy Spirit, we must be right about everything—even though other equally Spirit-led individuals may have formed diametrically opposite opinions on the same questions.

Excessive reliance on the Holy Spirit in matters of factual knowledge is hazardous. On questions of scientific fact and historical truth, God has given us the inquisitive skills and the analytical tools to draw our own responsible conclusions, and he expects us to use them. Generally he doesn't shortcut this process with supernatural revelations on matters that we can resolve for ourselves by diligent study and hard work—such as the accuracy of different Bible translations.

When the pastor in our example speaks of shielding church members from incorrect, divisive doctrines, he's actually doing something rather different. He's shielding them from alternative opinions. He's saying, "You only need to hear one opinion, and that's mine."

We are accountable in equal measure for all the opinions we hold, whether we form them for ourselves or accept them uncritically from others. To accept the opinions of others without examining the issues for ourselves is not a responsible act. To force others to do likewise is even less so.

Unity and Disunity

Having labeled Mr. Lim's opinion as "incorrect", the deposition goes on to describe it as "divisive" and then as masterminded by Satan.

To think this way is to misunderstand the nature of divisiveness. Holding contrary opinions is not in itself divisive. We can agree to disagree, and still choose to respect the opposing opinion, even while not holding to it. This is true unity. It differs from the fragile unity that comes from agreeing on everything—fragile, because as soon as disagreements arise, which they always do, the unity evaporates.

True unity is not easy to achieve. It's costly, since it comes from loving and respecting others, from doing to others as we would be done by. That's why God values it highly.

Disunity and division may well be masterminded by Satan, but disagreement is not. Agreement and harmony may be good, but they are not ends in themselves, and they should never be enforced by the suppression of alternative views. There is (or should be) room in the church for intelligent debate. There should be room for people, having debated and considered all aspects of an issue, to agree to differ and still live in unity and harmony.

Anger

Disagreement in church therefore, far from being a bad thing, may actually be healthy. Sometimes it goes a step further and spills over into anger. Paul encourages us—with defined and limited parameters—to get angry sometimes.⁹⁸ Jesus got angry, frequently. From these it follows that anger is a legitimate human emotion, designed into us by God, and so presumably having some legitimate purpose.

In church, anger tends to be badly received, and nowhere more so than in the Pharisee church, where it can be seen almost as the one ultimate, unforgivable sin. Isolated moral lapses may be forgiven, but a single outburst of anger can see you labeled as emotionally unstable and blacklisted for years or even decades.

Why are Pharisees so afraid of anger? Obviously, for people concerned with externals as opposed to internals, anger makes an easy target, since it's usually clearly visible on the outside. Also, anger can be a warning sign of incipient rebellion. Mr. Lim is expected to submit to leadership *from the heart*—not just in actions and will, but also with his entire mind and thought processes. That's the level of absolute control that the Pharisee church is looking for. Anger indicates that they have failed to get it.

Another reason touches on the question of why God gave us anger in the first place. A church in which all anger is repressed is a bit like a marriage in which two people have been together for years and never had a single argument. Does that make it a healthy marriage? Probably not. More likely, one or both partners have been suppressing their true emotions in the interest of some false notion of unity, while in reality they gradually drift further and further apart. It's not a healthy way to run a marriage, or a church.

Arguments and anger are important, because for many of us, the only time we ever really tell the truth is when we're angry. We repress our

⁹⁸ Ephesians 4:26

irritations. We pretend there's nothing wrong. Then finally the pressure rises to the point where anger explodes, and we say out loud what we've been thinking all along. The truth comes out, the air is cleared, and the groundwork is laid for real relationship. It's unpleasant, but it's necessary.

For the Pharisee church, this approach represents potential disaster. If people start getting angry, they may start saying what they really think. This undermines the whole Pharisee ethos, based as it is on pretense and hypocrisy. Pharisees incorporate into their structures mechanisms to keep the lid on anger for as long as possible. Sometimes of course, as in our example church, that only magnifies the intensity of the final, inevitable explosion.

Individual or Corporate Responsibility?

There's no such thing in the Bible as corporate responsibility. God sees each of us as individuals, and he demands that we take responsibility for every aspect of our lives before him. We can't hide behind the authority of others, no matter how eminent they are. If others have fallen into error and I choose to follow them, then I must bear the full consequences of that decision.

This may seem a bit harsh, but it's a consequence of what we've seen earlier regarding the true nature of God's judgment. The "reward" that God holds out before me is the chance to fulfill his destiny for my life. The "punishment" that is threatened is that I miss out on that destiny. If the punishment were prison, I could plead mitigating circumstances—my leaders led me astray, and foolishly I believed them—and ask for a reduced sentence. But if it's a question of missing my true destiny, then there's nothing God can do to change that. If I've missed it, I've missed it. He may come up with another, alternative destiny, but it will never be quite the same.

