

April - June 2023

The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

I AM THE TRUE VINE

Part 2

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the husbandman. Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples.” (John 15:1-8)

In the previous article John 15:1-6 was examined. This is truth pertaining to the New Covenant – the old vine of national Israel was soon to vanish away; the spiritual Israel of Christ and His Church is to be seen, the indivisible true vine. The branch mentioned in the first part of verse 2 was determined to be the true believer in Christ, who had sunk into a barren and unfruitful state. The words “*taketh away*” are based upon a Greek word mentioned over forty times in Scripture and translated in the main as ‘lifted up’ or ‘raised’. This gave a picture of a branch having fallen from its trellis or supporting wire and trailing in the mud, which the Husbandman lifts up, locating it again to where it can get air and light. The other branch in verse 2 is washed and cleansed of all fungi and parasites, that it might be more productive. Verse 3 describes the manner in which the believer is thus washed – “*through the Word*”. Verses 4-5 mention the Christians’ abiding in Christ: not their saved position in Him, that is once and for all, but continuing in vital and experimental communion with Christ, without whom they can do nothing.

“If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6). Here is probably the most difficult verse of all; nevertheless, if the exact phraseology is noted, and the grammar carefully examined, the difficulties are greatly minimised. The literal Greek rendering here is: ‘if any one abides not in Me’, that is, if any one of the branches (any believer) continues out of fellowship with Christ, that believer is ultimately “*cast forth*”. Now it cannot be said of a person who has never come to Christ that he or she does not abide in Christ. This is made more plain by the words “*he [or she] is cast forth as a branch*”. In all that we are seeing now, we must not lose sight of this fact, that everything the Lord is saying under the figure of the vine and its branches has reference to the believers’ **sojourn upon earth**. It is **not** a picture of eternal security; it all has to do with fruit-bearing. The believer who remains habitually out of communion with the Lord and bears no fruit is in view – he or she is a branch, but a barren one. If this fruitlessness persists, the husbandman will eventually strip that believer of the opportunities and gifts which they failed to improve and to cultivate. It is the same thought as the salt which loses its savour (cf Matthew 5:13) and henceforth is fit for nothing. Luke 8:18 sheds further light: “*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*”. John is even more explicit: “*Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward*” (2 John 8). All this has to do with bringing forth fruit to the glory of God in this present life. It is **not** truth pertaining to eternal security.

The latter part of John 15:6 states: “*men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned*”. Here is an example of the minute accuracy of Scripture. Note the change of pronouns in this latter phrase: it is not that ‘he’ is gathered and ‘he’ is burned, as would be in the case if an unbeliever or false professor was meant; but rather ‘them’, and ‘they’. Let me explain this very carefully: if a **man** (or woman), singular, abides

not in Christ, then **he** (or she) is cast forth as a branch, also singular. But ‘men gather **them** (plural) and cast **them** (plural) into the fire, and **they** (plural) are burned’: these plural pronouns do not refer to individual persons, but to the works, or effects, of the one who is cast forth as a branch. What are those things that issue from a believer who does not abide in communion with Christ? Nothing but leaves, with no spiritual fruit. And what becomes of the redundant foliage in the life of a fruitless Christian? First Corinthians compliments and clarifies the matter, although a different figure of speech being used: “*For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire*” (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

The truth here is identical to John 15: it is the useless activity of a believer’s life lived outside of communion with the Lord which is in focus; one who has not kept in intimate fellowship with the Head, and in consequence has been a branch producing nothing but leaves, or “*wood, hay, stubble*”. **These** are what will be burned, and are the “*them*” of verse 6 – the dead works of a life lived out of touch with the Lord. Though mercifully “*he himself* (singular) *shall be saved: yet so as by fire*” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

Here is a solemn warning and a most heart-searching application to those who are the Lord’s. Either our lives, as the result of ongoing and continuous fellowship with Christ, are bringing forth fruit to the honour and glory of God (fruit which the Scriptures says ‘will remain’); or because of neglected communion, and a failure to abide in Him, we are in great danger of being ‘cast forth’ or ‘set aside’. Opportunities will be taken away, ability diminished, and what little remains to show from such a life will only be fit for burning, in a coming day.

“Ah! Who shall thus the Master meet,
Bearing but withered leaves?
Ah! Who shall at the Saviour’s feet,
Before the awful judgment seat
Lay down, for golden sheaves,
Nothing but leaves?”

