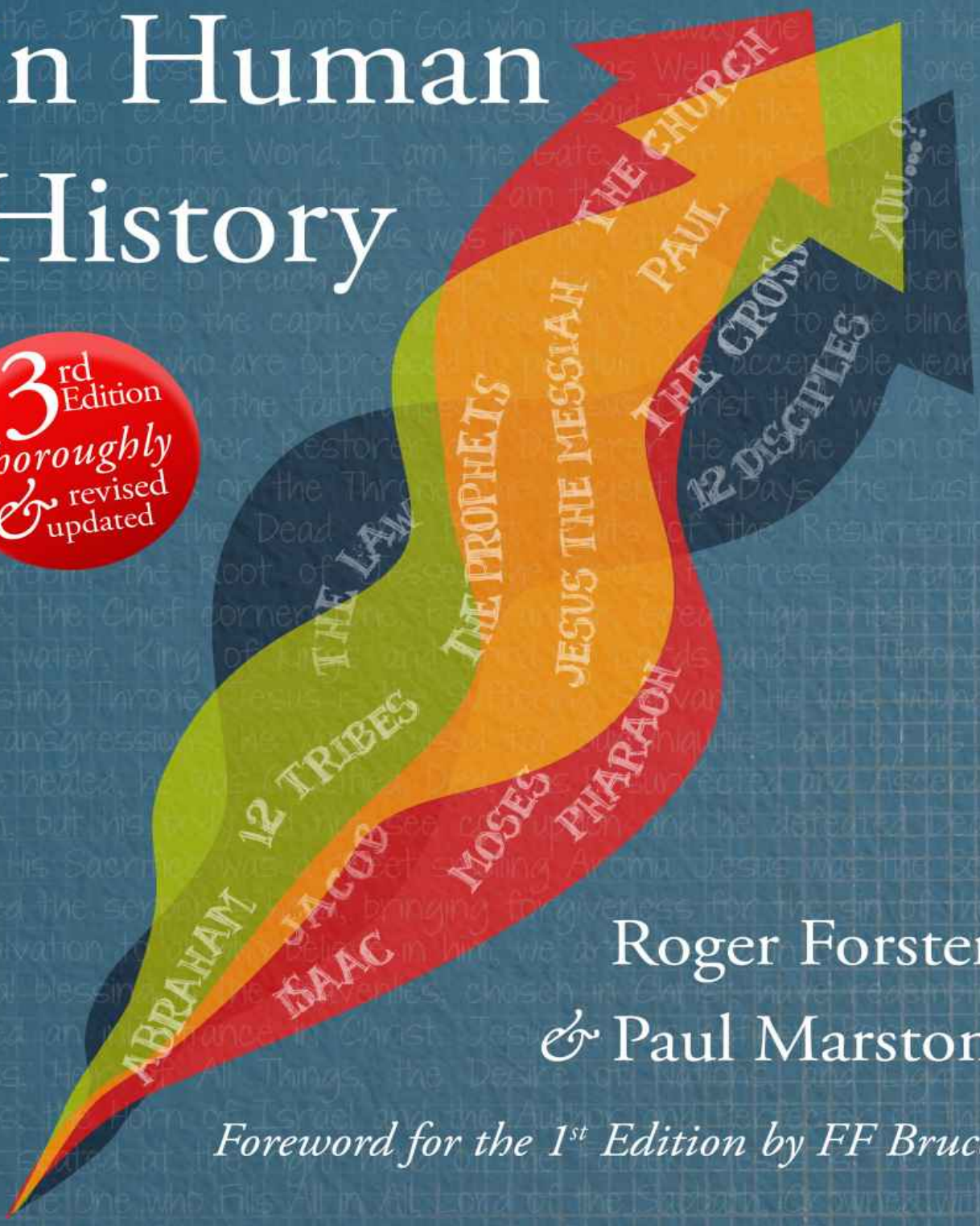
God's Strategy in Human History



3rd Edition
Thoroughly & revised updated

Roger Forster
& Paul Marston

Foreword for the 1st Edition by FF Bruce

Volume 2 | Reconsidering Key Biblical Ideas

God’s Strategy in Human History

Volume 2 – Reconsidering Key Biblical Ideas

Roger Forster & Paul Marston

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Foreword for the 1st Edition

by Professor FF Bruce

It is a sign of grace on the part of the authors of this book that they should invite an impenitent Augustinian and Calvinist to write a foreword for it. There are several reasons for my ready acceptance of their invitation, but there is one which outweighs all others, and that is the thoroughly exegetical character of what they have written.

There is a great danger, when once we have adhered to one particular school of thought or adopted one particular system of theology, of reading the Bible in the light of that school or system and finding its distinctive features in what we read. One reader may tend to do less than justice to those texts which stress man's responsibility; another will be inclined to modify the force of those which emphasize eternal election. The remedy for this is to bear resolutely in mind that our systems of doctrine must be based on biblical exegesis, not imposed upon it. The authors of this work bear this in mind, and make a special point of asking what the Scriptures really say. They do this by means of a study of key words and key passages in context.

This is not to say that I am convinced by all their arguments, perhaps my heart, like Pharaoh's, has been "strengthened"! That however, is not important; what is important is that the reader is provided with evidence on which he can form his own judgment.

A study of the following pages will impress on the reader that the initiative in saving grace rests with God; that the election of believers is "in Christ; and that election implies not that some are elected and the others consigned to

perdition, but that some are elected so that others through them may receive the divine blessing.

Professor FF Bruce

Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, University of Manchester



Preface

It is four decades since our book *God's Strategy in Human History* first appeared. It was reprinted several times in the UK and USA (as well as in mandarin Chinese), and a second edition came out in 2000.

This new edition has been substantially revised and expands similar materials in the light of deeper study and more recent New Testament scholarship. It is also now in two volumes. The first volume *God's Path to Victory* sets out the basic truths about how God's strategy for redeeming humanity focussed on preparation for and redemption through Jesus the Messiah. God's Old Testament dealings with Abraham and Israel were to this end. It notes how God's will and plan are not always done because he is not willing that any should perish but all should come to repentance. It explains how believers are both a battlefield and through prayer combatants in God's warfare on evil. In doing this it also touches on how meanings of some key terms in Scripture (for example 'righteous', 'sinner', 'justification' and 'election') have become distorted by some human theological traditions. This first volume can be read on its own, and for some readers this may be enough. For others, however, they will want to see much more in-depth analyses of some of these key concepts, and the detailed biblical reasons for denouncing some of these theological traditions as those which (in Jesus's words) make the word of God of none effect. This is what this second volume does. In six chapters a number of key biblical concepts are explored, showing how recent scholarship has shown conclusively that many of the traditionalist meanings given to them are based on imported human philosophy, and not 1st century understandings. The last chapter brings together some of the wildly unbiblical teachings of

Augustine of Hippo, a man whose theological influence amongst both Catholics and Protestants remains huge even today.

The first volume, then, sets the framework for the more detailed exploration of biblical terms and concepts in this present volume.

Our theological position is unchanged as conservative evangelicals, committed only to the authority of Scripture. We stand in the great traditions of for example the Early Church teachers, the Anabaptists and Wesleyan holiness theology, only because we find in them a teaching which is closer to Scripture and the heart of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah than some of the other theologies that have arisen. In understanding Scripture we seek to follow the best principles of biblical interpretation – of 'hermeneutics'. This involves close analysis of verses in their context, but also of the backgrounds of language and culture in which they were written. In our lifetimes, the availability of a wealth of new New Testament scholarship has enriched and deepened our understanding of the key concepts of God's unfolding plans, and these new volumes seek to share this with the readers.

Our commitment remains to what (in the Wesleyan context) might be called 'theology on horseback'. Our God chose not to given us a single book of 'systematic theology', but revealed himself in the context of history, relationship and action as recorded in the multiple books of Scripture. The great theologian, Paul, was a missionary not an 'academic', and Jesus himself never even wrote a treatise. What we would like is to be able to contribute towards a biblical and theological understanding for those who are already active in the spiritual conflict, and to stimulate others to get the vision and join it.

This approach is in line with the theology of the Bible. The biblical God in whom we believe is *relational* with those

made in his image. He himself acts, reacts, and interacts with us. He is not immovable, impassive, immutable and locked in rigid timelessness where nothing ever happens. Rather he can be angry, disappointed, glad, well pleased and may change his mind according to the reactions of those with whom he is in relationship. In short, he is a *person* who is able to love and feel emotion.

The approach is also practical, because God calls upon those who love him, who are called according to his purpose, to be co-workers with him in his world in the power of his Spirit.

Some theologians have only *interpreted* the world in various ways – the point is to *change* it! Jesus' commission was about making disciples, not belief systems.

Acknowledgments

The responsibility of anything said in this book remains that of the authors alone. We would, however, like to thank the many scholars who have commented on the various editions of this work. These include Dr GR Beasley Murray, Dr Mark Bonnington, Professor FF Bruce, Mr Geoffrey Bull, Rev A Morgan Derham, Mr HL Ellison, Mr T Harpur, Rev Derek Kidner, Dr and Mrs A Kinnear, Rev GW Kirby, Dr Leon Morris, Mr FN Martin, Dr T Martin, Canon Alan Neech, Dr Harold J Ockenga, Mr DF Payne, Dr Meic Pearse, Rev KFW Prior, Dr A Skevington Wood, Mr Alan Storkey and Dr Stephen Travis.

For this new work our particular thanks go to Dr Joseph Laycock for his detailed work on the text and giving us useful comments on many details in it.

Bible Versions Used

For a work like this, we wanted to use an accurate modern version, and unless indicated quotations will be from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Where other versions have been cited, the abbreviations used are as follows:

- English Standard Version (ESV)
- King James/Authorised Version (KJV)
- Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- Revised Version (RV)
- New American Standard Version (NASB)
- New English Bible (NEB)
- New International Version (NIV)
- Jerusalem Bible (JB)
- JB Phillips – no abbreviation

The Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, completed in the second century BC. The LXX was the version in common use in apostolic times. The New Testament writers sometimes quoted it, and it may help us to understand something of the implications of various Greek expressions used by them. It also includes twelve books of the Old Testament Apocrypha which may give insight into ancient Hebrew thinking.

About the Authors

Roger Forster

Roger studied mathematics and theology at St John's College, Cambridge. After a period in the Royal Air Force, he worked as an itinerant evangelist before starting Ichthus Christian Fellowship, with his wife Faith, in 1974. Roger was one of the founders of March for Jesus, was on the board of the AD2000 Movement and the Council of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance for many years. He has been involved with the Evangelical Alliance since the early 1970s as a member of the Council, and has served on a number of EA committees.

Among his many responsibilities he has been Chairman of the Council for the UK Evangelical Alliance and honorary Vice President of Tearfund, and is honoured to be on the Council of Reference for Aglow International (Britain), and together with Faith is a patron of Springs Dance Company.

Roger and Faith have a son and two daughters: Christen, Juliet and Deborah.

Together Roger and Faith have written *Women and the Kingdom*, and his solo books include *Suffering and the Love of God: The Book of Job*, *Prayer: Living in the Breath of God*, *The Kingdom of Jesus*, *Trinity*, *Saving Faith*, *Fasting*, and *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning…*

Paul Marston

Paul's initial studies included philosophy and the history and philosophy of science and scientific methodology at London University's LSE, where his tutors included the philosophers of science Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend. He has a PhD and three Masters degrees: in theoretical statistics, in the history and philosophy of science, and in

theology. He has lectured on courses at the Nazarene Theological College, and is currently a Senior Lecturer (now part time) in the University of Central Lancashire.

Paul and his wife Janice have a daughter Christel, and a son Justin.

His solo books include *The Biblical Family*, *God and the Family*, *Christians, Divorce and Remarriage*, *Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages*, *Women in Church Leadership and in Marriage*, and *Gay Christians and the Jesus Centred Church*.

Paul and Roger have co-authored a number of books including: *Yes But…*, *That's A Good Question*, *Reason and Faith*, *Christianity, Evidence and Truth*, and *Reason, Science and Faith*.



Chapter 1: Wills, Plans and Sovereignty

God's Will and Plan

In chapter 6 of *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*, we raised the point that from the 5th century onwards there developed various schools of theology following the novel ideas of St Augustine of Hippo, and these effectively denied the reality of the spiritual conflict. We sketched there the biblical teaching that God has given humans the freedom to choose whether to accept or reject his will and plan for them, and so not everything that happens is according to what God wants. In the present chapter we will look at this in much more detail, and in chapter 7 we will show that the novel Augustinian doctrines went against what was universally taught by Christians up to that point – that humans have freedom to choose whether to accept or reject God's offer of unmerited salvation.

The Augustinian teaching is stated clearly by the modern Augustinian theologian Paul Helm:

> … even on those occasions when the command of God is disobeyed, the disobedience is in accordance with his will, in the sense of his decree. (*The Providence of God*, p 48, also p 131ff)

Some readers may find any suggestion that God wills and decrees *everything* that happens (including sin and disobedience) to be novel, unbiblical and absurd. If you are one of these readers then you may wish to skim-read some of this chapter. But since many commentaries contain such erroneous doctrines, we will look here in detail at biblical teaching on the will and plan of God, to see if there is any truth in them.

In the New Testament there are only two Greek roots from which come the words for God's *will* and God's *plan*. One root is *thelō*, which means wish, will, or desire. The second root is *boulomai*, from which come such words as: counsellor – *bouleutēs* (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50); taking advice – *bouleuomai* (Luke 14:31); and plan or wish or would – *boulē* and *boulēma* (Luke 23:51; Acts 5:35; 27:42,43; 17:20, etc).

(For more on these two word groups see Colin Brown *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* vol 3, pp 1015-23 and Kittel & Friedrich (eds) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol 1, pp 633-7 and vol 3, p52-62.)

The Bible makes it clear that both God's will *and* God's plan can be opposed and rejected by men and women. Let us take these words in turn and examine scriptural use of them.

God's Plan Rejected (Greek: *boulomai, boulē, boulēma*)

The classic reference work by Kittel and Friedrich states:

> *Boulē* denotes 'deliberation' and 'taking counsel' in all its stages and effects up to 'resolve' and 'decree'… *Boulēma*… denotes the 'will' as plan, project, purpose, goal or tendency. (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 1, p 636)

The word can just mean 'will' but tends to imply a deliberate plan. Luke applies it often to God's plans (see for example Luke 7:30; 23:51; Acts 2:23; 4:28,38; 13:36; 19:1; 20:27; 27:12) and is quite explicit that an individual can reject the plan of God for him or herself:

> But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will (*boulē*) of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him. (Luke 7:30)

Human beings, of course, cannot thwart God's ultimate plan for the world, but the Bible teaches that they both can and do thwart his plan that they, as individuals, should have a part in it. The Pharisees could not prevent God's ultimate plan from achieving its end. The New Heaven and New Earth will come, whether they want it or not. In this sense we may well cry, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns!' (Revelation 19:6, NASB). But what individuals *can* do is to personally opt out of the new creation to come. God ordains that the New Heaven and Earth will come. He does not ordain which particular individuals will accept his plan for them to have a part in it. There is a beautiful analogy to this in physics – in some chaotic systems, the end state of the system can be predicted with certainty, but the position of individual particles in it cannot. There *will* be a New Heaven and New Earth – God has decreed it. His plan is for

people to repent and enter into it – but individuals can opt out, as did those spoken of by Luke.

How then should we take verses like Isaiah 46:10 – ‘my counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure’ (the LXX uses *boulē* and *bouleuomai*)? If we took them to mean that every detail of God’s plan was always enacted then they would flatly contradict Luke 7:30. We must, therefore, understand them as referring to the broad outlines of what will be accomplished, not to details about what part each individual will play in it. There seems to be no other way to interpret Scripture consistently. In John Piper’s review of our 1st edition he characterised this argument thus:

> Forster & Marston opt to take Luke 7:30 strictly and Isaiah 46:10 loosely…

Thus is misleading. The Isaiah verse is in a poetic passage comparing the powerless dead idols with the true and powerful God. It is not arguing that absolutely everything that happens is what God wants, that is not the point at issue. Moreover, earlier God had said:

> But you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities. (Isaiah 43:24)

No sensible hearer would then take Isaiah 46:10 to mean that actually their sins and iniquities were all according to God’s explicit plan. It is not ‘taking it loosely’ to believe that it means that God’s overall purposes of redemption will happen – this is the obvious meaning in the Isaiah context. But Piper does not explain how, in his view, we are to take Luke 7:30 ‘loosely’ instead. Luke 7:30 is not in a prophetic prose-poem but in a sober statement. To take it to mean some kind of ‘revealed will’ as against some kind of ‘effectual will’ would be alien to the whole passage. Piper also gives (in section E of his review) a list of verses that supposedly show that God’s will is always done. None of

them imply anything of the kind, though of course if one approaches them with a prior philosophical idea that God's will is always done then this can be read into some of them. Joseph's generous words to his brothers (Genesis 50:20) are well in line with our understanding that God brings good from all situations. Deuteronomy 29:4 says God has not given them understanding, but as Paul later says 'when a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed' (2 Corinthians 3:16). Their own impenitence – which God continually bewails – meant he withheld understanding. Piper cites several verses from Proverbs. However, Proverbs 16:9 refers to those who turn to God for guidance and 16:33 refers to the specific outcomes when guidance is sought through a lot. To try to make these kinds of verses mean that God's will is always done even when evil men rape and mutilate little children is absurd. Of course God's counsel will stand (Proverbs 19:21), his overall plan will come about. Of course God does intervene to cause some things to happen (Proverbs 21:1), but this would not mean his will is always done. Piper cites Isaiah 63:17 where the sinful Israelites say it is all God's fault they are sinners and it is up to him to send revival – but God himself in Isaiah 65:2 lays the blame at their door:

> I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good.

To say that the stretching out is a fake because God really wants them to continue in their sinful rebellious ways is to make nonsense of the whole passage. Blaming God for our sin is part of the sinfulness. Piper cites the promises of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 32:40 where God promises to put his fear in their hearts – but of course Jeremiah does not say that this will be against their will. God has put his love in our hearts today – but he didn't force us to become Christians. Piper's citation of Philippians 2:12-13 smacks of

desperation. This is the epitome of our theology – we have to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling because we are relying on the energy of God within us. But if God really were to do it irresistibly then what would be the point of Paul telling them to work it out? If God willed it then it would happen, and if not then not! Likewise when Piper cites 2 Timothy 2:24-26, it seems pointless for us to teach with gentleness etc if in fact it is all up to God whether these Christians escape the snares of Satan. Personalising it, if as a Christian I am in some snare of Satan and caught in sin, then this is (according to Piper) because God has not granted me repentance. Even as a Christian, his system implies, I have no freewill or moral choice to turn to God or not. So all Paul's urgings etc to walk worthy of out calling are pointless unless God grants us repentance. This is a strange version of Christianity. Piper's final citation is Revelation 17:17 where God causes the Kings to hate and desert the 'harlot'. Well of course (even allowing for the heavy symbolism in Revelation) we believe that God acts in his world, and of course he does affect some human decisions, but this does not imply that everything that happens is what he wants. The New Testament clearly states that it is not, and we believe it. We must now look briefly at a passage containing the root *boulomai*, over which there has sometimes been some misunderstanding. It is Ephesians 1:9-12:

> … having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in him. In him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel (*boulēn*) of his will

(thelēmatos), that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of his glory…

This has sometimes been thought to be saying that absolutely all events are directly determined by God's will. We must, therefore, examine it carefully. First let us look at the word in this passage rendered as 'works' in the NKJV (and other translations). It comes from the root *energeō*, which we may keep in mind by representing it with the little-used English word 'energize'. Its general sense may be illustrated by James 5:16 'The *energizing* prayer of a righteous man avails much.' It does not convey an impression of irresistible directive power, but rather one of strong stimulation. There is, in fact, more than one source that can provide such energizing. Compare the following:

a) I also labour, striving according to his *energizing* which works in me mightily... (Paul in Colossians 1:29)

b) The coming of the lawless one is according to the *energizing* of Satan, with all power… (2 Thessalonians 2:9; see also 2:7)

We can see the same thing in Ephesians:

(c) … the purpose of him who *energizes* all things according to the counsel of his will … and what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the *energizing* of his mighty power which he *energized* in Christ … of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective energizing of his power … according to the power that *energizes* in us … (Ephesians 1:11,19-20; 3:7,20)

(d) … sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now energizes in the sons of disobedience ... (Ephesians 2:1-2)

Both God and Satan are *energizing*, and Christians must 'turn on' to the right *energy*. Paul puts it like this in Philippians 2:12-13:

> work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who *energizes* in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure.

If the *energising* of God in us was irresistible then there would be no point in Paul telling them to do anything, whereas in fact he tells them to 'work out your own salvation (or salvaging process)'. God *energizes* in us, but we ourselves must plug in to the energy in order to work out our own salvaging process.

The connotations of 'energizing' in Ephesians 1:11 are poorly conveyed to us by translations like the RSV:

> who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will

or the NIV:

> who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will

These renderings are simply untenable, and both the RSV and NIV translate the same Greek word differently in the other Ephesians verses given above. Theologians like for example Paul Jewett (in *Election and Predestination* p 27) uncritically accept this untenable translation. Even more bizarre is the Contemporary English Version which reads:

> God always does what he plans and that is why he appointed Christ to choose us.

This bears virtually no resemblance to the Greek in either structure or meaning We should beware of poor translations.

The second thing we must consider in Ephesians 1:11 is what the phrase 'all things' (*ta panta*) refers to. In verse 10 Paul refers to the 'all things' which are to be headed up in

Christ. He next clarifies what these things are (things in the heavens and on the earth). He then refers (v11) to God energizing in the ‘all things’ (*ta panta*). Surely we must suppose that the all things God energizes are the same as the all things to be headed up in Christ? The ‘all things’ of verse 11 cannot refer to literally everything since verse 10 would be saying that everything (including the lost and even Satan himself) will be united in Christ, which seems inconsistent with some of the warning words of Jesus. We must therefore conclude that ‘all things’ in verse 11 refers to ‘all creation’ – which is to be headed up in Christ. There is certainly no reference to God determining all events, and no indication that everyone acts according to his plans. It does not mean ‘all events’ or ‘all that happens’, but ‘all creation’.

The thought is similar to that in Colossians 1:16-20 where we find that the ‘all things’ were created and consist in Christ, that Christ will have pre-eminence in them, and that all things will be reconciled in him. Eventually the all things will be reconciled and headed up in Christ, but in the meantime God energizes them according to his plan.

There is, then, no inconsistency between Ephesians 1:11 and the clear teaching of Luke 7:30 that an individual may reject God’s plan for him or her. While God’s plans for the universe will certainly succeed, an individual may nonetheless reject God’s plans for the part he or she personally will play in this.

So the Bible shows that an individual can reject God’s good plans for them, but does God ever deliberately plan that a person should be lost? We know from 1 John 2:2 of course, that Christ is the propitiation not only for our sins, but for those of the whole world – John could hardly have put this more plainly (see also John 1:29; 3:16; Titus 2:11). We know that God does not delight in the death of the wicked but

would rather they repented (Ezekiel 18:23). It will not surprise us, therefore, to find Peter saying of God's plan:

> The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing (*bouloumai*) that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

God's plan does *not* specify that particular individuals will perish. If anyone perishes it will be because they have rejected God's plan for them.

God's Will Defied (Greek: *thelō, thelēma*)

The meaning of this second word group is not totally distinct from *boulē*, but tends to mean 'wish, want, desire, will, intention' (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* vol 3, p1018). Jesus taught us that the will of God could either be obeyed or disobeyed by men and women, and God does not always get what he wants. This is in line with general Jewish understanding:

> A standing formula in the Palestinian synagogue is… 'to do his, God's will'… 'To do the will of the Father in heaven' is a common mode of expression…. 'As in heaven, so also on earth,' the prayer of R. Eliezer (90-100 AD) (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol 3, p54)

We all recognize this in the Lord's prayer: 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). It would be rather pointless praying this if God's will always happened all the time anyway. Jesus clearly assumed that it didn't, and that God's *will* (*thelō*) can be, and sometimes is, defied by men and women. Thus we read:

a) *Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34*

> How often I *wanted* to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were *not willing*!

b) *Matthew 12:50; Mark 3:35*

> For whoever does the *will* of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

c) *Matthew 7:21*

> Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the *will* of my Father in heaven.

d) *John 7:17*

> If anyone *wills* to do his *will*, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on my own authority.

e) *1 John 2:17*

> And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the *will* of God abides forever.

From these verses we can see that not everyone does God's will. If everyone were acting according to God's will, then presumably they would all live forever and enter God's kingdom. This would amount to universalism, which we know to be unscriptural because Jesus himself spoke about God's judgement (see also *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory* chapter 15). So we must conclude that people can and do refuse to do God's will. Humans have been given the freedom to will and so do something different from the will of God.

The Early Church referred to this as human 'freewill'. Like the term 'trinity' the term itself does not appear in Scripture, but (like the term 'trinity') it was created by the Early Church to summarise what they regarded as a key doctrine in Scripture – the Bible's teaching that God allows man a choice of whether or not to obey him. In chapter 7 we show the apparently unanimous teaching among Early Church leaders for the first 300 years that humanity had been given this freewill. It is important, then, to note that the arguments which we have presented in this present chapter are by no means novel or new, but coincide with some of the earliest Christian arguments against heretics of those days. Irenaeus (c130-200 AD), for example, cited Matthew 23:37 just as we have done, to demonstrate to his contemporaries that God has given man 'power of choice'. Gregory of Nyssa and other early Fathers associated human 'freewill' with being made in God's image (*On Virginity*, xii).

So the term ‘freewill’, like ‘trinity’, is not itself in Scripture, but the verses we cited above *do* refer to human will and make it clear that it *is* free to choose something different from what God wills or plans. Human will, in this context, *is* free. This rationale for the word ‘freewill’ requires more than a so called ‘compatibilist’ view of it which sees it as merely a lack of external compulsion. It is not from apparent human experience of freewill that we argue here (though this can be argued – as we have in *Reason, Science and Faith*, pp 79ff), but from *God’s* assertion that he is *not* determining their choices. God himself, of course, similarly has this kind of radical undetermined freewill (after all we are made in his image), and Jesus also claims it, for example in Luke 22:42.

Not only unbelievers but also Christians may, on occasion, reject the will of God as well as his commandments , and quench his Spirit, as is implied in:

f) *1 Thessalonians 4:3*

> For this is the *will* of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality (see also 1 Peter 2:15; Hebrews 10:36)

g) *1 Thessalonians 5:17-19*

> Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the *will* of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

Some unbelievers also fight against the Spirit. God, ‘who *wills* (*thelei*) that all men should be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4, RSV), sends his Spirit to convict their hearts (1 John 16:8), but they reject his plan for them (Luke 7:30), and resist the Spirit’s urgings to repent. Scripture says of them:

h) *Acts 7:51*

> You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your

fathers did, so do you.

But can they *continue* to resist the Spirit, or does there come a time when they have no choice but to repent? We should note that those accused here by Stephen of resisting the Holy Spirit, although ‘cut to the heart’, promptly murdered him. History shows, moreover, that many of this council stayed unrepentant all their lives. Their resistance to the Holy Spirit and rejection of God’s plan for themselves was a permanent thing.

It is clear, therefore, that whichever word for ‘will’ or ‘plan’ we consider, there are Scriptures showing that God’s will can be, and is, defied by man. Nothing in Scripture suggests that there is some kind of will or plan of God which determines everything that happens including all human choices. There is no term for some kind of ‘secret will’ which always happens, and such a suggestion runs against the teaching of Jesus.

God Changing his Mind

In recent years, theologians have come increasingly to recognize that the essence of personhood lies not so much in rationality but in the capacity to enter personal relationships (also explored in our *Reason, Science and Faith*). God created human beings, male and female, in his image, so that they could share personal relationships with each other (supremely in the deep knowing of marriage) and could also share personal relationships with him. Part of a genuine personal relationship is that actions are mutually-dependent. In Jeremiah 18, God himself clearly states that promises of blessing or judgment on a person or nation are dependent on the person's own reaction. If a nation is promised blessing, but chooses evil then God will change his mind and if it is promised judgement but repents the God will change his mind in the other direction (Jeremiah 18:7-10). Is a change of mind really what the Hebrew term used (*nḥm*) means? In the 5 volume work of exemplary Hebrew scholarship, (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*) by William Van Gemeren it states:

> a) The word is used to express two apparently contrasting sentiments in 1 Samuel 15, where God says, 'I am grieved (*nḥm*) that I have made Saul king' (iv. 11; cf v. 35), but where Samuel also announces that 'the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind (*nḥm*), for he is not a man, that he should change his mind (*nḥm*)' (v 29). The explanation seems to be that God does not capriciously change his intentions or ways of acting. It is the change in Saul's behaviour that leads to this expression of regret. The reference is notable as being one of the rare occasions when God is said to repent or change his mind concerning something intended as good (cf Genesis 6:6).

> b) In many cases the Lord's 'changing' of his mind is a gracious response to human factors. Thus in Jeremiah we often read that repentance on the part of people (usually *šwb* but *nḥm* in Jeremiah 8:6 and 31:19) will make it possible for God to repent, change his mind (*nḥm*): 18:8,10; 20:16; 26:3,13,19 cf 42:10. Note also God's response to Amos's pleas on behalf of Israel (Amos 7:3,6).(vol 5, p 82).

The term certainly does mean to change one's mind, and the principle was also recognized by Jonah (3:10, 4:2) and applied by God, for example in Ezekiel 12:3 and Isaiah 38:1-5. It is also the most natural way to take 1 Kings 21:1-35, 2 Kings 20:2-5, 2 Chronicles 32:24-6, Isaiah 38:1-6 and 39:1-8 (indeed, Brother Andrew has produced a nice little book, *And God Changed His Mind*). We have already met this idea in connection with Moses and Israel in chapter 10 of *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*. God is not capricious, his underlying nature, ways, and desires are unchanging. But he does change his mind in response to human reaction.

