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The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE LORD'S DAY

Part 9

“Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord: This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter. I will praise Thee: for Thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation. The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:19-24)

The articles in this series have considered the institution of the Sabbath, its inclusion in the Ten Commandments, the dignity afforded to it by Moses and the prophets, its corruption by Pharisaical formality, the Lord's correction of this, and its observance by the apostles and early church, both Jew and Gentile. The previous edition concerned that particular period of the very early church, when a brief overlap existed of both the Levitical and New Testament orders.

It is necessary now to examine the change that occurred in the actual day of observance. This is a major problem to some people. Let it be remembered, before proceeding any further into this, that at Creation the principle which was brought into being was of **one day in seven** being set aside for God. It is important to keep this in mind, for as we proceed it will be seen that the Christians' day of rest – the day set aside for God, for the settled New Testament age – is **not** the Jewish Sabbath; and that this change came about by the example and authority of the Risen Christ and His apostles. It will also become apparent that the change took place quite naturally and of necessity following events attending the accomplishment of redemption and the beginning of the New Creation. This is the ground upon which the Christian stands to do battle in defence of the Lord's Day.

Now back again to the ‘original’ for a moment: six working days and one of rest – that is the God-ordained distribution of time. It is the general course of nature, that labour precedes repose; and God the Creator established this. It is the order set out in Genesis 1 and 2. Indeed, it would not have made any sense in the beginning if God had rested on the first day, and then proceeded with the work of creation.

Passing on to Exodus 16:22-31 where instruction is given concerning the gathering of the manna, the emphasis is again, six days of collecting and rest on the Sabbath; likewise in the Decalogue, it is six days of labour whilst the seventh is the ‘sabbath of the Lord thy God’. Whatever may have transpired in the intervening years between Eden and Egypt, it was following the same abiding principle that the interval between one ‘rest’ and the next was six days. In this sense the Christian Sabbath is as much the Day of Rest as was the Jewish: it is one day in every seven days.

Reliable commentators are, in the main, agreed that the day observed as the first Sabbath after the Hebrews’ deliverance from Egypt was dated from the day of their redemption from bondage. This is substantiated by the preface to the Ten Commandments: *“I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”* (Exodus 20:2). Then some fifty years later when the Moral Law was recapitulated, precisely the same preface was given: *“I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage”* (Deuteronomy 5:6). Here the commandments are spelled out as in Exodus: *“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it”* (Exodus 20:8-11). But when we come to the Fourth Commandment in Deuteronomy there is an important

difference: *“Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee. Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched-out arm: **therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day**”* (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). In Exodus 20:11 the reason for the Sabbath and its observance is referred back to Creation; but in Deuteronomy 5:15 (where the same law in all its detail is repeated) there is an additional rationale for the observance of the Sabbath, namely: to commemorate their great deliverance from Egypt. ‘Therefore’ says God, ‘keep the Sabbath day’. This was not an infringement of the original commandment – these two chapters contain one and the same Law – but a mighty redemption had been wrought for Israel. This was a further reason and incentive (as significant as Creation itself) why the Sabbath was to be kept; because, says the Almighty: *“I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out”* (Deuteronomy 5:6).

The Hebrews’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt was by blood and by power: a slain Passover lamb, sprinkled blood, a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. *“Now all these things happened unto them for examples”* (1 Corinthians 10:11), and are highly typical of spiritual truth. The wonderful deliverance that is in Christ Jesus, loosing His people from their sins and delivering them from the bondage of Satan, is set forth in the detail of Exodus 12. When the Son of God Incarnate came to earth, and wrought salvation, He, by life and death, paid the ransom which effected eternal redemption. This great work culminated on the cross and was attested by a holy, righteous God by Christ’s resurrection. Then on the first day of the week (as time was then reckoned), He appeared unto His disciples – the evidence and proof of the efficacy of His

atonement. Therefore, it was not only a natural and an obvious thing, but **essential** that the commemoration of the Sabbath be changed from the type to the antitype; from the shadow to the substance; from the typical lamb to the Lamb of God; from the Paschal lamb of Egypt to Christ, our Passover.