(L. E. Akerman)

Before continuing further, let us summarise all that has been seen in John 15, for I fear that this figure of Christ as the Vine, and His believing people as the branches, is greatly misunderstood. In fact, one only has to turn to commentaries to discover the multiplicity of interpretations, which is most confusing. Whenever a type, parable, figure, or analogy is encountered in Holy Scripture, it does not, in and of itself, present a complete picture. It is absolutely impossible for a practical type or a human analogy to be fully illustrative of Divine truth. In the giving of parables, figures and analogies in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is focusing upon certain aspects only. To try and interpret them as a presentation of all truth, in a single type or parable, is to wrest the Scriptures. Each figure is but complimentary to a host of others, and other analogies must be borne in mind, and none held in isolation, to the exclusion of others. For example, the figure of ‘the body and its Head’ sets forth the indissoluble and indestructible union between Christ and His people. By contrast, the figure of ‘the vine and the branches’ was not designed to set forth that truth. Rather does it treat of the relationship which exists between the Lord and the Christian while yet upon earth – a relationship which can be interrupted.

The focal point of the analogy of the vine and the branches is fruit-bearing. In this there are three salient points: **Firstly**, the branch must be “in Christ”, that is, an integral part of the vine; a person who is truly born again, possessing that spiritual life which is found in Christ alone. **Secondly**, to be a fruit-bearing branch of the vine, there must be an ongoing purging, which is by the cleansing action of the Word.

Thirdly, the branch must abide in close communion with Christ, the Vine. The first two points are all of God's grace and divine action, but the third – of maintaining communion – is the Christian's responsibility. This is the dominant note of John 15. Two words constantly recur in these 27 verses, namely: “*ye*” and “*abide*”. The word ‘*ye*’ occurs over twenty times in this chapter, and the word ‘*abide*’ three times in verse 4 alone, and again in verses 5, 6, 7 and 10. Just as it is necessary for the sinner to heed the words of the Saviour, “*Come unto Me*”, it is equally imperative for the saint to heed these words coming from the same lips: “*Abide in Me*”.

There are those who are genuinely born again; they are branches of the true vine; yet are they often in doubting castle. They are fearful of their salvation; they merely hope that all is well. Now such a person is not ‘*abiding*’ in the vine; they have not an ongoing recognition or appreciation of the value of Christ's perfect atonement, or of the eternal efficacy of His precious blood. When this is the case, there can be no true fellowship with the Lord. Such a person must turn from self and sense and feelings (dependence upon which is the sin of unbelief) unto the Saviour who hath obtained their eternal redemption. Said the Lord: “*He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him*” (John 6:56). This is not a sacramental reference; the instruction means to feed or to meditate at all times upon that wondrous work of Christ, which has fully and completely satisfied a holy God, having met in total all the claims of Divine justice with its consequent wrath. Only in this way can the doubter be rid of torturing uncertainty, and so ‘*abide in Christ*’.

Yet another point to be made is, that ‘*abiding in Christ*’ means to maintain a spirit of entire dependence upon Him. Ever should we, as God's people, be aware of our helplessness, and come to a realisation of the truth of verse 5: “*without Me ye can do nothing*”. What are the branches of a vine, but helpless, clinging things? How unlike the branches of an oak tree which need no support, but which extend out in

massive strength, able to withstand the most violent of gales. But the Lord does not liken us to such branches. The branches of the vine to which we are likened are weak and cannot stand by themselves. They need supports and training wires to hold them up. The believer who entertains a spirit of self-sufficiency is not abiding in Christ. We are to have “*no confidence in the flesh*” (Philippians 3:3) and to ‘lean not unto our own understanding’ (cf Proverbs 3:5). Beloved, if there be no recognition of our own emptiness, then we shall not feel the need to turn and draw from His fullness. “*As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me*” (John 15:4). The branch of itself has absolutely no resources. It derives its very life from the stock of the vine.