But does it *really* mean that God changed his mind rather than God 'changed his mind'? That is, can we put it in inverted commas and effectively deny its force because it is somehow 'anthropomorphic'? Phrases like 'the arm of God' are not literal, so can we see 'I will change my mind' in the same way? Augustinian theologian Paul Helm suggests just this in *The Providence of God*. If, he says, we are to be 'committed to maintaining' the repeated biblical view that:

> … God is at times ignorant, that he changes his mind, or is open to persuasion, that his purposes of goodness are thwarted, and so on… we should also be committed to the view that God has a rich ever-changing emotional life, and perhaps that he has a body, and a physical location in heaven. (p 51)

There are huge problems with this argument of Helm's.

First, metaphor has to refer to *something*. We can all understand that ‘the arm of God’ is a poetical reference *to* exerting energy, and it is crystal clear that the Jewish people never ‘took this literally’ (cf Deuteronomy 4:15). But to what could ‘I will change my mind’ refer? If it really meant ‘I will appear to change my mind but really I intended this all along,’ then it would be a very strange ‘metaphor’ indeed because it would actually say something entirely different.

Who can fail to be moved by Jesus’ tearful lament over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37: ‘How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing…’ Augustine is forced to take these words to ‘really’ mean:

> … although Jerusalem did not will that her children be gathered together by him, yet, despite her unwillingness, God did indeed gather together those children of hers whom he would. (*Enchiridion* xxiv)

To Augustine, then, it is not really a ‘lament’ but a kind of crowing exultation. Jesus is crowing over them that God got exactly what he wanted in spite of their unwillingness. What an odd way to try to read it.

Similarly, Augustine takes ‘who wills that all men should be saved’ to mean ‘no man is saved unless God wills his salvation’ (*Enchiridion* xxvii).

This is not *interpreting* metaphor, but making words stand on their heads and mean the opposite of what they say.

The second flaw in Helm’s argument is that ultimately God becomes unknowable. Helm actually quotes one of his mentors, John Calvin, in suggesting that God is just presenting himself to us ‘not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us.’ So how do we know what God is like ‘in himself’, if his actual words to us mean something

completely different? Presumably we cannot – except perhaps by some kind of overriding philosophical principle. Or is it perhaps some kind of secret ‘gnosis’ which goes beyond the surface meaning of what God says and makes it mean the opposite? We thought that Gnosticism was supposed to have been eradicated long ago from Christian theology – though the *unknowability* of God was a trap some medieval theologians fell into. It is not biblical to believe God to be unknowable because as John 1:18 says:

> No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known. (NIV)
>
> No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him. (NASB)

The word to ‘make him known’ or ‘explain’ implies a deep exposition, – and it was Jesus who made the lament: ‘O Jerusalem,… how often I wanted…but you were not willing…’

The third problem is that we do not accept Helm’s starting point which is that ‘we are faced with apparently incompatible data.’ What he actually does is to set his own reading of supposedly ‘irresistible grace’ into certain verses in apparent opposition to the clear biblical teaching about God’s will and changes of mind. In *The Providence of God* (p 50) Helm interprets 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Romans 1:6; 9:11, 1 Corinthians 1:9 and Ephesians 4:4 in this way. Not one of these verses he cites, however, carry any such meaning – even in their most surface understanding. We do not have to ‘write off’ the verses about effectual calling etc, or pull verbal somersaults to explain them away. The implications that Augustinians read into them simply are not there. There *are* no ‘incompatible data’.

The fourth problem with Helm's argument is that if God does *not* have a rich, ever-changing emotional life (as Helm claims he does not), then God is not a person, and he is certainly not the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of our fathers. All he can be is the emotionless, passionless, god of Aristotle or neo-platonism – which is probably the original source of such incorrect ideas in Church history. It is quite extraordinary that, in seeking to glorify God, Augustinians like Paul Helm have actually depersonalized him. (We should say that this is about theology, not a personal judgment – we are acquainted with Paul Helm who is a fine Christian man whose faith seems to be much better than his theology.)

In other books (eg Paul Marston's *Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages*) we have shown that we are certainly not biblical 'literalists', and we believe that the modern version of this literalism is theologically and hermeneutically mistaken and does not follow the teaching of Jesus. Of course *some* parts *are* meant literally (like the empty tomb) but Jesus was literalistic neither about the 'serpent' nor about the 'days' in the creation accounts. What Jesus did teach us is that God is a warm, compassionate *Abba*, not the cold emotionless unchanging god of the neo-platonists, and one cannot somehow be taken to be a metaphor for the other. Perhaps God's experience of the process of mind-change may indeed 'feel different' to our own experience of changing our minds in response to other people's reactions, but it must mean *something* analogous to it.

Aspects of God's Will

Augustinians may try to argue away plain scriptural statements as metaphor, but they face a further problem. If, as they believe, everything that happens is God's will, then the unrepentance and perishing of the wicked must also be God's will. Yet God himself says it is *not* his will – so how can they reconcile this? Some, of course, do not even try to reconcile the two, but simply say that there are 'two sides to the truth.' 'On the one hand,' they say, 'man is responsible, but on the other hand God is sovereign and determines everything that happens'. This filters also into popular books, for example in *Arguing With God* Hugh Silvester states:

> …a thorough examination of the Bible usually finishes up with two apparently irreconcilable statements:
>
> 1. Man is responsible for his actions.
>
> 2. God orders or ordains all things. (p 71)

The classic *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (1961) by Jim Packer said something similar but called it an 'antimony' instead of a contradiction. Norman Geisler speaks of 'mystery', and wants to assert human freewill but concludes: 'God has determined everything (even our free choices)' (quoted in *Predestination and Freewill* by Basinger and Basinger, chapter II). Paul Jewett in *Election and Predestination* takes the ideas of Augustine and the Reformers as an aspect of truth, and so in his final analysis unsurprisingly concludes: 'Mystery confronts us on every side' (p 108), and litters his final chapters with 'paradox'.

We must be careful here. First let us note in what form the contrast is usually stated. Alongside God's supposed determination of all events is set 'man's responsibility' or perhaps 'man's own view of his conversion'. Now the Bible

undoubtedly *does* imply human responsibility, but a contrast of this with God's supposed determining of all things is not the prime difficulty here. The point is that God himself says that men and women *can* (permanently) reject his will and plan for their lives, and refuse to follow it. God does not say merely that people *think* they can do this, but that they can and do actually do it. So if we are to set up 'two sides to the truth' then the real antithesis must be:

> 1) Humans can and do reject God's will and plan for them.
>
> 2) God determines all events and his will is always done.

Or perhaps:

> 1) God clearly states that he wants people to repent and they do not
>
> 2) God determines all events and his will is always done

Either of these is plain contradiction, and if we are to allow such contradictions in our thinking then almost any doctrine can be read into the Bible on the basis of isolated verses – being heralded as a new 'side to the truth'. Ironically, the very same author as quoted above goes on to say:

> Once the Christian admits that there is a real and complete contradiction in his thinking he can give up his claim to talk sense and may logically make any statement he chooses, however outrageous. (Silvester, *Arguing With God*, p 47)

Having given us two contradictory statements himself, all Silvester can do to escape his own condemnation is to claim that: 'on a practical level there is no difficulty'. This solves nothing. It is a great shame to see men of God thrown into such confusion. The choice, in fact, is simple. We must either give up any form of reason and accept plain contradictions as 'sides to truth', or else we must abandon

both statements 2 above (as they stand at least) as being inconsistent with Scripture.

Some more subtle theologians have tried to retain something like statement 2 by distinguishing two different senses of the word ‘will’. One group try to distinguish ‘God’s commands’ from God’s real will. John Piper, in a famous article praising the hyper-calvinist Jonathan Edwards, wrote about:

> … some perplexing things in the Bible, namely, that God often expresses his will to be one way, and then acts to bring about another state of affairs. (http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/is-god-less-glorious-because-he-ordained-that-evil-be – accessed 2012)

He follows Edwards’ terms ‘will of command’ and ‘will of decree’ which is slightly different from ‘signified’ and ‘effectual’ wills. In his review of our first edition Piper suggested that an example of this was God commanding Pharoah to let the Israelietes God when he was strengthening Pharaoh’s resolve not to do so.

Paul Helm (quoting Augustine in his defence) says much the same thing:

> … even on those occasions when the command of God is disobeyed, the disobedience is in accordance with his will, in the sense of his decree. (*The Providence of God*, p 200)

As comforting as this might be if I should fall into sin (after all I am only breaking God’s command – really I am doing what he wants), it seems to be just a fancy way of saying that God is not being honest and telling us what he wants. This might be understandable if eg he wants to test Abraham, but it seems a bit strange if Paul eg says that God ‘wants all men everywhere to repent’ (Acts 17:30) and it is

not really what God wants at all. Moreover, the real problem is not

- God commands one thing (all to repent, Acts 17:30)
- God really wants another

But rather is:

- God says he wants one thing (all to repent 2 Peter 3:9 or the wicked to repent Ezekiel 33:11)
- God really wants another – and determines that many will stay unrepentant

In Piper's Pharaoh example, God really did want the Israelites to be free. There is no contradiction between him commanding Pharaoh to do something and then acting to delay the compliance. This does not indicate anything like a 'revealed will' and a 'secret will', because God never says it is his will or plan that Pharaoh will immediately comply. God never says that it is his will or plan that Isaac will be sacrificed. But God does say it is his will and plan that none should perish.

The other version of the 'two wills' idea is not much help either. Consider the following passage from Calvin's commentary on Romans:

It is true, God would not men should perish as touching his signified will, for he offered unto man a law, promises, threatenings, and counsels, which things, if he had embraced, he had surely lived. But, if we have respect unto that mighty and effectual will, doubtless we cannot deny, but God would have men to perish.

Calvin believed that:

> Whom God passes by he reprobates; and from no other cause than his determination to exclude them… (*Institutes III* xxiii 1)

Calvin also says we should not refuse to say with Augustine:

> God could change the will of the wicked into good, because he is omnipotent. Why then does he not do it? Because he is unwilling. Why he is unwilling remains with himself. (*Institutes III* xxiii 13)

The phrase ‘signified will’ presumably means here will-as-revealed-to-man, and the phrase ‘effectual will’ means will-as-carried-into-effect. The argument in this passage, therefore, is that verses like ‘the Lord is … not willing that any should perish’ show us God’s ‘will-as-revealed-to-man’ but the fact that many do perish shows us God’s real ‘will-as-carried-into-effect’. We are thus presented with a supposed ‘signified will’ which is the complete opposite of his supposed ‘effectual will’. His ‘signified will’ is that he ‘would not’ have anyone to perish, but his real will is that many shall because he is unwilling (for unknown reasons) to act to change them.

Now as far as we can see there would be only two possibilities if this kind of ‘two wills’ view were correct. One would be that God is lying: he tells us (or ‘signifies’) that he wants to save everyone but in fact has no such wish. The other would be that God really does at the same time actively want to save them and decides not to save them. In short, either God would be a liar and deceiver or he would be a God of contradiction and chaos. Neither of these conclusions would be acceptable to any Christian, but there would seem to be no other possibilities if Calvin were correct. This is not a criticism of God but of Calvin’s (and Augustine’s) inconsistent (and therefore incorrect) theology.

Though doubtless those who suggest it are sincere, all this kind of ‘interpretation’ seems to many of us to be verbal sophistry and denial of Scripture’s plain sense. Does God mean what he says or not? God often speaks figuratively of course, but this is not a question of ‘literalism’ or ‘literary genre’, but giving his words any sensible meaning at all.

But is there, in fact, the slightest basis in scriptural language for distinguishing in this manner between a signified and an effectual will? We have discovered nothing in Scripture which shows that God has an effectual or any other kind of will that men should stay unrepentant and so perish. If we are prepared to abandon any philosophical presupposition that God's will is always done, and accept the simple biblical teaching that a man perishes because he rejects God's plan for him and does not do the Father's will, then the whole elaborate apparatus of signified and effectual wills is rendered unnecessary. This 'apparatus' not only includes the supposition of two diametrically opposite 'wills' of God. It must also suppose an 'effectual calling' and a non-effectual one, an 'unconditional election' and one which we need to 'make sure' (2 Peter 1:10) and so on. The whole exercise in double-think is unnecessary and should be scrapped. Such theology is a tradition which makes ineffective the word of God.

At this point it might be helpful to mention a rather different distinction of two types or aspects of the will of God: this distinguishes his 'permissive will' and his 'active will'. It is often said, for example, that it is only God's permissive will that people should suffer. Could this distinction be applied to the present problem? Could we say that it is only God's permissive will that men should perish, but his active will to save them? It is difficult to comment on this suggestion, for it is not clear exactly what it means. If we speak of God's permissive will, then what exactly is he 'permitting'? Is it that he permits men to continue on the road to hell when he could transfer them to the road to life? Is it rather that he permits them to choose which road they want and permits that choice to stand? Or is it that he permits the world to carry on when he could annihilate it? The first of these interpretations would again be contradicted by God's repeated statements that he does not want people to

perish. One of the other two versions might be better, but it is difficult to know this without a clearer statement of what exactly is meant.

Therefore, let us consider whether the Scriptures themselves give a hint of there being two aspects to God's will – and if so, what they are. We know that one clear aspect of God's will is his unwillingness that any should perish and his desire that all men everywhere should repent and come to a knowledge of the truth. Is there another aspect? A good clue may be found in the moving words of Psalm 32. David begins by saying:

> Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered… I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord', and you forgave the iniquity of my sin …

The Lord replies in verses 8-9:

> I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with my eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you..

Why did God allow David to sin and then forgive him when he confessed it? Why not simply stop David from sinning in the first place? Was it God's permissive will to allow him to sin? Well, in a sense, yes. But the reason was that God does not want mule-like servants who have to be forced to obey him all the time. He wants those who will freely accept his instruction and counsel. He wants relationships of mutual affection and love, not those based on some kind of force. God could bridle unbelievers, tinker with their wills and hearts, and turn them into automata (or mules), so that they have to do what he says. But if he did this it would still not achieve his purpose of developing free relationships such as God desired to have with David.

It is, of course, nonsense to say that God could create men who were free but force them to do his will. Some try to argue against this by quoting Jesus saying: ‘with God all things are possible’ (Matthew 19:26) but this is no use because he said this in the context of rich men entering the kingdom of heaven. God can perform miracles and do what is impossible to man, but the words ‘force a man to freely do God’s will’ do not state an ‘impossibility’ – rather, they do not state anything at all for they are a meaningless word series. The addition of ‘God can’ in front of them does not remove their meaninglessness. Hugh Silvester puts it well in *Arguing With God*:

> God is all powerful but that does not mean that he can do anything. He cannot make 2 + 2 = 5 and he cannot make it raining and not raining in the same moment at the same place...When we say God is all-powerful we mean he can do all things that can be done, which doubtless includes many things that are impossible to man. But we do not mean that he can give a hydrogen atom and a helium atom the same atomic structure. Even God could not create free men without at the same time creating men who were able to rebel. (p 60,61)

We could, then, set out two aspects of God’s will as:

> a) He wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.
>
> b) He doesn’t want a set of bridled mules; he wants, therefore, to leave people free to accept or refuse his plan to give them the free gift of salvation.

We should note, however, that these are *not* contradictory; the two aspects are really part of the same will. God wants everyone to repent and enter a free love-relationship with himself. But, if he *forced* men and women to repent, then their allegiance would not be freely given – they would no

longer be truly persons but mules. He would not have *saved* people, but made mules out of them. God created humankind in his own image and desires men and women to be conformed to the image of his son (Romans 8:29). This divine wish will be unfulfilled in those who perish through unrepentance, but it would be no better fulfilled in them if they were transformed into mules. There is a sense in which transformation into mules is just another way of perishing. God prefers to endure with much longsuffering those fit only for destruction, for at least there is then the opportunity for some to respond to his call to receive mercy and enter a love-relationship with him (compare Romans 9:22). So the fact that some perish is quite consistent with God's desire that all should be saved. They are complementary expressions of a single will to save *persons*.

The reason, we discover, for God not saving everyone is not that he doesn't really want to; it is not a great mystery; it is not part of his 'inscrutable will'. It is simply that if he *were* to force them, they would no longer be persons. He would have failed to achieve anything of his purpose. There is no contradiction, or even paradox, between the perishing of persons and God's desire to save them. They are both necessary expressions of one and the same will to form relationships of love, sharing, and understanding with men. This is the only conclusion we can see that harmonizes the Scriptures.

Long ago, Dr J Agar Beet beautifully expressed how God freely chose, in Love and in his grace, to bless mankind:

> Whatever God does in time he purposed from eternity; and whatever he does, he does unmoved by any good thing external to himself… God proclaims that he will save all those who believe the good news and none else. Therefore he formed from eternity of his own free will the purpose to do

so. God saw men in sin and misery, and resolved to save. He was moved to save by his love to the entire race: John 3:16f; 1 Timothy 2:4; Titus 2:11. To reconcile the salvation of sinners with divine justice God gave his Son to die. He chose the Gospel and faith (1:16f; 3:22w) to be the instrument and the channel through which salvation should come to the individual. He resolved to exert (2:4) upon all who hear the Gospel influences leading to repentance and faith, influences without which (John 6:44) repentance and faith are impossible. He thought fit in infinite wisdom and universal love to permit men either to yield to or to resist these influences… (*Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 278)

God’s Sovereignty

At this point some readers may be thinking: ‘Surely God would not be *sovereign* if everything were not directly determined by him?’ This word is popular with some Christians but in the NKJV God is *nowhere* described as ‘sovereign’ nor is the ‘sovereignty’ of God ever mentioned. God is proclaimed to be a great king (for example in Psalm 47:2) and ‘king of kings’ in 1 Timothy 6:14 and Revelation 17:14; 19:16 (though this same title is also used of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:12 and Nebuchadnezzar in Ezekiel 26:7). The implication is that, like earthly supreme kings, God is powerful and defeats his enemies and protects his subjects – but there is certainly no implication that he always gets what he wants. In the United Kingdom the Queen and Parliament are rightfully sovereign, but many things that happen in the kingdom are not what they want.

This is not to deny that the Lord is indeed King of kings, but it may help us to remember that the reign of God (and of the Lamb) neither makes humans into automata, nor makes the battle a fake in which God directs both sides.

What about the word ‘almighty’?

Many English translations render the Hebrew *El Shaddai* as almighty. According to Van Gemeren’s *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (vol 4, p 401) the only reason for this is that the LXX translators made an ‘educated guess’ at its meaning. So what does the Hebrew really mean? *El* is the word for God. But what of *shaddai*? The word *shad* is used a number of times in the Old Testament to mean a female bosom or breast (eg Isaiah 66:11) and most probably *Shaddai* relates to this. The word *dai* means ‘enough’ and again is common in the Old Testament (eg Exodus 36:7). ‘*The all-sufficient God*’ would seem a more natural translation of *El Shaddai*. This is reflected in Genesis 49:25:

> By the God of your father who will help you,
> And by the Almighty (*Shaddai*) who will bless you
> With blessings of heaven above,
> Blessings of the deep that lies beneath,
> Blessings of the breasts (*shaddayim*) and of the womb.

So there is no word ‘almighty’ in the Hebrew bible. The LXX also often uses *pantokrator* to translate the Hebrew ‘lord of hosts’ (*yhwh ṣ ebā’ôt*) and this is probably behind the loose Old Testament quotation used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:18. *Pantokrator* is only used nine other times in the New Testament – all in that book of Revelation which is the place where it is most clearly seen that God does not always get what he wants because spiritual forces battle against him. But how may we understand this ‘all-powerfulness’ of God? For a concept like the love of God the Bible gives us human analogies (for example, the human father-son relationship). For a concept like almightiness we can have nothing comparable in the human realm. Care is needed, therefore, in deciding its meaning, and we must certainly take into account the implications of other statements made in the Bible. Whatever our conclusions about the meaning of almightiness, it clearly cannot mean that God’s will or plan is irresistible in every detail, since the Bible says that neither is.

Further light on the word *pantokrator* or ‘almighty’ may be shed by Hebrews 2:14. There the power (*kratos*) of death is said to have been in the possession of the devil. It was, it implies, a central part of the great war that Christ himself had to die on the cross to wrest power from Satan’s grip. Whatever we understand, therefore, by ‘all-powerful,’ it cannot be undiscerningly taken to imply that there are no powers but God in his universe. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* says of *kratos*:

> The word is a title of royalty, and also means rule or dominion (eg *Herodotus* 3, 69, ‘he who has dominion over the Persians’)… (vol 3, p 716)

The word *kratos* in the New Testament seems to imply ‘strength’ (Acts 19:20) or ‘dominion’ (1 Peter 4:11 and 5:11, Jude 25 and Revelation 1:6) – and in 1 Timothy 6:16 different versions take it as either! Dominion is ascribed to Christ and God, whose right it is to rule. God’s rightful dominion is obviously the whole universe, but parts of it are, in practice, usurped by other agents to whom he has given some independence of will and delegated authority. The devil, according to Hebrews 2:14, had the kratos of death, but this *kratos* was destroyed through the death of Jesus.

It is with such a background in mind that we must approach a little-used word like *pantokratos* which ascribes ‘all-dominion’, and it would be unwise to build any key doctrines on this word alone. We emphatically believe in God’s sovereignty in this sense, but there is no reason to take the term to contradict plain teaching of Scripture that God’s will is not always done. The triumphant biblical cry: ‘The Lord reigns!’ is a celebration that he will triumph over those opposed to him and his servants – not a recognition that those apparently opposing him are really doing what he wants anyway.

Moral Problems

We must, of course, beware of seeming to judge God. God is God, and he tells humankind what is right, not the other way around. Nevertheless, we should identify with Abraham's heartfelt cry in Genesis 18:25:

> Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?'

This was said in confidence in his God, not in judgment on God. We are confident in our God that he is both just and loving, and that systems of human theology which deny one or the other of these must be false.

Our understanding of Scripture is that human will (or freewill if you like) is the source of sin as it goes against the Divine will and commands. This, as we show in chapter 7, was the universal view and understanding of Christian leaders for the first four centuries.

But how do Augustinians see this? Writers like AW Pink actually glory in God's supposed planned responsibility for evil:

> To declare that the Creator's original plan has been frustrated by sin, is to dethrone God. (*The Sovereignty of God*, p 21)

John Piper quotes with approval Jonathan Edwards:

> Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

> (http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/is-god-less-glorious-because-he-ordained-that-evil-be – accessed June 2012)

In other words, God ordained the evil so that he could show off his selective benevolence. This does not sound much like the Kingdom of Heaven Lordship that Jesus shows us in Matthew 20:25-28. If Jesus said these words about himself, and he is the express image of God, what is God really like?

Now we all, of course, accept that God was free not to create *anything*, or just to create an inert universe, in which case sin would (presumably) never have occurred. In this sense, then, God is 'responsible' for sin – but its possibility is the price to be paid for creating other personal beings. Pink and others, however, believe it was God's *deliberate plan* that Adam – and presumably all after him – should sin. The picture he and those like him present of God (to the delight of the new militant Atheist movement) is an egotistical, self-centered tyrant whose actions are aimed solely at self-gratification and whose 'glory' is simply unrestricted power. To many of us such a picture is both immoral and unbiblical – even worse than the ultra-liberal view of God as an indulgent Santa Claus. Yet Paul Helm seems to imply much the same:

> God could have prevented evil by creating human beings such that they freely did only what is morally right… Moral evil… its entry was not unexpected by God; rather, it was ordained by him. (*The Providence of God*, p 200).

Helm, then, is not saying that God merely *allows* the possibility of evil as an inevitable corollary of human freewill – but that God actively planned and ordained it. In defence of this he quotes Augustine, the theologian who (as we will see in chapter 7) first introduced torture and imprisonment

as legitimate means to spread the gospel. Again, though, Helm seems to imply that God's avowed abhorrence of evil is a charade – really he is quite glad it is there. Helm admits: 'we have struggled to understand how God can ordain evil and yet not be the author of it.' Some of us have more than struggled with it, we find it plainly contradictory. Helm's suggestion that God ordains some evil for chastisement or punishment does not help – for there would be nothing to discipline or chastise if God had not ordained any evil in the first place. When it comes down to it, Helm's only real argument seems to be that 'The state of pardon and of renewal is one of greater worth or blessedness than a faultless original position.' This seems extraordinary. Would a parent *really* be happier the greater sin his or her child fell into before becoming a Christian? Would a parent actually deliberately *force* the child into deep sin and degradation so that a later rise might be more dramatic? As Jesus said in another context, even human fathers are better than that. Moreover, the whole thing, all the holocaust, the rape and torture of children, the awful human suffering, turns out to be just so that God has a chance to show his grace and forgiveness. This irresistible grace and forgiveness is, moreover, not even shown universally (as argued by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love*, for example) but just to a sovereignly (ie arbitrarily) selected few. The rest are then to be tortured forever and ever and ever, time without end, in hell, to demonstrate this 'God's' justice.

The 'God' in this whole extraordinary picture is not even merely as bad as the 'kings of the Gentiles' – the ones Jesus mentioned in Luke 22:25 as he washed the disciples feet to make known to them what God was like. Such a 'God' would be a monster. What is really surprising is that any Christian theologian could ever have constructed him, or that there could be circles in which this was seen as orthodoxy.

Augustinian Appeals

What is it, then, that has seduced so many past Christians into anything like this kind of Augustinian view of God?

Paul Helm's starting point in his book is very significant. He begins not with the God found in the Bible, but with issues of risky or risk-free universes. He finds the notion that God may not be absolutely ordaining everything a bit scary, so begins by arguing that this cannot be true, and returns to it at the end:

> If we believe in a 'risk' view of providence, based upon an incompatibilist view of free will, or for some other reason, then there will be many occurrences in our lives which are as surprising to God as they are to us. In these circumstances it will be impossible for us to see our lives as a response to what God has ordained, since on this view God has ordained only a proportion of those events which befall us, that proportion which does not involve the free choices of human creatures, and which those free choices in no way affect. (*The Providence of God*, pp 215-6)

'Yes, yes and amen!' This is the excitement that we find in the New Testament, of working together with God, standing in his armour, to bring in his plans and purposes as the battle rages in the heavenlies. This is much more biblical and it is morally and emotionally preferable to a view in which the alternative is an individual pre-ordained response to a timeless, emotionless, experienceless God who has planned and ordained evil and says he wants one thing while really wanting another.

This, however, is typical of the kind of motivation which seems to set some abstract philosophical principle above the whole sweep and tenor of the biblical portrayal of God.

Paul Helm similarly slants his earlier work *The Eternal God* with arguments from God's supposed 'timelessness' and 'immutability'. But any supposed principle of divine 'changelessness' or 'immutability' has to take its meaning in the light of biblical teaching – not become a set of glasses through which all biblical teaching must be viewed. Biblical theology begins with interaction with a personal God, not from an abstract philosophical idea of one.

Another such overriding principle is a desire for the supposed 'glory' of God. Is the glory of God really diminished if anything can thwart his will? Surely, as John Wesley wrote in a work that answers similarly many of the same objections we deal with here:

> How is it more for the glory of God to save man irresistibly than to save him as a free agent, by such grace as he may either concur with or resist? (*Predestination Calmly Considered*)

Through a misguided obsession with worldly concepts of 'glory' applied to God, there is a danger of negating not only his love, but also his holiness, ie his genuine abhorrence of sin. Yet as we have already seen, Christ taught us that the glory of God does not consist in lording it over people, but in his own sacrifice (see chapter 4 in *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*, and Matthew 20:2528, Mark 10:42-45, Luke 22:24-27 and John 13: 12). If we really grasped Christ's revelation that God's glory is the cross, and learned to glory in it ourselves (Galatians 6:14), then the glory of God could never again be confused with the glory sought by the natural minds of the rulers of the Gentiles, or, indeed, by the 'world ruler' himself.

Another influence is the often-made accusation that those who do not believe God's sovereignty to be of this absolute form are teaching that salvation is 'of works'. But if for example, a woman owes a million pounds and a benefactor

offers to pay it for her, who has ‘saved’ her if she accepts? Well, in one sense she has ‘saved herself’ by accepting the gift, and in this sense Peter urges sinners to ‘save themselves’ in Acts 2:40. But one would obviously be more likely to say she was saved by her benefactor. She has in no way worked for or earned her ‘salvation’ simply by accepting a free offer. Alternatively, suppose that a child is perched on a roof surrounded by deep flood water five metres deep. A woman rows twenty miles, pulls alongside, and offers to take her to safety. The child has, of course, to agree to get into the boat. But who has ‘saved’ her? In a sense she saved herself by accepting the offer – but how many papers would report it as: *Child saves herself by stepping into boat*?

How then should we regard the claim that if we are free to reject or accept God’s free offer of salvation then we earn it by accepting? It is surely not a ‘work’ to accept a free offer (either of salvation or of a million pounds or of a boat ride to safety), and a person who accepts a free gift has not earned it. As Charles Spurgeon wrote in *All of Grace*:

> …faith excludes all boasting. The hand which receives charity does not say ‘I am to be thanked for accepting the gift’; that would be absurd.

When Paul talks of this in Romans 4:4 he, says:

> Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (also chapter 3 in this volume on the importance of understanding the rabbinic ideas Paul is attacking here).

We must surely reject the suggestion that it is ‘works’ to accept an undeserved offer. But why did people even suggest this in the first place? As we show in our chapter 3 the Latin language is partly responsible for such views of ‘works’ and ‘merits’.

A more subtle form of this argument is the appeal to a Christian's own practice. The question may be asked: 'Who do you give the credit to for your conversion – yourself or God?' But again, to use our analogy, it would be foolish for a man or woman to strut about patting themselves on the back simply for accepting an offer to pay their debt. Their attention should not be focused on their acceptance of the offer, but on the offer itself and on the love that leads the benefactor to fulfil it if the gift is accepted. Of course, we thank and praise God for his Love, for his offer and for his fulfilment of that offer to us. The fact that others have refused similar offers does not make our own less precious. Moreover, all this talk of 'credit' is not Christ-like. A shepherd girl offered the heart and love of Solomon would be too taken up with wonder and love to think of credit. The heavenly bride will be gazing on Christ, not wondering if she ought to receive credit for accepting his amazing offer of love. A concern with credit would only be the concern of those like the 'kings of the gentiles' we looked at earlier. This reminds us of that Pharisee in Jesus' story who was careful to ascribe all the credit to God: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men…' (Luke 18:11). His whole focus was wrong.