In the purposes of God, the three stages in the development of the Sabbath may be described as:

- 1) **The Patriarchal Period** of human history, in which the Sabbath was based upon its Creation institution – six days work, one day sanctified for God.
- 2) **The Sinaitic Period** in which the Sabbath still had reference to Creation, but took on an added meaning on account of the exodus: “remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt...therefore...keep the sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15) – six days labour, one day holy. It was now based not upon Creation only, but also upon deliverance.
- 3) **The New Testament Age.** Its original institution still in view, the Sabbath henceforth commemorates the New Creation (cf 2 Corinthians 5:17) and greater deliverance wrought by the Saviour, shown to be accomplished and accepted by God by His resurrection from the dead. The labours of Christ Jesus being finished, rest is secured for His people.

Thus, on the first day of the week the risen Saviour, who had completed His work, appeared unto His own. This was amazing. Indeed, it was **so** wonderful that this day must now be ‘the day of days’ for His people. But note that the apportionment of time is untouched; the same principle is maintained in all ages as at Creation – one day in seven set apart for God.

This Divinely-appointed change was foreseen in the Old Testament hundreds of years before it came about. The Psalms contain a key statement, note it very carefully: “*The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvellous*”

*in our eyes. **This is the day** which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it”* (Psalm 118:22-24). Let these verses be carefully analysed. The stone spoken of here is Christ. Of this there is not the shadow of a doubt for the New Testament applies this verse to Him on no less than six occasions: Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20 and 1 Peter 2:4-7. So, the stone is Christ. He was rejected, reads the Psalm. When? At Calvary. He was set at nought; cast away by the builders. When? In the tomb. But He became the Head of the corner. When? In Resurrection. This is marvellous, says the Psalmist; a mighty act; it is the Lord’s doings; Almighty God is at work in this! Yes, indeed – a new, spiritual Creation is in view here – the power of God in Redemption. When was it finalised? At the Resurrection. Then on the first day of the week the Lord appeared, demonstrating that His work was done. On the first day of the week He rested; His toil was completed; although once rejected He became the Head of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing. His work is now finished, so **this** is the day of commemoration. **This** is the day that He has made by virtue of redemption – we will be glad and rejoice in it. Such is the interpretation and significance of these prophetic words.

“If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law” (Hebrews 7:11-12). This Epistle describes the blessed condition of the New Testament people of God: they have a new covenant, a new Mediator, a new way of access, a new High Priest and new promises – all better and far superior to those which went before. Not just one thing is changed, but **all**. Therefore, the reckoning of the Sabbath must be from the glory and triumph of Christ the Mediator in His resurrection.

“There is made of necessity a change also of the law”. This, of course, is a reference to the Ceremonial and Judicial order of things. The Moral

Law of God is unalterable – it stands forever; but as described in a previous article, under the Levitical economy, certain aspects of the Judicial and Ceremonial Laws were linked to the fourth commandment, for example, the death penalty for Sabbath-breaking. These aspects were Jewish; they were not written upon the tables of stone that were deposited in the Ark. Nevertheless, to the Jews it was all part of their practice of Sabbath observance, as was the day itself, reckoned from their deliverance out of Egypt. However, under the terms of the New Covenant, of necessity there must be a change. The Judicial and Ceremonial aspects are now abrogated. There was no more offering for sins, no more stoning, and no longer a day calculated on the basis of the physical deliverance of a national people from an earthly oppressor.

This change to the first day of the week was based upon the New Covenant, but it did not contradict the Moral Law – the fourth commandment of which enshrined the Creation principle of one day in seven for God. This New Testament change was in computation, not principle. After effecting the material creation, God marked it by instituting a day of rest: a Sabbath. It was the seventh day. After effecting the spiritual creation, God marked it by a change to the first day of the week. It is still a Sabbath.