That's why we have a responsibility to ourselves to see that we don't get pulled off course by false teaching or mistaken leaders. It's also why God gets so angry with teachers who lead others off the track and prevent well-motivated and sincere people from reaching their full potential for the kingdom. God's indignant lament is frightening:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Hosea 4:6

The pastors have taught lies. The people have believed them, have lost their way, and now are perishing. I wonder if Jesus had these words from Hosea in mind when he lambasted the Pharisees for locking the door to the kingdom of heaven.¹⁰⁰

There's no security in hiding behind our leaders. Our responsibility is to get to the truth, and to do so by using any and every means available. God has not called us to mindless obedience. He's called us to test our apostles¹⁰¹ and hold them up to scrutiny. If they fail the test, don't follow. That's responsible church membership.

Vows

The Bible shows a marked lack of enthusiasm for vows, particularly vows made to fellow humans rather than to God. Vows restrict our freedom. Once we've made them, we have to keep them. God, on the other hand, wants to keep us as free and unencumbered as possible, so that we will be available to him. Then if he decides to lead us in some new and unexpected direction, we will be free to follow.

Mr. Lim made two vows—one to submit to the church leaders, and the other to refrain from raising divisive issues. Vows of submission to God are fine, but we have no business making vows of submission to anyone else. People are flawed. They make wrong decisions. Making a vow of submission to future decisions that haven't even been made yet is not a wise or responsible act. If it comes into conflict with our responsibility to submit to God, then we've got a problem.

Vows can be used as a means of control and to cement power structures. They restrict or deny our responsibility to listen to God for ourselves. We should be wary of making vows, and even more wary of churches that demand them.

OVERVIEW

The church discussed here is a moderately extreme example of a Pharisee church. It has a rigid hierarchical structure. It has pastors who fail to distinguish between opinions and facts, thus making themselves effectively infallible. It suppresses thought and suppresses individual responsibility. It denies our true covenant relationship with God. And it

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 23:13

¹⁰¹ Revelation 2:1–2, quoted at the head of this chapter

ties everything together with a series of binding vows that say in effect, “Even when we’re wrong, we’re right.”

Pharisaism may not always be so clear-cut. It can be subtle, partial, and difficult to discern. Still, we owe it to God and to ourselves to try and recognize it.

We need to be aware of a misguided understanding of Christian charity that constantly gives the benefit of the doubt to others. It’s an easy trap to fall into since we feel we should be kind, generous, and trusting, but it’s a trap that Jesus and Paul both studiously avoided.

Jesus gave no latitude to the Pharisees. He never said, “Let’s give them another chance. They’re sincere, and they mean well. Maybe they can be reformed.” He never understood Christian charity in those terms. He recognized the Pharisees for what they were, discerned the spirit behind their actions, and from that moment on never compromised with them for an instant.

Evil doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It diffuses out to infect all around it. Perhaps on a desert island, with no one to harm but themselves, Jesus might have taken a more tolerant attitude toward the Pharisees; but in a community of vulnerable people, he felt obliged to confront them. He saw the potential for damage to others, and he moved quickly to expose their fallacies.

This way of looking at authority structures in the church may run contrary to what many of us have been taught. It may cross our ingrained instincts, and we may struggle for a time to feel comfortable with it. After years of spiritual subservience, we may no longer have the strength and confidence to stand firm and assert our correct position in Christ within the church framework.

In the next chapter, we will look at three biblical props to our confidence that can be helpful as we struggle to grasp the unique role that God has prepared for each of us.

CHAPTER 25

LISTENING TO DONKEYS

OLD HABITS DIE hard. Seeing our pastors as God's ordained representatives on earth may have had its advantages and may have given us a place to hide. If we've become accustomed to laying aside our own capacity for original and critical thought and accepting unquestioningly the opinions and conclusions of others, then the idea of taking responsibility for our own lives and spiritual destinies can seem unnerving.

Here we look at three biblical principles that can give us the confidence and security to be who we are in God alone, apart from the church, and thus help move us towards fully realizing our New Covenant potential. When we are under siege from overbearing church authority structures, we can fall back on these truths. They are: (1) the priesthood of all believers, (2) the remnant principle, and (3) the Balaam principle.

UNDERSTANDING PRIESTHOOD

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹⁰²

The function of a priest is to act as an intermediary between man and God. Priests play a central part in almost all religions. Gods are usually

¹⁰² 1 Peter 2:9

seen as remote and inaccessible figures having little interest in direct contact with ordinary people. The role of intermediary is given to an elite group of individuals, either ritually purified or having some form of special training, who are granted the privilege of talking directly to the deity and receiving answers in return. Ordinary people are denied this privilege. If they want divine favours or interventions, they have to present their requests indirectly, through the priests.

During a limited and defined period in Old Testament times, our God chose to use a similar system. This period started with Moses and Aaron in about 1500 BC and continued up to the time of Jesus. This was the era of the Mosaic Covenant. During this time, God appointed priests who performed certain specific and clearly defined roles of mediation between himself and ordinary people.

It's important to understand that this never prevented other people from talking directly to God. Many of the most important characters in the Old Testament, who played key roles in fulfilling God's plan, were not priests. They were ordinary people from ordinary backgrounds, who walked and talked with God in exactly the same way that you and I do now. The role of the priest was limited to certain defined and specific functions, mainly concerned with atonement for, and forgiveness of, sin.