The last influence we will mention here is another appeal to a Christian's own practice: 'Don't you pray that people will be converted? This means that you recognize in your heart that they will be converted only if God wills it.' While this is subtle, it is not a convincing argument. We pray that the Holy Spirit will powerfully convict people of their own need, of God's love and judgment. We do not pray that he will override their own decision processes and *force* them to believe. Obviously Christians believe that other people's decisions may be *affected* by their own actions – otherwise why should they preach? No person lives in a vacuum; this is true both in the physical and in the spiritual realms (see

also J Stafford Wright's *What is Man?*). As we pray we ask the Holy Spirit to utilize and interpret our prayers (Romans 8:26), and thus we join the battle against the principalities and powers in the fight to influence men and women. God's conviction of a person's heart can powerfully stimulate them to a decision for repentance – but the Bible nowhere indicates that God negates a person's own choice. Even in major revivals we hear of many who are convicted and smitten by God's Spirit, but later lapse back in unbelief. No one advocated the 'power from on high' more than Charles Finney – but he did not believe it negated human choice. On the contrary, God is prepared to say:

> Because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear; but did evil before my eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight. (Isaiah 65:12)

God leaves a person with free choice. He does not 'force' repentance on a person who chooses a path that does not delight him. If it has been our practice to pray that God will override the will and choices of other people, then we should change our practices, not our theology. Our theology should be the same on our knees as in a Bible study.

Conclusion

God made a free choice to create humankind and all the earth, over which he is the rightful sovereign. It was his sovereign choice to create humankind with a freedom to choose that in which God himself does not delight. The Bible clearly teaches that God’s will is not done when men and women set their wills against his, and that God can react to human sin or repentance by changing his mind about intended judgment or blessing. No amount of human philosophical thinking, or traditions in human theology, should seduce Christians from acceptance of this plain scriptural teaching.



Chapter 2: Justification and Righteousness

The terms ‘justification’ (*dikaiōsis*) and ‘righteousness’ (*dikaiosynē*) are closely related. One of the basic problems with language is that it is not exactly translatable. A given word in one language may have connotations and semantic fields which mean that there is no single word in another language which corresponds. Thus the Greek *pistis* can mean ‘belief in’, ‘faith in’ or ‘faithfulness’. In English ‘justification’, ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’ all carry different connotations, but usually they translate the same basic Greek term based on *dikaiosynē*.

Colin Brown wrote:

> All the words in this group are derived from *dike*(→ Punishment). According to H. Fiske the original root noun mean ‘instructress’ or ‘instruction’… (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol iii, p 353)

James Ernest has stated:

> It is generally agreed that *dikē*, the basic term in this group, is related to *deiknymi*, ‘show, indicate.’ …it ends up meaning ‘justice’. (*Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol 1, p 318)

Alister McGrath has noted how language itself changed the perspective on the word. The etymological meaning of the Hebrew *tsedeq* was to do with victory, connecting God’s activity as a judge and Israel’s victory over her neighbours. For the prophets, however,

> *ṣedāqâ* was effectively that condition or state which was required of Israel if her relationship to

> God was to continue. (*Iustitia Dei*, p 8)

Ernest (vol i, p 328) also claimed ‘the exact meaning (of *ṣedāqâ*) is not discoverable’ but seemed to express ‘fullness and abundance.’ He asserted, however, that it was relational.

Colin Brown asserted:

> Righteousness in the Old Testament is not a matter of conforming to a given set of absolute legal standards, but of behaviour which is in keeping with the two-way relationship between God and man. (vol iii, p 355)

Butterworth in JI Packer et al *Here We Stand* (p 12) also argued it was relational, not (like *iustitia*) some impersonal standard of justice to which God and man must conform. The Old Testament meaning of ‘justify’ is generally ‘declare righteous’ not ‘make righteous’.

McGrath in the work already cited showed a theological/linguistic transition: *ṣedāqâ* → *dikaiosune* → *iustitia*.

The Latin Fathers, mediaeval theologians, and theologians into the Renaissance and Reformation, mostly relied on the Latin, and McGrath noted the difficulties of translating ‘essentially Hebrew concepts such as ‘justification’ into a Latin linguistic and conceptual framework’:

> The Hebrew *haṣdiq* usually translated ‘to justify’ cannot bear the negative sense ‘to condemn’ or ‘to punish’, its primary sense apparently being ‘to vindicate’, ‘to acquit’. (p 12)

The meaning of *dikaiosynē* in the LXX was influenced by Aristotelian use, a ‘secular concept incapable of assuming the soteriological overtones associated with the Hebrew term’ (*Iustitia Dei*, p 10). However, classical usage also ‘almost invariably seemed to be applied to someone whose

cause was *unjust*', meaning to punish. The LXX shifted away from this towards the Hebrew meaning, and meant 'to acquit' or 'declare to be in the right' or to 'vindicate'. Thus Judah said 'Tamar is vindicated rather than I' (Genesis 38:26). The phrase 'justify the righteous' occurred approvingly, but Isaiah 5:22-3 complained the wicked were being justified, and Isaiah 43:26 invited Israel to confess her sins to be justified. God and his judgments were also said to be 'justified' (Psalm 19 [18]:9; 51[50]:4). Sometimes people were to be justified/vindicated by God, presumably against adversaries (Isaiah 45:26), and this was applied in what is clearly a messianic passage (Isaiah 50:8). In Ezekiel 16:51-2 it meant to make someone appear more righteous than oneself. Translating *zākâh* rather than *ṣādaq* it could mean pure (Micah 6:11) or even self-purify (Psalm 72:13), though this was rare.

In the LXX 'justify' did *not* mean 'forgive sins', or 'make righteous'. It certainly never meant either to impart or to impute an ethical quality. Though often forensic, justification/acquittal was made on grounds of already existing rightness, and, in the adversarial court system, 'vindication' was often nearer the meaning (as eg when Messiah or God was to be 'justified' or people were 'justified/vindicated' against opponents/enemies).

New Testament usage was likely to assume the LXX meaning of the term. Luke 7:30 says that when Jesus noted the greatness of John the Baptist, those who had been baptised by him 'justified God'. They did not make God righteous not did they forgive God any sins – they just praised his righteous actions. Modern reference works have emphasized that also to Paul, as the LXX, 'justification' (*dikaiōsis*) and 'righteousness' (*dikaiosynē*) were fundamentally 'forensic' and relational. Kittel and Friedrich stated:

> We can see, particularly from Dt.Is. (*diakaiwθηναι* in 43:9, 26) that the image of the legal dispute is always present… (p 195) The starting point for an understanding of what Paul means by the *diakaiosunη θeou* [righteousness of God] is provided by legal righteousness… God both is and demonstrates righteousness… Righteousness is forensically ascribed to the believer. Forensically does not mean 'as if' he were righteous, since the sovereign sentence of God is genuinely pronounced. Nor does it mean that moral rectitude is attained. What it does mean is that the man who has *diakaiosunη* is right before God. (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol i, pp 203-4)

Brown compared Paul and James:

> … in both Paul and James *dikaiō* [justify] means to pronounce righteous, though in the case of James it concerns evidence that can be seen by men, whereas in Paul it is the eschatological verdict pronounced by God on the unrighteous… the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith is relational or forensic… (vol iii, pp 370-3)

The contrast between justified before men and before God is not, however, convincing, as we shall later see when we revisit this.

Historical Ideas of Justification

Some readers may find it a bit laborious to trail through various major historical understandings of ‘justification’ and ‘righteousness’. They are, however, key biblical terms, and some of the incorrect historical understandings remain as influences in the evangelical world today, so we need to do this.

1) Making Righteous

McGrath, in his scholarly analysis of the term’s history, noted little attention was paid to ‘justification’ before Augustine, and in some senses the ‘doctrine of justification’ began with him. Central to ‘justification’ in late Augustine was his novel idea of the meaning of the ‘righteousness of God’. This was something God bestowed on sinners who could not choose or desire righteousness unless God’s electing grace compelled them. Even then, God might give people regeneration, faith, hope and love, but without the gift of perseverance they were not in the elect. McGrath stated:

> Augustine understands the verb *iustificare* to mean ‘to make righteous’ and is unable to find this understanding in earlier commentators. (*Iustitia Dei*, p 30)

This was based on understanding the Latin – *ficare* as a form of *facere* – though this was not an acceptable meaning for the underlying Hebrew word. Augustine’s concept of justification:

> … includes both the event of justification (brought about by operative grace) and the process of justification (brought about by cooperative grace)

The *amor dei* (love of God) was central to this for Augustine (as J Burnaby also showed in *Armor Dei*). For those selected, the initial act of justification began a renewal process and

liberated the previously bound freewill. This led cooperatively (provided the gift of perseverance was also preordained as Augustine assumed) to renewal of the divine image in the subject. There was no need for 'imputed righteousness', and Augustine was not really much concerned with the *basis* on which God was able to overlook/forgive sin, his primary focus was on the absolute sovereignty of grace in the process. Justification was not a forensic term or even a moral judgement but a 'setting-right' divine action.

McGrath added concerning *iustificare*:

> The Greek verb has the primary sense of being considered or estimated as righteous, whereas the Latin verb denotes *being* righteous, the reason why one is *considered* righteous by others.

This overall shift meant a change of emphasis from God to man. (In parallel, Tertullian developed the concept of human 'merit', but the Greek term focused on the 'merit' as assessed, the Latin term spoke of intrinsic worth.)

Western theology became largely a set of footnotes to Augustine, with all his error, and McGrath summarised:

> The medieval theological tradition was unanimous in its understanding of justification as both an act and a process… (p 182)

2) Declaring/Imputing Righteousness

Luther's earlier view was that man must 'recognize his spiritual weakness… and turn in humility from attempts at self-justification and ask God for his grace' (*Iustitia Dei*, p 192). McGrath claimed that by 1516 he broke radically with this, becoming more necessitarian and introducing various novelties, though actually his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518)

still spoke of ‘imparting righteousness’. By 1519, however, his *Sermon on Twofold Righteousness* explained:

> 1. Justification is a forensic declaration not a transforming process
> 2. Justification is distinct from sanctification (implicit – later Lutherans made explicit)
> 3. The formal cause of it is an ‘alien righteousness’, imputed rather than imparted.

To Luther, then, justification was still an initial act of imputation, but did not involve any actual change. There was, of course, some tension in this, as Luther did expect faith to manifest itself if given and saw it as involving a union with Christ, but this was not any basis of justification because the Christian was ‘*simul justus et piccata*’ (at the same time righteous and a sinner). We noted in detail in *Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory* chapter 2 that actually the Bible never calls believers ‘sinners’ but ‘righteous’, so this popular Lutheran phrase is to use the language in a totally unbiblical manner.

To Calvin:

> He is said to be justified who, in the judgment of God, is righteous. He is justified by works whose life is pure and blameless before God; and no such person ever existed before Christ. They are justified by faith the righteousness of Christ. Such are the elect of God. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol ii, 683)

This was still about a forensic imputation/declaration of ethical quality/standing (in *Institutes* 2.11.2 he speaks of ‘imputed’ righteousness). Calvin also (like Luther) believed it involved a personal union with Christ.

McGrath (and also Peter Toon *Justification and Sanctification*) explained various Lutheran/Reformed

nuances which followed. One, influenced by Beza, led to TULIP (which we define in our next chapter) – including principles Calvin did not make explicit, like limited atonement and double predestination. The 1647 *Westminster Confession* (followed verbatim by the 1689 *London Confession*) generally followed TULIP and imputation:

> Those whom God effectually calleth he also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins… by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them.

Amongst Puritans, John Owen held the imputed righteousness concept but also developed Beza, seeing the atonement is a quantitatively precise payment for sin which therefore must cover exactly the right amount for the sins of the elect. Others, like Richard Baxter, did not accept this, holding that Christ 'paid' only a qualitative equivalent – the *solutio tantidem*. Justification was the act/process which through union with Christ gave forgiveness of sin and renewal.

Wesley (*Works*, vol viii, p 277) did not find imputation of the righteousness of Christ in Scripture, but defined justification as the initial time of forgiveness/remission of sins (*Works*, vol v, p 57) and so distinct from and antecedent to sanctification (eg *Works*, vol v, p 56, vol i, p 224).

Evangelicals have generally adapted either Augustine or Luther or Wesley – with variations. Reformed Presbyterian Charles Hodge in his Romans commentary (iii p 17) insisted justification was 'an act, and not, as sanctification, a continued and progressive work.' In contrast, some Reformed moderns, like Petersen (*Possessed by God*), have claimed 'sanctification' is fundamentally given at conversion with justification. Generally 'justification' has been taken to mean either 'making righteous' or 'imputing righteousness';

in either meaning it is an *initiating* act of God, forgiving sins and inaugurating a Christian life.

Common to all these various 'traditional views', then, is the connection of 'justification' to the initial setting right of the individual with God – whether this is through a legal declaration that someone else's merits have been considered to be transferred, the impartation of ethical qualities and therefore standing, or whatever.

3) The New Perspective

The publication of EP Sanders (*Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 1977) stimulated what Dunn (in his commentary *Romans 1-8*) called a 'New Perspective' (NP) on Paul and rabbinical Judaism. Sanders followed with *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) and *Jewish law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (1990), with major developments for example by Dunn and NT Wright. A central insight of Sanders and the New Perspective was that the Pharisees and Rabbis, unlike most Latin Fathers and Reformers, were not centrally concerned with 'how do I get right with God', and were not 'Pelagians' in the sense of believing that they could 'earn' God's acceptance. They 'gloried' in *the Law*, not in their own works, and, as Jesus noted in Luke 18:11, could say 'God *I thank you* that I am not like other men'. In their 'covenantal nomism' they *knew* that they were God's people because he had freely chosen to covenant with them – the issue was what was the *badge* of being the people of God, or how should they live out their destiny,

Along with this realization, though, there came implications for other terms. Generally the New Perspective has recognized (as we argued in 1973) that the phrase *pisteus Iėsou Christou* in Romans 3:22 (and elsewhere) means 'faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah' just as *pistin tou theou* means faithfulness of God in Romans 3:3. In this present

chapter we will assume that this is indeed the meaning of *pisteus Iėsou Christou*, but in our next chapter we will give in detail the very strong reasons to take it to mean this.

On ‘justification’ the New Perspective brought a major change in understanding.

Wright stated in 1997:

> The discussions of justification in much of the history of the Church, certainly since Augustine , got off on the wrong foot – at least in terms of understanding Paul – and they have stayed there ever since. (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p 115)

A key claim made for example by Sanders, Wright and Dunn is that justification is dealing not with the method of entry into, but the ‘badge of membership’ of, the ‘elect’. Thus Wright:

> The ‘works of Torah’ were not a legalist’s ladder, up which one climbed to earn the divine favour, but were badges that one wore as the marks of identity, or belonging to the chosen people in the present, and hence the all-important signs, to oneself and to one’s neighbours, that one belonged to the company who would be vindicated when the covenant God acted to redeem his people. (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p 238)

Dunn stated:

> In talking of ‘being justified’ here Paul is not thinking of a distinctive initiatory act of God. God’s justification is not his act in first *making* his covenant with Israel, or in initially accepting someone into the covenant people. God’s justification is rather God’s acknowledgement that someone is in the covenant whether this is an

> *initial* acknowledgement, or a *repeated* action… or his *final* vindication of his people. (*Jesus, Paul and the Law*, p 190)

Thus in the New Perspective the *primary* meaning of 'justify' is to declare that a person is 'righteous' = 'in rightstanding with God' or 'really in covenant with him'. Thus 'justification' may well *imply* that sins *have* been forgiven and that a person *has been* made right with God – but this is not its primary meaning. The New Perspective understanding is well in accord with the LXX. As noted, this was seldom if ever an initiating act, but a declaration of rightstanding or a vindication in the face of antagonists.

In the New Perspective 'justification' can include: i) God's declaration when someone first repents and turns to faith that they are part of his people and forgiven/accepted, ii) God's ongoing declaration by the badges of active-trust or actions-flowing-from-trust that someone is part of his people, and iii) God's final vindication of his people in declaring they are his at the last judgement in the face of critics/adversaries.

Reading 'justification' in Paul like this requires a major paradigm shift for those of us brought up in an evangelical tradition.

It differs radically from Augustine's concept of a purely divinely-determined transforming divine act and process to 'make right'. To Augustinians 'faith' arises *from* this initiating process – in the New Perspective it is *by* demonstrated faith that someone is 'shown to be God's' (= 'justified'). Justification is *by* faith, not faith *by* justification.

Superficially, the New Perspective is closer to Lutheran/Reformed views: both emphasize the forensic or declaratory nature of 'justify'. Luther, however, based this forensic declaration on a legal decree that imputed the 'alien' ethical perfection of Christ to us. This was 'all of

grace’, it required nothing in particular to activate it, and it concerned ethical qualities and sinlessness (ie God looked on the sinlessness of Christ and imputed this to us). God happens, Luther believed, coincidentally to decree union/faith along with imputation, but it was not really necessary for it to manifest as in any case (as already noted) he thought we were *simul justus et piccator* (*righteous and at the same time a sinner*). To Luther ‘justification’ *meant* forgiveness of sin and escape from God’s judgment, to the New Perspective it *implies* that both these things have happened, but it *means* being vindicated as ‘God’s person’.

Scripture and the New Persepective Understanding

Paul mentions ‘justification’ throughout Romans in 2:13; 3:4; 3:20; 3:24; 3:26; 3:28; 3:30; 4:2; 4:5; 4:25; 5:1; 5:9; 5:18; 6:7; 8:30; 8:33; and James in 2.26. What does it mean?

Paul’s phrase is ‘justified *by* faith’ not ‘faith *by* justification’. Faith, then, must be a means to justification, not a product of it, and must be prior. This might work with either traditionalist view if we suppose that the faith (divinely ordained in Augustine or Luther) occurred just before the justification. There is still some problem, for the unpurified person is still exercising faith just before being cleansed and forgiven, but perhaps it could be thought to be virtually instantaneous. Where, however, does this leave James’ ‘justified by works’ (*ex ergon dikaioutai*)? Had James said ‘justified by the kind of faith which later produces works’ it could just possibly have been argued that God chooses to give *that* kind of faith just before purifying/imputing. But exegetical ingenuity cannot alter the words ‘justified *by* works’. If saving-faith immediately (and virtually simultaneously) preceded justification, there would be clearly no time for any works to have happened – and if the righteousness of Christ were imputed there would be no need anyway. The ‘traditionalist’ commentators – ancient and modern (for example John Murray in *The Epistle to the Romans*, James White in *The God who Justifies*) – could never really harmonise what James actually said with their ideas. In the New Perspective view, however, Paul is saying ‘works of the Law’ are unreliable as markers of being God’s true people, whilst James is saying that works of compassion flowing from faith reliably indicate that these are people with real faith. There is no contradiction because it is not about initial forgiveness but about demonstrating ongoing rightstanding with God.

NT Wright's profound works on Judaism and early Christianity emphasize the corporate nature in Jewish thinking of election, salvation and their national destiny. The post-Augustine notion that *justification* concerns how individuals can *get right with God* is not the Jewish understanding. The associated Augustinian view of Romans as concerning *how persons become Christians* has, Wright says: 'systematically done violence to that text for hundreds of years…' (*What St Paul Really Said*, p 117). It is not about individuals *getting* right, but Christians being *declared* right in Christ. So Wright says:

> Righteousness is a forensic term… for the plaintiff or defendant to be 'righteous' in the biblical sense within the law-court setting is for them to have that status as a result of the decision of the court. (*What St Paul Really Said*, p 117)

A judge does not *impute* or *impart* an ethical righteousness to a plaintiff, it is a judicial declaration which renders him justified. Wright makes a further point about Paul's term 'justification':

> It is not 'how you become a Christian', so much as 'how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family…' (p 122)

It is, he says, the cross which is the basis of Christian fellowship and the confession of Jesus as Lord which is the badge of covenant membership:

> Faith is 'the badge of covenant membership', not something one 'performs' as a kind of initiation test… Justification is not how someone *became* a Christian, it is the declaration that they *have become* a Christian. (p 122-5; also see *The New Testament and the People of God*, p 238)

There *are*, of course, legitimate questions about how one *does* enter into the right-standing with God. Obviously Paul, as a missionary seeking to win people to Christ, *was* concerned with issues of how people become Christians – ie how they enter a faith relationship and the covenant. But this is not the fundamental meaning of justification.

Paul and James both cite Abraham as crucial. Not only would 'imputation' of someone else's righteousness be manifestly alien both to Genesis 15 and Paul/James, but Abraham's chronology is also a central issue. To Paul, in Romans 4, Genesis 15:6 (Abraham believed God and it was 'counted to him for righteousness') archetypically demonstrated justification. But God had long before spoken to Abram and: 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out…' (Hebrews 11:8). According to Stephen (Acts 7:2) this faithful obedience started in Ur, and so by Genesis 12:1 it reports that the Lord *had* told him to go out from his country (presumably Ur). In any event, his faithful walk with God began long before Genesis 15. The Lord had appeared to him again in 12:7, and Abram built an altar. In 13:4 he had called on the name of the Lord, and in 13:14 the Lord spoke to him again. In 14:19 Melchizedek had called Abram 'blessed of God'. Genesis 15:1-6 followed over 20 years of obeying and worshipping God in relationship – it would be ludicrous to suggest that Genesis 15 was the time of his conversion, purification, being 'made right with God' or first having righteousness 'imputed'. Abraham having faith in the promise of God in Genesis 15 was just a continuation of his long-standing lifestyle of faith. Genesis 15:6 simply notes God's declaration that it is faith that counts as 'righteousness'. Good accountants don't fudge accounts by 'imputing' a credit that really belongs to someone else, they 'credit' to the account the assets that are actually there. This is *followed* by the declaration of a covenant – the burning torch passing between the sacrifice pieces Abraham

had made. What had previously been a promise believed in faith now became a covenant. Circumcision, the sign of that covenant, actually first appeared two chapters later in Genesis 17.

God's declaration implied, of course, that Abraham's sin was not a barrier to his relationship with God, but none of this was about forgiveness of sin. It was not about Abraham being on 'trial' in a forensic setting or escaping God's wrath. It was about a public declaration or demonstration that Abraham was 'God's person', a confirmation of God's promise (now in covenant form) that his own descendants would inherit the land, and that in him all nations of the earth would be blessed. As Van Gemeren stated in a long section on *ḥ šb* or 'account':

> God accepted Abram's faith and accounted it as the basis for declaring that Abram was in a right relationship with him. (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol ii, p 306, article by John Hartley)

Paul identifies this as his key incident of 'justification', and it was clearly not about initial acceptance, nor about forgiveness of sin, nor about being made a more ethical person.

If 'justified' had meant 'made righteous', moreover, then James and Paul are contradicting each other about Abraham. No wonder Luther, believing what he did about justification and imputed righteousness, was famously disparaging about James, calling it an 'epistle of straw'. But with the proper understanding of 'justification' let us compare the key passages:

> *Romans 4:2-3*
>
> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For

> what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’

By ‘works’ here Paul means essentially ‘works of the Law’ = circumcision, sabbath-keeping and diet. This is clearly the New Perspective view, but actually comes as early as Origen (cf Mark Reasoner’s *Romans in Full Circle*, p 25). As already noted, circumcision did not start until two chapters later in Genesis 17. What God accounted as being in rightstanding with him was Abraham’s faith-life – not meticulous ceremonials. Put another way, God confirmed that Abraham’s faith-life was credited in his account as rightstanding.

So what about James?

> *James 2:21-25*
>
> Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.
>
> *Hebrews 11:17*
>
> By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten
>
> *Genesis 22:12-13*
>
> … for *now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

Hebrews 11:17 explains that Abraham's faith in the promise of God was such that he was prepared to offer up Isaac, believing that God could even raise him from the dead. James' point is similar. 'Works of the Law' like circumcision, diet and Sabbath-keeping, are not necessarily indication of any inner faith, and are not, therefore, sure indications that a person is in rightstanding with God. What showed Abraham to be such a person was that his faith in God was so strong he was prepared to bet his son's life on it. *That* kind of act *can arise only from faith*, and is itself the completion/proof of such faith as James says.

Because Abraham had freewill Genesis 22:12 implied that Abraham's action was a demonstration *even to God*, who says he 'now knows' the kind of faith Abraham has. The vindication of Abraham's faith as real, is as much to God as to men. Abraham's faith was shown by his actions and so through this he was 'justified' again, ie shown to be in right-relationship with God. This makes implausible Brown's suggestion (above) that James is concerned with justification before men whilst Paul before God. Again, of course, none of this is to do with initial calling, conversion or forgiveness of sins. *Neither* to James *nor* to Paul is 'justification' about an initial act which *begins* faith and *precedes* all works, but about the distinguishing marks that declare someone to be a true servant of God. This is why James can claim that the demonstration is 'completed' in the acts by which Abraham showed his faith. Abraham's 'works' were not a way to 'earn' forgiveness or salvation, but a demonstration of his faith and the rightstanding for which it was 'reckoned' or 'accounted'.

The 'righteous' person lives by faith, and by that faith is shown/demonstrated to be 'righteous' ie living in rightstanding service of God. This was the implication of the key verse in Habakkuk quoted in Romans 1:18.

The New Perspective on Paul in regard to justification enables us to see how James and Paul really are not diverging; but is this understanding of the term consistent with other Pauline references?

Romans 2:13; 3:4 are future. The context is one of final judgment: those who 'do' the law instinctively because it is the work of the law written on their hearts 'will be justified'. Now this could hardly mean that they 'will be' transformed by union with Christ as they are at the final judgment. It cannot mean that they then *will be* given the imputed sinlessness of Christ, because this would negate the view of justification as a 'once for all' act beginning a faith-life on earth. It is consistent with the New Perspective understanding of justification, meaning that they *will be* vindicated/declared and shown to be people of God. Their lives, following the inner promptings of the Spirit, conscience, and God-given heart-law, perhaps incurring the mockery of ungodly neighbours (cf eg Wisdom 2:12-18) will finally be vindicated – God will declare them to be his.

There is, actually, a subtle difference between those here who have the 'work of the Law' written on their hearts, and those in the New Covenant of whom it is said:

> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33, compare Hebrews 10:16 etc)

These are people who actually *have* the Torah, but it is to be written in their minds and hearts. Those in Romans 2 do not have the Torah but its *work* is written on their hearts,

Romans 3:20; 3:24; 3:26; 3:28 and 3:30 give us the *basis* and *scope* on which God is able to make faith the badge or mark of any person in rightstanding with him. It is the

faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah who died a sacrificial death, the benefits of which (including forgiveness for sins) are received through faith in God. God declared Abraham to be ‘his person’ although Abraham had sinned and so fallen short of being the sinless person to whom alone we might expect God to give such a badge. God could make this declaration because Abraham had been redeemed, forgiven, etc – but actually this was prior to the time at which he was ‘justified’. Again, at risk of repetition, it should be emphasized that a paradigm shift in the *meaning* of ‘justified’ is needed to understand this statement. God had ‘passed-over’ Abraham’s sins, but that act of forgiving was *not* what the New Testament means by ‘justification’. It is, of course, true that for God to ‘justify’ (ie to declare to be in right relationship with him) he has to forgive/pass-over sin. The justification implies that either this has happened or is happening, but it is not the *meaning* of the term justification itself.

Paul moves smoothly onto Abraham’s justification (Romans 4:2;4:5) which cannot have a radically different meaning. Paul emphasizes that the mark or badge by which people are declared to be right-with-God is consistently *faith* and not ceremonial ‘works of the Law’. This does not mean that their actions are irrelevant, because the faith-life implies having the law ‘written on our hearts’ (whether or not we have the Bible) and this implies a lifestyle of fulfilling it. To ‘fulfil the Law’, however, does not mean sinlessness because the Law never expected such a thing, but a walk with God in which sins are forgiven. This was the whole point of sacrifice – immediately after the ten commandments are given God gives a provision of an altar for dealing with sin (Exodus 20:24). Paul’s point is, of course, that now at last we know the real *basis* on which God forgives sin – the faithful sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah.

The reference in Romans 4:25 is to the resurrection of Messiah being for our ‘justification’ or ‘vindication’ (as Dunn renders it in his commentary). The crucifixion brought forgiveness for sin, but in raising Messiah God publicly declared Messiah’s followers to be God’s people. Romans 1:4 has said that Jesus the Messiah, physically a Jew, was ‘declared to be the Son of God with Power’ by his resurrection. In declaring that Jesus was his Son, God was at the same time declaring that those who, like Jesus, based their lives on faith-relation with God rather than ritual observance, are vindicated/declared to be the people of God.

Romans 5:1 points out an implication of justification: if God declares us in right-relationship with him through faith then this brings ‘*shalom*’ – a ‘peace with God’ which is not merely absence of hostility but a wholeness and fullness of life. The access of the faithful to God’s presence is now seen to be through Jesus Messiah who died for us.

Romans 5:9 as seen through the traditional paradigm says that the blood of Jesus brought forgiveness for sin (ie the traditionalist understanding of ‘justification’). But the context from Romans 5:8 is *not* forgiveness for sin, but that *God has demonstrated/proved his love for us* by the death of Messiah. The blood that Messiah shed for us, undeserving as we were, itself declares that the faithful *are* accepted/designated by God as his people. This being so, we can also have assurance of being ‘saved from the wrath to come’. Jesus died to reconcile us, his blood declares we are beloved of God, so we can be more sure that his resurrection life will save us.

Later in Romans 5 we find that through Adam came the opportunity for condemnation, so through Messiah came opportunity to be declared part of God’s people and share his risen life.

Romans 6:7 says that one who has died is ‘justified from sin’. At first reading this might seem to support the traditional paradigm and speak of forgiveness for sins. Actually this is not the context. Romans 6:1-11 (and the parallel in 7:1-4) is not about forgiveness for sins, but about release from Sin. Romans 6:7 and 7:3 picture us as bound to Sin, but death brings a legal release – a *declaration* of being no longer bound and so free to ‘marry’ another. It is not about forgiveness but about release, a legal declaration of freedom. Romans 6:18, 6:22 repeats the point experientially, using another word for ‘freed’.