Just one further point in conclusion, which has been addressed in a previous section, but has a strong bearing here: “*Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath*” (Mark 2:28). The institution of the Sabbath is as old as time itself. It is an exalted appointment, universal in its extent, an institution of the highest dignity. But remember that Christ is Lord even of the Sabbath – He is “*Heir of all things*” (Hebrews 1:2), “*Head over all things*” (Ephesians 1:22), “*Lord of all*” (Acts 10:36). He is not like Moses, merely a servant: “*And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over His own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end*” (Hebrews 3:5-

6). “Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you, That in this place is One greater than the temple” (Matthew 12:5-6). Christ is the Son, far superior to Moses, greater than the temple – He is Lord of the Sabbath. Has not He the right and the authority after having effected this spiritual creation, to claim the day that followed as His? For this is what it amounts to; hence it is called the **Lord’s Day**. This is the Christians’ Sabbath; the day which the Lord has made, having become the Head of the corner. This is the day of our week that is sanctified to the Lord our God. “*This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it*” (Psalm 118:24). So may the Word of God be blessed to every reader, for His glory.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

“The Law was given to Israel not that they **might** be redeemed, but because they **had** been redeemed. The nation had been brought out of Egypt by the power of God under the blood of the slain lamb, itself the symbol and token of His grace. The Law was added at Sinai as the necessary standard of life for a ransomed people, a people who now belonged to the Lord. It began with a declaration of their redemption: “*I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*” (Exodus 20:2). It rested on the basis of grace, and it embodied the principle that redemption implied a conformity to God’s moral order. In other words, the very grace that redeemed Israel carried with it the necessity of revealing the Law to Israel. The Law was given that they might walk worthy of the relation in which they now stood to God, worthy of a salvation which was already theirs. The covenant of the Law did not supersede the covenant of promise, but set forth the kind of life which those who were redeemed by the covenant of promise were expected to live.”

J. McNicol (1869 – 1956)

IS IT ENOUGH?

1 Kings 19:4

It is sinful to wish our own deaths, though we are under pains more painful than death. It is sinful to desire death absolutely; [though] we may desire it with submission to the will of God. To live is an act of nature; but to be willing to live because God wills it is an act of grace. And as it is our holiness to do the will of God while we live, so it is our holiness to be content to live while we suffer according to His will. On the other hand, to die is an act of nature; but to die because God wills it is an act of grace. Christ is said to be obedient unto death, because He died in contemplation of God's decree, and in conformity to His good pleasure. To die thus is the duty of a Christian, and the crown of all his obedience. Satan would have us live as we will, and die when we will; he tempts us as much to die when we list, as to live how we list. Satan puts Job upon it peremptorily: "*curse God, and die*" (Job 2:9); desire or procure thy own death.

To wish for death that we may enjoy Christ is a holy wish; but yet we must not wish that, absolutely. The Apostle Paul 'desired to be dissolved and to be with Christ' (cf Philippians 1:23), yet you see how he qualifies and debates it. To wish for death that we may be freed from sin is a holy wish; but yet we must not wish that, absolutely. We must refer ourselves to the pleasure of God, how long He will let us conflict with our corruptions and our lusts, with this body of death and sin which we bear about us.

But to wish for death because our lives are full of trouble is an unholy wish. God may, yea and hath, as much use of our lives in our troubles as in our comforts. We may do much business for God in a sick-bed. We may do God as much work when we are bound hand and foot in a prison, as when we are at liberty. Passive obedience brings as much glory to God as active [obedience] doth. Therefore, we must not wish

for death, especially not with an absolute wish, because we are under troublesome evils...

The Apostle saith 'I count not my life dear, so I may finish my course with joy' (cf Acts 20:24); but we shall account our lives too cheap, if we fear to finish our course with sorrow; if we think that it is not worth the while to live unless we live in outward comforts. We exceedingly undervalue our lives when a cross in our lives makes us weary of [them]. This was Jonah's infirmity, when he had taken [ill humour] about the gourd; he would needs die, and he concludeth the matter: "*it is better for me to die than to live*" (Jonah 4:3, 8) and all was because he could not have his will, because he was troubled. This also was Elijah's infirmity, when he was persecuted by, and fled for his life from Jezebel: "*and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers*" (1 Kings 19:4) ... We ought rather to seek to God that He would remove the evil from us, than remove us from the evil. For God hath a thousand doors to let us out of trouble, though he doth not open the door of the grave to let us in there and out of the world. He can end our troubles, and not end our lives...