There were two types of priests: the High Priest and the ordinary priests. At any one time there was only a single High Priest, while there were several thousand ordinary priests. These two offices had different responsibilities. Ordinary priests made sacrifices and offerings to God for specific sins that people had committed and wanted to make right with God. When you knowingly sinned, the priest offered the sacrifice prescribed by the Law to obtain forgiveness for you.

These sacrifices could only ever provide a partial solution to the sin problem. People sin and then forget what they've done. They sin without realizing that what they did was wrong. And they sin so much that the system of sacrifice, if applied rigidly, would quickly be overwhelmed by the sheer volume and variety of the sins. It was impossible for the sacrificial system to deal with the entire sin problem for everyone, so there had to be a backup system. This backup revolved around the High Priest.

The High Priest had a single, specific duty, which was performed once a year on the Day of Atonement, the holiest and most solemn day of the Jewish calendar. By means of an elaborate ritual, all of the unconscious or forgotten sins of the community that had been missed by the sacrificial system over the previous year were symbolically transferred onto a single

goat. This goat was then driven out into the wilderness taking the sins with him, and never seen again.¹⁰³ So an end was made of them. This is the scapegoat—the innocent who takes upon himself the blame for the misdeeds of the guilty others.

This two-tier system of atonement with its two classes of priests was effective for as long as the Mosaic Covenant was in force, but it was only ever intended to be temporary. It had a defined beginning and a defined end. Before the time of Moses there was no priesthood, at least not in the same sense. Abraham didn't need a priest—he went straight to God for everything.

With the arrival of Jesus, God revamped the whole system again. The old, hereditary office of High Priest, by now irredeemably corrupted by political interference, was abolished. In its place we were given one permanent and immortal High Priest, who is, of course, Jesus Christ himself.¹⁰⁴ Remarkably, Jesus takes on himself all the multiple roles of the Day of Atonement ritual—as priest, as sacrificial victim, and as scapegoat. Now when we need help with our sins, or with anything else, we can go straight to him.

At the same time that the office of hereditary High Priest was being abolished, the ordinary priesthood was also given a makeover. The old, clan-based priestly caste was done away with, and in its place, God put a completely new class of priests. The new priesthood is us, the ordinary members of the Christian church. This is the “priesthood of all believers.”¹⁰⁵

What does this mean? It means that from now on we have direct access to God for everything. Our priesthood gives us that right. For additional help, we can go through our High Priest in heaven, who is Jesus. Now and forever, we communicate with heaven directly. Earthly intermediaries are no longer needed.

The implications of this change are huge. They affect the way we think of ourselves in relationship to God and the church. They take us beyond the ramshackle structures we love to erect to govern our institutions, and straight into God's perfect family. Now, the two tiers of the hierarchy are:

1. God and Jesus
2. Us, the believers

¹⁰³ Leviticus 16:21–22

¹⁰⁴ Hebrews 2:17

¹⁰⁵ 1 Peter 2:5; 2:9; Revelation 5:10

The priesthood of all believers is a well-established and mainstream Christian doctrine, and most of us are aware of it already. Unfortunately, when we come into church, many of us forget what we believe. New pressures come into play. We face entrenched hierarchies with dominant players in positions of power. We struggle with political expediency, peer pressure, the desire to conform and to be accepted, and false notions of humility. Soon we find ourselves looking to others for guidance and instruction, and our own essential priesthood gets forgotten.

God wants us to hang onto our priesthood, in the church as well as outside of it. He gave it to us because he wants us to have it, and we have no business giving it away. It's integral to living the life God wants for us, and if we want to go beyond mere church survival and on to the fulfillment of our true spiritual destinies, it's something we need to learn to hold onto.¹⁰⁶

UNDERSTANDING THE REMNANT

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.¹⁰⁷

This one is a bit more obscure, but it's a consistent theme running right through the Bible, and we need to understand it. It's also a useful

¹⁰⁶ Not surprisingly, the priesthood of all believers has not always been well received by the church, and often the truth of it has been obscured. The Catholic Church has gone the furthest down this road, with an almost wholesale reversion to the Old Testament understanding of priesthood.

Confusion of meaning is also found in Protestant churches. Although the priesthood of all believers is generally accepted—in letter if not in spirit—the issue is often muddied by an unfortunate linguistic confusion concerning the exact meaning of the English word “priest.” The word derived originally from the Greek *presbyteros* (Latin *presbyter*), which in the New Testament simply means “elder”, and described someone who, older either in age or in experience, took on a supervisory role in the church. Unfortunately, there is a second Greek word *hiereus* (Latin *sacerdos*), which is also translated as “priest.” This word refers to the type of cultic priest found in the Old Testament.

The problem arises particularly in the older, more established Protestant denominations, where church leaders often slide between the two meanings as if they were one and the same. They may call themselves “priests,” meaning presbyters or elders, knowing full well (if they stopped to think about it) that many in their congregation understand this as *hiereus/sacerdos*, the Old Testament type of priest (with the increase in prestige and authority that comes with that title). For Pharisees, the misconception is a highly satisfactory one, which they are usually in no hurry to correct.