All this also casts a new reflection on the Romans 8 references. The sequence is:

> Foreknowledge → predestination → calling/naming → just ifying → glorifying

We can write this as:

> Foreknowledge → setting a destiny → calling/naming → declaring to be his people → glorifying

God has declared us – those of faith – to be his people. Nothing can change this or separate us from his love. God foreknew that he would have a people forgiven through Christ’s death and chosen in Christ. He set their destiny to free and rule creation, named them holy and declared them to be in rightstanding as his people, and this will lead to their glorification in the future when, as with Jesus when he was ‘glorified’, they free and serve the world.

Assessing the Diverging Views on Justification

There are glaring basic chronology flaws in the 'traditionalist' Augustinian and Lutheran/Reformed views on 'justification' as applied to Abraham. Genesis commentaries have never suggested Abraham was converted in Genesis 15. Looking through a selection of 'serious' commentaries on Romans, some unconvincingly addressed the general sequence issue, none get over the timing issue of *Abraham's* 'conversion' if he is a model for 'justification'– even when they have lengthy *excursi*. We looked specifically at some (who take varying degrees of 'traditionalist' views) written after the New Perspective was developed: Cranfield (1975); Käsemann (1980); Morris (1988); Stuhlmacher (1994); Moo (1996).

Once, perhaps, there was no alternative, but since the publication of the New Perspective offers a clear alternative, how have leading writers with 'traditional' views advocated their cases? Generally they simply ignore the New Perspective arguments.

The 1999 joint declaration by the Lutheran World Federation and Catholics (translated as *Joint Declaration* (2000)) described 'justification' as:

> … the forgiveness of sins (cf Romans 3:23-5; Acts 13:39; Luke 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Romans 5:12-21) and from the curse of the Law (Galatians 3:10-14). It is acceptance into communion with God – already now but then fully in God's coming Kingdom (Romans 5:1f). It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Romans 6:5). (sec 11)

This reasserted traditionalist paradigms. To show that justification meant forgiveness of sins three verses were cited. The first, Romans 3:23-5 can certainly be read

otherwise. Acts 13:39, follows a reference to forgiveness for sin though Jesus, but the reference itself more naturally means:

> And through him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed by the Law of Moses (NASB also ESV and NIV).

The third, Luke 18:14, does not specify what 'justified' means, and we would naturally read it as an affirmation by God of a rightstanding. The reference in the declaration to 'liberation' from Sin and the Law was valid, and in accord with the New Perspective paradigm. The declaration referred 'acceptance into communion with God' to Romans 5:1, which in view of Romans 4 seems very unlikely to mean this.

The declaration finally referenced 'uniting with Christ', to Romans 6:5, which does not mention 'justification' and relates in a more complex way to the mention in Romans 6:7.

The declaration's repeated understanding of 'justification' was to mean 'forgiveness of sins and making righteous'. Lutherans and Catholics agreed that any 'consent' involved from those being justified was itself caused by God. They diverged on whether the process of 'forgiveness of sin and making righteous' had to involve baptism. To Catholics 'Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the words and believers in it.' How this was believed to work for babies being christened was not stated. They added: 'In justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope and love and are thereby taken into communion with him.' How this could conceivably have applied to righteous Abraham in Genesis 15 was not explained. The joint document revealed some differences (eg on whether our works receive differential reward in heaven (Catholics) or everyone is treated the same (Lutherans)). It also tried to

rewrite the 16th century, explaining that the 1545 Catholic Council of Trent was not condemning properly explained modern Lutheranism and Lutheran confessions never intended to condemn properly explained Catholic doctrines. It was soothingly ecumenically accommodating, but made no reference at all to the New Perspective.

RC Sproul (*Justified by Faith Alone*, 1999) was heavily critical of the work leading to this declaration, insisting on justification through Lutheran 'alien righteousness' which:

> … refers to a legal action by God by which he declares a person just in his sight… (p 12-13)

He held Augustine's 'making just' (based on Latin roots) was as wrong as his doctrine that baptism cleansed from original sin, and his teachings on priestly function. Sproul noted various views of Trent which the joint document had conveniently glossed over, eg the necessity for penance. Sproul's 'evangelical' doctrine was purely forensic, a declaration which occurred 'the moment we believe and before ever righteousness is inherent in us'. Justification was therefore the initiation into Christ, and 'righteousness' was seen as an ethical quality (though if indeed, we note, righteousness were rightstanding with God, how could it be 'inherent' in someone?) Sproul held that justification was at conversion and preceded sanctification. Though regeneration accompanies justification, the latter was based purely on the imputed righteousness of Christ. Sproul gave no reason why God, if he chose, could not impute this righteousness *without* any regeneration or change. Paradoxically, Sproul adapted the old 'Roman Catholic' doctrine of merit:

> Imputation… involves the transfer of Christ's merit to us, Christ's righteousness is not infused in us but is assigned to us and counted for us. (p 31)

This notion of transfer of ‘merit’ perhaps inadvertently made clear that Luther’s new doctrine was really an adaptation of that of the Catholic monk Tetzel (whose sale of papal ‘indulgences’ so outraged Luther) except that the ‘merits’ transferred were solely those of Christ. Actually ‘merit transfer’ has no basis in either the LXX or the New Testament. Bizarrely Sproul cited Abraham in Romans 4 as ‘the model for justification via imputation’. He claimed that to Paul ‘Abraham was counted righteous when he believed’ in Genesis 15. Sproul did not explain how this could be an *initiation* into righteousness when Abraham had already ‘by faith obeyed’ (Hebrews 11:8) when he left Haran 25 years earlier in Genesis 12, nor where either Genesis 15 or Romans 4 referred to righteousness imputed from someone else. Finally, Sproul gave us stern warnings that the gospel stood or fell by the concept of imputed alien righteousness (which McGrath demonstrated was unknown before 1516). He made no attempt to address the New Perspective.

James White, in a heavy tome *Justification* (2001), restated the view that it concerns declaration not impartation:

> To be justified means to be declared right with God by virtue of the remission of sins accomplished by Jesus. (p 73)

White tried to distinguish different senses of the Greek term ‘righteous’. He said one is:

> … being in a right relationship to God in the sense of being morally upright. (p 76)

This is confusing. If moral uprightness rather than faith *were* really the basis of their rightstanding with God, then most of *Romans* would be mistaken. White, following Berkhoff, insisted that ‘Justification takes place once for all’, it is a past act for us, distinct from the experience of sanctification. Again, though he cited Romans 4:1-8 as a key passage, he did not explain how this could possibly relate to

Abraham in Genesis 15 given Genesis 12 and Hebrews 11:8.. White cited many Reformed theologians who have the same view, none of whom explain this. White well explained James 2:12, supporting Johnson's rendering: 'Was not our father Abraham shown to be righteous on the basis of deeds when he offered his son Isaac on the altar' (p 345). White's analysis of James was good, but he then had to argue that James used the term 'justification' entirely differently from Paul – which seems very unlikely for such contemporaries.

Peter Stuhlmacher in *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (1994) hardly addressed the issue, but in *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification* (2001) argued that Sanders had exaggerated, the truth was really somewhere between Sanders and Strack-Billebeck. He criticized Dunn for claiming that the 'works of the Law' referred primarily to Sabbaths/circumcision/diet because: i) Contemporary Judaism (eg Qumran) did not distinguish ritual and ethical, ii) Paul also uses 'works' in other contexts. He did not really address the contextual evidence Dunn presented on this (eg in *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, p 191). Stuhlmacher claimed we must 'first consider' (p 14) that justification occurs at future judgement. This (as the above Dunn quotation showed) is actually a major indication that Dunn's view is correct, and not the traditional ones which make justification a single divine-act which initiates Christian life. Much of Stuhlmacher's actual treatment (pp 55f) seems to be defending the atonement. The New Perspective does not, however, question that through Christ's death sins are forgiven; the issue is the meaning of the *term* 'justification'. Stuhlmacher claimed that the language of Galatians 2:16 'shows quite unambiguously' that the phrase *pisteus Iėsou Christou* meant 'faith in Christ' not 'faithfulness of Christ', and so (along with all those who still took this view) left unanswered the question of how anyone before Christ was forgiven – though he did seem to emphasize that faith was a

free human response. What he did not do was address the actual arguments of the New Perspective (as given above) concerning the *term* justification. Thus for example:

> Romans 6:15-23 shows that justification places people in sanctification and the service of righteousness. (p 66)

Romans 6:15-23, however, does not use the terms ‘justify’ or ‘justification’.

Piper (*Counted Righteous in Christ*, 2002) was recommended by Sproul, Packer, Stott, Grudem, and numerous others as a defence of ‘imputation’. Piper first explained how his marriage and family security depended on imputed righteousness – at which those of us whose secure marriages/families are not likewise dependent (but rather are dependent on the empowering Holy Spirit as we are transformed by the renewing of our mind) can feel only compassion. Then he cited Romans 4 as a key passage: ‘Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness’, he explained, related to the ‘accounting metaphor’. His argument was that a ‘wage’ was something *external* credited, it was not the ‘works’ or ‘faith’ itself. This, however, made a distinction Paul was manifestly not making. A tally-keeper might say: ‘three hours work, right, that’s £30’ – meaning that the two were regarded as equivalent in accounting terms, not that the £30 was some kind of ‘external’ credit. In a balance sheet, £3000 stock is *equivalent* to £3000 cash – accountants don’t think in terms of ‘external credits’. Romans 4:4 and 4:5 both speak of faith being *accounted for* righteousness/rightstanding, neither say that on the basis of faith something else is accounted for righteousness, much less that a righteousness of Christ is imputed. Even if it were taken that Abraham’s belief *in* the promise of an offspring were kind-of equivalent to belief in that offspring (ie in Jesus), Genesis neither says nor

implies that the righteousness of that future offspring is to be ‘imputed to’ Abraham. How then, did Piper manage to jump to such a manifestly absent concept? He concluded:

> Our imputed righteousness does not consist of faith but is received by faith.

But in his mind ‘righteousness’ seemed to mean some kind of ethical quality. He said:

> Sinners need righteousness to stand before God. That is why it is being ‘pursued’ by Israel.

This not only ignored the New Perspective altogether, but implied Israel was chasing some kind of ethical perfection to be able to *begin* a relationship with God – a plainly unhistorical suggestion. If, however, ‘righteousness’ really *were* an ethical quality of sinlessness, then obviously, it must be someone else’s which was credited us – so it must be the ‘righteousness of God’ as mentioned in Romans 3:21 etc. Presumably, God could only have a suitable transferable *human* ethical quality in the person of Christ, so it must really mean ‘the righteousness of Christ’.

But could Piper find any actual biblical reference to support this tortuous trail of inference? He ‘found’ it in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 3:9, 1 Corinthians 1:30 and Romans 10.4 – none of which say anything of the kind. Philippians 3:9, eg, says that through faith in Christ we have ‘the righteousness which is from God by faith’. There is not the slightest indication that Christ’s ethical life is imputed to us by some kind of legal fiction. Then he cited 1 Corinthians 1:30, but this says that Christ ‘became’ not only our righteousness but our ‘sanctification’. So is our sanctification also an externally imputed fiction, ie Christ’s sanctification which is ‘imputed to us’? Not according to the *Westminster Confession* ch xiii (not to mention the New Testament).

Piper also seems to fail to notice a parallel biblical passage about being accounted righteous. Phinehas took a decisive action in expunging sin from amongst the nation, and God said:

> Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with my zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in my zeal. Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.' (Numbers 25:11-13)

The Psalmist comments:

> Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stopped. And that was accounted to him for righteousness to all generations forevermore. (Psalm 106:30-31)

The phrase 'accounted to him for righteousness' is almost identical in Hebrew to the one about Abraham, and surely no one can import some idea that it meant God imputed the righteousness of Christ here to Phinehas? Plainly Phinehas was 'zealous' with a Godly zeal before the act, and God counted this zeal as a rightstanding with him for both Phinehas and (since he is pronounced to have a priestly function) in a sense for the whole nation.

In all this we may note two things. Firstly, the doctrine of imputed righteousness is defended by a system of tortuous reasoning – no explanation is given of why Paul did not express the doctrine as simply as did the *Westminster Confession*. Inherently complex concepts like the Trinity are inevitably expressed in round about ways, but imputed righteousness is easy to express – and the New Testament

does not state it. Secondly, no explanation is given of how it conceivably applies to Genesis 15 (let alone Psalm 106), nor how the apostle Paul could hope to base such a doctrine on a Genesis passage to which is it so conspicuously foreign.

In 2007 John Piper produced *The Future of Justification: A Response to NT Wright* and NT Wright replied in 2009 with *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*. Piper added little to his earlier works, and really does not address the issues Wright raises at all. The 'imputed righteousness' concept is simply not there in Scripture, and would be alien to a real understanding of justification as Paul taught it. Piper, by all reports is a nice man, and his review of our first edition was courteous though dissenting. We acknowledge him as a brother in Christ, but like so many Augustinian/Lutheran/Reformed theologians his picture of God is of a monstrous absolute dictator concerned only for his own glory no matter at what cost to his hapless creations many of whom were created to be sovereignly left in sin and then tortured forever. Even Wright, with great courtesy, writes:

> There is a sense in which what Piper claims about 'God's righteousness' could be seen as going in exactly the wrong direction. He sees it as God's concern for God's own glory, which implies that God's primary concern returns, as it were, to himself. There is always, of course, as sense in which that is true. But the great story of Scripture, from creation to covenant right on through to the New Jerusalem, is constantly about God's overflowing, generous, creative love – God's concern, if you like, for the flourishing and well-being of *everything else*. (*Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*, p 51)

Amen to that.

God’s Righteousness

This term, as we have noted, is closely linked to ‘justification’. So, how, we may first ask, can God be said to be ‘righteous’? What is ‘the righteousness of God’?

Augustine, it will come as no surprise, can be relied upon to get it wrong:

> [The righteousness of God is] not that whereby he himself is righteous, but that with which he endows man when he justifies the ungodly... ‘But righteousness of God by faith of Jesus Christ’ that is by the faith with which one believes in Christ; for just as there is not meant the faith with which Christ himself believes, so also is not meant the righteousness by which God himself is righteous. (*De Spiritu et Littera*, ch 9)

Augustine’s innovative reinterpretation of ‘faithfulness of Christ’ as ‘faith in Christ’ (which Wallis in *The Faith of Jesus Christ in early Traditions* has shown was not present in earlier Christian writers) is linked with an odd view that God is not righteous. Given the clarity with which the Old Testament presents God as Righteous, this is an odd way to take the phrase ‘righteousness of God’. In any case, in the New Testament the *adjective* righteous is applied to God in five passages, and this cannot somehow be taken to mean a quality of ‘righteous’ that he confers on the elect. These passages are John 17:25; Romans 3:26; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 John 1:9; Revelation 16:5-7. In eg the first of these the reference is quite general ‘O righteous Father! The world has not known you, but I have known you; and these have known that you sent me.’ The Revelation verse, however, says:

> You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because you have judged

> these things… Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are your judgements.

God is shown to be righteous by the process of just judgement, and this accords with the expression ‘the Lord, the righteous judge’ (2 Timothy 4:8) In 1 John God is spoken of as ‘faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins,’

Sometimes the meaning can be lost because the word ‘righteous’ is also rendered ‘just’. NT Wright notes how he hailed with delight the issue of the NIV claiming ‘only to translate what was there’ only to find:

> The translators had another principle considerably higher than the stated one to make sure that Paul should say what the broadly Protestant and evangelical traditions said he said. (*Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*, p 35)

He adds the bald statement:

> If a church only or mainly relies on the NIV, it will quite simply never understand what Paul was talking about…

As an example he cites the NIV of Romans 3:21-6:

> But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known… this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe… [God] did this to demonstrate his justice... he did so to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

We already noted (and will deal with it in depth later) that rendering *pisteus Iėsou Christou* as ‘faith *in* Jesus Christ’ is incorrect, it should be ‘faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah’. The phrase *dikaiosynē de theou* is here rendered as ‘righteousness *from* God’, whereas in Romans 3:5 *theou dikaiosynēn* is rendered ‘God’s righteousness’. Wright says

it is ‘quite impossible’ that this phrase should mean ‘righteousness from God’ as the NIV renders it (cf in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p 465). Philippians 3:9 does indeed speak of *hė ek theou dikaiosynē* (the righteousness *from* God) meaning a righteous status from God, but this is a different phrase and context. In Romans 3:26 the same word *dikaiosynē* is now rendered by the NIV as ‘his justice’ to disguise its identity with the ‘righteousness of God’ a few verses earlier. Needless to say, when in Romans 3:4 Paul speaks of God being ‘justified’ *dikaiothės* the NIV disguises this by rendering it ‘proved right’.

Righteousness and Justice are, however, closely allied, and the concept of faithfulness also comes into it. A major concern of Paul in Romans is to vindicate God, and this Romans 3:4 verse is clear about this. God is ‘justified’ or vindicated because his righteousness/justice is shown both in his faithfulness and in his judgement.

The linking of ‘faithful’ and ‘righteous’ raises an aspect of God’s righteousness emphasized eg by James Dunn:

> Righteousness… is something which one has precisely in one’s relationships as a social being… God is ‘righteous’ when he fulfils the obligations he took upon himself to be Israel’s God, that is, to rescue Israel and punish Israel’s enemies. (*Romans 1-8*, p 40)

To NT Wright, this is fundamental:

> The question of the righteousness of God, as expressed by Jews in this period, can be stated as follows: when and how would Israel’s God act to fulfil his covenant promises?
>
> The Book of Romans, in fact, has ‘the righteousness of God’ as one of its primary

> themes. (*The New Testament and the People of God,* p 217, 458)

In his Romans commentary, Wright says that Paul's great theme in this section of Romans is:

> … 'the righteousness of God' meaning by that the faithfulness of God to the promises long ago announced to Israel. That divine faithfulness, which seemed to be called into question by Israel's failure to be a light for the Gentiles, is now revealed through the faithful Israelite, Jesus the Messiah. (p 464)

Wright does seem to identify God's righteousness as exclusively *covenant* faithfulness, which seems to us to be mistaken as we will consider below. But certainly God's righteousness and faithfulness are closely linked.

Human Righteousness

As the fundamental meaning of being ‘righteous’ is forensic-relational and not an ethical quality, certain other verses can be understood in context. Were we to think of ‘righteous’ as meaning ‘ethically irreproachable’ or as ‘never having sinned’, it would seem absurd to suggest that men like Noah and Lot were righteous (Genesis 7:1; 2 Peter 2:8; compare Genesis 9:21;19:30-38). Since, however, the word implies basically that someone is in a right-standing before God, we may see why the word is applied to them. The same is also true of Job. The Lord himself declared Job to be blameless and upright (1:8; 2:3). This did not mean that Job had no faults, but that he was in a fundamentally right-standing before God.

To the Western mind, the word righteous often not only implies ethical perfection; it tends also to have connotations of self-righteous. These two associations of ideas might easily have led us to condemn Job for continually protesting his innocence and righteousness. When we see what his claim really was – to be in a fundamentally right-standing with God – we may understand why God condoned what he said. Job is indeed righteous before God and is right to say so.

The forensic use of words from the root for ‘righteous’ is often found in the book of Job, as when Job says:

> See now, I have prepared my case, I know that I shall be vindicated (or ‘justified’). (Job 13:18)

Here he can mean only that he will be declared righteous, as by a judge giving sentence in a lawsuit. So also, when the Lord says to Job:

> Would you indeed annul my judgement? Would you condemn me that you may be justified? (Job 40:8)

The forensic note of the passage and the opposition of condemning to being justified show that ‘righteous’ here means something very like ‘declared righteous legally’. This is the background to Job’s repeated question: ‘How should a man be just with God?’ (Job 9:2, and see 15:14; 25:4). In each case it is standing with the Lord that is in question, and the implication is that if God *really* pushes it, no one can make such a claim. Job, however, also says ‘I *know* that I am righteous’ (13:18). With our post-Augustine hang-ups many evangelicals today would really hesitate to say that (at least without lots of caveats). Job’s dilemma is that he *knows* he *is* in right-standing with God (actually, God said it to Satan at the start of the whole thing, so Job is not mistaken) but at the same time he knows that if God really did choose to enter into a controversy with him he would lose.

Job, of course, mistakenly thought that his afflictions had been due to the hand of God – and therefore it seemed inevitable that there must have been a slip up somewhere in the divine administration.

So God asks him: ‘Would you condemn me that you may be justified?’ (40:8). God is not saying that Job isn’t justified, but that his theology is a bit awry as to how to maintain it! Job finally realizes (chapter 42) not that he was really a wicked unjustified man all along, but that he simply hasn’t well understood the complexity of the universe as God governs it (a complexity the Lord has been showing him). Yet God (42:8) feels that compared with the nonsense assumed by the ‘Comforters’, what Job has said is right! Oddly, their message had been; ‘If you return to the Almighty you will be built up…’ (22:23). Suffering is punishment for sin and indicates a lack of right-standing, so just repent and it will all be ok. Alas no. A person can be in right-standing with God and yet suffer – as Habakkuk also found out. The answer, as Habakkuk was told, was that the

righteous (the one in right-standing) shall *live by faith*. In a sense Job, for all his lack of insight, had been doing just that. The great confession of 19:25 stands against all the odds: ‘For I know that my Redeemer lives, and he shall stand at last on the earth.’ Job, and any righteous people like him who suffer, are part of a battlefield. But they can also be combatants – living *by faith*.

Sadly, there are those today who tell Christians that their illness must be due to sin or lack of faith because ‘Jesus has taken all our pain and sicknesses’. This seems to be a revised version of Job’s comforters. Well Job *knew that his Redeemer lived* – but actually it was not a lack of faith in God that led to his suffering. Neither, incidentally, was God ‘trying to teach him something.’

In regard to righteousness Paul’s attitude to the Law or ‘Torah’ is complex:

> *Romans 2:13*
>
> For not the hearers of the Torah are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the Torah will be justified
>
> *Romans 3:20*
>
> For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the Torah, since through the Torah comes knowledge of sin. (RSV)
>
> *Romans 3:21-25*
>
> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from Torah, although the Torah and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah for all who have faith. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Jesus the

> Messiah whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.
>
> *Romans 8:2-4*
>
> For the Torah of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the Torah of sin and death. For God has done what the Torah, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the Torah might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (RSV)
>
> *Romans 10:3-9*
>
> For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end (*telos* = *end direction*) of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified. Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the Torah shall live by it. But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (RSV)

What did it mean to be a Jew 'keeping the Law'? It did not, for the Jew, mean living a perfect ethical life and never sinning, because no one was stupid enough to imagine this to be possible. The Old Testament Torah did not require

people to be ethically perfect. ‘Keeping the Torah’ meant making the sacrifices for sin etc in the Torah, it meant keeping all the rituals and penances. This is how Paul could say that he was ‘as concerning the righteousness of the Torah blameless’ (Philippians 3:6). But his whole argument is that the keeping of the Torah was (and is) truly efficacious *only* if applied in *faith*. Faith, as shown in the story of Abraham, preceded the Torah.

What Paul wants to make clear is that it obviously cannot be any ceremonials in Torah *as such* that indicate a rightstanding. Sin was recognized through Torah, and the sacrifices established through it appealed for God’s forgiveness; but it was never really clear how God could be both just/righteous and yet pass over their sins in declaring people of faith to be in rightstanding. Torah (and the prophets) pointed to the answer to this, but only when it is recognized that this is through the faithfulness of the Messiah in dying for sin does it become clear. This is why it is *so* ironical that anti-Christian Jews were trying to establish their own basis for rightstanding with God and ignoring his! They were not seeking ethical perfection (this is not what righteousness means) but their own way to shown to be in right relationship with God – ignoring the centrality of the suffering and dying Messiah that is the *telos* (end aim) of the Torah. In Romans 10, Paul is not contradicting Moses but explaining what he meant. Neither is he suggesting that Moses was referring only to the future Christian age. This would be absurd – Moses was talking to the Israelites at that time, not about some wispily envisioned future age a couple of millennia later. The ‘doers of the Torah’ are not some hypothetical but actually non-existent ethically perfect group, they are those who applied the Torah principles leading them to faith – as much for Moses’ contemporaries as anyone else. Applied like this by a Christian Jew like Paul it is the ‘Torah of the Spirit of Life in Christ’ which has set

him free from the selfish fleshly effort that made it a ‘Torah of sin and death’ to him.

Righteousness and Covenant

As has been made clear, the new Perspective on Paul has brought much benefit in understanding the New Testament:

> - The Pharisaic focus was on being the people of God rather than getting an individual ticket to a spiritual heaven.
>
> - The phrase *pisteus Iėsou Christou* means ‘faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah’ not ‘faith in Christ’.
>
> - The Abrahamic covenant is about ‘The-single-plan-of-God-through-Israel-for-the-world-accomplished-through-Jesus-the-Messiah’ (NT Wright’s words).
>
> - The meaning of justification and righteousness are as above.

NT Wright’s works have been of inestimable value in this, but we would like here just to raise some questions about aspects of it. God’s ‘faithfulness’ and ‘righteousness’ are certainly closely allied concepts, not just in Paul but eg in 1 John 1. Wright, however, emphasizes that the word ‘righteousness’ connotes the notion of God’s covenant faithfulness. (*Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*, p 52) and that:

> The phrase ‘The Righteousness of God summed up sharply and conveniently for a first century Jew such as Paul, the expectation that the God of Israel… would be faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs’. (*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p 398).

We will, however, consider whether the concept of God’s righteousness extends *beyond* covenant faithfulness (and in Scripture it appears to) as we consider the following key points:

1) Does the ‘righteous’ nature of God extend *beyond* covenant faithfulness?

2) Could a person who had never heard of the Abrahamic or New Covenant be ‘righteous’ by having faith in God?

3) Who are the Gentiles promised immortality in Romans 2?

The righteousness of God certainly *is* associated with covenant faithfulness, and those in the Abrahamic covenant (Jews and Gentile Christians) are righteous through faith in God and the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah. Paul is majorly concerned, as a Jew who feels anguish for his people, to show that God’s dealings with Israel have been faithful and righteous. He is also concerned to show that Gentile Christians are ‘righteous’ and a part of ‘God’s-single-plan-to-save-the-world-through-Israel-and-Jesus-the-Messiah’ on the same footing as Jews because they are ‘all one in Jesus the Messiah’ (Galatians 3:28).

But because this is a *main* focus this does not need to imply either that there are *no other* aspects of God’s righteousness other than specific covenant faithfulness, or that the ‘righteous’ people are *restricted to* those within the Abrahamic covenant.

In prehistory days Enoch is said to have ‘walked with God by faith’ for 300 years (Genesis 5:22; Hebrews 11:5). He was presumably ‘righteous’ outside *any* of the Abrahamic, Old Covenant or New Covenants and there is no mention in regard to Enoch of any specific covenant of any other kind.

Let us also consider Noah:

> But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just [righteous] man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God… But I will establish my covenant

> with you; and you shall go into the ark – you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. (Genesis 6:8-9, 18)

Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: 'And as for me, behold, I establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish my covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' (Genesis 9:8-11)

Noah is proclaimed to be a righteous man *before* God makes any promise to him. When a covenant *is* made, it is about preservation from the flood, and about future preservation to Noah's descendants and the animals, because such a flood will not happen again. It is nothing to do with the Abrahamic covenant, and no coming seed or Messiah is mentioned. Hebrews explains that Noah was walking in faith:

> By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. (Hebrews 11:7)

Faith, to Paul, James and the writer to the Hebrews, leads people to take action when God calls them to. But such a call is not *restricted* to being within the Abrahamic covenant or indeed within any specific covenant.

Let us also consider Lot. In Genesis 12 God calls Abraham to go out to a new land, and makes the messianic promise, though there is no specific covenant at that time. In Genesis

13 Lot separates from Abraham and goes into Sodom. Then we find:

> (God) delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds) (2 Peter 2:7-8)

It would be really stretching this to suggest that it was part of the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham has, by the time Sodom is judged, received the covenant, but he is not living with Lot and there is no indication that Lot entered into it with him. Had Lot been in close contact and in the covenant then presumably Abraham would have known if any others were in it with Lot. But Abraham himself says:

> Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would you also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' So the Lord said, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.' (Genesis 18:24-27)

Abraham surely could not have imagined that God would find fifty 'righteous' people *who were part of the Abrahamic covenant*, or, indeed, who were in any kind of specifically covenant relationship with God? Moreover the righteousness of God as 'judge of all the earth' seems to be in question here, not whether he will be faithful to a specific covenant, but whether he will 'do right' in the sense of a just verdict. God's righteousness includes covenant faithfulness but has a wider context as well.

There are hints about other characters.

Melchizedek suddenly appears as a ‘priest of God’ in Genesis 14:18. He is evidently not a part of the Abrahamic covenant, because he received tribute from Abraham, and is greater than he (Hebrews 7:1-2). So is this mysterious figure some kind of pre-appearance of Jesus himself? This seems unlikely as the Hebrews writer says that Jesus is a priest ‘*after the order of* Melchizedek’. Had Melchizedek actually been some kind of pre-appearance of Jesus surely the writer would have said so? William Lane insists:

> It is evident throughout the paragraph [in Hebrews] that the writer treats the meeting recorded in Genesis 14:17-20 as an actual historical incident. (*Hebrews 1-8*, p 167)

Jonah was sent to preach to the Ninevites, but his message in ch 3 does not seem to urge them all to enter the Abrahamic covenant. They understand, though, that his message of impending doom may be averted if they repent. Their king says:

> But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish? (Jonah 3:8-9)

Jesus says:

> The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:40-41)

He says that the Ninevites *repented*, and ‘will rise up in judgement’ against the unrepentant Jews, which surely must mean that they were accepted by God on the basis of their repentance? If all it meant that the immediate destruction of

Nineveh were averted but they would be damned at the final judgement, then why would Jesus say they would ‘rise up in judgement’ at that final assize? Jonah was, of course, proclaiming to them the moral judgment of Israel’s God, but there is no indication that they were circumcised or entered the Abrahamic covenant. They did not become Jews.

We have noted also in *Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory* that Job, in all probability, was a figure worshipping and sacrificing to *Elohim* in the days of the patriarchs – there is no apparent knowledge amongst him or his friends of any Abrahamic covenant.