Another very valid point to be drawn from the analogy is this: the branch does not **produce** the fruit; it only **bears** the fruit. The branch is but a conduit or channel through which flows the vital sap and fruit-producing juices of the vine itself; which results in the luscious clusters of grapes. But we must never think it is the branch that produces the fruit. The fruit is produced by the vine, borne upon the branches, but only as a result of the branch being in, and abiding in, the vine. The fruit, and the sufficiency to bear that fruit, is all of Christ. It is not just that the believer realises his need of Christ, and so comes to Him for rest, support and supplies of strength, and then goes off in so-called Christian service in order hopefully to produce fruit. I fear there is an abundance of this kind of thing: glowing reports are circulated and amazingly successful campaigns highlighted; self-glorifying experiences are reiterated and the statistics are mind-boggling; but has it been done in accord with the Divine mandate? Are these people doing the Lord’s work in the Lord’s way? Coming back to the Law of God again, it is not just who is worshipped, but how He is worshipped that matters. To worship or serve the true God in a false manner is to break the whole law, and so render everything totally unacceptable to the Most High. Yes! His commandments are exceeding broad, and something of that principle is seen even in these opening verses of John 15. Let us as

individuals and local churches abide in Christ, being branches that function as channels of Divine truth and power, so bearing the true fruit of the vine and not just producing rustling leaves, which in the end will be burnt up.

“If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (John 15:7). This verse, like verses 13 and 14 of the previous chapter, is so often sadly misinterpreted. Many have erroneously appealed to these words in order to justify the most unworthy prayers. There are some professed believers who would say that if we are definite enough with the Lord, and are so importunate that we will not leave off praying for a particular thing, then in the end God will grant it. Indeed, some will go even further and say that God must grant it; He cannot refuse. But 1 John 5:14 comes in at this point: *“And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us”*. The promise is not a blank cheque to be filled in by us and presented at the throne of grace. What is more, many of us have had enough experience in prayer to forever dissipate the delusion that sufficiently hard praying will bring us all that we want.

Many a saint of God has prayed with much earnestness, and prayed expectantly, but it has not been ‘done unto them’. Does this falsify the Lord’s promise? Of course not, for every word that He spake was infallible truth. There are two qualifying conditions here in verse 7: *“If ye abide in Me”* (the maintaining of heart communion with Christ), and *“If My words abide in you”* (the life must be regulated by Scripture). There is a difference here. Do we not know of Christians, who genuinely love the Lord (and it would be bold to suggest that they did not), yet on certain parts of the Scripture they turn a blind eye? They simply ignore it; though in some aspects their hearts are tender and loyal to Christ. Contrariwise, there are others who would strive to dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’ of the divine mandate, yet they are cold, hard and rigid. This type can be far worse than the first. But neither is being condemned

in isolation: the Lord requires a proper balance. The tender heart, moulded by grace should live close to Him, ever abiding in intimate fellowship, and must love the law of the Lord and delight in its precepts. Every detail and fine point is so important that, cost what it may, it must be observed.

We should note the grammar: “*words*” not “*word*”. There are plenty of Christians who claim to believe the Bible and accept it as being the Word of God – few believers would flinch from this – but alas, there are many, if pinned down on certain points would say: ‘I do not accept that’, or ‘I do not believe that practice to be necessary’, or ‘I do not believe that God is concerned with such things in this day and age’. Beloved, the meaning of the text is not a superficial assent to Scriptures ‘in the round’. It is the detail of every aspect of doctrine, faith and practice. For these, says the Saviour, are “*My words*”, worthy to be obeyed; not in a rigid, hard, Pharisaical manner, but as one whose heart is brimming with grace and abiding in Him. All this is in accord with the tenor of the Lord’s whole discourse in the upper room: “*He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me*” (John 14:21); and “*If a man love Me, he will keep My words*” (John 14:23). What had the Lord said previously? “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4). There is not primary and secondary truth, as many teach today. No! It is the Lord’s words – every word.

But that is not all, for Christ says in verse 7 that His words are to ‘abide’ in His people. It is not a spasmodic or occasional observance of certain aspects of truth, but a constant ongoing conformity to the whole of Scripture. It is habitual communion with God through obedience to His Word, the detail of which becomes our very meat and drink. What will the prayers of such a person be like? What will they ask the Lord for? One who is in such close communion with Christ and whose desires are regulated by the detail of Holy Scripture will never be heard to pray for anything which gratifies the flesh; for their every thought will be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (cf 2 Corinthians 10:5). That

person will have proved the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (cf Romans 12:2). Their very minds will have been transformed; they will think right; and in consequence they will truly pray in the Spirit. Nothing of self or of the flesh will intrude, and nothing according to self-will; but all according to God's will. Such prayer is not only glorifying to God, but wondrously satisfying to the soul. The believer who is so in fellowship with Christ and completely governed by His Word will not ask amiss. Indeed, I do not believe true prayer to be just asking – true prayer is vital communion with God. It is powerful intercession; and this is only possible if His words are abiding in us. Without this the power is missing.

“Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples” (John 15:8). These words take the form of an appeal. The glory of the Father was ever the supreme consideration with Christ, and in this verse He presses it upon His people: ‘do you really want to glorify God too?’ The Lord would have us equally concerned about this. *“Herein is my Father glorified”* – this is the one and only way in which it can be done. An unfruitful branch is dishonouring to God; He is only glorified as fruit is produced – and fruit is only produced by abiding in Christ, and His words abiding in us.

What exactly is meant by ‘bearing fruit to the glory of God’? Keep to the analogy of the vine, for this is the context: fruit is not something that is attached to the branch, or fastened on from without, to give a pleasing appearance. Genuine fruit is the result of life within the vine – it is the organic product of that vital life. How much activity is seen today in church life – schemes, ideas, gimmicks of all descriptions – which produce results of diverse kinds. Perhaps resulting in a large number of so-called ‘decisions for Christ’; maybe a great many being baptised; another venture caused quite an increase in church attendance; some other gimmick brought in extra children to the Sunday school. In this kind of thing, some Christians pride themselves today, and think that by such methods they are bringing forth fruit. But this is not the fruit

produced by the vital life of the vine flowing through the branches, causing fruit to spontaneously form and be borne. No! The things just mentioned result from extra-Biblical and un-Biblical practices; something which man has attached from outside – not the result of abiding in Christ, and His words abiding in them.

Another point must be made pertaining to Christian service. No doubt there is an active side to this, for it is likened to running a race, to a soldier fighting in battle, and so on. But let none think that true fruit is only borne in this way, for then would the sick or aged have passed any possibility of fruitfulness. How discouraging this would be to many of God's choicest saints. The fruit for which God is looking is the true fruit of the Spirit, and such is listed in His word: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law*" (Galatians 5:22-23).

There is no 'law', no restriction, against bearing fruit of this nature; nothing can prevent any believer from bearing this fruit of the Spirit, which is true spiritual fruit. Old age, sickness, incapacity, form no barrier to spiritual fertility. God can be as much glorified in the sick chamber as in the pulpit. Fruit is the outflow of one's union with Christ, and if that union of abiding in Him and His words abiding in oneself is maintained, the vital life will flow, and the fruit – genuine fruit – will be seen, whether the branch be in the forefront of the vine or obscured from view. There is a most clear word in the minor prophets: "*From Me is thy fruit found*" (Hosea 14:8). Philippians 1:11 adds: "*Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.*" The Apostle was not in the limelight when he said this, he was not heading successful campaigns, but was shut up in prison for the cause of Truth. Nevertheless, he was bearing fruit in isolation to the glory and praise of God.

Brethren and sisters, if there be anything of the fruit of spiritual love in us, then that is nothing other than the love of Christ constraining us (cf

2 Corinthians 5:14). If there be any joy, true deep-seated spiritual joy, then that is Christ's joy as mentioned in verse 11, and the "*joy of the Lord*". If we have peace in our hearts, then it is the peace which He has given (cf John 14:27). If there be any spirit of meekness or gentleness in us, that is not ourselves, but the meekness and gentleness of Christ (cf 2 Corinthians 10:1). Can you not see the wondrous link-up of Truth in all this, and how Holy Scripture all harmonises into one glorious whole? The Apostle Paul was such a shining example of a fruit-bearing branch, and by many statements he discloses how it was brought about. He states: "*Christ liveth in me*" (Galatians 2:20), "*I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought by me*" (Romans 15:18), "*Christ speaking in me*" (2 Corinthians 13:3), "*He that wrought effectually . . . was mighty in me*" (Galatians 2:8), and "*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*" (Philippians 4:13). Paul fully realised that it was the vital life and power of the Vine itself which produced true fruit in his life. Anything and everything else was of no value. As such, human effort and thought is nothing but leaves. The Father is glorified in the bearing of much fruit; not exciting statistics of apparent success, but rather the genuine spiritual fruit that emanates from Christ Himself, and which can be produced whatever the circumstances may be. One commentator has set out the relationship between Christ and the believer in this way: "Life **in** Christ is salvation; Life **with** Christ is fellowship; Life **by** Christ is fruit-bearing; Life **for** Christ is service."