Natural reason saith, 'it is better to die than live under oppressions'; but divine reason saith, 'there is more honour to be gained by living under oppressions, than there is ease to be attained by dying from under them'. To bear a burden well is more desirable than to be delivered from a burden – especially if while we are bearing, we can be doing good... A Christian should be content, yea he should rejoice, in suffering much evil upon himself, while he can be doing any good; especially if he can do much good to others... We should be willing to live so long as God, or His Church, have a stroke of work to be done, which our abilities and opportunities fit us to do... It is better to live (though we are the meanest) working for God, than to die, though we have been the chiefest.

Joseph Caryl (1602 – 1673)

If at any time you feel disposed again to say, “*It is enough*”, and that you can bear the burden of life no longer, do as Elijah did: flee into the silence of solitude, and sit under – not the juniper tree – but under that tree whereon the incarnate Son of God was made a curse for you. Here your soul will assuredly find sweet refreshment; yes, from Christ’s acceptable offering to God. He is a hiding-place from the storm, a covert from the tempest, a shadow from the heat, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land...

At the sight of the cross, you will no longer think of complaining of the greatness of your sufferings; for here you behold sufferings, in comparison with which yours must be accounted a light affliction, which is but for a moment: here the righteous One suffers for you – the Just for the unjust. In the view of the cross, you will soon forget your distresses; for the love of God in Christ Jesus to you, a poor sinner, will absorb all your thoughts. Under the cross, you are prevented from supposing that some strange thing is happening unto you; ‘the disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his Lord’; and as the kingdom has been bestowed upon the Head, so will it also be upon the members. At the foot of the cross you are preserved from impatience; for you cannot but rejoice exceedingly that what you are enduring is only a temporal suffering, and not the curse which fell so dreadfully upon your Surety. At the foot of the cross, your grief will soon be lost in that joy and peace of God which drops from this tree of life into the ground of your heart, and the foretaste you will here obtain of heaven will sweeten the troubles of this life as with the breath of the morning, and before you are aware, will bring over you, as over Elijah, the feeling of a heavenly repose; yea, the cross itself will be transformed into such a medium between heaven and earth, that the most comforting thoughts shall descend into your soul, and the most grateful thoughts shall ascend from your soul to heaven, like those angels of God seen in a vision on the plains of Bethel by the solitary and benighted patriarch Jacob.

F. W. Krummacher (1796 – 1868)

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God.” (Hebrews 6:1)

Of all those persons who were called by grace, and formed a part of the Early Church in the first century, it might have been expected that those with a Jewish background would be the most advanced in their comprehension of Biblical truth. A familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures, and of God’s former dealings with humanity, would surely stand them in good stead for the reception of New Testament doctrine. Having been Jews, they had ‘much advantage, every way’, *“chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God”* (Romans 3:1-2); *“Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen”* (Romans 9:4-5).

In practice, however, the very opposite proved to be the case. Writing primarily to Hebrew believers in the epistle of the same name, the inspired Apostle rebukes them severely for their lack of understanding: *“ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat”* (Hebrews 5:11-12). This was a distressing and undesirable situation. Time is of the essence, and neither the Apostle’s life, nor the lives of his hearers, were of indefinite duration. He could not be forever re-covering old ground, and elementary level Christian truth. Vast tracts of doctrine had still to be addressed; there were yet so ‘many things to say’, and some ‘hard to be uttered’ (cf Hebrews 5:11). Neither Paul nor those to whom he wrote could afford to be playing in the shallows, while whole oceans remained unexplored.

The Word of God is of timeless relevance and enduring profitability, and the Holy-Ghost-inspired reproofs of a former age continue to have their point of application. In this 21st Century, it is to be feared, they must be levelled against professing Christians throughout the English-speaking world. ‘Why?’ it might be asked, ‘what particular advantage do they have?’ Let it be answered: ‘much every way’. A reliable translation of the Bible for over 400 years; an even longer history of able expositors and commentators whose works remain to the present day; an accompanying rich hymnology; a ‘goodly heritage’ of independent, Biblically-ordered worship, stretching back at least as far as records exist; indeed, a combination of factors which, it might justifiably be assumed, would produce Christians of the very highest calibre.