¹⁰⁷ Romans 11:5

defensive tool for when we're tempted by the "safety in numbers" trap, which goes something like this: "Surely they can't *all* be wrong! It seems like the entire church is going that way! It doesn't seem quite right to me. I just can't see that Jesus would have gone down that road. But if they're all agreed on it, then I suppose that means that God must be in there somewhere."

"And even if they *are* all wrong, God can hardly hold it against me when I'm just doing the same as all the others. So, rather than stick my neck out and risk making a complete fool of myself..."

That's safety in numbers, and it's a trap most of us fall into from time to time. It's not always easy to be an Elijah, and we find all kinds of reasons to go along with the crowd. That's when we need to understand remnant theology.

This is how it works: When we stand back and take an overview of God's dealings with his people, we find a surprising pattern repeated over and over. God starts something off, and in the early stages it flourishes and grows rapidly. Later, however, it turns sour and loses its vitality. This is the point at which we might expect God to intervene and initiate reform to get it back on track, but often he doesn't. Instead, he appears to walk away and let it go. Meanwhile, he takes out from within it a small nucleus of people, the ones who have remained true to the original vision, and he uses this remnant to start a whole new work. The old one is discarded.

This is remnant theology, and it can be shocking to us. However, the Bible gives so many examples of it that the principle is difficult to deny.

The first use of the word "remnant" with this kind of meaning is in the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, where God preserves the members of Jacob's family in Egypt during a famine, and afterwards establishes them as the nucleus of a new nation.¹⁰⁸ However, the concept is seen much earlier than this, for example in the story of Noah. In this story, the entire human race has sunk deep into sin and apostasy. God rejects the notion of trying to reform them, and instead allows them all to drown in the Flood. Only Noah and his immediate family are saved, and from this single remnant family the entire human race is rebuilt.

In subsequent biblical history we find many examples, Elijah and his small band of followers being the best known.¹⁰⁹ Later on, we see ten of

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 45:7

¹⁰⁹ The word *remnant* is not used in the Old Testament story of Elijah and his supporters, but is applied to them by Paul in Romans 11:4–5

the twelve tribes of Israel being destroyed, with just two being preserved as a remnant; and later still these two suffer a similar fate in Babylon, with only a small nucleus returning seventy years later to start again.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, is the first writer to formulate a systematic and thought-out theology of remnants.¹¹⁰ He starts with Elijah and goes on to identify a general pattern, which he then extrapolates into the New Testament era. Drawing on a prophecy from Isaiah,¹¹¹ he explains how God is taking another remnant out from among those who were his chosen people. These are the Jewish Christian converts, who are to be the start of the new movement. For Paul, the Christian church is the latest in a long line of remnants.

Christian history doesn't end with the New Testament, and it's not difficult to identify examples of remnant theology in action over the subsequent two thousand years. The shells of once-vibrant churches litter the cities of the Western world; yet often, even while these are being converted into designer homes, restaurants, and shops, or else lying empty and desolate, around the corner new and rapidly growing churches are drawing the crowds with innovative forms of worship. God moved on and started again.

It is not always easy for us to understand why God should choose to work in this way. We don't expect to see God giving up on people, and it can shock us. The simplest and most obvious explanation would be that these people are just too far gone and too corrupted to be salvageable.

Thus, in Jesus' parable of the wineskins,¹¹² the old wineskins—from the context, meaning the Pharisees—are judged to be beyond recovery. The only way forward is to start again with new wineskins. After Jesus delivers this parable publicly, we see no further efforts on his part to bring the Pharisees back to God. Their doom is now assured, and his main concern is to limit the damage they can inflict on others. From now on, he concentrates increasingly on the nurture of his own small group of disciples and adherents, who are destined to be the next remnant.

There's no suggestion in the parable that God *wants* it this way. He can only use those who are available to him. To use the Pharisees as the base on which to found the Christian church was not a viable option. Their self-deception had gone beyond the point of realistic recovery.

¹¹⁰ Romans chapters 9, 10, and 11

¹¹¹ Isaiah 10:22–23, cited in Romans 9:27

¹¹² Luke 5:37–38

Remnant theology teaches us that there's no safety in numbers in the search for spiritual truth. We cannot assume that majority backing for a certain position makes it any more likely to be correct than the minority position. God's truth is just as likely to be found residing in a small and unnoticed remnant as in the mainstream thought of a major religious movement. This has always been true, and it remains true today. If we're hiding behind the majority, then we're on dangerous ground.

That doesn't mean that being in the minority automatically makes you right. You can be in the minority and still be wrong. It means that numbers, or lack of them, are simply irrelevant—even when you're in a minority of one.

So the lesson is this: Set firm boundaries with the world and with the church, and go straight to God. Listen to all the opinions you can get, but take Christ the Messiah as your primary teacher. Don't worry about being unpopular or in the minority. The greater hazard is *popularity*.

Peer pressure within the church can be almost irresistible. As social beings we fear isolation above all else. When we become Christians and turn our backs on the ways of the world, we may be hoping to find some compensatory comfort and consolation in the church. To be faced instead with Elijah's wilderness lifestyle with its diet of locusts and wild honey is unappealing to most of us, and the temptation is to fall into line and conform. But for those who have discovered the unsatisfactory nature of the compromise and are looking for a better way forward, there are worse places to end up than as a member of God's chosen remnant.