Now the close of verse 8: "*So shall ye be My disciples*". I am reminded of John 8:31: "*If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed.*" The underlying thought in each of these two verses is the same: continuance in the Word is not a **condition** of discipleship – but it is the **evidence** of discipleship. In the bearing of much fruit (that is, the true fruit of the Spirit) we make manifest genuine discipleship. May such marks of grace be found upon us all, for God's glory.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

NOTHING APART FROM CHRIST

The Lord leaves no uncertainty in a matter so nearly affecting both Himself and [His disciples]. As surely as He is the vine, they are the branches. There is, and could be, no failure on His part. It is easy for us to fail in dependence, and to lack confidence in Him. To abide in Him supposes, not merely distrust of ourselves, but cleaving to Him and counting on Him. Every influence around us is adverse to this; every natural feeling not less so. Faith working by love alone secures it, for self and the world are then alike judged in the light of God. It is not only that we need and cannot do without Him for the least things as truly as the greatest, but He attracts us by His positive excellency. If He is the one source of fruit agreeable to the Father, He cannot be slighted with impunity, least of all by those who confess Him. It is not the grace which gives eternal life in Him of which the Lord speaks, but throughout these verses, the responsibility of the disciples. There is danger of ruin, no less than fruitlessness, where one does not abide in Him.

This then is the secret of fruit-bearing. It is not in saints any more than in self, but by abiding in Christ, and Christ in us. Then there is more than promising blossom – fruit follows. Where He is intercepted from our view, or we look elsewhere, there is no such power: we manifest our nature, not Christ's. Nor does the character of the circumstances affect the result: He is superior to all, in spite of our weakness. Abiding in Christ, we may safely face the most hostile; and if traps be laid and provocation given, what matters it, if according to His word we are found abiding in Christ, and Christ abides in us, as He then does? For that the two are correlative, He guarantees, and we know. Again, does fruit follow [simply] because we are amongst the dear children of God? Alas! how often the very reverse is proved, and the levity, if not the bitterness, in the heart comes out so much the more because we are saints not abiding in Christ. For gossip about saints to saints is even more painful than among the sons of this age, not a few of whom seem above it, though on grounds of nature. Again, trials cannot shake off spiritual

fruit, nor blighting influences either, if we abide in Christ and Christ in us; but the greater the pressure, the more fruit, where we thus abide. And the heart feels that so it should be, as it is. For, as ordinances fail, and law is the strength of sin (not of holiness, flesh being what it is), Christ here as everywhere has the glory by faith and to faith; 'because apart from Me ye can do nothing'.

But now ... the Lord returns to the disciples, and with divine simplicity and fulness gives the way of blessing and abundant fruit. 'If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask what ye will, and it shall come to pass for you. In this is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit, and ye shall be My disciples' (cf John 15:7, 8). Thus is each thing put in its place: the first need for the Christian is to abide in Christ; the next, to have Christ's words abiding in Him; then he is emboldened to ask with assurance that the resources of divine power effect accordingly. For thus Christ Himself has the first place, and the saint is kept in dependence as well as confidence. Then His words direct as well as correct; and we need and have both (though doubtless in so abiding, direction would here be the characteristic, rather than that holy correction, which we deeply want in our walk through this unclean and slippery world). If so led, prayer is encouraged to expect the surest answer, for the heart is in fellowship with Him Who prompts the desire, in order to accomplish it in His love and faithfulness.

Further, in this is the Father glorified, that we bear much fruit, and become disciples of His. What enlargement of heart that so it should be in the midst of what, apart from Him, would be but a grief and worry to the saint, if not worse! With Christ all is changed, and even the most distracting cares turn to fruit; so that to live in the flesh, instead of being with Him in glory, becomes worth the while; but only when to live is Christ (cf Galatians 2:20). Thus is His Father glorified even now, and we become Christ's disciples in deed and in truth.

William Kelly (1821-1906)

THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND

[Throughout history, true, spiritually-minded believers have – rightly – eschewed the so-called ‘arts’ and ‘culture’ of this present evil world. But something of a dilemma occurs when secular music takes up a religious theme, as with oratorios, passions and sacred cantatas. Should an exception be made in these cases? Does a spiritual subject sanctify the medium? Presented below are short excerpts from three authors of different denominations and backgrounds, giving a unified answer.]