All these seem to indicate that people could be ‘righteous’ without being either Jews or Christians. Again we must re-emphasize that ‘righteous’ does not mean ethically perfect. It means in a rightstanding before God. There may be a question about how God *can* declare people to be in a rightstanding with him even though they are ethically flawed, but this is an issue Paul deals with in Romans.

Turning to Romans

Romans contains the most systematic of Paul's theologies. NT Wright's commentaries on Romans *The New Interpreter's Bible* (2002) and *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part One* (2004) apply much of the New Perspective to the epistle. He rightly states that: i) texts in Romans need to be taken in an overall context, and ii) that sometimes missing out (as the NIV often does) a word such as 'for' (*gar*) obscures the meaning.

But parts of what might be called the 'traditional understanding' seem to linger in evangelical thinking. For example Romans 1:18-3:20 is taken to be establishing the 'universal sinfulness' of humanity This is virtually universal amongst commentaries, but here are just a few. Wright himself says:

> From 1:18 right through to 2:16, he lays out a charge against the human race in general: humankind is rotten to the core.' (*Romans for Everyone*, vol 1)

Hultgren in his Romans commentary says:

> It begins with an indictment of Paul against the entire world (1:18-3:20). He establishes that all persons, Jew and Gentile alike, are under the power of sin. (p 85)

Morris in his Romans commentary heads it 'Universal Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20' and writes:

> Paul is about to expound a wonderful salvation But first he establishes the need for it showing that all people are sinful. Many of his contemporaries did not agree… (p 73)

There are several things wrong with this whole understanding:

1) It does not fit the immediate context where Paul is leading on from the comparison in Habakkuk between the righteous and the wicked

2) He did not need to 'prove' that everyone had sinned and needed God's forgiveness None of his contemporaries – Pharisees or anyone else – thought otherwise. Any notion that he did need to prove any such thing is a vestige of the 'old perspective' on Paul and the Pharisees.

3) None of the various quotes Paul makes in 3:1-9 assert either universal wickedness or that all Jews or all Gentiles are wicked. Within Israel there was always a remnant of the righteous – he notes this later in Romans.

4) Because the Bible plainly speaks about the 'righteous', most commentaries have to fudge the 'universal sinfulness' to mean 'the innermost truth of all of us as we are in ourselves' (Greathouse's commentary p 68) In other words it is not how we actually *are* but how we *would be* if God had not saved us. This, however, is simply not what it says, and it seems wildly unlikely that Paul would have expected someone to read this into it. Moreover, if there is behind this notion some idea that we believers are really all '*simul justus et piccata*' (at the same time sinners and righteous) we already noted that this idea has no foundation in biblical language.

Let us look first at the context Paul starts his systematic treatise in 1:16, and we need to work through from this point. The NIV again misses out the word 'for' (*gar*) in 1:18 as it does not fit its theology, though the NKJV, NASB and ESV all have it. These verses actually read:

14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. 15 So, as much as is in

> me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.
>
> 16 **For** I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.
>
> 17 **For** in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith(fullness) to faith; as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'.
>
> 18 **For** the wrath of God is (being) revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

The NIV makes verse 18 a completely new thought (which indeed seems to be the idea in most of the commentaries – even Wright's). But surely the *gar* means that 1:18 is continuing ideas of the previous verses, just as the *gar* in 17 means it continues the thought of 16? There is no 'new section' here, Paul moves smoothly through his ideas from 1:8 onwards. Actually Dunn accepts this saying:

> (*gar*) 'for', can express simply connection or continuation of thought… That a connection of thought is certainly intended is clear from the parallel structuring of vv 17 and 18… but… the connection is as much of contrast as of cause. (p 54)

Greathouse states:

> The postpositive conjunction *gar*, *For*, introduces this section of the letter as a substantiation of the theme stated in 1:16-17. (p 69)

Now in Habakkuk 2:4 there is absolutely no thought of the 'universal sinfulness of man', *or* of somehow arguing against those who think that there are people around who have

never sinned, *or* that wickedness is man ‘in his natural state’ The Habakkuk context is, one in which God contrasts the wicked and the righteous (‘righteous’ in the real biblical sense, not the mythical ethically perfect):

> Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

In Habakkuk this is really central, because the prophet has been contrasting the apparent suffering of the righteous with seeming prosperity of the evil people. There is no concept of ‘universal sinfulness’ in Habakkuk, and God’s response concerns the contrast of the wicked and the righteous.

There certainly is, as Dunn says, a *contrast* between 1:17 and 1:18, the same *contrast* as in Habakkuk between the righteous and the wicked. Just as Habakkuk, having noted the comparison, goes on to denounce the nature of the wicked, so does Paul in 1:18 and the following verses – but he is denouncing the ‘wickedness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness’.

Morris says that many of Paul’s contemporaries did not agree that ‘everyone is sinful’ Well certainly they did not agree that everyone is a ‘sinner’ in the sense that the word is used in Scripture, as for example in Mark 2:15. But there was no school of Jewish theology that denied that everybody had sinned. When Paul says this in Romans 3:21 it is not controversial, nor is it something he had to ‘prove’ by quoting Old Testament prophets out of context.

Paul does not say: ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all men because all men suppress the truth….’ It just makes no contextual sense to imagine that for some reason (and in total contradiction to Habakkuk who had the ‘righteous’ living by faith) Paul is now talking about ‘universal sinfulness’. Neither Habakkuk nor Paul, moreover,

says anything resembling ‘this is what we would all be like in our natural state’.

In Romans 3:9 Paul asks ‘Are we (Jews) better than they (Gentiles)?’ So what is he asking?

> Is it a) Are there some or all Jews who have never sinned?
>
> or b) On the whole have Jewish societies been any better than Gentile ones?

If it is a) then all the quotations he gives in 3:9-18 are taken out of context None of them is arguing about whether or not there are people without any sin. They are accusing either a Gentile or a Jewish society of being generally corrupt and unrighteous. But this was never to deny that there were, living in those societies, people like Habakkuk, a ‘remnant’ who were righteous and living by their faith.

When Paul does later say ‘for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God… being justified freely…’ he is actually referring to the redeemed, and that they have sinned is not contentious. The righteous have all sinned and are redeemed through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah by whose sacrifice God can pass over the sins without judgement. But from Romans 1:18 onwards Paul is referring to ‘those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness’, and looking at the effects of this in their lives and societies. The Christian gospel, however, will *reveal* how this works – actually it is through the *faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah* to those who have faith in God The gospel shows how this works, and why God could ‘pass over’ former sins of those who had faith in him.

Paul begins his development in Romans 1:16 The gospel is the ‘power of God for salvation’ and it operates from God’s faithfulness to those of faith – just as it did for Habakkuk. Habakkuk’s whole experience was of ‘salvation’ *within* his wicked society, the word means a salvaging process which

goes beyond getting a ticket to heaven. From 18, however, like Habakkuk, Paul is outlining how the soul of the wicked is ‘not upright’ within him (or her). When they choose to suppress what they could know about God, his wrath involves ‘giving them up’ to the consequences of their choices So they ‘receive in themselves the penalty’, and have ‘debased minds’ – just like those in Habakkuk whose souls were not upright within them.

All this is important because the ‘old perspective’ obsession with ‘universal sinfulness’ and *proving* that everyone has sinned distorts how people would otherwise naturally read Romans 2.

Romans 2:1-4 refers to the general trait of humankind to make moral judgements – and yet often then excuse themselves. But Paul then implies that sometimes those who make moral judgements do not recognise the God dimension:

> And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? (Romans 2:3-4)

Now of whom is Paul here talking? Surely this must mean men of all kinds in all kinds of era? But he says that the ‘forbearance of God’ is ‘meant to lead to repentance’. So is this *only* for those Gentiles who hear the Christian Gospel? Or is this kindness of God meant to lead a much wider group to repentance? Are they a group who know instinctively that there is a right and wrong, and that they themselves (if they were not suppressing the truth in unrighteousness) do wrong things and offend God and so need to repent? A group maybe like the Ninevites, whose knowledge of the one true God was sketchy to say the least.

Then Paul goes on:

> Or do you despise the riches of his goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his deeds' [Psalm 62:12]: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honour, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel. (Romans 2:4-16)

He identifies those who seek glory and honour and immortality who will receive eternal life, and says that these 'do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law…

show the work of the law written in their hearts – their conscience bearing witness'. Who are these people? We considered this in chapter 13 of *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*, but here give a slightly expanded version.

We will look at this in the context of the recent analyses given it by Wright, who is certainly one of the greatest living New Testament scholars, though on this particular point we think he is mistaken. In *The New Interpreters Bible* (p 441) he identifies three possibilities which we give as:

> a) 'This is a purely hypothetical category. Paul is indicating that when God judges the secrets of all hearts, if there should be any who succeeded in doing good, they would indeed reap the appropriate reward; but he is holding up a mirage that will disappear when the argument is complete. There may, in other words, be Gentiles who fulfil part of the Law, but this will count for nothing.'
>
> b) 'Others have… seen 2.1 as evidence that Paul does not hold, after all that all humans are sinners. He is aware, they say, that in both the Jewish and pagan world there are some humans who really do that which God intends, who avoid vice and practice virtue, and who will be suitably rewarded at the end.
>
> c) 'The people in question are *Christian* Gentiles'.

Some not dissimilar possibilities are listed eg in Richard Longenecker's *Introducing Romans* (p 357f).

Actually we believe that *none of these is correct*, but let us look at each of them.

Wright says that both the first two 'are difficult to maintain' (though 'absurd' is nearer how we would less euphemistically describe them). The idea of a kind of 'Pelagian' moral perfection is a later invention of Augustine, and neither Paul nor any of his critics would imagine any

such thing. To him and them ‘righteous’ never meant ‘ethically perfect’, and the suggestion that there are any (apart from Jesus the Messiah) who never committed sin would have seemed silly both to Paul and his Jewish critics. More to the point, it just would not have occurred to them. In any case, if Paul’s object is merely to prove that all Jews and sinners and need forgiveness, how is the introduction of hypothetical but actually non-existent Gentiles who do the law by nature and conscience going to help? Paul is holding up these Gentiles to the Jews in 2:17f to make a point – what weight would hypothetic non-existent Gentiles carry in such a context? Surely they must be real ones.

The second suggestion also seems odd, though it depends, of course, on what one means by ‘sinners’. The problem is that (as we saw in our first volume chapter 2) many modern evangelicals use this term in a non-bliblical sense; in their thinking, we have all sinned and so are ‘sinners’. The Bible, however, does not use ‘sinner’ in this sense; in eg Mark 2:16, Mark 2:17, Luke 6:34, Luke 7:34, Luke 15:1,` Luke 19:7, John 9:16, 9:25, 1 Peter 4:18 etc, a ‘sinner’ is an unrepentant person in contrast with someone who is ‘righteous’ ie is in rightstanding with God. Jesus contrasts his disciples with ‘sinners’ (Luke 6:34) and says that he has ‘not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance’ (Mark 2:17). So of course all people have sinned, but in *this* biblical sense not all people are ‘sinners’.

John reflects well this dual aspect of sin and sinners:

> But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that

> we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:7-10)
>
> Whoever abides in him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen him nor known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for his seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. (1 John 3:5-9)

The phrase ‘he who sins’ is the same as ‘a sinner’ in this sense – it means someone who habitually sins and is unrepentant. Christians have sinned, have been forgiven, and so ‘do not sin’ in the sense of habitual unrepentant lifestyle. Christians are no longer ‘sinners’ in the sense that the Bible consistently uses this term.

So *if* NT Wright’s second alternative is that Paul thinks there are those who never sinned it is absurd. *If* it means there are those who are not ‘sinners’ in the sense of unrepentant sinful lifestyles then plainly he does. Clearly in this sense Jesus disciples are distinguished from ‘sinners’. Whether some people outside the Old and New Covenants are also not ‘sinners’ in this sense is what we will be considering; but to phrase it as meaning that ‘Paul does not hold, after all that all humans are sinners’ would seem odd.

In *Romans for Everyone* (p 41) Wright seems to identify this option b) as ‘any Gentile who happens to make a special moral effort’. But no one would define a ‘righteous’ person in biblical terms as someone ‘who makes a special moral effort’; *faith* is always the basis of being righteous.

If, then, we take option b) to mean either that there are people who never sinned, or that Paul might think that 'people who make a special moral effort' could be righteous, it is plainly wrong.

Wright himself argues for his option c): the people here are Gentile *Christians*. Actually there are several really major problems with this.

1) Wright himself identifies one key reason why the third option is implausible, which concerns the point that they do this *by nature* (*physei*). He argues that it means they have the Torah *by nature* rather than that they are doing good *by nature*. He then says:

> This is exactly the sense that Paul gives to (*physis*) thirteen verses later when, making an almost identical point, he describes Gentile Christians as *he ek physeos akkrobysyia ton nomon telousa* (*the by-nature uncircumcision that fulfils the Torah*).

Wright appears, however, to be assuming what he wants to prove. We do not believe that either verse refers to Gentile Christians. The text literally says:

> And shall judge which by nature uncircumcision the law it fulfil you.

Of course the meaning given here would, in any case, be different from the earlier usage. No one is *born* circumcised. Most versions render it 'physically uncircumcised'. What would it mean to be *physically* without Torah? Gentile Christians were certainly physically without circumcision and remained so, but they were not physically without Torah – they had access to it through their Jewish fellow-Christians. Moreover it is surely more natural to link 2:14 back to 1:26 where the same term seems to mean what is the natural human action taught by the order of nature?

2) The most natural grammatical reading of 14 is that they do ‘by nature’ what is in Torah, and this is associated with the reference to ‘conscience’ in vs 15. But why would they need to act by nature and conscience if they were *Christian* Gentiles? Surely Christians would be following the apostolic (and so Jewish) teachings? We don’t need to do it ‘by nature’ or ‘by conscience’, We have *both* the Old Covenant revelation *and* the teachings of Jesus, and We follow *these* by faith. Gentile *Christians* are those who have learned from Jewish teachings and those of the Jewish Messiah – why would Paul need all this convoluted reference to nature, conscience, what could be known of God through creation etc? It just would not make sense.

3) It would be odd to describe Gentile Christians as those who ‘do not have the Torah’. Later in his letter Paul wrote (Romans 7:1) ‘for I speak to those who know the Torah’ – even though in Romans 16 his personal greetings clearly greets both Jews and Gentiles. Gentile Christians generally *did* have access to the Torah through their Jewish fellow Christians. Suppose that we do read the first part of the verse 14 as ‘they do not have the Torah by nature’ this would be irrelevant – Jewish proselytes Like Rahab and Ruth did not ‘have the Torah by nature’ in this sense, but were not considered outside the Abrahamic covenant. Moreover, Paul repeats in the second half of verse 14 that they are ‘law not having’, using virtually the same words (though the order is different) and there is no qualification here. These people in 2:14 are not people who merely do not have the law *by nature* but have been later given it by the Jewish Christians. They are people who do not have the Torah *at all* apart from what God has written in their hearts and consciences.

4) Paul describes the judgement of such Gentiles in these terms:

> … who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel. (Romans 2:15-16)

Does this *really* sound like Gentile *Christians*, who have the assurance of salvation through their faith in Jesus the Messiah? Is this the same group of whom later Paul boldly asserts: 'we rejoice in hope of the glory of God' and 'There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' and 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?' etc? Am I, as a Gentile Christian, to hope that *maybe* my conscience *might* excuse me in the day of judgement? Are my thoughts on that day to accuse or maybe excuse me – when I have *as a Gentile Christian* the explicit promises of God? These promises are those Paul gives when he turns in chapter 5 from faith in God to more specific *Christian* faith. These are God's assurances through Paul that I have been 'declared righteous by faith' (5:1) 'have peace with God through our Lord Jesus the Messiah' (5:1) 'have died with Christ' and been buried in baptism and risen anew with him (6:2-5) and there is 'now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Jesus the Messiah' (8:1)? With all this, am I just to kind of hope that my thoughts might accuse or maybe even excuse me on the day of judgement? Wright suggests that for Gentile Christians 'being outside the Torah and yet fulfilling it from the heart, leaves them with questions that may produce a moment of panic in even the most settled believer' (p 442). No it doesn't. To virtually all Christians of whom we know, not having fulfilled Torah is not an issue, and any Christian we know who has died at peace has never had a moment of panic that they have not fulfilled the Jewish Law. It is all just wildly improbable. Paul is not talking

in Romans 2:15-16 about people who sound anything like Gentile Christians.

5) If in all this Paul is referring to Gentile *Christians* then actually 2:17-20 would describe pretty well the role that the all-Jewish Christian apostles really *did* have to the Gentile Christians. So why not say: 'Well of course the Gentiles who became Christians really did learn from the Jews and their Torah concerning the Abrahamic covenant and what it meant, but now they are doing it whilst many of you Jews are not'? But Paul's text simply doesn't read like this.

6) Wright seems to imply that the *only* ones who can be righteous before God are:

- Faithful Old Testament Jews who were in the Abrahamic Covenant
- New Testament Jews who are Christians
- New Testament Gentiles who are Christians and so have entered the Abrahamic covenant.

But then surely there would be 'partiality with God' (Romans 2:11)? It would imply that *for most of human history up until Paul wrote*, actually *only* those who had the Torah and were in the Abrahamic covenant (ie Jews) could receive 'glory and honour and immortality'?

Wright gives the same perspective in his *Romans for Everyone* p 41: 'it is clear that (Paul) is talking about Gentiles who have become Christians.' Well this does not seem clear at all. Wright makes a cross reference to 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 where Paul is, of course, talking to Christians, but it is an entirely different thought. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul says that those to whom he writes are 'letters' written on the apostles' hearts by the Spirit. He does not refer to the law being written on their hearts.

Jeremiah *does* prophesy that this 'writing the law on their hearts' will be a special feature of the New Covenant:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.' (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This is never cited by Paul (unless we read it into Romans 2), but in any case it refers particularly to Israel (even if we can extend it to us Gentile Christians). It is not talking primarily about people who have no access to the written Torah, but promising that Jews who *do* have such an access will have a relationship with God based on a spirit-within and not legalism.

None of this, however, is any reason to deny that Paul may have been thinking of a similar kind of direct revelation by God of himself *through nature and conscience* in pre-Christian times, which is the most natural way to read Romans 2. As we noted already, in *Romans for Everyone* Wright suggests that the only alternative to *Christian* Gentiles is that it might refer to 'any Gentile who happens to make a special moral effort'. But we are definitely *not* suggesting it is people who are 'making a special moral effort', and this is clearly not what Paul means here.

So what do we know about these people from Paul? They are those:

i) Who did not suppress ‘what could be plainly known’ about God from creation (1:19)

ii) Who did recognise that God’s patience and kindness was meant to lead them to repentance (2:4)

iii) Who sought for ‘glory, honour and immortality’ – they were seeking what could be given only through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah (even if they did not know this at the time) because Jesus is the man crowned with glory and honour who did not see corruption (Psalm 8:5; Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27; Hebrews 2:7-9).

iv) Who will be given eternal life in the day of judgement (2:7) rather than now (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14)

v) Who were doing ‘by nature’ and ‘conscience’ what was in Torah, because the *work* of Torah is written on their hearts.

To suppose these people are *Christian* Gentiles is just inconsistent with much of this. We Gentile Christians do not need to know about God from creation, because we have heard the explicit Christian gospel and about the associated Abrahamic covenant. We have been led to repentance not because of the natural revelation implied in 2:4 but by preaching. We Gentile Christians don’t need to rely any more than Jewish believers on ‘conscience’ because we have a lot of specific revelation.

So who *are* these people in Romans 2:4-10? We don’t believe they are any of the three groups referred to by Wright. They are Gentiles throughout pre-Christian history who have had *faith* in God, and lived a faith-life. They are Gentiles throughout Old Testament times who were ‘righteous’ in the sense that Abraham was looking for ten

‘righteous’ people in Sodom. But ‘righteous’ did not mean ‘ethically perfect’ or ‘sinless’ – this is part of the old perspective on Paul which should now be buried and forgotten. When the Ninevites repented they did not become ethically perfect, they threw themselves on the mercy of God – in faith.

This, indeed, was the whole start to this section of Romans. Paul cited Habakkuk: ‘the righteous shall live by faith’. For Christians and Jews it is faith in a God known through a specific revelation and covenant. For others it was a repentance God led them to through natural theology and conscience, and a seeking of glory and honour and incorruption through faith. This is not at all the same as a ‘special moral effort’, and nor does it imply some kind of ethical perfection.

Can we think of such people in history? We will look at some in a few pages later in this present chapter.

Returning first to Romans 3, it is useful to step back and look at the overall trend of Paul’s argument. He began by citing Habakkuk, and then developed the contrast found there between those who live righteously by faith and those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. He insisted that there were Gentiles who ‘by nature’ and a natural conscience also lived righteously, and would receive glory and honour and eternal life. So the natural question in 3:2 is ‘What is the advantage of being a Jew and what is the point in circumcision?’

We should note, though, that if the Gentiles he has been speaking about who will receive eternal life on the day of judgement are only Gentile *Christians*, then neither the question nor his answer would make sense. This would have been a silly question if throughout the entire Old Testament period only those in the Abrahamic covenant could be

saved. But it makes a lot of sense if he is claiming that throughout this period there were also righteous Gentiles.

Paul's answer is:

> Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. (Romans 3:2)

Now, as we have indicated, if his comparison were really with *Christian* Gentiles this point would be totally invalid. Christian Gentiles now also possess not only the Old Testament oracles of God because (as he later says in Romans 7:7) all the Church leaders, Gentiles as well as Jews, know the Torah, but they also have many of the sayings of Jesus. So where would be the Jewish advantage? Gentile Christians have *more* oracles than they do including those in which in the last times God spoke to us through a Son!

If, however, Paul's comparison is with Gentiles who have lived a righteous faith-life *without the specific revelation of Scripture* then it makes perfect sense. What he is saying is that whilst some pre-Christian Gentiles could indeed live righteously by faith through nature and conscience, it was obviously an *advantage* for the pre-Christian Jews to have the specific words of God in Scripture. We don't deny today that people can be *righteous* and *Christian* without having the Bible in their language – but we obviously think it an *advantage* to have the Bible and this is why groups like Wycliffe Bible Translators translate it.

Paul then continues his two-streams idea:

> For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? (Romans 3:3)

This is not about 'universal sinfulness' but about the fact that *some* of the Jews (pre-Christian and in his present Christian era) did not believe. This will later be a key part of his argument in Romans 9–11. God is faithful/righteous – but

throughout history and into the present some of the Jewish people have been unfaithful to God.

He goes on to ask a different question. This is not about *advantage* but about whether the Jews are ‘better’:

> What then? Are we better than they? (Romans 3:9)

So what is he asking? Is he asking: ‘Are there some Jews who are completely sinless and therefore can ‘get to heaven’ on a ‘Pelagian’ basis?’ Clearly not. He goes on to cite a number of Old Testament verses, but in their context *none* of these are actually asserting ‘universal sinfulness’ as the commentators tend to take these verses. In each case, as in Habakkuk, the prophet is bewailing the general sinfulness and lack of righteousness in society (usually Jewish society), but recognising that there is a remnant living righteously. We might similarly say today ‘Our British society is full of materialism and selfishness’ without implying that literally no individuals in it are living loving, righteous, lives in the biblical sense. We might ask in terms eg of banking culture ‘Is the UK any better than the USA?’ without implying that every banker in either country was corrupt. Even when Elijah mistakenly bewails that he is the only one left in Israel he is not asserting *universal* sinfulness – and Paul later comments on this:

> God has not cast away his people whom he foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life’? But what does the divine response say to him? ‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal’. Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. (Romans 11:2-5)

Romans 3:10-18 is not asserting universal sinfulness but that in general Jewish and Gentile societies are *both* full of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. What Paul is pointing out is that the Old Testament prophets also castigated *Jewish* societies as being full of sin and unrighteous living. He is kind of saying: ‘Come on guys, looking at the prophets it doesn’t sound as though the Jews (ie Jewish society) did much better in being righteous in God’s sight than Gentile ones.’

In both Jewish and Gentile societies, however, there may be a righteous *remnant* living by faith, and with God’s approval set on them by grace. This is just like in the days of Habakkuk whose society (as he bewails) was corrupt, but the righteous were living by faith.

All the verses Paul quotes about Israel show this pattern. Romans 3:10-14 quotes from Psalm 14:1-3 However, the Psalmist immediately goes on to say:

> Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call on the Lord? There they are in great fear, for God is with the generation of the righteous. You shame the counsel of the poor, but the Lord is his refuge. (v4-6)

If Paul were really quoting this to ‘prove’ universal sinfulness then he would be quoting it out of context There is a ‘generation of the righteous’ called ‘my people’.

Likewise Romans 3:13 quotes Psalm 5:9. But these words about them immediately follow:

> But as for me, I will come into your house in the multitude of your mercy; In fear of you I will worship toward your holy temple Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies;

> Make your way straight before my face. (Psalm 5:7-8)

The verses that follow 5:9 then say:

> But let all those rejoice who put their trust in you; Let them ever shout for joy, because you defend them; Let those also who love your name Be joyful in you. For you, O Lord, will bless the righteous; With favour you will surround him as with a shield. (Psalm 5:11-12)

The words quoted in Romans 3:13 concern David's (Jewish) enemies. He contrasts them (as often in Scripture) with the 'righteous' who have put their trust in God. If Paul were quoting this to 'prove' universal sinfulness he would be quoting it totally out of context.

Romans 3:14 quotes Psalm 10:7, and once again the Psalmist is bewailing 'the wicked' – there is no indication in the Psalm of universal sinfulness or that *everyone* is 'wicked' in the Psalmist's sense. In Psalm 10:8 we find reference to the 'innocent' and the 'humble' who commit themselves to God and whom the Psalmist encourages God to defend.

The nearest Paul might get to 'universal sinfulness' is the quotation in Romans 3:15-17 of Isaiah 59:5-8. In this beautiful passage of Isaiah the prophet is bewailing the apostate state of the nation, Even then, for example, we get:

> The righteous perishes, And no man takes it to heart. (Isaiah 57:1)

The simple fact, then, if that if Paul really were citing all these verses to 'prove' that all the Jews were sinful, he would be taking most or all of them blatantly out of context. If, on the other hand, he is really wanting to show that, on the whole, Jewish society didn't do much better than Gentile

society, then he does a good job. His quotations show exactly this.

Please note that we are *not* denying that *everyone has sinned*, but just that this is not what Paul is saying in Romans 1:18ff. This is analogous to what Wright correctly says about 'justification': many (though not all) of the doctrines read into it by traditionalist evangelicals may be true, but are not part of that particular term.

As already noted, in 3:19-20 Paul says that it is of course 'works of the Torah' that Jews take as distinctive, but these cannot in themselves be enough, because actually through the Law comes knowledge of sin, and we all know that we are guilty. So he goes on to explain how now it has been 'revealed' what was not clear before, that the basis on which God can 'overlook' sin and declare faith to be counted as righteousness is the *faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah*. In pre-Christian times this was unknown to the righteous Gentiles (like Epimenides – see below) and only dimly perceived if at all by most faithful Jews.

It is so sad that most translations render this key phrase wrongly. It was surely Paul's greatest 'Ah ha!' experience when he saw that it was the faithfulness of *Yeshua* the Messiah in dying sacrificially, that had enabled God to forgive the sins of all who had faith in God in any age. The recognition that *pisteus Iėsou Christou* means the 'faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah', actually means that specifically *Christian* faith is not mentioned between Romans 1:16-17 and Romans 5:1. The key passage is well translated by NT Wright:

> But now God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the law – though the law and the prophets bear witness to it: it is God's righteousness through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah to those who believe. For there is no

> distinction, for all sinned, and came short of the glory of God, and they are justified freely, by his grace through the redemption which is in the Messiah Jesus. God put him forth as a means of atonement, through faithfulness, by means of his blood; this was to demonstrate God's righteousness because in his forbearance he had passed over previous sins. It was to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time – that he himself might be in the right and might justify people by Jesus' faithfulness. (*What St Paul Really Said*, p 128)

So who are the 'those who believe' or as it might be translated 'all who have faith'? Surely this is faith *in God*? It is not specifically *Christian* faith, or even necessarily faith in the Abrahamic covenant? How was Noah declared righteous? Presumably through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah to all who have faith. How about Lot? Or Melchizedek? Or maybe Epimenides or Lao Tzu as we will presently ask? Of course a central point here is that the declaration that it is 'counted as righteousness' is based on faith rather than on ritual observance, but surely the faith is in *God* not in the Abrahamic covenant? Is God restricted to speaking only to Jews and Christians? Surely not. The *logos* of God (or, as Chinese translations call it, the *dao*) enlightens *every man who comes into the world*.

The passage also refers to those sins that were 'left beforehand unpunished'? Is this *only* Jewish sins of those Old Testament period Jews in the Abrahamic covenant? Well if there is really no 'partiality with God' then surely it refers also to some Old Testament period Gentiles not in the Abrahamic covenant? Paul does not say 'Well God used to be partial throughout most of history but now he has become more egalitarian.'

This issue relates to Paul's sermon in Athens:

> Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: *To the unknown God*. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is he worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, since he gives to all life, breath, and all things. And he has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.' 'Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead.' (Acts 17:22-30)

Paul says that God has made of one blood every nation of the earth and has appointed boundaries etc 'so that they should seek the Lord in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of

us…’ There is no indication that only if such men know of the Abrahamic covenant do they have any chance. Paul refers to the altar to the unknown God, maybe in the tradition set up by Epimenides the Cretan in the 6th century BC (a man who reputedly taught the Athenians to sacrifice), and Paul goes on to quote the quatrain from Epimenides, who is also quoted as a ‘prophet’ in Titus 1:12. Surely Paul here is recognising Epimenides as someone who does right ‘by nature’, and who will receive ‘glory and honour and immortality’ as well as ‘eternal life’? But no-one suggests that Epimenides was a Christian or even that he had heard of the Abrahamic covenant. If you have faith in God, you do not have to have heard about Jesus the Messiah for his faithfulness to be operative to you. Clearly this is true in Romans 3 where this faithfulness of the Messiah is the basis for forgiveness for past sins. But is this only for past sins of Jews within the Abrahamic covenant? Surely God has no partiality? This was true for Gentiles as well as Jews *throughout history*. They formerly worshipped in ‘ignorance’ (v23) and this past ‘ignorance’ God overlooked (v32), but now Paul has come to tell them a fuller truth about this God and call to repentance and acceptance of the Messiah – to whom he goes on to refer in the next verse and assert (as in Romans) that God has given assurance of the position of this Man by raising him from the dead. Jesus in John 4 likewise notes the religious ‘ignorance’ of the Samaritans, and that ‘salvation is of the Jews’, yet still identifies himself as the Messiah that the *Samaritans* look for. We note that Jesus in Luke 10 said the way to received ‘life’ was to fulfil the commandments to love God and love one’s neighbour. How did he suppose this could be done? By ‘making a special moral effort’? Surely not; this love was the mark of a faith-life. So when in this same passage Jesus goes on to cite the ‘good Samaritan’ as a doyen of such love for a neighbour, is he suggesting that the Samaritan was ‘making a special moral effort’, or that the man was in a real faith-

relationship with God – in spite of the imperfections of his religion?