THE BALAAM PRINCIPLE

They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.¹¹³

There are few stories in the Old Testament quite as charming as that of Balaam and his donkey.¹¹⁴ In the story, God places an invisible angel with drawn sword across Balaam's path to prevent the prophet and his donkey from making a journey that God has forbidden. Three times the

¹¹³ 2 Peter 2:15-16

¹¹⁴ Numbers 22:22-35

donkey refuses to cross the angel, and in so doing, three times saves the unwitting prophet from certain death. Finally, God opens the mouth of the donkey to speak in human language. Balaam's eyes are opened to see the angel and the nature of the imminent danger, and Balaam is forced to bow to God's rebuke from the mouth of his own animal.

There's a serious lesson for us in this story, which is that *God can speak through anyone*. Balaam was a spiritual leader of high repute. He had a high opinion of himself and of his own spiritual gifts, and as a prophet he naturally expected to be God's spokesman to others. God decided differently.

In terms of absolute spiritual gifting and depth of knowledge, Balaam was clearly way ahead of the donkey. But God, who is no respecter of persons, was not impressed by Balaam's office and didn't see him as deserving of special treatment. To bring him down to earth and deflate his foolish pride, God looked around for the most menial, insignificant messenger he could find, and he chose the donkey.

God is not limited to using those with greater knowledge, experience, and status to teach those with less. He can, and often does, reverse the roles.

For those who identify with the self-styled spiritual leader Balaam, the message is: Listen to everyone, no matter how menial or inexperienced they may seem to you. You never know who might be the next donkey in your life, sent by God as a bearer of wisdom to keep you on track.

For those who identify more with the donkey, the message is: You may lack experience, wisdom, or natural talent, but it doesn't matter. God can still use you as his chosen instrument to speak his word to those older and more experienced. Be ready for it, and don't be surprised or resist it if it happens. It may even involve wisdom beyond your natural capabilities. Balaam knew a lot more about angels than the donkey, who probably knew nothing at all; but that didn't stop God from providing the donkey with a single, blinding flash of supernatural wisdom to set his master straight.

We may feel, like the donkey, that we are condemned to be instruments in the execution of other people's plans and agendas forever. This is not at all what God wants for us. If that's how we see it, we need a thorough reordering of our own self-image as well as of our God-image. This can take time and patience. As we navigate this process, it can be useful to remind ourselves occasionally of the story of Balaam.

There's a final lesson, or warning, here. When we critically appraise the leaders in our churches, we need to ask ourselves the question, "Where

do they stand on the Balaam scale?" A true spiritual leader will always have an eye open for the donkey in his life. He won't limit God, and he will always keep himself open to hear the opinions of those younger and less experienced than himself. He should be happy to have God rebuke or correct him through such a one.

Many leaders will not pass this test. These are men in whom the character of God is improperly formed. Their sensibility of their own status makes them incapable of seeing a donkey as anything other than a convenient means of transport. We need to be wary of such men. It doesn't mean that they're necessarily in the wrong place or position—God has room for imperfect men at every level. It does, however, mean that many of their responses will be determined by fleshly rather than spiritual considerations, and so we need to treat them with caution.

Hierarchy is deeply ingrained in the church, and we will probably be taught that God wants it that way. We may be told that it's wrong to question, to express opinions, or to follow God's leading in our lives without approval from above. It's lucky that Balaam's donkey didn't think that way and didn't feel the need to ask Balaam's permission before opening his mouth—otherwise history might have turned out differently.

The story of Balaam and his donkey is a warning against excessive pride and willfulness, and a warning against excessive or inappropriate humility. We should never put a limit on what God can do through us—to do so is to insult him. I may have a low opinion of myself, but I can hardly go any lower than Balaam's donkey, and I should never use my own human limitations as an excuse for limiting what God can do through me.

CHAPTER 26

SETTING OUR CHURCH BOUNDARIES

And do not fear what [this people] fears, or be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel, he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.¹¹⁵

THE TROUBLE WITH Norman is that he doesn't appreciate the role of the church." The comment was made by Nick, a young Eurasian recently out of Bible College. He had just taken on his first salaried ministry post in the Singapore Baptist church I was attending.

I think what he meant was that I should refrain from forming independent opinions, give the church ministers their rightful due as having been ordained and appointed by God, and accept their decisions as being also from God. Then I should concentrate on unquestioning obedience and cooperation with their plans.

Nick's words were well-meant, and the underlying sentiments were entirely sincere; but in the months ahead, they would come back to haunt him. Shortly afterwards, a conflict arose within the church leadership. The church official responsible for home group ministries wrote an article in the church bulletin that the senior pastor took as a personal criticism. He felt that she

¹¹⁵Isaiah 8:12–15

was trying to undermine his position in the church in order to build a power base of her own, with the ultimate intention of taking over the church.

The senior pastor wrote to the Council of Deacons, detailing the lady's perceived shortcomings, alleging mental instability, and asking that she be removed from her office. Before sending the letter, he circulated it to various members of the church staff and asked for their signatures. Nick knew little of the issues involved, but he felt he owed loyalty to the senior pastor, so he duly signed the letter.