With regard to music, let the saints of God be jealous of its true glory, which is, its high and holy consecration. “*Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*” (Ephesians 5:19), you employ the gift in the noblest service, and consecrate it to the highest end on earth. “*Praise is comely*” (Psalm 33:1, 147:1), and God has said, “*Whoso offereth praise glorifieth Me*” (Psalm 50:23). A praiseful spirit is one of the most deeply sanctified emotions of the soul; praise one of the holiest engagements of the Christian. The service of heaven is the service of song; the chief employment of the glorified is praise. It behoves us then to give the holiest, the highest consecration possible to this noble art. Carnal, worldly music breathing from the lips of a saint of God is as incongruous and inharmonious as a bacchanalian song breathing from the lips of a glorified spirit. Nothing but what is holy in its sentiment, spiritual in its tone, and edifying in its influence should be uttered by a Christian’s lips, should vibrate from a Christian’s harp.

The magnificent composition of Handel’s ‘*Messiah*’ supplies no exception to this rule. Admitting the Divine inspiration of the words, the transcendent genius of the composer, the sublime character of the oratorio, and the elevating influence of its skilful and masterly execution, we must yet maintain that the music of the ‘*Messiah*’, as performed in modern times by the unholy and the unsanctified, should be as distasteful and painful to the Christian and spiritual mind, as it is, unquestionably, unacceptable and dishonouring to God. What spiritual mind can listen

to the solemn words of Christ, expressive of His heart-sorrow, His soul anguish, His bodily sufferings, sung by voices and breathing from instruments of music in a cathedral, wont to wake the echoes and the plaudits of a theatre*, without indescribable torture of feeling and the most depressing sadness of spirit? Could we thus listen to a recital of the humiliating insults, the lingering tortures, and dying agonies of one the nearest and the dearest to our hearts? Never!

Beware, then, of the unholy fascination of music. It may lead you from God, allure you from Christ, draw you into the world. It may become an easy and a fatal snare to your soul. Seek the deep sanctification of the gift, and its holy and supreme consecration to God. As such, sacred music, breathing from a spiritual mind, a Christ-loving heart, may be a valuable aid to the soul, soothing, sanctifying, elevating. God can give you a night-song, a song in the gloom of your sorrow, loneliness, and woe, a song of His love unchanging, of His faithfulness unfailing, of His presence sweetening your sorrow, soothing your grief, cheering your solitude, making you submissive, happy, and cheerful in the darkest and most painful path along which your covenant God is leading you.

Beloved, the chief employment of heaven is music. Oh, what melody floats through those bowers, rings through those mansions, reverberates through that dome, from the spirits of just men made perfect! They sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. They sing of the everlasting love, of the atoning blood, of the sovereign grace that brought them there. Around the Lamb once slain they cluster, and upon His head, once filled with bruises, torn and bleeding with the thorn-crown, they bind the diadem of their praise. And, oh, how worthy is He of their sweetest anthem, their loftiest song, their loudest hallelujahs! So resplendent will be the unveiling of His divine glory, His human beauty; so great will appear His love, so glorious His work, so rich His grace, and so precious Himself to the heart, that from every creature which is in heaven will be heard the anthem, "*Blessing and honour and glory and*

* i.e. applause

power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:13). Then, disciple and follower of Christ, separate yourself from all secular, carnal, worldly music, and learn on earth, in the house of your pilgrimage, in the strange land in which you dwell, and amid your trials, sorrows, and conflicts, the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb, which will employ your tongue throughout eternity. “It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto Thy name, Most High: to shew forth Thy loving-kindness in the morning, and Thy faithfulness every night, upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound” (Psalm 92:1).