We mentioned above the 6th century BC Chinese sage Lao Tzu, who taught that the *dao* could lead men to spontaneously do what is right. In an interesting recent book *Lao Tzu and the Bible*, Yuan Zhiming argues that this original message of Lao Tzu was later subverted into mere legalism in the systems of Confucianism and Daoism. In Chinese Bibles today it is the Word, the *dao*(道), who is the light who 'enlightens every man who comes into the world' (John 1:9). We may think of others to whom God may have spoken, like the Akhnaton movement in Egypt, or some of the Greek thinkers whom Early Church leaders thought had prepared their world like a *paidagogus* for the coming of Jesus, as the Old Testament had prepared the Jews. God may have spoken to other groups post-Jesus who never heard of him. In *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Don Richardson mentions the Karen Tribe who worshipped *Y'wa*, the Lahu who worshipped *Gui'Sha*, the Wa worshipped *Siyeh* and various other tribal groups who for generations worshipped a high God who led them to accept Christ when eventually missionaries reached them.

In Romans 4:24 Paul finally switches to note that Abraham's story was not just about him 'but also for us'. *Now* he is speaking about Christians in his own day, though even then to emphasize the continuity we are characterized as those who 'believe in him who raised up our Lord Jesus from the dead'. Well Noah and Abraham (and Epimenides) believed in this same God, but we now *recognise* God as the one who did this act of vindication. We actually *know* that Jesus was delivered up for our offences but raised again for our justification/vindication. However the first really specific *Christian* reference after Romans 1:18 is when Paul says in 5:1-5:

> Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

This refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant, and then in Romans 6, he speaks of unmistakable Christian features like Christian baptism.

A key point, however, is that once the genitive is taken in its natural sense and recognised as subjective in the key phrase ‘the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah’, this illuminates the whole meaning of Romans 1:17-4:23. Those who benefit from this are those who ‘have faith (in God)’ not specifically those who ‘have faith in Jesus’. Paul is explaining the basis on which God accepted those who have placed their trust in him (Jews and Gentiles) throughout history, not just in the Christian era.

What is the Point of Preaching?

If people can have faith and be ‘righteous’ without hearing about God’s covenants, then why should we preach? In a sense, one might ask a similar question: ‘If the first century Jews all had the Old Testament, why did John the Baptist need to preach repentance?’ Paul says that the Jews have much advantage ‘because they have the oracles of God’ (3:2). Specific words from God can have three important effects. Firstly, they can stimulate repentance in those who are presently unrepentant, especially if the preaching is Spirit anointed. Secondly, knowing more about God can help us to live more closely to him and love him more – this, indeed, is why as Christians we have spirit-filled Christian teaching. Thirdly, if people know about the Holy Spirit and receive him it can empower their lives (cf Acts 19:2,6), and in indwelling them God fulfils his purpose in dwelling with mankind.

Paul in Romans 10 says:

> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, ‘The man who does those things shall live by them’. But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)’. But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For

> the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes on him will not be put to shame’. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon him. For ‘whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ (Romans 10:4-13)

What does this mean? It comes in a section dealing with Israel, and speaks of the spread of the ‘good news’. The ‘confession’ with the mouth is specifically ‘Jesus is Lord’, and the belief is that God raised him from the dead, and we can live in his resurrection life. This is something that Jews (as well as Gentiles) could recognise *only* if they heard the Christian gospel. Maybe Jews after Isaiah began to see the role of a suffering Messiah, but not the ‘Lord Jesus’. So is Paul saying that the true righteousness comes only with Christian faith? But if so, then how could Old Testament Jews have been righteous? Paul goes on to mention the seven thousand righteous remnant in the days of Elijah, and these were clearly not Christians. The Christian gospel raised righteous Jews who became Christians to a new level of salvation experience – just as it did with the god-fearer Cornelius whose prayers were a sweet thing to God *before* he heard the Christian gospel (Acts 10:4). It did the same for God-fearer Lydia whose heart was already in tune with God when he opened it to receive the good news about Jesus (Acts 16:14). As we preach the good news, any who are in true relationship with God, hearing and learning from the Father, will be drawn to accept Jesus:

> No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. (John 6:44-45)

Others may be stimulated by our preaching to repent and turn to God for the first time.

‘ Getting Right’ and Repentance

We have noted that in Scripture two streams of people are identified. There are those who are in right-standing with God as judge and will receive eternal life, glory, honour, and incorruption; and there are those who will face indignation and wrath and will perish. What determines who is in which, and how can someone move from one group to the other? How does a person get ‘right with God’?

As we have seen, the *biblical* word ‘justification’ concerns primarily the *declaration* of who is right with God, not the issue of *becoming* right. Faith, manifested through action, is the badge of those who *are* in right-relationship. For Abraham, being justified by faith was not about *entering* a right-standing. His faith was counted to him for righteousness (ie as a *declaration* of his right-standing with God) in Genesis 15:6 – but he had actually *been* living a faith-life since Genesis 12.

What then, does Scripture tell us about the issue of *becoming* right? Van Gemeren states:

> Ultimately Deuteronomy offers a choice that is unmistakably reminiscent of Genesis 2. This choice, persuasively presented through the use of parallel expressions, results in either life or death. Choosing life, which is nothing less than choosing Yahweh and loving him with all one’s heart and soul (30:19-20), involves blessing, prosperity, and longevity. Choosing death, which is rejecting Yahweh, involves cursings, constant dread and uncertainty, and destruction… the prophets, and particularly Ezekiel, pay special attention to the religious dimensions of *ḥ yh* [life]. Life, once again, has its source in Yahweh. While the image of ‘living water’ has already been seen in describing actual running water, Jeremiah applies it to God himself

> (Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13). Yahweh is a fresh spring, the water of which brings healing and salvation.
>
> In addition, the Deuteronomy connection between life and obedience is repeatedly emphasized in the prophetic writings, and it is Ezekiel who provides the most sophisticated presentation of it. Here, the spiritual dimensions of life are summarized as follows: (a) If a righteous person does not sin, he will live, even if his father sinned (Ezekiel 3:21; 18:9,17,19). (b) However, a righteous person will not live if he sins; his former righteousness will not suffice (33:12-13). (c) If a wicked man turns from his ways and does what is just and right – gives, back garments taken in pledge, returns stolen property, follows the decrees of life, does no evil – he will surely live (33:15-16). In short, the soul that sins will die (18:20). Therefore, Ezekiel urges his listeners to repent and live (18:32; 33:11; cf Amos 5:4-6). (*Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol 2, p 109)

The key is this 'turning back' or repentance. God repeatedly insists that:

> So I will judge you, community of Israel, each on the basis of your behaviour, affirms the Lord Yahweh's oracle. Give up your rebel ways, so give them up, or else iniquity will mean a tragic end for you. Throw away all your acts of rebellion against me, and you will get for yourselves a new heart. Why die O community of Israel? I don't want anyone's death, runs the Lord Yahweh's oracle. So give it all up, and you will gain life.' (Ezekiel 19:30-32 – Leslie C Allen *Ezekiel*, p 264).

God *twice* repeats his insistence (v 23 and 32) that he does not want the wicked to perish, but to repent and live.

Commentators (eg Allen and also John B Taylor in *Ezekiel*) rightly link this with Ezekiel 36:26 and other verses in which God promises that it is he who will sprinkle them with purifying water and put this new spirit within them *if they turn to him*. Later prophecies indicate a time, in the New Covenant, when this divine inner renewal will be especially strong.

In the New Testament the message of John the Baptist was to repent and be baptized (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:4; etc), and Jesus and his disciples initially brought the same message (Matthew 6:12). Those who had refused to repent and accept John's baptism had 'refused God's plan for them' (Luke 7:30). Jesus also urged repentance to avoid perishing, and said he had come to call sinners not the righteous to repentance, and heaven rejoices over each one who does (Luke 13:3,5; Luke 16:30; Matthew 19:13 and parallels; Luke 15:7-10). Jesus explained the Old Testament teaching that after the Messiah's resurrection 'repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:47). The Early Church call was indeed to 'repent and be baptized' and 'repent and be converted' (Acts 2:28 and Acts 3:19; also Paul in 22:16). For those in process of repenting, baptism 'saves' people as the appeal to God for a clear conscience through the resurrection of Christ: 1 Peter 3:21 and Romans 6, express this in different ways. Paul saw his commission as to preach to turn Gentiles 'from darkness to light… that they may receive forgiveness of sin and an inheritance amongst those who are set aside by faith in me' (Acts 26:18). The message was 'Repent and turn to God and do works worthy of repentance' (Acts 26:20). Moreover, the New Testament reaffirms what Ezekiel said:

> The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9, NASB)

Not only does God *command* everyone everywhere to repent, but this is really what he wants.

We must, of course, keep this in context. To us today, the call to repent and enter a right-standing with God usually comes at the same time as the call to believe in Jesus. But in first century Israel there could be many Jews who had already repented (perhaps even having received the baptism of John like some in Acts 19:2-3) but not heard the Christian message and received Christian baptism. These were not called on to repent, but did receive baptism. Likewise there were many Gentile 'god fearers' who were seen by the Jews as 'righteous Gentiles' and who kept biblical standards predating the Law but were not circumcised (Mark Nanos in *The Mystery of Romans*, p 52, connects these to the ruler in Acts 15:29). Cornelius was amongst these, a praying man in relationship with God, who was not called upon in Acts 10 to repent but to believe in Jesus. Peter says:

> In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears him and works righteousness is accepted by him. (Acts 10:34-36)

Cornelius' baptism was not so much for remission of sins, but receiving the sign of a reality of Christian experience which was already his. Likewise the prayerful Lydia was not called upon to repent, but as she was already in relationship with God 'the Lord opened her heart' to accept Jesus, and she was baptized (Acts 16:14-15). Her words about being 'faithful to the Lord' indicate a new phase of an ongoing relationship. To most Gentiles, however, there was a need for repentance. To Paul, the goodness of the Creator revealed in nature itself should lead towards repentance (Romans 2:4) but in the Christian era Gentiles are much more specifically called (all men everywhere) to repent (Acts 17:30).

With Jews already in faith-relation the reaction might be not repentance but believing in the Messiah on the basis of the Scriptures (eg in Berea in Acts 17:11-12). In his encounter with the Jewish leaders in Rome Paul's focus is on convincing them that Jesus is the Messiah and some believed (Acts 28:23). He explains elsewhere his conclusion that those who did not believe were missing the obvious because they were unrepentant and would not turn to the Lord:

> But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. *Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away*… But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe… (2 Corinthians 3:14-4:4)

The blindness in this context is blindness to the meaning of the prophecies of the old covenant – blindness to the Messiahship of Jesus. The cure is to turn to the Lord.

What is the determining factor of *who* comes to repent? Is it the pre-fixed decree of God or the free-choice response of the one repenting? One would have to say that when God repeatedly insists that he does *not* want anyone to perish, but would *rather* that they turn and live, it would be very odd indeed were we to discover that 'actually' it is God who selects just some to make repent. The implication throughout Scripture, and in the Early Church, is that God has given people responsibility to choose.

There is, of course, a sense in which Jesus came 'to *give* repentance to Israel' (Acts 5:31). Peter does not say that the gift is given to a select few, he says 'to Israel,' and his

hearers would clearly have understood him to mean the nation as a whole. The gift, then, is offered to all but not all accept it. Likewise when repentance is also ‘granted’ to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18), it is obvious that it was not an irresistible gift, for not all of them accepted. In *All Of Grace*, the great Baptist preacher CH Spurgeon wrote:

> Repentance, as a natural feeling, is a common duty deserving no great praise… Jesus is exalted on high, that through the virtue of his intercession repentance may have a place before God. In this respect he gives us repentance, because he puts repentance into a position of acceptance, which otherwise it could never have occupied.

Repentance earns nothing. To be sorry does not ‘earn’ forgiveness. It is even more absurd (as Latin theology tended to do) to speak of the ‘merit’ of repentance than to speak of the ‘merit’ of faith. It is not about merit, but about being sorry and receiving the free gift of forgiveness, made possible by the faithful act of Jesus the Messiah in going to the cross. God gave his Son, who died for the sins of the world, enabling any who believe in him to have forgiveness and eternal life (John 1:29, 3:16, etc).



Chapter 3: Works and Faithfulness

Background

Imagine you are a (male) Jew born in Iconium (in Asia Minor) during the reign of the Emperor Caesar Augustus around 3 BC. When you were eight days old you were given the sign of the Jewish covenant (circumcision). You were brought up to think of the Torah (Law), given by the Lord God himself to Moses on Sinai, as the treasure and glory of Israel. Through the Law, Israel has been given the opportunity to show devotion to their Lord. Through the Law they can make proper propitiation for their sins – and you have sometimes gone to Jerusalem at Passover to offer sacrifice at the glorious Temple itself. On one visit you found this so overwhelming that you could only stand in awe in the Temple courtyard of the men, and cry 'Lord be merciful to me' (Jesus referred in Luke 18:14 to a similar Jew, who went down to his house 'justified'). You always kept the Law conscientiously. Not that you went to the lengths of your neighbour Thaddeus, a Pharisee who thought there was a necessary precise way of doing everything. But you kept it, and your heart was sad at the domination of pagan Rome over God's chosen nation. You were waiting for the time when God would look on the grateful hearts of his people, overlook their faults, and vindicate them by establishing Israel as the heart of all earthly kingdoms. Like all good Jews, you hoped to be a part of this, when God would bring blessing not just to Israel, but, through them, to the non-Jews as he had promised to Abraham in the Torah itself. Probably this would happen when God sent his Messiah, the one to come and redeem Israel and establish the Kingdom of God and the resurrection that was the hope of Israel.

Then, one day a few years into the reign of Emperor Claudius, a little man came to speak at your synagogue. He was a cultured Jew, well versed both in the Jewish Law (he had trained under a leading rabbi) and in Greek philosophy. He brought the stunning news that the Messiah – Yeshua the Messiah – had in fact already come, and, as Isaiah had prophesied, his own people did not receive him. The Jerusalem authorities had actually arranged for his execution – but God had raised him back to life. The man, Paul, called upon all the Jews to be baptized in the name of Yeshua the Messiah (*Iėsou Christou* in your Greek language) accepting his death as the just judgment of God on sin, and claiming a part in it through calling on his name.

All this came as a 'bombshell'. Large numbers of Jews – *but also non-Jews* – had accepted the message. There had always been non-Jews who worshipped the true God but did not want to become fully Jewish – 'god fearers' they were called. There was no hostility towards them – sometimes they contributed liberally to things like the building of synagogues (cf Luke 7:4-5). But this was different. In the Messiah, Paul claimed, Jews and non-Jews could enter the plans of God, become part of his task force for the future kingdom, *on an equal basis*.

You and your household were baptized, though not all Jews accepted this. Your neighbour Thaddeus was implacably opposed, claiming that it subverted the whole covenant with Israel. Only through strict adherence to Torah, Thaddeus thinks, can Israel become fit for God to use them in bringing in the kingdom. The non-Jewish Christian converts have left their slavish service to pagan gods, but have little idea of Torah and indeed are not being taught it.

It is now five years since your baptism. Things are a bit confused. Thaddeus is still totally opposed – saying 'Christians' (as you are nicknamed) claim God has broken

his covenant with Israel. You do not feel altogether easy about accepting non-Jews on equal footing. What was the point of getting the Law if it is no help or advantage? Some recent Christians came to your gathering from Jerusalem, the centre of things, saying that the non-Jewish members ought at least to take the sign of the Abrahamic covenant – circumcision. God declared Abraham righteous through his faith, but he then gave Abraham circumcision as the sign of the covenant. There might be no need for non-Jews to keep the Torah given on Sinai 400 years later, but they ought at least to be circumcised. It is right and proper (they say) for non-Jews to enter the inheritance of Abraham as promised, but they ought to take on the sign of the covenant with Abraham.

There is also controversy about how to go on with the Lord. If God gave the Torah to the Jewish people to help them to be holy, then some voluntary self-discipline seems a good way forward. If not the Torah, then some set of regulations would help – the discipline of keeping certain days to remember God, and the looking for signs. Voluntary regulations may be adopted for a strict lifestyle. No one, of course, denies Paul’s message of faith in Messiah as the basis of being a Christian. But one has to move on from there to look for a path to holiness. Yet you cannot help but feel that some people take inordinate pride in the amount of fasting and observance they do. It had all seemed so simple at the start. If only Paul would write…

Paul’s Concerns

Paul did write. He wrote the letter to the Galatians in which he addressed exactly this situation. In it he sought to establish a number of basic points:

1. The marks of being central in God’s plans to help bring in the Kingdom were not ordinances or ‘works of the Law’ even in Habakkuk’s day, but *living by faith*.

2. God’s declaration of the right-standing of his people now was not based on ordinances they could do (or works of the Law) but on something Messiah had done – it was through the *faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah*.

3. God declared Abraham in right-standing before him by faith before he had performed any ordinance – making the *non-Jews his rightful heirs* without a need for ordinance.

4. Circumcision was a sign of the specifically Jewish covenant – *adopting it implied accepting all the Torah*. Even those wanting non-Jews circumcised were no longer doing that, and wanting it just for a quiet life with non-Christian Jewish critics was no fit motive.

5. Just as the Spirit was received by faith, not as a reward for keeping ordinances – the way forward to holiness was likewise by faith. ‘*Fruit of the Spirit*’ would be qualities denoting real holiness, character qualities not externals.

We will explore Paul’s letter in some depth later in this chapter.

Paul’s Non-concerns

Unfortunately, most of us reading Paul’s letter today have never really thought through or understood the situation. Few of the hot issues Paul deals with in Galatians and Romans are familiar to us. We have little idea of the beliefs of those he opposed – and many may not have noticed that even those he is critical of in Galatia had believed in and been baptized into Jesus as Messiah, and received his Spirit.

One of the reasons for this, as noted in the two previous chapters, is the confusion caused by the legacy of Augustine. The various brands of Lutheran/Reformed theology descending from him have seen the central issues thus:

1. Justification means an individual being made right with God, and having a ticket booked for a spiritual heaven.
2. An individual is made right with God through believing in Jesus and no other basis (though where this left faithful Habakkuk is never really addressed).
3. ‘Pelagians’ believe, in contrast, that a person can earn acceptance with God through ‘good works,’ perhaps by living a morally perfect life by their own efforts.
4. If ‘faith’ comes from anything to do with the individual himself, then this would be a work of which the individual could ‘boast’. Therefore it must come *exclusively* from God’s selection. ‘Election’ means God’s predetermining decision that certain individuals will respond to the gospel and persevere, while those not so selected will be damned.
5. Without that predetermining election, no individual would accept and persevere in the gospel, so none would go to heaven.

Most of us come to Galatians and Romans with at least some of this ‘baggage’, but let us just look further at a version of the Reformed system itself. Thus, for example RB Kuiper:

> The great question is, and ever has been, whose work it is. Does God save the sinner or must the sinner save himself? Or is salvation a joint venture of God and man? It is no exaggeration to assert that according to the Bible salvation belongs to God a hundred percent. (*The Bible Tells us So*, p 82)

Kuiper brings us the all too common myth that the Early Church leaders were all off-beam and the truth was then restored by Augustine. He extols the famous five central points of Calvinism (sometimes called TULIP):

- ***T****otal depravity* [Since the fall of Adam humankind have been utterly corrupt – even common acts of secular human kindness are due only to the ‘common grace’ of God]
- ***U****nconditional election* [individuals are chosen to be saved purely by sovereign acts of God, nothing depends on any free human choice or reaction]
- ***L****imited atonement* [Jesus died for the sins of the elect, not for everyone’s sins]
- ***I****rresistible grace* [God’s decision to bring repentance and life to some selected individuals irresistibly overcomes their own total depravity and determines them to repent and believe]
- ***P****erseverance of the saints* [Given that God has selected a person, there is no possibility that they will fall away]

As we noted in *Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory*, there is always a certain amount of doubletalk from Augustinians,

and, like Augustine, they speak of ‘human responsibility’ and even ‘freewill’. But the bottom line is that they claim that without a predetermining sovereign decision by God, focused on that *particular* individual, *all* human individuals would reject any offer of salvation. Why God has decided to save only some and not everyone we are not allowed to question – though the model is of a despotic ruler of Augustine’s time who would be considered lenient if he let off just a proportion of rebels and tortured and slaughtered the rest. As Kuiper says: ‘If a sinner is saved, the ultimate reason is that from eternity God chose [ie selected] him to life everlasting’ (p 84). He finds this personally reassuring, there is ‘no weak link in the chain’ – his place in heaven is all predetermined by God. It is a ‘risk-free’ universe– for Kuiper at least and never mind his next door neighbour who is inevitably bound for eternal torment.

We have explained already why any such theology is unbiblical, and that such Augustinianism arrives at a view of both God (an emotionless, non-reacting, all-determining God) and humankind (‘responsible’ and ‘free’ but yet also having all reactions totally predetermined by God) at which no one simply reading the Bible could possibly arrive. What we can see more clearly now, in light of recent scholarship, is that even Kuiper’s starting point was wrong. Kuiper sees ‘the great issue’ as concerning what determines the individual sinner’s destiny to go to heaven or hell. The work by the New Perspective writers like Dunn and Wright demonstrates that to read Romans and Galatians as treatises on how the individual could be ‘right with God’ and go to a spiritual heaven, is itself a gross distortion. As an evangelist, Paul is, of course, interested in how people enter the blessings of God – but this is not his prime concern here. Rather, it is with:

- the *righteousness of God* (meaning God’s relational faithfulness to his people and covenants)

- the *distinguishing mark of the elect* (meaning those who are as a group set to fulfil the purposes of God to bring in a new creation)

- the *basis of that distinguishing mark* (the 'faithfulness' of Jesus the Messiah).

This is in contrast to what Kuiper sees as 'the great question', which concerns individualistic anxieties about personal blessing in heaven.

Having asked the wrong question, Kuiper then also gives the wrong answer to it. He raises 'Pelagianism' as a spectre, and denounces Roman Catholics as 'semi-Pelagians'. Now Wright perhaps over-optimistically remarks:

> We have got over the old idea that law-keeping was an early form of Pelagianism, by which the Pharisees and others sought to earn their justification or salvation by moral effort. Sanders has expended a good deal of effort in demonstrating that such a picture is thoroughly false to first century sources, and, though this notion will reappear from time to time, it must be resisted. (*Jesus*, p 388)

Wright adds elsewhere that actually he knows of *no* theologian who believes anything like 'Pelagianism', and certainly there weren't any we know of in first century Galatia or Rome. Paul's Galatian 'opponents' shared his belief that someone became a Christian through faith in Christ – the issue was about holiness, ie how to *go on* with God. Even non-Christian Jewish opponents (addressed indirectly in *Romans*) 'boasted' in the Torah – a gift of God – not moral good deeds. Paul, as we shall see, centrally contrasts what we do in ritual ordinance observance ('works of the Law') with what the Messiah has done in gong to the cross. Human faith arising from repentance is merely the way to receive the gift – to suggest that this would be itself

a ‘work’ or ritual ordinance is absurd. Paul is not interested in denying the reality of human responsibility, he is interested in establishing God’s covenant faithfulness, and uplifting the cross of Christ, rather than ordinances, as the basis of receiving its blessings.

If we really wanted to answer Kuiper’s questions about ‘Pelagianism’ biblically, we would say this:

1. Repentance is a free reaction to God’s offer of unmerited forgiveness and unearned involvement in his purposes. Acceptance of the free gift of grace in Christ is not a ‘work’ and does not earn either forgiveness or salvation. Acts 5:31 says that God gave ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ to ‘Israel’ but the gift was not irresistible.

2. In Scripture, it is in free grace that God makes the offer of forgiveness through Christ who died for the sins *of the world* (ie everyone). A person responding positively ‘saves himself’ in the sense of Acts 2:40 by ‘repenting and being baptized’ (Acts 2:39) – but this does not ‘earn’ anything.

But we really want to focus on Paul’s concerns rather than Kuiper’s. In the remainder of this chapter, then, we will look in detail at the Jewish background and at some of the Pauline letters in response to the pressing theological issues of his day.

1st Century Judaism

Jesus and the apostles were themselves Jews, and spoke in a context in which *theological* opposition within and outside the Church came from other Jews. So how much can we know about general beliefs of first century Judaism? General sources are these:

- Works dating a bit earlier (The Maccabbees, etc)
- The Dead Sea Scrolls (from second century BC to contemporary)
- The Gospels (written probably c65-80 AD by Christians)
- The Epistles (particularly those of Paul c50-60? AD)
- Philo (Jewish first century philosopher in Alexandria)
- Josephus (Jewish historian writing c90 AD)
- The Mishnah [the Jewish oral law, set down about 200 AD]
- The Talmud [later commentary on the Mishnah]

In the New Testament we meet different groups including:

a) *Sadducees*: These included the High Priest and a majority in the highest Jewish civil and religious body, the Sanhedrin. Their opposition to Jesus seems mainly concerned to preserve the Temple and its associated political/religious status quo.

b) *Scribes/lawyers/rabbis*: These were the experts in the Jewish Law – both the written Pentateuch and the oral traditions of the elders. The words scribe (*grammateus*) and lawyer (*nomikos*) were virtually synonymous (See Douglas *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oesterley & Box *Religion of the Synagogue*, p 232; Schürer *The Jewish People at the Time of Jesus Christ*, Div ii, vol iv, p 313-5,

etc). The term *Rabbi* was honorific at the time of Christ but later came to be the standard word for a lawyer.

c) *Pharisees*: These might include rabbis, but in general their emphasis was on strict observance of the Mosaic law, rather than study as such. They had no 'official' power, and had to collude with Herodians (Mark 3:6), or in Paul's case with the Sadducean priestly authorities (Acts 9:1-2) to take any action. They were, though, a powerful theological pressure group, and included activists like the early Paul/Saul.

Few people can be unaware of Jesus' great declamation in Matthew 23 in which he repeatedly says 'Woe to you, Scribes, Pharisees, play-actors…' What can we make of this? Oral tradition interpreted the Law for specific ordinances. Thus in Mark 7 'Pharisees and *some* of the rabbis [scribes]' criticized the disciples for not adhering to the washing ceremony prescribed by the 'traditions of the elders.' Eating laws and Sabbath laws dominated later rabbinical tractates, but this was not about hygiene but ritual. Jesus replied that it is what is in a person's heart that counts, not what external regulations they keep. A more significant incident is found in Mark 3. In chapter 2 Christ had claimed to forgive sins (v. 5) and this had caused questionings among some rabbis (scribes) though the Pharisees are not mentioned. In 2:16, some 'rabbis who were Pharisees' questioned his eating with common people. In 2:24 the Pharisees questioned his disciples' plucking of ears of corn on the Sabbath. It was, however, in 3:1-6 that the crisis came. It was because Christ healed on the Sabbath that some Pharisees decided that he must be killed! (3:6). John also says: 'For this cause did the Jews persecute Jesus, because he (healed) on the Sabbath.' (John 5:16). His claims of equality with God (John 5:17) only made them seek *the more* to kill him (John 5:18). The Sabbath issue was central, and Jesus was grieved at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5),

and also criticized their focus on externals rather than the heart. Before we get too critical, however, we should note that it is an easy slide for any faith from an emphasis on holiness and closeness to God down into legalism and a focus on externals. Christians have sometimes suggested that the religion of the scribes and Pharisees was merely an empty and hypocritical legalism, but there are two main reasons why this is both wrong and misleading:

1) The first is the wide divergence of opinion among rabbis. Thus, for example the two schools of Hillel and Shammai were often in disagreement. Some rabbis had little sympathy for the Pharisees. Some, like Gamaliel, advocated a liberal approach to those of dissident viewpoint (Acts 5:34-39). There were, in short, many different strands of thought within rabbinical Judaism..

2) Secondly, the Gospels picture some in all the strata of Jewish society as waiting in humility for the kingdom of God. Surely Simeon was not alone in his righteous devotion, looking for the coming Messiah and the consolation of Israel, Spirit-led, in faith communing with his God who was the God of Israel? (Luke 2:15). Surely prayerful Zechariah and devout Anna – not to mention Joseph and Mary themselves – were not alone in their faith-communion with their Father? (Luke 1:13; 2:37, etc.) As for Pharisees, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the highest Jewish civil and religious body, and both were disciples of Jesus who stuck by him when others had fled (John 19:38,39; Luke 23:50). We should also note that at least one lawyer found no conflict between his rabbinical studies of the Law and Jesus' interpretation of it; Jesus told him that he was not far from the kingdom (Mark 12:34).