Alas, that the very opposite seems to be the case. The modern church is populated by ‘believers’ who hardly know what they believe, and who could not give a sensible answer or reason for the hope they claim to have (cf 1 Peter 3:15); persons for whom the greater part of the Bible is essentially unknown; whose ‘faith’ makes no discernible impact upon their lives; whose practice of religion is so feeble, it will scarcely see them through the Lord’s Day, much less the intervening days of the week; in summary, spiritual ‘milksofs’, ‘infants’ and ‘babes’ in the most pejorative sense of the word.

What is the cause of this malady, this epidemic of under-development? In the case of the Hebrews, the fault evidently lay with the hearers, who are described as being ‘dull’ of hearing, a word denoting apathy and indolence, and alternatively translated as ‘slothful’ in Hebrews 6:12. Whilst the persons addressed evidently came under the sound of the Word, they failed to show the diligence and application that Divine truth demands in its reception. To all such, the warning comes: “**Take heed therefore how ye hear:** for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have” (Luke 8:18). What begins as a casual and careless attitude to the preached Word may end in a complete breakdown of one’s profession.

However, in the current church scene, in what might broadly be described as ‘evangelicalism’, the state of preaching is also worthy of censure, and is equally, or even more, to blame. A child will never have a proper development if he is not weaned; and if the ministry never amounts to more than ‘milk’, little wonder that the congregation is malnourished. There are plenty of churches, the woeful state of whose members is entirely the consequence of the liquid diet to which they are subjected, week after week. Deficiency in the pulpit always leads to deprivation in the pew.

There are three prominent features of today’s ministry (speaking particularly of the United Kingdom) which seem to be exacerbating the problem, accelerating the down-grade in preaching, and detrimentally affecting Christians in many places:

1. The Proliferation of Itineration

In the current climate, when ‘pastor-less’ congregations seem to outnumber those with a settled ministry, the system of visiting preachers has become an accepted norm, and is relied upon by many – not only as a short-term contingency, but as a permanent arrangement over a period of years or even decades. How ever commonplace this practice may have become, Christians need to realise that it has no precedent in the Scriptures. The peripatetic labours of the Apostles (especially Paul) and their immediate successors were ordained by God for the establishment of the New Testament church, but were not given as a pattern for its ongoing administration.

Those who claim Paul as the great epitome and original of an itinerant preacher should examine his record more carefully. Where not prevented by civil unrest or severe persecution, the duration of his ‘visits’ were reckoned not in days, but in months and years, whether at Iconium (Acts 14:3), Corinth (Acts 18:11), or Ephesus (Acts 20:31). And when directed by the Holy Ghost to another venue, he was at great pains to leave a permanent provision behind him. Observe also his

instructions to Titus: “*For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee*” (Titus 1:5). In every place where a local church had been established, an overseer was to be installed. By the close of the Biblical canon, this was the established order of the New Testament church, such that the glorified Christ could address each of His seven epistles to the appointed minister (or ‘angel’) at those places (cf Revelation 2, 3). His divine recognition and acknowledgement of those men, elsewhere called ‘stars in His hand’ (cf Revelation 1:20), puts heaven’s seal of approval upon the arrangement.

The same cannot be claimed for the itinerant ministry. When a different man stands in the pulpit every week, or at every service, there cannot be a ‘balanced diet’ for the hearers. There is no prospect of a systematic ministry, or a comprehensive coverage of the Bible. There cannot be that desirable situation where, “*the word of the Lord [is] unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little*” (Isaiah 28:13), because there is no consistency over time. Neither can a visiting preacher hope to enter in to the particular needs and concerns of the people before him, and ‘feed them with food convenient for them’ (cf Proverbs 30:8), and give a word suited to their present case, for it is not known to him. Worse still if he should tailor his message, and presume to know their wants, on the basis of hearsay, rumour, or the fallible judgment of his own eyes.