Octavius Winslow (1808 – 1878)

Whereunto shall we liken the people of this generation, and to what are they like (cf Luke 7:31)? I represent [them] to myself [as] a number of persons of various characters, involved in one common charge of high treason. They are already in a state of confinement, but not yet brought to trial. The facts, however, are so plain, and the evidence against them so strong and pointed, that there is not the least doubt of their guilt being fully proved, and that nothing but a pardon can preserve them from punishment. In this situation, it would be their wisdom to avail themselves of every expedient in their power for obtaining mercy. But they are entirely [heedless] of their danger, and wholly taken up with contriving methods of amusing themselves, that they must pass away the term of their imprisonment with as much cheerfulness as possible. Among other resources, they call in the assistance of music. And amidst a great variety of subjects in this way, they are particularly pleased with one: they choose to make the solemnities of their impending trial, the character of the judge, the methods of his procedure, and the awful sentence to which they are exposed, the ground-work of a musical entertainment. And, as if they were quite unconcerned in the event, their attention is chiefly fixed upon the skill of the composer, in adapting

the style of his music to the very solemn language and subject with which they are trifling.

The king, however, out of his great clemency and compassion towards those who have no pity for themselves, prevents them with his goodness. Undesired by them, he sends them a gracious message. He assures them that he is unwilling they should suffer: he requires, yea, he entreats them to submit. He points out a way in which their confession and submission shall be certainly accepted; and in this way, which he condescends to prescribe, he offers them a free and full pardon. But instead of taking a single step towards a compliance with his goodness, they set his message likewise to music; and this, together with a description of their present state, and of the fearful doom awaiting them if they continue obstinate, is sung for their diversion, accompanied with the sound of cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of instruments (cf Daniel 3:5). Surely, if such a case as I have supposed could be found in real life, though I might admire the musical taste of these people, I should commiserate their insensibility!

But is not this case more than a supposition? Is it not in the most serious sense actually realized amongst ourselves? I should insult your understandings, if I judged a long application necessary. I know my supposition must already have led your thoughts to the subject of the '*Messiah*' oratorio, and to the spirit and temper of at least the greater part of the performers, and of the audiences. The Holy Scripture concludes all mankind under sin (cf Romans 3:9, 10). It charges them all with treason and rebellion against the great sovereign Lawgiver and Benefactor; and declares the misery to which, as sinners, we are [doomed]. But God is long-suffering, and waits to be gracious. The stroke of death, which would instantly place us before His awful tribunal, is still suspended. In the meantime, He affords us His Gospel, by which He assures us there is forgiveness with Him. He informs us of a Saviour, and that of His great love to sinners, He has given His only Son to be an Atonement and Mediator, in favour of all who shall sue for mercy in His name. The character of this Saviour, His unspeakable love, His dreadful

sufferings, the agony He endured in Gethsemane, and upon the cross, are made known to us. And as His past humiliation, so His present glory, and His invitation to come to Him for pardon and eternal life, are largely declared. These are the principal points expressed in the passages of the ‘*Messiah*’. Mr. Handel, who set them to music, has been commemorated and praised, many years after his death, in a place professedly devoted to the praise and worship of God; yea (if I am not misinformed) the stated worship of God, in that place, was suspended for a considerable time[†], that it might be duly prepared for the commemoration of Mr. Handel. But, alas! how few are disposed to praise and commemorate the Messiah Himself! The same great truths, divested of the music, when delivered from the pulpit, are heard by many admirers of the oratorio with indifference, too often with contempt.

John Newton (1725 – 1807)

I will mention a circumstance which has happened in this place; and I do it for the sake of the children of God who have been seduced. We lately sat down at the Lord’s Supper – and would the Devil let us alone? – oh no! There was what is called an ‘Oratorio’ in the Popish Chapel – I wish you did not know what it means. It is taking passages out of the Word of God, and setting them to music, and they are sung by profane persons: they take the sweetest words in the Bible; the very words that are life to a believer (cf John 6:63). Was not this one of the ‘depths of Satan’ (cf Revelation 2:24)? Now we should have set our face against it. You sat down and took the cup of the Lord, and then went and took the cup of devils (cf 1 Corinthians 10:21); you were sitting in the temple of the Lord, and will you go and sit in the temple of idols (cf 2 Corinthians 6:16)?

Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813 – 1843)

[†] G. F. Handel (1685 – 1759) was granted a lavish funeral at Westminster Abbey on 20th April 1759, the arrangements for which interrupted its normal functions.