The conflict quickly escalated through the church. Members found their sympathies aligning with one or other of the two warring parties. The church congregation was a mixture of Western expatriates and local Chinese, and the split took on a racial character, as the expatriates gave their support to the American senior pastor, while the local people rallied around the Chinese church official.

As often happens in church disputes, human rivalries were given a spiritual slant, God was recruited as an ally by both sides, and as a result, the dispute became far more acrimonious and divisive than might otherwise have been the case.

As the conflict became increasingly bitter, the senior pastor, shocked by the extent of the local opposition, decided that the unity of the church would be best served by his departure. Since at the time he had another job offer on the table, he submitted his resignation. The customary notice period was waived, and almost immediately he left the country to take up the new appointment overseas.

Nick now found himself in an untenable position. He had signed a letter condemning as mentally unstable a senior member of the ministry staff who was now back in a position of power and influence. He was a junior staff member, with no real allies or power base, and he saw that his own position in the church had no future. He left shortly afterwards, a little older and wiser, and perhaps with a more realistic view of "the role of the church."

Nick's over-spiritualized view of the church is a common one. This view puts an overtly spiritual slant on anything and everything that happens in church. It fails to recognize that ordinary human emotions—ambition, jealousy, greed, prejudice, and the like—can be equally powerful motivators of behaviour in the church as they are outside.

It's possible to under-spiritualize as well, and to see everything in natural and human terms, leaving no room in our understanding for spiritual forces, whether good or evil. However, of these two opposite errors, over-spiritualization may be the more common, for several reasons.

The first is that it seems intuitively to make sense. We feel that an all-powerful and authoritative God should exercise firm control over something as important as the church. After all, that's what we would do if we were God. The idea of a God who is prepared to take the risk of delegating oversight of his primary institution to mortal, fallible men can leave us feeling a bit uneasy.

Second, we may find that an excessively high spiritual view of the church can work to our advantage. For example, we may find it convenient to delegate the difficult decisions to God. That way, we avoid the responsibility associated with having to make them ourselves. We may also find it safer. You never get criticized in church for saying, "Let's pray about it." If you say, "Maybe we should use our common sense on this one," you can run the risk of being labeled as unspiritual, and that's a risk many of us prefer not to take.

Finally, the high spiritual view suits many church leaders. A high spiritual view of the church implies a high spiritual view of the office-bearers. When church leaders teach doctrines that emphasize their own role as God's appointees, it buttresses their own authority and helps them feel important.

Over-spiritualization is a boundary issue. It involves a misalignment of the shared boundaries that exist within the tripartite system of God, the church, and me.

When I try to offload my legitimate spiritual responsibilities, I can do it in two ways. I can try to force God to take responsibility for areas of my life that he does not wish to control directly; or I can ascribe to the church and its appointed officials (as Nick did) a kind of mystical significance and overriding authority beyond that which is warranted.

There's a similarity between these two, and there's a difference. The similarity is that in both cases the contraction of my boundary caused by my failure to accept responsibility, whether in relation to God or in relation to the church, leaves a yawning void that needs to be filled. The difference is that whereas God will never consent to fill that vacuum, the church will be only too eager to come in and take control.

People thrive on power and authority, and church leaders are no different from others in this respect. Throughout history, churches have been adept at expanding their own boundaries to wrest control of the lives of those individuals who were insufficiently assertive to hold them at bay. If you leave a vacuum, they will step in. If you accept a passive role, content to follow orders and make no decisions, in church you can do that—there'll always be someone ready and willing to make the

decisions and give the orders. But that is not what God wants for you. If you want the firm boundaries that will enable you to be the person God made you to be, you may have to fight for them.

Which brings us at last to the question posed in the title of this book—how *do* we survive in the Pharisee church? The answer is simple in theory, but less so in practice. First, we draw our boundaries—where God has told us, not the church. Then, we defend them.

DRAWING OUR CHURCH BOUNDARIES

The principles are these:

Our boundaries with God are God's responsibility

This is true at least of the obligatory boundaries that define our own sphere of exclusive responsibility. God knows where these should be, and he always places them correctly and in our best interests. Our only problem is to work out where he wants them and to fit in with that. The voluntary boundaries are, obviously, for us to position.

Our boundaries with the church are our responsibility

This is a responsibility we take for ourselves. The church may try to position the boundaries, but we don't allow it. Church leaders will often try and position the boundaries in such a way as to increase their own control. Over-spiritualization encourages churches to enlarge their own boundaries in this way, to the detriment of individuals. Jesus never countenanced this—for him it was always: individuals first, organizations second.

Church leaders are liable to position boundaries casually and without serious thought, unaware of the damage that boundary violations can cause in the lives of others. The lives most affected are ours. We are the ones who suffer the consequences. This is too important to leave to anyone else, so we do it ourselves.

Where do we position our church boundaries?

We imitate God.

This is crucial. We observe God and the way he operates—in our own lives, in the lives of others, and in the Bible. We try to understand

his guiding principles, and then we apply similar principles for ourselves.