Re-echoing his Lord’s own commands (cf John 21:15-17) Peter instructs church elders: “*Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind*” (1 Peter 5:2). The best person to feed a flock is their own under-shepherd; fully acquainted with each sheep and lamb; burdened with a sense of personal responsibility; bearing with them day and night (cf Genesis 31:38-40). The most diligent of itinerant preachers simply cannot fulfil this; for, “*he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose*

own the sheep are not ... leaveth the sheep" (John 10:12). It is in the very nature of the role.

The fact that so many un-pastored congregations are able simultaneously to engage a preacher every week, suggests that the disparity between the numbers of needy churches and able men is not so great as might be claimed. Why then are not more happy unions formed between pastors and people, for the good of all? Sad to say that in some cases, it is due to a conscious disinclination for the Biblical order. It is in the interests of those who 'cannot endure sound doctrine', and those who have 'itching ears', to 'heap unto themselves' a great multiplicity and variety of teachers (cf 2 Timothy 4:3). "*For in the multitude of... many words there are also divers vanities*" (Ecclesiastes 5:7). If the speaker is changed every week, then the contrary tastes of all the congregation can be pandered to, with little likelihood of challenging doctrinal matters ever being brought up in the pulpit; while the church's members can 'bear rule by their own means'. It is a sadly defective situation, and yet some of the Lord's people "*love to have it so*" (Jeremiah 5:31).

Or in other instances, the excuses made are financial ones. A church will not make a call, because they cannot support a 'full-time' pastor; or a preacher will not consent to come, because the pay is insufficient. Alas that a salaried, professional churchmanship (alien to the Scriptures, but beloved of Romanism and Anglicanism) should become so entrenched in the thinking of 'evangelicals'! What clearer word could there be, than that of Peter: "*Feed the flock of God... not for filthy lucre*" (1 Peter 5:2). As soon as 'money' comes into the equation, spiritual principle is jeopardised. Rather, let a financially constrained congregation 'give as they are able' (cf Deuteronomy 16:17), and trust to God for the outcome. And let that would-be pastor, determined to reap a carnal reward for a spiritual service (cf 1 Corinthians 9:11) recall that the Apostle Paul did 'no such thing' (v.15), supporting himself by other means (Acts 18:3, 2 Thessalonians 3:8-10), and consider which is greater: the call of the pay-check, or his call to the ministry.

2. Pulpit Popularism

If the increase in itinerant ministry has led to the impoverishment of congregations, so too has preachers' desire for popularity. The two things are not unconnected. If a man depends upon itineration to fulfil his ministerial aspirations, he needs to be invited back again. Even those who hold a pastorate may consider it in their best interests to have the congregation as large as possible, by any means, and preach with a view to achieving this. Others hope to be invited to address large audiences at conferences and fraternal meetings, and be reckoned amongst the 'big name' speakers of the day. But how should the message be framed to have widest appeal, even to a divergent or ecumenical crowd? The solution invariably involves dumbing down the content, in order to receive criticism from none, and 'Amens' from all. Deep doctrinal subjects are avoided in case some consider it too complicated; direct practical application is omitted, lest some present take a different view; questions of church order and the ordinances are left well alone for fear of offending those from other denominations; eschatological topics are avoided at all costs. What remains when all these objections have been taken into consideration? Perhaps the 'doctrines of grace' might be addressed in broad terms, or a general bemoaning of the state of the world, or a defence of the Christian faith by apologetics, or maybe a simple, evangelistic theme on the necessity of repentance and faith; with which no-one, surely, could find fault.

The preacher's objective of evading controversy and winning universal approval has been achieved – but at what cost? He has reverted, for expediency's sake, to the most rudimentary of topics in ministry, irrespective of the degree of spiritual maturity, or the needs of his hearers. They will not be edified or built up by such insipid fare; and if this is the continual tenor of the ministry they receive, it will at length prove harmful. Often, that which is **easy** to preach, and that which is **needful** to be heard, are diametrically opposed. It behoves both preacher and hearer alike to desire 'right things', rather than 'smooth things' (cf Isaiah 30:10).