EDITORIAL

A secular philosopher of the late 19th Century observed that, connected with the decline of traditional Christianity in Western civilisation, was the rise of a new religious system, which he dispassionately described as ‘the cult of the individual’ – an alternative religion in which the central tenet is ‘individualism’, and the god is man. If those symptoms were evident over 100 years ago, they have reached epidemic proportions today. Self-determination, self-worth, self-sufficiency and self-improvement are the mantras of modern society; democracy, politics and activism are predicated on the notion that ‘you can make a difference’, advertising and marketing on such slogans as ‘you deserve it’, and ‘you’re number one’. Modern electronic devices are geared towards personalisation and use by specific individuals; social media are based upon personal profiles and individual accounts. No-one wants to be identified merely as a member of a family, a part of a collective, or the employee of a business; they want only to know ‘what the country (or community, or company) can do for them’.

While for Bible-believing Christians this state of affairs may be distressing, it should not come as a surprise. The Apostle Paul, in his valedictory letter to Timothy lists the evils that will characterise the ‘last time’, and the order in which they are presented is telling: “*This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For **men shall be lovers of their own selves**, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy...*” (2 Timothy 3:1-2). Likewise Peter, speaking in similar terms, describes those “*that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, **selfwilled**, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities*” (2 Peter 2:10). The promotion of self-will, and the general rejection of authority in any form, is now normalised. The original deception with which the Devil ensnared humanity was: “*ye shall be as gods*” (Genesis 3:5). Twenty-first Century society is subject to “*strong delusion, that they should believe [this] lie*” (2 Thessalonians 2:11), and lives as though it were true.

Though as incongruous and blasphemous as heathen idols in the temple of God (cf 2 Chronicles 33:4, 5, 7; Jeremiah 7:30), this ‘cult of the individual’ has established itself in the churches, and exerts its malign influence everywhere: whether in preaching that emphasises the personal advantages of the Christian life; or gospel appeals that make one’s own decision the means of salvation; or in churches that pander to the comfort and entertainment of the attendees; or the plethora of age- and gender-based meetings, tailored to vanishingly specific peer-groups. It is evidenced too, in ‘individualistic’ Christians, for whom church membership and attendance must be subservient to their own lifestyle and itinerary; who cannot bear the authority of pastors, elders or deacons; who reject any notion of discipline; who move from place to place, selecting ministry only to their taste; who imagine their own personal interpretation of Scripture to be as valid as anyone else’s; who presume always to know better, and thus will not be taught; who desire the perquisites of membership with none of its responsibilities; who think that public services are for the worshippers’ benefit, and are disappointed if they do not receive any; who ultimately belong to that same breed of whom the Apostle complained: “*For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s*” (Philippians 2:21).

Certain aspects of the Christian experience are absolutely and entirely personal, and peculiar to the individual believer: the Atonement wrought by Christ, and His redemptive work, is particular, not general. Every application of that work to a soul, and the impartation of new life, is singular and unique. A profession of faith and the testimony of believer’s baptism can only be made personally. There is private prayer, devotion, and almsgiving known only to oneself and God. But all these points admitted, the Divine design for the Christian’s life is one of union and communion in that which is greater than the individual.

Every analogy of the New Testament church given in Scripture – the **Flock** (cf John 10), the **Field** (1 Corinthians 3:6-9), the **Building** (Ephesians 2:20-22, 1 Peter 2:5), the **Body** (1 Corinthians 12), the

Vine (John 15) – all attest to the same truth: the saved sinner is incorporated into a wondrous spiritual entity, in which the whole is far more glorious than the sum of its parts. Away with the ‘spirit of the age’, and the protestations of our old nature – this is something to be rejoiced in, and given expression to! “*Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular*” (1 Corinthians 12:27); “*We then ... ought ... **not to please ourselves.** Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification*” (Romans 15:1-2).

The fellowship of the saints is needful, and is a precursor to Glory; but union with the Lord Jesus is essential, and is the only means to Glory. Surely then it also follows, “*that they which live should **not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again***” (2 Corinthians 5:15). Let proud individualists face up to a serious question: would they wish to stand in the presence of Divine justice and Holy wrath, isolated, alone and on their own terms, with nothing to plead but self-righteousness? Who would not rather “*win Christ, and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness ... but that which is through the faith of Christ*” (Philippians 3:8-9).

“Oh, to be saved from myself, dear Lord;
Oh, to be lost in Thee!”

ANNUAL BIBLE CONVENTION

3rd & 4th June 2023 D.V.

Saturday 3.00 pm & 5.30 pm Tea served 4.30 pm

Lord's Day 11.00 am & 6.30 pm

Preacher: Mr D. Kay, Barnstaple

a cordial invitation is extended to all