It seems, therefore, untrue and unjust to portray rabbinicism or Pharisaism (let alone Old Covenant Judaism) as empty or

wicked. But what, on the other hand, are we to think of the attempts made in recent years to completely ‘rehabilitate’ the Pharisees? One suggestion is that really Jesus only meant to criticize a minority of them. On this we still agree with HL Ellison:

> It is quite out of the question that mainly non-Jewish readers of the Gospels could have been expected to have known so much about the Pharisees that, without guidance, they could have divided them into two groups to the major of which our Lord’s words did not apply. (*The Mystery of Israel*, p 40)

Another suggestion is that the New Testament is inaccurate, perhaps because its writers ‘contrived settings’ to answer their own contemporary issues. EP Sanders pushed this view in *Jesus and Judaism* and *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*, but we can neither accept this perspective on the New Testament nor find his reasons for it rational. Wright (*Jesus*, 376, etc) has sympathy with Sanders, but is critical of his conclusions about the inaccuracy of the Gospels. The Jesus of the gospels did make stringent criticism of Scribes and Pharisees. For this reason we think that sometimes conservative commentators may be over-influenced by Sanders. Thus for example Longenecker writes:

> As EP Sanders has rightly reminded us, the ‘covenantal nomism’ of first-century Judaism understood Torah observance not as merit-amassing, but as a gladsome response to a loving God who acted on people’s behalf and who asked that they in turn identify themselves as his people by keeping his ordinances. (*Galatians*, p 86)

We can accept that there is truth in this, but one would wonder at the severity of Jesus’ strictures were Pharisees just exhibiting a ‘gladsome response.’ Admittedly the word

translated ‘hypocrites’ simply meant ‘play actors’ without necessarily implying conscious deceit – but the ‘woe to you’ is pretty plain. Though some might make long prayers ‘for a pretence’ (Mark 12:40) to conceal greed and unkindness, the main thrust of Jesus’ attack was that they concentrated on the outside and on religious ordinances, and not on the heart. Nevertheless Jesus’ words to them are couched in the strongest terms. He said all their works were for men’s praise, and he called them ‘sons of hell’, fools, and blind. (Matthew 23:5; 23:15-17). He said that they had omitted judgment, mercy, and faith, and merely kept the trivial details of the Law (Matthew 23:23,24). He called them whitewashed tombs, full of uncleanness and iniquity. He called them serpents and vipers, warning them of their impending judgment. (Matthew 23:23,24). All strong stuff. Longenecker is rightly more cautious in his more recent *Introducing Romans* (p 329ff), saying that the New Perspective is a good corrective but perhaps Sanders and Dunn have swung the pendulum too far!

We have no contemporary rabbinical writings but sources like Philo and Josephus back up the New Testament picture of zeal for the Mosaic Law. Wright speaks of ‘strict interpretation and application of ancestral laws’ as the New Testament impression (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p 182). We do have the later writings of the Mishnah, and can ask two questions about these:

a) What kinds of things did they say?

b) Is it reasonable to believe similar things were said in the first century?

The difficulty on the first point is that the material is very diverse, and this makes it easy to build alternative pictures by selection. Views may diverge as to the centrality of a particular aphorism. Take for example the following passage:

> Antigonus of Soko says we should be like servants who serve their master for the service and not for reward – ‘and let the fear of heaven be upon you. (*Pirke Aboth* 1.3, Living Talmud, Mentor Rooks, p 48)

Our first edition comments on this are worth repeating:

> It is interesting to see how scholars’ comments on this saying reflect their general thesis about rabbinicism. Moore’s work is really an apologetic for the rabbinical tradition and (though worth reading from this point of view) seems to select the better strands of it. Of the above saying, he writes that it ‘stands at the head of… the Pharisaic tradition (p 96). Schürer, on the other hand, is much more critical of rabbinicism and says that it is ‘by no means a correct expression of the keynote of Pharisaic Judaism, which was in fact like the servants who serve for the sake of recompense.’ Third, Edersheim, being himself a Hebrew Christian, is prepared to be critical of rabbinicism while recognizing better strands within it. He points out that this saying of Antigonus was made in times of persecution. ‘These were dark times when God’s persecuted people were tempted to think that it might be vain to serve him’ (vol i, p 95). One might add that the connection between Antigonus and later rabbis is indistinct, and his saying dates back several centuries before those scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus criticized.
>
> Perhaps more noteworthy is the saying of the first century Rabbi Simeon (*Pirke Aboth* 2):
>
> Be alert in reciting the Shema and the prayer. When you pray, do not make of your prayer

> something automatic, but a plea for compassion, a supplication before God, blessed be he.
>
> There is no reason to deny that some of the rabbis said some true and beautiful things; all that we need to note is that the general trend of rabbinic/pharisaic thought had some unfortunate tendencies.

We might now wish to make this point rather more strongly, and the work of the New Perspective is important. The hallmarks of rabbinical Judaism were neither legalistic self-righteousness nor mercenary self-interest. Wright asserts:

> If one said to an articulate first-century Jew 'Why do you keep the Torah?', the ultimate answer would be 'Because I am part of Israel, the chosen people of the creating and redeeming God.' (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p 246)

The conviction that only by achieving greater holiness would Israel become fit for God to use in his salvation plans is parallel to that felt by many Christians seeking to be used by God in the work of his Kingdom.

All humans, however, can be tempted to pride – and the impression from Matthew 23 is that some early rabbis and their followers fell into this. Of the later period, Strack-Billerbeck stated starkly a rabbinical doctrine of merits:

> So, thanks to God's love, the Israelites are God's children, as such, they have received the most precious Divine possession – the Law – through which also the world was made. Just as the Law gave life to the whole world, it also means especially life for Israel. For the Law was only given to Israel so that they could gain reward and merit by it. To that end the study of the Law should be above all; for from study there naturally follows

> observation… Every commandment fulfilled means a merit for the Israelites, earned in the sight of God, while on the other hand every transgression brings on him a portion of guilt in God's eyes. Merits through fulfilment of commandments, and guilt through transgressions, are both entered in the book of heaven. Thus the Israelite has an account with God. (This is a translation from Strack-Billerbeck vol iv, pp. 3-6: *Das Soteriologisehe der Alten Synagogue*. See also Morris *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p 267, Stewart *Rabbinic Theology*, p 128, Jocz *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ*, p 278, and *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, p 272)

This might not have been meant very literally – Oesterley and Box comment that to 'Oriental ears hyperbolic utterance is the normal way of expressing things'. The arguments eg of Neusner & Sanders (*Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*, ch 5) on the genre of the Mishnah, should make us even more wary at reading too much into such dramatic pictures. Jewish theology divided into two branches: the Halakhah and the Haggadah (see especially Herford *Judaism in the New Testament Period*, pp 52-58, also Stewart *Rabbinic Theology*, p 6 et seq, and Edersheim *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol 1, p 11). Halakhah were purely legislative – establishing exactly what one should do in prescribed circumstances. Rabbis did not always agree on these, but, once laws were agreed, they were fixed and authoritative. The Haggadah, on the other hand, 'was only the personal saying of the teacher, more or less valuable according to his learning and popularity… (it) had no absolute authority' (Stewart *Rabbinic Theology*). This being so we often find disagreement amongst rabbis on precisely those wider issues in which we are interested.

This, of course, makes it all too easy to present a one sided view by careful selection of quotations.

To the rabbis, however, veneration for the Torah (Law), was deep, and knowledge of it essential to piety. Even the great Rabbi Hillel, known for greater liberality, reputedly had a maxim: 'The ignorant (*Am-ha-arez*) cannot be pious.' (*Pirke Aboth*, ii, p 5). If you did not know the law you could easily be led astray and, as the Pharisees scornfully remarked about the crowd who followed Jesus, come under God's condemnation (John 7:49).

The issue, in must be emphasized, was generally not about individuals getting tickets to a spiritual heaven – the focus was more national than individual. A widely accepted idea was the maxim that Professor Golding chose to preface his translation of *Pirke Aboth*: 'All Israel has a share in the world to come.' You had to be an exceptional sinner to be excluded. But what they thought was that some people had a greater 'leverage' with God than others. In one sense we also believe this. We can look at Abraham's intercession for Sodom, at Moses' intercession for his people, or, indeed Phinehas whose zeal and action God says:

> … has turned back my wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with my zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in my zeal. (Numbers 25:11)

As Christians we may ask some great man or woman of God to pray for us because we believe that:

> The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:16)

Most Christians believe that there are those who are 'close to God', whose prayers we particularly value. We would not call it 'merit', but we might call them 'saintly' or 'holy' or 'sanctified'. Many evangelicals also feel that if the someone

is ‘deeply into the Word of God’ this signifies a greater piety. We need, perhaps, to try to see the rabbinic debates on ‘merit’ more in this light. There seems no indication that ‘merit’ meant some ethical quality that could be imputed to someone else as in the Lutheran doctrine.

Davies writes:

> The first discussion on the question of merits in the Rabbinic literature occurred between two Rabbis of the first century BC, namely R Shemaiah and R Abtalion. The specific question with which they dealt was, ‘What merit did the Israelites possess that God divided the sea before them?’ Shemaiah taught: ‘Sufficient is the faith, with which Abraham their father believed in me that I should divide the sea before them, as it is said: `And he believed in God and he counted it unto him (ie at the sea) for (doing) charity (with his children)’’ (Genesis 15:6). Abtalion says: Worthy is the faith they (the Israelites themselves) believed in me so that I shall divide the sea before them, as it is said: ‘And the people believed’ (Exodus 4:31). (*Rabbinic Judaism*, p 269)

Marmorstein in *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinic Literature* p 37, points out that at this stage ‘faith’ was the ‘merit’ in view. Again, we may not like the term ‘merit’, but Jesus clearly taught that faith was powerful:

> Jesus turned around, and when he saw her he said, ‘Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ (Matthew 9:21-22; see also 17:20)

Other rabbis suggested it was the merits of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, or the twelve tribes, which caused the Red Sea to part. (Marmorstein p 144, etc; Davies p 270). One rabbi specifically ascribed it to circumcision. Sadly, it seems that

‘merit’ soon came to imply mere works of the Law rather than faith-relation with God.

This is, unfortunately, a danger in all ‘holiness’ movements. What starts as a passion to be close to God and live a faith-life which is powerful in his Kingdom, can degenerate into an elaborate set of rules which indicate whether a person is truly holy. For the rabbis there was a double danger because the Torah, which really did come from God, was elevated to such a degree that many exaggerated claims were made for it, and simply accepting it brought Israel spiritual ‘leverage’.

Alfred Edersheim comments that the Talmud is:

> … full of references to the merits of the just, to the ‘merits and righteousness of the fathers,’ or else of Israel in taking upon itself the Law. (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol 2, p 290)

As for the Gentiles, in theory a Gentile might also achieve ‘merits,’ but in practice there was little hope for him to become part of God’s plans for salvation unless he became a Jewish proselyte. To Jews, Gentiles (who did not keep the law) were ‘common’ (*koinon*), and So Peter says:

> You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. (Acts 10:28)

To associate intimately with Gentiles could compromise Israel’s destiny as the chosen nation and the people of God on earth.

None of this was about individual tickets to a spiritual heaven, but about being God’s people on earth. To the Pharisees (and also in fact for the Essenes) the central badges and marks of the people of God were ‘works of the Law’ (particularly circumcision, diet and Sabbaths), and to be effective in acting out their destiny set by God they had

to meticulously keep an elaborate legalistic version of Torah. To Jesus and Paul in contrast, the distinctive badge of the people of God was a faith life in which passionate love of God overflowed in love for others and a life pleasing to him.

Faith and Faithfulness

Earlier in this book we have insisted that in verses like Romans 3:22 and Galatians 2:16 it should read ‘faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah’ and the various translations that render ‘faith in Christ’ are mistaken.

The phrase here (and in similar verses) is the genitive: *pisteus Iėsou Christou*. It can be read (it is claimed) as either:

> 1) ‘*Subjective genitive*’: faithfulness *of* Jesus the Messiah
>
> or 2) ‘*Objective genitive*’: faith *in* Jesus the Messiah

The arguments are technical, but actually it makes a big difference to the understanding, particularly of Romans 3.

Usually a genitive would be translated as a ‘subjective genitive’ ie ‘the faith(fulness) of Christ’. Arland Hultgren, in his big commentary on Romans, has a section on the issue Though he argues for a different rendering, he admits:

> When the two words *pistiç Xρistou* appear on the page, the most natural way to render them is ‘faith of Christ’ (or ‘Christ’s faith’) Since the word *pistis* can also be translated as ‘faithfulness’ (as Romans 3:3), the phrase can be rendered as (the) ‘faithfulness of Christ’ (or ‘Christ’s faithfulness’). This uncomplicated rendering is fundamental to any debate. (p 625)

So this would be the ‘most natural’ rendering, the old King James version did so, and we argued strongly for it in our first edition of this book. But various commentaries and translations have argued that in these specific cases it should be an ‘objective genitive’ and read ‘faith *in* Christ’. This interpretation is found in Augustine (*On the Spirit and the Letter*, 15). Hultgren (p 655) claims it is found earlier in

Origen, but Mark Reasoner (in *Romans in Full Circle*, p 24) says that Origen left open a subjective reading and made comparison between Jesus' faith in God and Abraham's faith in God which is an argument used today to view the genitive as subjective. Jerome's Latin Vulgate has:

> Justitia autem Dei per fidem Jesu Christi in omnes et super omnes qui credunt in eum: non enim est distinction
>
> The justice of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe in him: for there is no distinction…

This adds the phrase 'in him' but retains the genitive without any hint that it might be 'objective' and so rendered as 'faith in Christ'. Augustine, in the passage quoted above in chapter 2, gives the normal genitive and then *interprets* it as 'faith *in* Christ.'

Certainly Luther adopted the 'objective genitive' reading of Augustine, and since it has been common. But is it plausible?

Paul uses the word 'faith' a lot, though generally without specifying in what. We can note in Pauline use:

- The (dative) '*faith in*' is used four times: faith *in* Christ (*pisteus en Christō*) (Galatians 3:26; Colossians 1:4; 1 Timothy 3:15) faith *in* the Lord (Ephesians 1:15).

- The (accusative) *had faith into* Christ (*eis Christon*) (Galatians 2:16) had faith *into* him (Philippians 1:29).

- The (dative) *believe on* (*epi*) him (Romans 4:5; 4:24; 9:33; 10:11; 1 Timothy 1:16).

- Paul uses the adjective 'faithful' or 'believing' a lot, both of God and of people (eg 'faithful Abraham' Galatians 3:9).

> - The (genitive) '*faith* (*fulness*) *of*' is used by Paul as follows: *faith*(*fulness*) *of* God (Romans 3:3); *faith*(*fulness*) *of* Abraham (Romans 4:16); *faith*(*fulness*) *of* Christ or of Jesus Christ (*pisteus Iėsou Christou*) (Romans 3:22,26; Galatians 2:16; 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; Philippians 3:9); *faith*(*fulness*) *of* the Son of God (Galatians 2:20); *faith*(*fulness*) *of* the energizing of God (Colossians 2:12).

Firstly the grammatical issues. One Greek grammar stated:

> It is as well to remember that in Greek the question is entirely one of exegesis, not of grammar. (Moulton *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol 1, p 72)

Certainly Paul does elsewhere use genitive terms like 'the knowledge of Christ' (Philippians 3:8) and the 'fear of God' (2 Corinthians 5:11) The use of 'faith of God' in such a sense is, though, absent or rare.

Possibly it is in Acts 3:16, though this is far from certain. It could equally well be taken here as a subjective genitive, that is, that the faithfulness of the name of Jesus has made the man well. Having faith in the name is not enough, as the exorcists in Acts 19:13 found out to their cost. The name is faithful to those with faith in God who call on the name, not those with faith in the name itself.

The other verse cited is Jesus words in Mark 11:22 'have faith of God'. Again this is far from clear. The New Testament talks about a 'gift of faith' (1 Corinthians 12:9), and mountains can be moved only if we receive this gift. Where do we get it? Presumably 'of God'. All Christians have faith, but most do not move mountains or wither fig trees, and this may be the kind of thing Jesus has in mind here – in which case the genitive is not objective.

If such a genitive is ever objective, then, it is certainly very unusual, and hence Hultgren's comments. Cranfield in his commentary (p 203) says that the 'subjective genitive' is 'altogether unconvincing' – though he does not say why and can claim only the two uncertain New Testament objective genitive uses of 'faith' outside of Paul in Acts 3:16 and Mark 11:22 On the other hand 'faith into' (*eis*) is used over 40 times outside Paul in the New Testament, 'faith on' (*epi*) four times, and 'faith in' (*en*) in John 3:15.

Richard Hays looks at Paul's other uses of *pistis* followed by a name or pronoun:

> … George Howard tabulates twenty-four such instances of which twenty refer to the faith of Christians, two to the faith of Abraham (Romans 4:12, 16) one to the faith of everyone who believes (Romans 4:5), and one to the faithfulness of God (Romans 3:3). Thus in every instance in which *pistis* is followed by a proper noun or pronoun in the genitive case, the genitive is unmistakably subjective. (*The Faith of Jesus Christ*, p 148)

He adds that in a more recent article Howard has looked at the LXX and found 'It was inappropriate to the Hellenistic Jewish mentality to express the object of faith by means of the objective genitive.'

Various grammatical reasons advanced for an objective genitive in the disputed Pauline passages are flawed as we will now see.

FF Bruce in his 1982 *Galatians* claimed it must be an objective and not a subjective genitive because:

> … when Paul expresses himself by the verb πιστευω [*pisteuō*] and not by the noun πιστις [*pistis*], Christ is the undoubted object of the faith as in the clause immediately following… (p 139)

The clause following is not, however, a genitive, and Paul actually uses the genitive with the verb later in his letter (Romans 4:16 – *pisteus Abraham*) where it is clearly subjective ie 'faith of Abraham' whatever its precise meaning.

Hultgren looked at another argument that when Paul speaks of an attribute of Christ or God (eg 'the peace of God' in Philippians 4:7) he uses the indefinite article 'the'. But this is not always the case for eg in Philippians 1:8 he speaks of 'the compassion of Christ' and In Galatians 1:6 of 'the grace of Christ' and there is no definite article.

Hultgren again argues that Romans 4:16 is irrelevant because 'the faith of Abraham' is not Abraham's personal faith but the 'Abrahamic faith' as it were. But we can compare the structure in Romans 4:16 and 3:26:

> 4:16: also to that out of the faith/faithfulness of Abraham (*tō ek pisteus Abraham*) who is the father of us all
>
> 3:26: that he may be just and the justifier of that out of the faith/faithfulness of Jesus (*ton ek pisteus Iėsou*)

From 4:16 Paul goes on to quote the verse in Genesis about Abraham being a 'father of many nations'. It is out of Abraham's faith/faithfulness that we are now his children, as Romans 4 goes on to explain It is out of the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah that we are justified

Grammatically, then the subjective genitive 'the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah' seems to be the more natural reading, and there is no grammatical objection to it.

So what about the contextual arguments? These seem to favour very much the subjective genitive 'faithfulness of Christ':

1) Parallels

There is every reason to suppose that Jesus would be called ‘faithful’ just as God is. There is a connection between Jesus and the ‘*āman*’ or faithful one in the Old Testament. In Revelation 3:14 Jesus is called the ‘Amen, the Faithful the True.’ In 2 Corinthians 1:18-20 Paul says that God is faithful and that all the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ. Christ is not only called ‘Faithful and True’ (Revelation 3:14; 19:11) but a faithful High Priest and faithful to God. (Hebrew’s 2:17; 3:2). Paul himself says: ‘if we are unfaithful yet he (Jesus) stays faithful’ (2 Timothy 2:13). The similarity of this verse to Romans 3:3 can leave us in little doubt that the concept of Christ’s ‘faithfulness’ is one that would have quite possibly occurred to Paul in Romans 3:22, Galatians 2:16 etc.

2) Alternative terms

Paul could easily have said ‘faith in Christ’ (cf Ephesians 1:15: ‘faith in the Lord Jesus’). His use of the genitive (as in Romans 3:3 and 4:16) would have been the only way to say ‘faithfulness *of* Jesus the Messiah’. . .

3) Immediate context

If we remember that ‘believe in’ and ‘have faith in’ render the same Greek term, then to take it as an objective genitive in Galatians 2:16 would make it really repetitive. It *would* then read:

> … a man is not justified through works of the law but through *faith in Christ*, even we had *faith in Christ* Jesus, in order to be justified by *faith in Christ*, and not through works of the law.

If the phrase is a subjective genitive it reads far more naturally:

> … a person is not justified by works of the law but only by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, even we had faith in Christ Jesus, in order that we might be

> justified on the basis of the faithfulness of Christ and not of the works of the law'. (see also Longenecker *Galatians*, p 81)

This is not repetitious, and makes perfect sense Hultgren argues (p 639) in a subjective genitive reading the middle part about having faith in Christ has no function within the verse This is not true because obviously although Paul's comparison is between what we have done (works) and what Messiah has done (faithfulness), he makes it clear that to *appropriate* this a person needs faith.

Actually in at least four of the six cases where 'faithfulness of Christ' appears, there would be an unusual repetition if the genitive were objective. In 3:22 the objective genitive would read:

> ... the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, unto all who have faith.

Robert Jewett in his commentary (p 276) claims that this is to show the 'social dimension' of faith in early Christianity as 'jargon for participating in the community of the converted.' He does not explain why Paul could not simply have said: 'the righteousness of God unto all who have faith in Jesus Christ'. There *would* be redundancy if the genitive were really 'objective', and Jewett does not explain this away.

4) A better comparison

Both in Galatians and in Romans Paul is comparing the 'faithfulness of the Messiah' with 'works of the law' as a basis for justification. His whole point is that it is not anything *we* have done, but something *Jesus the Messiah* has done. Philippians 3:9 similarly compares 'righteousness of law' with righteousness 'through the faithfulness of Messiah, the righteousness of God based on faith'. In Galatians 2:20-21 it should read:

> I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul's whole point is that it is now Christ who is living *through* him. It is the faithfulness of Christ that enables him to live, and Paul even defines that faithfulness 'who loved me and gave himself for me'

5) A better overall context

Christians believe that, because *everyone* has sinned, the *only way* to be forgiven and accepted by God is through the sacrificial death of Jesus But does this mean that *only* those who '*have faith in Jesus*' can be forgiven and accepted by God in this way? Though Christians often talk loosely as if this were so, plainly it is *not* biblical theology. People like Enoch, Noah, Lot, and Habakkuk were surely forgiven and accepted by God, but it would require some very ingenious arguments to imagine that they had 'faith in Jesus'. Their faith was in God If perhaps Abraham, or David, or Isaiah had some vision of a coming Messiah, even this was hazy – and for most faithful Jews their trust was simply in Yahweh. David, in the extremity of his realisation of guilt in Psalm 51, can only cry out to God to forgive an cleanse him. So if Paul were to write a systematic treatise then surely we would expect him to say as much? *All* those with a true faith *in God* are forgiven and accepted because of what *Jesus the Messiah* did on the cross. Now if Romans 3:22 and 26 are subjective genitives, then Paul *does* say exactly this. He says that it is witnessed in the Law and prophets that:

> The righteousness of God is by the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah on all who have faith (in God)…

This demonstrates how he passed over the sins of Old Testament period people with faith in God because:

> (God) is just and justifies people out of the faithfulness of Jesus.

If Romans 3:22 and 3:26 were really both objective genitives, then Paul would never have dealt with this issue in his systematic Romans treatise, nor, indeed, anywhere else.

These five contextual reasons give very strong evidence for the subjective genitive reading of these verses.

Dunn, on Romans, says that the subjective genitive reading ‘continues to find advocates and has recently gained a wave of renewed support’ (*Romans*, p 166).

In his later commentary (1995) on Galatians 2:16, Dunn says:

> It is now frequently taken in the sense ‘the faithfulness of Jesus Christ;’ that is, Christ’s faithfulness in going to the cross, a covenant faithfulness which made good the unfaithfulness of Israel, or indeed, Jesus’ own faith in God which is now the basis of Christian living and in which Christians now share…

Dunn himself seems to remain unconvinced, though Ben Witherington (in *Grace in Galatia*, pp 179-183) answers in detail all Dunn’s objections.

Longenecker (p 85) sets out the meaning in Galatians well, and cites an increasing number of scholars who have recognized it. Sanders in *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (p 18) makes a similar point, and so does Hays in *The Faith of Jesus Christ*. It has also got into more popular commentaries, eg L Ann Jervis *New International Biblical Commentary: Galatians*. George Lyons in his Galatians commentary favours it.

We will assume the subjective genitive, therefore, in what follows. Its mistranslation in nearly all the translations may make it difficult for readers to follow the arguments if they use their usual version – so we may give our own renderings or those in the commentaries of Wright or Longenecker.

Works and Faithfulness in Galatians

Galatians was not written to combat mythical ‘Pelagians’ who thought one could ‘earn’ salvation by moral perfection. It was not even written to combat Jewish opponents of Christian faith. It was written to counteract *Jewish Christian* teachers who thought that faith in Christ was an essential first step, but that non-Jewish Christians should at least adopt the ‘sign of the covenant’ (cf Genesis 17:11) ie *circumcision*. Their viewpoint was not at all unreasonable. If the Church was to enter into the blessings promised the ‘seed’ of Abraham, then the sign insisted on even for any of Abraham’s *household* should surely be applied? Gentile converts might not have to keep the law (Abraham didn’t) but surely should get the sign of the covenant? The Galatians also seem to have thought that the mark of going on into greater sanctification was adoption of ceremonial regulations (3:3; 4:10) – though perhaps at the expense of concentrating on the qualities which really indicated a vibrant inner life of spiritual faith (5:16-26). Longenecker says:

> Paul seems to be interacting with a typically Jewish attitude, as expressed most clearly in the Talmud, that truth comes in two guises, the first in elemental form and the second in developed form… that Paul’s was an elemental form of the gospel, whilst theirs is the developed. (*Galatians*, p xvcii)

Actually, some at least of the advocates of circumcision may have done so for a quiet life rather than fanaticism (2:14 and 3:12-13) – since they themselves had relaxed some of their stricter observance. But in any event Paul writes to those who have believed into and were baptized into Christ (2:16 and 3:27). So he *begins* his argument with words we can translate as:

> We who are Jews by birth and not ‘sinners of the Gentiles’ and who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but only by the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, even we have had faith into (*eis*) Messiah Jesus, in order that we might be justified on the basis of the faithfulness of Messiah and not on the basis of the works of the law. Because on the basis of the works of the law shall no one be justified. But if, while we are seeking to be justified in Messiah, we are found to be sinners, does that mean that Messiah is a minister of sin? Absolutely not!.. For through the law I died to the law in order that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Messiah… and the life I now live in the flesh is by the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if declaration of right-standing came through law then Messiah died for no purpose. (Galatians 2:15-21 – mostly from Longenecker but we used ‘Messiah’ instead of ‘Christ’).

As a Pharisee Paul had been ‘blameless’ regarding ‘righteousness under the law’. (Philippians 3:6). As we saw, this did not mean *sinless* it meant that as a Jew he had fulfilled the Law’s requirements for atonement for sin. But then he (like them) had believed into Jesus Christ (or Jesus the Messiah), so that God would declare him in right-standing not through ceremonial observances, but by what Jesus Messiah had done – ‘loving me and giving up himself for me’. Verse 17 raises the paradox for Jews, that seeking declaration of right-standing in the Messiah implies recognition that they also are themselves ‘sinners’ in need of a radical solution. Yet the law is upheld in this, for all the requirements of the law were met, because Paul was regarded as having *died* (cf Romans 6–7) in Christ. He is

declared in right-standing *in* Christ, who was 'raised to declare us in right-standing' (cf Romans 4:25). Finally, in verse 21, his most telling argument on the issue *for Christians* – if the Law could deal adequately with the problem then why did Messiah need to die? Galatians 3:1-5 adds another reference to their own experience – if faith was the basis of their receiving the Spirit, then faith should be the basis of their growing in holiness.

From Galatians 3:6 he has to establish that even without circumcision they are true 'heirs of Abraham.' Galatians 3:10-12 argues that the Law cannot create true 'right-standing before God' because there is a curse on everyone who does not do 'all the things in the Law.' Elsewhere he suggests that this means that logically they need to keep *all* the Law if they are circumcised (5:3). Here Paul goes on to cite the key verse from Habakkuk which we can translate as:

> Now it is evident that no man is declared in right-standing before God by the law, for 'the right-standing man by faith will live'. And the law is not of faith. (3:11-12)

The Habakkuk 2:4 verse is nothing to do with how someone gets forgiveness from God, it is (as Sanders and others point out) about the marks of a righteous person. There was, amongst Jews, controversy as to whether this meant by God's faithfulness or by the person's own faith/faithfulness (see Longenecker, p 199). From Romans 1:17 we might conclude that Paul saw it both ways: 'from faithfulness to faith.' And Galatians 3:9 also refers to 'faithful Abraham' Our problem today is that (as we have repeatedly noted in this book) we have been brainwashed into seeing all this as about how to 'get right with God' in terms of forgiveness, and an individual ticket booked for a spiritual heaven. Paul was concerned (and this was the point at issue with the Galatians) about how to *live* in a way which demonstrated a

right-standing with God – a right-standing which indicated that a person was part of the community at the centre of God's salvation plans to bring in a new creation. God's word to Habakkuk is that, in times when the elect seem to be suffering tribulation, the very mark of election/right-standing is not ceremonial observance, but a core faith-relationship with God.

From Galatians 3:19 Paul addresses the obvious question of why the Law was given at all if what he says is true. If faith has always been the mark of a right-standing person, then why give the mosaic Law? The phrase 'because of transgressions' probably means 'to bring about a consciousness of sin in sin-hardened humanity.' (Longenecker p 188). We agree here with Longenecker that Paul was probably not intending to be 'as precise as commentators would like to make him,' but was just making the point that the Law without faith could not anyone righteous or 'alive'. However:

> ... the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by the faithfulness of Jesus Messiah might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor (*paidogogus*) *to bring us* to Messiah, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Messiah Jesus. (Galatians 3:22-6)

The genitive in verse 22 is subjective (Longenecker, p 145), but the phrase 'faith *in* Christ' (*pisteus en Christo*) really *does* appear in verse 26. The law is like a *paidagogus*, an honoured slave in rich families who disciplined a child and took him to his teacher. Presumably Old Testament Jews like Habakkuk would find that the Law operated to direct them

back to their faith-relationship with God, so perhaps at one level the Law *always* directed people to faith because it increased consciousness of sin. This can function to provide boundaries where that relationship is less sure, and to drive us back to the communion of that relationship to meet its demands. But Paul is here speaking in terms of time frames, and says that now 'the faith' (the phrase in both verse 23 and 25) has come. This means specifically Christian faith, 'faith *in* Christ' (v26). With this there is a new consciousness of *sonship* (v26). It was Jesus who first taught us to address God in prayer as 'Abba Father'. Only through Jesus can we come to God as father This then is the point, *everyone* baptized into Christ (the new Covenant when God would write his *law on their hearts*) has *put on* the Messiah and is part of the seed of Abraham promised when Abraham was faithful but uncircumcised. This is really Paul's end point – to argue that to be a part of this one does not have to keep the ordinances of Mosaic Law. Paul continues in Galatians 4 to emphasize this new consciousness of sonship – this is based on the Spirit in our hearts (4:6). In 4:8-11 he applies all this to the non-Jews or Gentiles – pointing out that they did not leave one kind of bondage just to become ensnared by another.