3. Seeking the Found

Another subtle erosion of preaching has occurred from an unforeseen quarter. In recent years, it has become the near-universal habit of mainstream evangelical churches to appoint one of their Sunday meetings as the ‘gospel service’. On these occasions, a ‘simple gospel message’ is typically preached, in the ‘how to become a Christian’ genre, often incorporating an evangelistic appeal, or call, to the unconverted. To this service, regular attendees are encouraged to invite non-Christian friends or relatives, as the ministry will be specifically targeted towards the unsaved. The exact origins of this practice are unclear – whether the liturgical divisions of the state church, or the traditional service formats of Brethrenism – but it is now so widespread amongst independent churches, that the writer was recently accused of ‘not preaching the gospel’, by virtue of the fact that there is no designated ‘gospel service’ in the scheduled meetings at North Road Chapel.

Let it be said at the outset, that the declaration of the way of salvation is of fundamental importance to the New Testament Church, and a vital component of all ministry. Perhaps there are some congregations in existence where unconverted persons, with no public profession of faith, greatly outnumber the church’s members; and where un-churched newcomers are welcomed every week; necessitating a very regular and simplistic presentation of New Testament truth. God be thanked for such places, wheresoever they may be found.

However, the reality for most congregations is very different. A more typical demographic in these days is a small company of saints, all Christians of many years’ standing; and if there be amongst them those who have no public profession of faith, they are perhaps children of members, or regular attendees, whose continued condition is certainly not due to a want of hearing, or comprehension of the truth. When, in circumstances like these, half of the Lord’s Day services are devoted to oversimplified applications of isolated New Testament texts, something is seriously wrong. When a preacher effectively ignores twenty mature

Christians while directing his whole sermon to two visitors, presumed unsaved; or worse, persists in making his emotional appeals when none but the church's members are present, there is a gross disservice done to the flock of God. Such excuses as: 'it will do you good to hear this again', or 'you never know who might come in', will not suffice. The world has a proverb for this misdirected activity: 'preaching to the converted'. A grievous error is committed if salvation is not preached to the lost – **and** when the saved are needlessly 'evangelised', without distinction.

This is the fault that Paul sharply reproved: "*laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God*" (Hebrews 6:1). Foundations are of utmost importance, and are that which must come first and foremost. "*If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?*" (Psalm 11:3). But no building consists entirely of foundations; indeed, they serve no purpose **unless** built upon. Let them be laid, soundly, squarely, on solid rock, in order that the rest of the structure may follow. He who makes no further progress in doctrine, but is ever laying and re-laying the basics, should take warning, "*Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish*" (Luke 14:29-30); a justifiable reproach.

The 'gospel service' arrangement risks depriving the Lord's people of their necessary food, limiting their spiritual development, and arresting their growth in grace. It also has many other shortcomings which are rarely admitted or addressed, for fear of being called 'un-evangelistic', or hyper-Calvinist, for example:

(a) It misconstrues the function of the church. The church on earth is not just a 'mechanism for effecting salvation', nor merely a means to an end – it is **an end in itself**. Its purposes are, firstly to glorify God (which is done, whether sinners are saved, or reprobates are left without excuse, cf. 2 Corinthians 2:14-16); secondly to be a fold for the flock of God, where they may be nourished and fed; and thirdly to

bear witness unto the world. The Lord will still have His church, and the church will still have a purpose, long after the last elect soul is added to its number.

(b) It is not faithful to the Word of God. The Scriptures contain only one John 3:16, only one Acts 16:30, among its 31,000 verses. Texts of this kind are but a small part of the whole Bible. This is not an oversight on the part of its Divine Author. Ministers of the Word should strive to reflect the balance of truth that the Holy Spirit has Himself inspired there. The Lord has many purposes to accomplish in the declaration of His Word to sinners, not only salvation. It may sometimes be sent forth to prick a man's conscience, or teach him morality, or check his wickedness, or exacerbate his guilt. Also, in the experience of the writer, it is impossible to predict from the pulpit which sermon, or what part of Holy Writ the Lord will use to greatest effect – often it is the most obscure and unintended of passages that the Holy Ghost applies to a soul, 'that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not the preacher' (cf 2 Corinthians 4:7). Who can dictate to Him in which service He must save, and by what verses of Scripture?