Our boundaries with the church, set by us, must mirror our boundaries with God, set by him. This means that if there are areas of my life where God refuses to trespass, I don't allow the church to trespass there either. Likewise, there may be areas where, in my personal life with him, God asks me to assume the responsibility. In that case, I resist any attempts by the church to undermine or nullify that responsibility.

It's that simple.

Sounds easy?

Well—maybe, but not always!

The biggest problem is that many of us have never had a correct understanding of God's boundaries in the first place, and until we have this, our chances of getting a right balance with the church are remote. If we see God as the vengeful tyrant, or as the obsessive law-maker, then we'll most likely let the church walk all over us, or find ourselves embedded in a maze of rules.

This is why several chapters of this book are devoted to dealing with the character of God, how he sets his boundaries, and what he does and doesn't do. But ideally, God's character is something we learn over time, from personal experience, not from reading books.

Then defend them

After setting our church boundaries, we defend them firmly and resolutely. This may be easier in some churches than in others. The ancient Romans used to say, "If you wish for peace, prepare for war."¹¹⁶ If people see that your boundaries are firm, they're more likely to respect them. If your boundaries are seen to be weak, they're more likely to be tested.

Don't seek confrontation. But if it happens, and if you're careful, you can often repel boundary violators courteously, gently, and tactfully, and they may not even notice you doing it.

¹¹⁶*Si vis pacem, para bellum* is usually attributed to Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (c. AD 390)

EXAMPLES

Church boundary violations can relate to almost any issue imaginable. It's not possible to deal with all or even a small fraction of these, so I've given here just two short, real-life examples to illustrate how this can work in practice.

1. Guilt

"I think there must be something wrong with me. I come to church, but I can't concentrate on what's going on. When the minister gets up to preach, my mind wanders all over the place. I can't focus on what he's saying. Maybe if I were more spiritual, I could get more engaged..."

A member of our church spoke these words to me some time back (about a previous minister, not our current one). He felt guilty because his thoughts drifted off during the sermon, and he thought that this reflected on his own spirituality.

This may not be immediately apparent as a boundary issue, but it is. It reflects inappropriate guilt, and inappropriate guilt is almost always a boundary issue. There was a good reason for my friend's problem—the preacher was a boring speaker. Either he had little to say of real worth, or he was incapable of saying it in an interesting way, or both. The problem would not have arisen if he'd had a better message or a better preaching style. My friend had no real reason to feel guilty or inadequate, but he did.

Why the guilt? After all, the problem could equally well have arisen in a classroom, business seminar, or debating chamber, and no one would have felt guilty. Who ever felt guilty about falling asleep in front of a boring teacher? This sort of guilt usually only happens in church. It relates back to over-spiritualization...

This is church! We've got the Holy Spirit in here! When the Holy Spirit is in action, everything is interesting. Even boring speakers!

I don't think so!

Keeping people interested in boring speakers has never been a part of the Holy Spirit's job. Hiring a public speaking coach might be a more constructive solution. Giving the problem a spiritual dimension that it doesn't merit solves nothing.

Guilt is widespread in churches. People who fall away from church or otherwise get detached almost always feel guilty. They think, *It's God's church, it must be right, so the fault must be mine.*

Not so. There's no magic here. We go to church as members of a holy priesthood. We should behave that way and be treated that way. We shouldn't be subjected to boring preaching. If preachers can't make it interesting, they shouldn't be doing it.

2. Money

Some months ago I attended morning service in a church other than my own. It's an ambitious, rapidly growing, professionally-run organization with excellent preaching, and I always enjoy my visits there. But as with many ambitious churches focused on quantifiable yardsticks of success, personal boundaries can often end up being violated.

That day they had a visiting speaker from another country. His message carried a heavy financial slant and was interspersed with exhortations to buy his (overpriced) ministry materials at the end of the meeting. When it was time for the offering to be taken, he rose from his chair. "Now...however much money you ordinarily give on a Sunday, this week I want you to give *thirty percent more*." This was accompanied by a slew of promised blessings that would flow from our extra generosity.

A couple of decades ago, I would have reacted to this flagrant boundary violation differently than I did now. Then, my boundaries were weak, often pitifully so. I would have reacted with a mixture of guilt and anger. These negative emotions would have been directed not towards the violator but—irrationally—towards God. In those days, I blamed God for everything. Probably I would have paid the thirty percent, as being the easy way to deal with the guilt. That would have redoubled my anger, and I would have gone home at the end feeling angry, frustrated, trapped, and abused.

That was then.

This morning I listened with equanimity. I looked around to read the faces, curious to see how others were reacting. But really it was none of my business—my responsibility is for my own decisions, not for those of others.

For me there was no issue. I had no interest in the preacher's opinion on how much I should give. Of course he wants us to give more! Maybe that way he gets invited back next year. He was pushing hard to operate outside his legitimate boundaries, but he certainly wasn't going to be crossing mine. My boundary is modeled on God, and I know for certain that God would never use these kinds of tactics on me. If God won't do it, then I won't allow it from anyone else either.

I went home at the end of the service unruffled, relaxed, and maybe even a little amused.

SINK OR SWIM

I think that more people leave church because of personal boundary violations by church hierarchies than for any other reason. I'm constantly amazed at the devastating effects such violations have on people. It's almost as if they've been raped, and in a sense they have. Their anger and bitterness can smoulder for years or decades, even to the grave.