(c) It does not well serve the people. Mature saints are impoverished for a lack of strong meat. But equally, those whose faith is tender may be unnecessarily shaken by this mode of preaching, worrying that their own experience of salvation has not lived up to the high ideals and dramatic descriptions given in the gospel service. Those who as yet have no outward profession of faith may find themselves unfairly tarnished and harangued as unconverted, when their actual case is a need of assurance, or dispelling of fear, or conviction concerning believers' baptism. Those who are unsaved, used to being in the 'line of fire' every week, may become all the more hardened against it. And when this very prescriptive categorisation is made, defining the content and conferring different degrees of importance upon the Lord's Day services, there will inevitably be those who feel justified in attending the one, and absenting themselves from the other, further worsening the problem of 'once-ism' which so afflicts the churches today.

Conclusion

Having considered the ways in which these errors are committed in the modern church, it is important also to observe the positive injunctions contained in the text, and the delightful alternative prospect set before the reader. There will always be a place for preaching the way of salvation, and the foundational principles of the Christian faith. It is sometimes precisely what is called for (cf Hebrews 5:12); but from this starting place, it is the duty and privilege of the people of God to “*go on unto perfection*” – to enjoy a fulness and completeness in their comprehension of His Word, and a ‘whole-some’ spiritual diet.

When the preacher was the Lord Jesus Himself, He took for His text “*Moses and all the prophets*”. ‘Unlikely subject matter for an explanation of the gospel’, some might say. But from this place, “*He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself*” (Luke 24:27). It is the particular joy of a consecutive, expository ministry to be forever finding the Saviour and His works in the most unexpected of places (be it an enigmatic character of patriarchal times, a strange clause in the ceremonial Law, or an artefact of the temple) and to prove beyond all doubt that ‘these are they which testify of Him’ (cf John 5:39). Here is a pattern for preaching that honours God and His Word, delivers the preacher from bias, and ensures that all the hearers receive their proper portion in due season (cf Luke 12:42, Matthew 13:52).

What, ultimately, is ‘the gospel’? In the narrow view of many, it is the simple declaration of the way of salvation to those who know it not. But in the Apostles’ understanding, it was something much greater – stretching from Genesis (cf Galatians 3:8) to Revelation (cf Revelation 14:6), embracing both doctrine (cf 1 Corinthians 15:1) and practice (cf 2 Corinthians 9:13). If this Biblical definition is more fully grasped, the truth becomes clear: whenever the Scriptures are faithfully preached, it is ‘the gospel’ that is heard; and every service is ‘the gospel service’.

R. J. Steward

EDITORIAL

For our editorial on this occasion, we have borrowed the pertinent words of William Gouge (1575 – 1653), commenting upon Hebrews 5:13, entitled: “The Disgrace of Old Babes”.

“The apostle here useth this metaphor of babes in the worst part as a matter of disgrace, because after sufficient means to have made them strong men, they remained as babes; for they who, being long trained up under the gospel, grow not thereby in knowledge, may well be accounted babes, or young novices, or freshmen (as they say in schools), or ‘nibs’, or ‘pages’. The apostle calls them not only babes, but also “*carnal*” (1 Corinthians 3:1). It is not time and means which bringeth true honour and makes men highly to be accounted of, but a good use of that time and means; and progress and proficiency answerable thereto. Without these, long standing and much means are but a reproach. In schools, such an one is counted a dunce. As the bodies of men have degrees of growth, so their spirits. It is growth in knowledge and grace, and ripeness of understanding, that makes a Christian to be accounted strong and spiritual.

Among other motives to provoke every hearer to improve to the best advantage that he can, the time and means which God doth afford him, this is one: to avoid the reproach of an **old babe**. These two epithets, ‘old’ and ‘babe’, do not well agree. Oldness or antiquity is a matter of glory and dignity; the younger are to reverence them. But for old persons to be children or babes, doth not only take away their honour, but also bring a reproach upon them. A young babe is no disgrace, but an old babe is... Thus we see what a disgrace and damage it is to be an old babe; yet what congregation is there wherein there be not many such? Some lay the blame hereof upon their minister; and I cannot deny but that there may be a fault in some ministers by not attending their flock as they should; yet that doth not wholly excuse the dull hearer.”