Why are the effects so devastating and potentially so much worse than the effects from comparable violations in secular settings?

First, churches generally have—and should have—more than their fair share of psychologically weak and vulnerable individuals. These are people who are particularly prone to damage from boundary violations. They had trouble securing their boundaries even before they came into the church, and it may have been the desire to find something different that brought them there in the first place. When they get to church and find that the abuse is not less, but is actually worse than outside, the effect can be devastating.

Second, when people become Christians and join a church, they often consciously relax their boundaries. This renders them particularly vulnerable. It's a bit like falling in love—you let down your defenses and open yourself up, and in the process leave yourself open to severe pain if your trust is abused. This vulnerability may be compounded in people with a background of passive dependency who have abnormally weak boundaries to start with. Boundaries that started out weak can end up even weaker—an example of how Christianity can sometimes take our negative character traits and magnify them.

Then the abuse may be not only institutionalized, but also serial, multiple, and ongoing. You can leave one church to escape it and find the same thing in the next church. After this happens a few times, you inevitably end up thinking, *They can't all be wrong! It must be me!*

Finally, the damage is made worse by the fact that the perpetrators are claiming to be acting under God's authority. If you accept their claim—and it can be difficult not to—you are left with limited options. You can blame yourself, or you can blame God.

To blame yourself is to accept guilt, and this explains the widespread guilt among Christians who go away from the church. Walking away from the church with a clear conscience is not easy to do. To blame God opens

the door to anger, and that's why anger with God is more pervasive than anger with the church, even though the church is a habitual violator, while God never, ever violates anyone.

There's really only one answer to all this, which is to put God in the centre and recognize the church as the blunt and flawed instrument that it usually is. With God as our centre, secure in his unqualified love and acceptance, secure in our newly-restored and God-honoured legitimate boundaries, we carve out a place for ourselves—in the church, outside the church, or wherever else we feel comfortable and motivated to be.

JESUS AND HIS BOUNDARIES

This discussion can hardly be complete without looking at one final question. How did Jesus set the boundaries in his own life?

Another insight from Scott Peck is helpful here—both in understanding Jesus and in pointing to a sensible way forward for us:

We must possess or achieve something before we can give it up and still maintain our competence and viability. The pathway to sainthood goes through adulthood. There are no quick and easy shortcuts. Ego boundaries must be hardened before they can become softened. An identity must be established before it can be transcended. One must find oneself before one can lose it.¹¹⁷

The first step for all of us, Peck explains, is to develop strong, secure boundaries. Only when these are firmly in place can we choose to relax them selectively in certain areas. This is exactly what Jesus did.

There were many occasions when Jesus voluntarily relaxed his boundaries, choosing to make himself vulnerable to his enemies and available to his friends. The most obvious example of this vulnerability was at the end of his life, in choosing the cross and all that it entailed; but we see it frequently also in the smaller incidents of his life. He healed on the Sabbath in full view of the Pharisees, inviting condemnation. He walked into the traps set for him, choosing not to defend himself. Even when under hostile surveillance, he flouted laws and conventions to help the needy. He courted vulnerability to a degree that was dangerous and almost foolhardy, and he finally paid the ultimate price for it.

¹¹⁷M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978)

At other times, however, we see Jesus doing the opposite and retreating behind firm, strong boundaries. He withdrew from dangerous situations. Often he maintained anonymity to avoid trouble. Sometimes he answered accusations with a belligerence that can seem shocking to us now. Even his mother and brothers on occasion felt the lash of his tongue when they got in the way of his ministry—no filial piety or family sentiments were allowed to intrude when Jesus was intent on fulfilling his purpose.

In all these things, Jesus' life and actions are mirrored in his teaching. Sometimes he talks of voluntary weakness, walking the extra mile, and not fighting back in the face of evil; elsewhere he tells us to be as wise as serpents and warns us to be on our guard against the abuses of evil men. There's a time for childlike trust, and there's a time for the pathway to sainthood that runs through adulthood.

Jesus is our model and our pointer towards God, and as we come to know God better, we will find his character to be the same. We will find him to be kinder, more considerate, and more generous than we ever could have imagined; but at the same time, we may find in him a stubborn rigidity, as he steadfastly refuses to bend or compromise with all our attempts to suborn him to our own purposes. God's boundaries are eternal, unwavering, and sacrosanct.

In the ancient wisdom we are reminded of where the true meaning of human life resides:

to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.¹¹⁸

This walking with and in relationship to God is the beginning and end of all things. All else in our lives should contribute to that one overriding mission and purpose, or else it's worthless.

The church exists to further that aim. The church is there to help us in our mission of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking more closely and humbly with our God. If it does that, it has value. When it ceases to do that, or even becomes a stumbling block or a source of harm, then we have God's full permission and encouragement to erect and maintain whatever boundaries we may deem necessary for our defense.

Every one of us is a unique individual, created by God for a unique purpose. The ultimate failure in life is to allow anything, anyone, or any organization, however grandly named, to steal that away.

¹¹⁸ Micah 6:8



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