This is an outline, not a critical commentary (for which read Longenecker!), but there are a few further points. First, on boasting. It was not about getting initial forgiveness and a ticket to heaven, but that they wanted to score over each other in terms of holiness (6:4). Others regarded it as a triumph to induce people to accept circumcision (6:13). Neither of these concern 'getting right with God,' but Paul wants none of either. In fact, jealousy, envy and striving are 'works of the flesh' (5:15, 20-1) – all part of a focus on self-effort. The only thing to 'boast' in (6;14) is the cross of Christ, the one through whose faithfulness we are anywhere.

Through this we have ‘crucified the flesh with its passions and desires’ (5:25)

What does Galatians say, then, about how one gets ‘right with God’? Actually not a lot – it is not the main point of the letter, which is to Christians. Paul speaks eg of Jesus the Messiah having died for our sins (1:4); of them having had ‘faith into Christ’ (2:16) and being ‘baptized into Christ’ (3:27). In the Early Church baptism was part of an initial confession – associated with repentance and forgiveness of sin (cf Acts 2:38) and 1 Peter 3:21). Paul would presumably have agreed with the writer to the Hebrews that the ‘elementary teachings’ were ‘repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgement’ (Hebrews 6:1-2).

To the uncircumcised Titus he wrote:

> But when the kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men. (Titus 3:4-8)

The phrase here is not ‘works of the Law’ but ‘works of righteousness’. The point being made is that the ‘good works’ to which they are repeatedly exhorted (the Greek phrase in Titus 2:7, 3:1, and 3:8) flow out of inner spiritual renewal, they don’t bring it about. The air here, like that in

Hebrews, is of a brief reminder of what is well known. There is a similar much quoted passage in Ephesians:

> But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus… For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Again (see 2:11 and 3:1) this is to Gentiles, and it is ‘good works’ and not ‘works of the Law’ which are in view. This is not about justification, but about the basis on which they have been salvaged, and the hint behind being ‘raised with Christ’ is again a reference to being baptized into his death to share his resurrection (cf Romans 6:4). Plainly this was not to do with good works, but involved a willingness to identify with Christ, to admit spiritual death, and to seek in faith for that raising up which only God in his mercy can bring. Actually, in Ephesians Paul is not dealing with mythical ‘Pelagians’ either – but with the peaceful unity in the Messiah of the faithful Jews and faithful Gentiles in *one* ‘new man’. It is about fellow citizenship in the household of God. The faithful amongst the ‘godless’ (a term for those without the Law) and the faithful Jews are now in union.

Paul was always clear that the source and beginning of spiritual life – described as spiritual renewal, ‘salvation,’ etc, was in the mercy of God received through repentance and faith: a step for Christians represented in baptism. NT Wright states:

> Paul's conception of how people are drawn into salvation starts with the preaching of the gospel, continues with the work of the Spirit in and through that preaching, and the effect of the Spirit's work on the hearts of the hearers, and concludes with the coming to birth of faith, and entry into the family through baptism (*What St Paul Really Said*, p 125).

This seems to omit to mention the reaction of the individual who can *choose* a path of resistance to the Spirit or repentance and baptism. This has in a sense always been the choice – and it faced those eg who heard John the Baptist and either accepted the baptism of repentance or rejected God's will and plan for them (Luke 7:30). It faced the hearers of Peter who were urged to 'save yourselves from this crooked generation' – by repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38 and 40). Repentance is a gift of God, and arises in response to the Holy Spirit – but it is a gift which can be accepted or refused (see also the end of our first chapter).

But the Galatians knew all this, and it is not the concern of Paul's letter to them. Nor can his letter be fitted into a response to the kind of 'Reformed' concerns we cited above. Thus take, for example, Galatians 5:3-4:

> You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified [ie shown to be in right-standing] by law; you have fallen from grace.

Now to those who mistakenly think that 'justified' means initial forgiveness and acceptance by God, someone who is seeking to be 'justified by law' cannot be a real Christian at all! Yet clearly Paul is speaking to those who not only are Christians but received the Spirit by faith (3:2). Moreover 'fallen from grace' does not mean that their individual tickets to a spiritual heaven have been cancelled. They are still Christians but their efforts to show their close standing

with God (ie seeking to be ‘justified’) are misplaced because based on legalism and not a dynamic link with Christ. Sadly, many modern holiness movements have fallen into the same trap. Paul is speaking about standing in the purposes of God, and adds ‘in faith we wait for the hope of final declaration of right-standing’ – a part in the coming placing of the sons of God (cf Romans 8:19, etc) which will bring in the new creation.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is complex. He meant it, however, to make sense to *those who received it* in terms of the actual issues they faced. It is in these terms that we must seek its meaning – not in terms of imported theological baggage which relates to Augustine’s concerns 350 years later. Galatians is fundamentally a book about *sanctification* or living out being the people of God, not about ‘getting right with God’. Paul’s fundamental comparison is between reliance on ritual observance as a path to holiness, or on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all those who have faith.

Righteousness, Works and Faithfulness in Romans

Romans is dealing, of course, with a wider set of circumstances and issues than Galatians. In Galatians Paul is dealing with Jewish Christians who are encouraging Gentile converts to be circumcised – so there he speaks to *Christians*, primarily about the basis of their developing sanctification and holiness before God. In Romans we have more of a systematic treatise – and the Jewish 'opposition' he addresses throughout it would not necessarily begin from Christian belief at all. Its fundamental themes, then, as we saw in the previous chapter, are the righteousness of God (especially associated with his relational covenant faithfulness), and the basis of declared right-standing (ie justification) for believers. How could Paul possibly be claiming that a new body, the Church, was now in the centre of God's developing plans for a new creation, that its members did not even need the circumcision sign of the covenant, and yet God had not been unfaithful to his covenant to the Jews? Paul has in a systematic treatise to make sense of his gospel to first century Judaism in general – not just to those already committed to Christ.

NT Wright in *The New Testament and the People of God* (p 268) brings out in detail some fundamental concerns of first century Judaism:

> 1) 'Belief in Israel's election' – of which keeping Torah (the Law) was a badge and sign.
>
> 2) 'The call of Israel has as its fundamental objective the rescue and restoration of the entire creation.'
>
> 3) 'God's righteousness' meaning his covenant faithfulness must be vindicated
>
> 4) Thus there has to be some explanation why Israel was not 'ruling the world as his chosen people should'

The general Jewish answer to 4) was that the fault must be with Israel – sin must be involved. A common view was then that Israel should be patient and faithful and in Wright's words 'keep the covenant with all their might'. A zeal for the 'works of the Law' – ie for scrupulous keeping of the Torah according to tradition – could then be one way in which this was translated into practice.

Paul, in Romans 1:16-11:36, develops his systematic theological treatise and we believe Wright is correct in asserting that this was not fundamentally a treatise about how individuals could get 'right with God,' but about the above issues central to any Jewish theologian. We looked in the previous chapter (and also in *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*, chapter 13) at his development of the theme of two streams of humanity – the proud who suppress the truth in unrighteousness and those who live by faith in God. It is through his faithfulness in dying sacrificially that Jesus the Messiah enabled God to pass over and forgive sin as he declared that people of faith were in rightstanding with him.

But what about the issue of God's covenant faithfulness with Israel? As we have seen, Habakkuk's problem was similar to that of Paul's Jewish contemporaries. How could God be sovereign if the elect nation: a) contained corruption, and b) were being oppressed by Gentiles? Paul re-applies God's response to Habakkuk: there are both Jews and Gentiles who are in rebellion against God, but the righteous lives by faith – from God's faithfulness to faith.

Paul then returns to the issues of God's righteousness ie covenant-faithfulness in 3:1-4: The Jews had the great advantage of God's specific oracles.

> What advantage then has the Jew? Or what is the profit of circumcision? Much every way: first of all that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. For what if some were without faith? Shall their

> want of faith make of none effect the faithfulness of God? God forbid…

‘ Without faith’ could mean ‘lack of faith’ or ‘unfaithfulness’ – to Paul almost the same thing. Though they have ‘the oracles of God’ and God is faithful, if Jews do not follow those oracles on faith basis (like Abraham and Habakkuk) they are rightly judged.

On the whole has Jewish society been any better than Gentile? (Romans 3:9) Well to judge by the words of the prophets Paul goes on to quote there is not much to choose between them!

The first function of the Law to those who accept it is to bring recognition of sin (Romans 3:19). But then in 3:20-21:

> … by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (NASB).
>
> But now God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the law – though the law and the prophets bear witness to it: it is God’s righteousness through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah to those who believe. (NT Wright’s translation)

This is complex. In themselves doing ‘works of the law’ (in particular circumcision, diet and Sabbaths) cannot do anything to show that someone is in rightstanding with God. But the Law and Prophets themselves proclaim the faith-basis of rightstanding, the basis on which the regulations themselves are properly approached. And in the end *God’s* righteousness is based on the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah.

In Romans 2:23 Paul is critical of the ‘boast’ of his Jewish critics. Recent figures like Sanders, Wright, and Dunn are sceptical that the kind of 2nd-3rd century writings about

‘merits’ quoted above from Strack-Billerbeck can be ascribed to first century Judaism – ‘even when attributed to earlier rabbis’ (eg Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p 205). In any event, their real ‘boast’ or ‘glorying’ was in the Torah itself, not in some kind of store of works. Paul’s primary target, then, is those who boast or rejoice *in the Law*. In 5:2, 3 and 11 he speaks of a proper rejoicing, which is in things we have *through our Lord Jesus Messiah* who brought reconciliation and a hope.

Simple external conformity to the Torah regulations was not enough to become part of God’s true people on earth. Jesus, in similar context, had said that their righteousness had to ‘exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees’ for them to ‘enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:20). As Jesus went on to explain, sin could be committed ‘in the heart,’ being part of God’s task force meant getting this right too. Paul’s own acute awareness of this problem is recorded in Romans 7, with his final realization in Romans 8 that the cancellation of condemnation and life in the Spirit was the answer

A person is justified by faith ‘without the works of the Law’ (Romans 3:28). ‘Faith’ is the only basis for justification for Jew and Gentile alike, though this establishes rather than makes void the Law. Romans 4:2 says that Abraham was not justified by works (of the Law), but by faith. In Greek the verb *ergazomai* (which means to work) is a cognate of the noun *ergon* which means deeds or works, and is part of the word group including hired labourers (eg Matthew 20:8). But *ergon* is a much more general word for deed or act. Paul is therefore not necessarily reflecting what his critics thought about ‘works of the Law’, but pushing the term. It is questionable whether they really thought that works of the law ‘earned’ anything in accounting terms, but what Paul is emphasizing is that God chose to ‘count’ Abraham’s faith as righteousness, and this was *charis* (grace).

Paul continues:

> Now (*dé*) to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. (Romans 4:4-5)

'The ungodly' surely cannot refer to Abraham here. Of commentaries, Dunn suggests (p 288) that Abraham is 'ungodly' in the sense of not keeping the Law's statutes – but this seems in accord neither with the Old Testament usage nor Paul's use of 'godly' in the New Testament. In any normal sense Abraham was a 'godly' (if imperfect) man before Genesis 15. Wright suggests (p 492) that God established the covenant with Abraham whilst he was still 'ungodly', but this again would be an odd use of the term; 2 Peter 2:7-8 seems to contrast Noah and Lot with the 'ungodly' though neither had any Abrahamic covenant. Sanday & Headlam (p 101) suggest that Paul is not intending to call Abraham 'ungodly' but to start a new idea in verse 4, and this seems to us the most likely. It links rather with verse 6, where the Psalmist refers to the blessing for the person whose sin is forgiven and to whom God does not account sin. When Paul later (5:6) comments that God loved us and Christ died for us we were still ungodly sinners the meaning is plain enough. But Romans 4:5 remains startling, almost hyperbole in a Jewish context

The promise, in any event, came to Abraham before he had even received circumcision, and this was so that he could be the 'father' of all who, like him, have faith – whether circumcised or not (4:11-12). All this was crucial to Paul's case. Even in announcing the covenant to Abraham, God had spoken of 'many nations' – the implication being that from the start his 'faith descendants' had been intended to include non-Jewish peoples. Romans 4:25 comes back to

specify in what sense exactly the ‘faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah’ has been the central focus of justification: ‘who was put to death for our sins, and raised for our justification’. The faithful of all generations had a part in the death of Christ which fulfilled the Law’s requirement on sin; but in raising him from the dead God also declared the faithful to be in a right-standing. Again we reiterate, specifically faith *in* Christ, something possible only after his incarnation, does not really appear between 1:18 and the end of Romans 4, and is really expanded only in Romans 6 onwards.

The meaning of righteousness and works are also important to our understanding of what Paul says about Jews and Gentiles. In Romans 9:30-32, for example, we read:

> What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.

By now we should all be clear that ‘righteousness’ means a right-standing with God, not some kind of moral lifestyle. Paul was not saying that the Jews failed to lead a moral lifestyle whilst non-Jews suddenly found themselves leading one! Paul seems to be saying is that the Law is being totally fulfilled only through the Messiah – which to others was just a stone of stumbling.

Cranfield explains it that they:

> ... in their legalistic quest after a righteous status of their own earning have failed to recognize and accept the righteous status which God was seeking to give them; for all along, had they but known it,

> Christ was the goal and meaning and substance of that law which they were so earnestly pursuing, and the righteousness to which the law was summoning them was all the time nothing other than that righteousness which God offers to men in Christ. (*Romans*, p 520)

To reiterate, neither this nor chapter 11 is fundamentally about which individuals will go to some kind of spiritual ‘heaven’. It is about the plans of God to salvage humanity, and the role in this which Israel will play. It is about the Jewish concerns cited at the start of this sub-section. Paul was concerned about individuals, and his message of repentance was noted at the end of our previous chapter. But this is not the focus of this part of Romans.



Chapter 4: Chosen and Elect

Types of 'Election'

The subject of this chapter is the Greek word *eklektos*, which is translated in our versions either as 'chosen' or 'elect'. This is used in the New Testament in six main contexts (using the noun, adjectival or verbal forms of the word):

1) *Of Christ*: Luke 9:35; 23:35; 1 Peter 2:4; 2:6 (and Isaiah 42:1)

2) *Of the Church in Christ*: Romans 8:33 (16:13); Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:2; 2:9; 5:13; 2 Peter 1:10; Revelation 17:14. (Matthew 24:22-31; Mark 13:20-27; [Luke 18:7?])

3) *Of the nation of Israel*: Acts 13:17; Romans 9:11; 11:28 (and Isaiah 45:4; Deuteronomy 7:7)

4) *Of believers within the nation of Israel*: Romans 11:5,7

5) *Of the twelve disciples*: Luke 6:13; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16,19; Acts 1:2,24-25

6) *Of Paul*: Paul occupied a special position as an 'apostle of Christ' with the others, and is thus called a 'chosen vessel' in Acts 9:15. See also Acts 22:14; 1 Corinthians 9:1,15, etc

The verses 'many are called, but few are chosen' are dealt with at the end of the chapter. The only other uses of the word 'choice' or 'election' are in Luke 10:42; 14:7; Acts 6:5; 15:7; 15:22; 15: 25; Romans 16:13; 1 Corinthians 1:27,28; 1 Timothy 5:21; James 2:5; 2 John 1,13, but none of these is important to our topic. (See *The New International*

Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol 1, p 539 for a more analytical listing.)

What did the New Testament writers mean to convey by the word *eklektos*? The primary idea in the above cases seems to be that God has bestowed an office. The word ‘election’ today carries connotations of voting and *selection*; but the main idea in the New Testament seems to be one of responsibility and being given a task to perform. God, in a sense ‘selects’, but the choice is not arbitrary. Jesus was not arbitrarily selected to be the Messiah, the beloved Son, the Chosen one of God.

In this sense election seems to be close to the concept of a ‘calling’ or vocation. God bestows an office, and with it he also gives a ‘name’ or ‘calling’ to the agent concerned. This being so, it is possible to refuse to live up to that calling, ie to fail in the task that we have been chosen to do. We cannot, of course, ‘un-call’ ourselves! If God has chosen us for an office then it is not possible for us to cancel his choice. We can, however, refuse to perform the task concerned, and he may then decide to remove us from it. If we think of King Saul, he could not cancel God’s decision to give him office he was even filled with the Spirit and given the gift of prophecy (1 Samuel 10:10)! But, as we know, his disobedience and lack of faith caused God to remove the office from him (1 Samuel 13:13-14).

It may be difficult for us today to grasp these aspects of the meaning attached to the word ‘chosen’ by the Hebrews. It will therefore be useful to illustrate them by looking at some of the ‘elections’ mentioned above. We will see both similarities and differences in these different elections, and it is important that we clearly distinguish what is meant in each case.

The Election of the Twelve Disciples

Some of the aspects of this may be set out as follows:

a) Jesus chose twelve from all his followers

> … he went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples to himself; and from them he chose twelve whom he also named apostles (Luke 6:12-13; the word ‘apostle’ means ‘messenger’).
>
> And he went up on the mountain and called to him those he himself wanted. And they came to him. Then he appointed twelve, that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach… (Mark 3:13-14)

b) All twelve were chosen – Judas too

> Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?’ He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray him, being one of the twelve.. (John 6:70-71)

In 1 Corinthians 15:5 Paul shows that ‘the Twelve’ was seen as an official position.

c) Jesus foreknew their reactions

> … you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be

> fulfilled, ‘He who eats bread with me has lifted up his heel against me.’ (John 13:14-18)

d) The apostolic task was to witness to Jesus’ life and resurrection

> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit… And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:16,27)
>
> Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection’. (Acts 1:21-22; see also Acts 1:2-3; 3:15)
>
> Him God raised up on the third day, and showed him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us … And he commanded us to preach to the people’. (Acts 10:40-42)

e) Judas fell from God’s chosen office for him

> For he (Judas) was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry … ‘Let another take his office.’ Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us … one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection’ … And they prayed and said, ‘You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two you have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. (Acts 1:17-25)

Since Augustine, various theologians have viewed ‘election’ as an irresistible ticket to blessing, rather than as the

bestowal of an office. For these schools, the words ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’ have therefore been made into an assertion about God selecting who should become Christians and so be saved. But in fact the whole passage is definitely addressed specifically to the twelve disciples. In John 13:5 we read that Jesus began to wash the disciples’ feet. In John 13:12 we read that when he had washed their feet he sat down and began to talk to them. Verse 16 refers to their task as ‘servants’ who are to be ‘sent’. In verse 18 he says that not all will follow his words. He ‘knows’ or ‘understands fully’ those whom he has chosen, and realizes that the Scriptures will be fulfilled that one of them will betray him. This verse is markedly similar to John 6:70 – ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?’ The word *chosen* refers to his choice of them: as apostles, not to the election of believers. Verse 18 finishes with a reference to ‘he who eats bread with me’, and verse 21 reemphasizes that it is one of them, ie one of *the apostles*, who shall betray him. The whole discourse is addressed to the twelve apostles, and, after Judas leaves, to the remaining eleven. In John 14:26 Jesus promises them that the Holy Spirit will teach them all things and remind them of what he has told them. This verse is surely a key verse concerning their special authority as apostles, to set out Christ’s teachings; it applies to them in a way it has not applied to anyone else. John 15:3 continues the pattern with a reference back to 13:10, again concerning the eleven. John 15:27 refers specifically to their apostolic function as witnesses – reminding us, among other verses, of the Acts 10:40 reference to ‘witnesses *chosen* before by God’. The whole of the last supper discourse, then, even up to 18:1 where Jesus rose with his disciples, is addressed to the apostles as his chosen witnesses. Some of his words, to be sure, we may apply to other Christians as well, but we must be careful which of his words we use in this way. Verses like John 14:26 and 15:27 refer specifically to aspects of their ministry as

apostles, and no direct application may be made to others. With this in mind, what are we to understand from John 15:16: ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you’? Both of these words *chosen* and *appointed*, are words the Gospels use in definite reference to their apostleship. In Luke 6:13 we see how Jesus chose twelve, and he says in John 6:70 ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve…’ In Mark 3:14 we read how he appointed twelve to preach and receive authority. It is, therefore, very difficult indeed to see how John 15:16 could conceivably be referring to anything other than Jesus’ choice and appointment of them *to be apostles*. There is no thought whatsoever that this ‘choice’ might concern whether or not they would believe, or whether they went to heaven or to hell.

The first key point, then, about ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’ is that it referred to their election as apostles. The second key point is that it was linked specifically to their *appointment*, ie to apostolic office. The appointment was a freewill choice of Jesus, but whether to fulfil the office was their own decision. Thus Judas himself was chosen with the other eleven, but ‘fell’ from his office. This is very important. Jesus says: ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?’ John goes on to emphasize that Judas was ‘one of the twelve’. Jesus does *not* say: ‘I have chosen eleven of you but the other is a devil’. The election of Judas was no different from that of the others. Peter does not say that Judas was never really an apostle; he says that he fell away from the apostolic ministry.

As we describe in detail in chapter 7 below, Augustine tried to make ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you,’ apply to all believers as an irresistible choice. Since, however, Jesus definitely said the words to Judas, Augustine had to get around the problem that Judas was not thereby set on an irresistible path to salvation. The net effect is this: on one hand he had to confuse together two elections (ie *the*

apostles versus *the Church in Christ*) – which are quite separate in the New Testament, and on the other hand he has to make the election of Judas and the other eleven into two *different kinds* of election – although they are not distinguished in the New Testament. As a result he got himself into a remarkable and unnecessary tangle.

The point is that this election was not about whether a person went to heaven or to hell; it was the bestowal of an office and a task. There are two aspects of such a bestowal; over one aspect a person's will has control, and over the other it does not. The disciples' own wishes could not determine Jesus' choice of apostles, nor could they appoint themselves to the office. Jesus said: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.' They did not choose to have the calling (or naming) applied to them; that choice was made in God's free strategy. It was based on his foreknowledge, but was not directed by any human will. The office, calling, and task to fulfil, were ordained by God alone. What God did not ordain was how they would match up to the task he had allotted them. Eleven of them chose to fulfil their calling through the power of the Spirit. Not, of course, that they could do anything in their own strength. 'Without me,' said Jesus, 'you can do nothing' (John 15:5). It is possible to wage Christ's warfare only if one is fighting in him and in the strength of his might. We cannot achieve the task God gives us without his aid and he does not expect us to. There is, however, something on which his aid is conditional. Note carefully Paul's words in Romans 7: 'in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells.' Man is bound to sin, sold under sin, carnal, hopeless, impotent. But, after this most complete statement of human depravity, Paul goes on:

> I can will what is right but I cannot do it. (v18, RSV)

or

> I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. (v18, ESV)

God wants us to have a willingness to perform the task; he supplies the means. In the eleven faithful apostles, although the ‘flesh was weak’, the ‘spirit indeed was willing’ (Matthew 26:41). This was what God wanted of them – willingness – and he would not force it on them. But although the eleven were willing to perform their task through God’s power, Judas was not. He had received the same calling, he had been chosen and appointed to the same office, he had shared in the ministry of that office, but he fell away from it. Peter does not say that God made Judas fall away, he simply says that he did fall away. It was his own choice. It was not that he could somehow un-choose or un-call himself, for both the calling and election were Jesus’ decision. What Judas could, and did, do was to fall away from the ministry he had been given, and so forfeit the blessing he could have brought and enjoyed.

The election of the apostles was unmerited. It was an office none of them had earned, and none had taken for himself. It was an unmerited privilege, but (as always in God’s dealings) it involved responsibility of like proportion. Being named as an apostle brought the great opportunity to be built by God into the foundations of the Church of Christ (Revelation 21:14). But to that one who fell from this ministry, his privilege turned to great condemnation and crushing guilt at the enormity of his sin. Privilege from God is an opportunity for blessing, but also for condemnation. The same principle applies to the election of Israel (see below). Not only salvation but also condemnation came to ‘the Jew first and also the Greek’ (Romans 2:9,10). Election is an office, a responsibility, a privilege. It is never an irresistible selection for final blessing. God, of course, assigns callings according to his foreknowledge. But although Jesus may have known the hearts and reactions of

those he chose, nevertheless his choice of Judas was no different from his choice of John. He said that he knew a disciple would betray him, but he did not cause Judas to fall.

The Election of the Nation of Israel

The election of Israel shows many similarities to the election of the apostles. Some of these may be summarized into sections similar to those used for the apostles:

a) God chose them alone from all the nations

b) The whole nation was chosen

c) God knew in advance what their reactions would be

d) Their task was to prepare the way for the Messiah to bless the world, and then 'arise and shine' with him

e) Some fell away from God's purpose for them.

Other similarities also exist: the choice of the nation of Israel, like that of the apostles, did not determine their final destiny as individuals; it had nothing to do with whether they went to heaven or to hell. In fact, in Romans 2 and 9 Paul strongly attacks the idea that national election was a pledge of national salvation. In *Enchiridion* chapter 25, Augustine made it clear that he took this whole passage of Romans (including 9:11) to imply that Esau was damned and Jacob was saved. This is, however, a strange interpretation. Since the context is speaking of the two nations Israel and Edom (see chapter 9 in *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*), it would imply that all Edomites were damned and all Israelites were saved. This is, ironically, exactly the view that Paul is attacking in Romans 2 and 9!

The election of Israel in Romans 9:11 concerned the office and function to which the nation was called in this earthly life, not to anyone's eternal destiny. Its only connection with the issue of heaven and hell was that the greater responsibility it brought would give greater opportunity for blessing if they repented and greater condemnation if they rejected God's plan for themselves. Both salvation and condemnation came to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. Like the election of the apostles, the election of Israel was

unmerited and unearned. Jesus said: ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’; Paul said of the choice of Israel:

> … it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy (Romans 9:16).

God’s choice of (the nation of) Israel was declared while Israel and Edom were both still in the same womb. It was not earned, either by works or by foreseen works. Their election was not something they took for themselves. It was a choice made in God’s free strategy. We are not told whether this was just because he had to pick one (since they could not both be in the line to the Messiah) or whether God foreknew when he made the choice, what Jacob’s (and Israel’s) reaction would be. It may even be that we can discern something in the attitudes of Jacob and Esau that explains the choice (though it certainly is not ‘works,’ for Jacob’s behaviour was far from exemplary!)

Though Israel’s election by God was free, unmerited, and unearned, the privilege it brought was accompanied by great responsibility. God had put his name upon the sons of Israel (Numbers 6:27) and they had to live up to this calling (or *naming*). Some of them were reprobate and failed in this, and therefore the name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles (Ezekiel 36:20; Romans 2:24). Jews who did not live up to the task that was implied by their chosenness lost the blessing God intended. In Paul’s day this was true of those who failed to arise and shine as God intended when the great light of Jesus came to them (Isaiah 60:1). If they refused to repent and become part of a golden vessel to shine forth bringing honour to God, they would be under his wrath and be used instead as a vessel for no-honour. The great thing about God is that he is able, in his foreknowledge, to make use even of those who rebel against him. So, although Judas rejected him, God used this rejection to set in motion the events leading to Christ’s

atoning death. Similarly, although some Israelites fell away, God used them to stimulate others to repentance (see chapter 12 in *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*).

There is one important difference between the election of the twelve disciples and that of Israel: Israel, unlike the disciples, had a strong corporate aspect – it was the *nation* which was the elect rather than the individuals in it who were elect. God obviously did not choose to make certain people into Jacob's descendants. Rather, it was because they were such descendants that they were elect. Being born into the nation, they were born into its election. But this was not the *only* way for a person to enter the election of the nation. Ruth is an example of someone who did not enter this election by birth but by choice. Ruth said to Naomi:

> Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

It was clearly her own choice to become a proselyte to the Jewish nation and faith. In entering the nation she entered also its election. We see this clearly from the fact that she was the great grandmother of King David, and so was an ancestor of Jesus himself (Ruth 4:22; Luke 3:23-32). We must remember that the whole election of the nation, as announced to Abraham, was with the object of preparing for a seed (Christ) through whom all nations would be blessed. Ruth, although she entered the election of the nation by choice and not by birth, partook of that election so completely as to become part of the line of descent to that seed. Ruth was not chosen to become part of the nation of Israel – rather, in becoming part of that nation she entered its chosenness.

The Election of Believers Within Israel

We must now also consider a slightly different use Paul makes of the word elect. Not only does he regard the whole nation of Israel as elect, but he also speaks of a remnant within the nation who are ‘according to an election of grace’ (Romans 11:5-7, or ‘grace-election’).

Since the first edition of this book back in the 70s we have been encouraged in reading various scholarly works, in particular the detailed works of NT Wright. He writes for example:

> Chapter 9 has long been seen as the central New Testament passage on ‘predestination,’ though as we shall see the theological tradition from Augustine to Calvin (and beyond) did not grasp what Paul was actually talking about here. (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, p 620)

Although we do not always share an identical perspective with NT Wright, consideration of some of his material shows that not only was Paul dealing with problems central to his national theology, but that his answers show a ‘falling into place’ of ideas in tension in other Jewish traditions. A concern with the ‘Righteousness of God’ was closely bound up with demonstration of God’s covenant faithfulness. How could it be that the elect nation of Israel was not fulfilling her destiny as a light for the Gentiles at the centre of a divine rule? When Paul takes up these issues in Romans 9–11 he is not dealing with some side issue, but with an issue central to any first century Jew. His answer (an elect within the elect) is also a development of, rather than break from, some strands of contemporary Jewish theology. One difference is that Paul saw *faith* as central to that inner election rather than stricter adherence to *works of the Law*. Faith was both a badge of membership of that elect and also the means by which ultimately the destiny of that elect –

the elect Israel as representative humankind in fulfilment of the task failed by Adam – would be achieved.

In our chapter 2 we saw how in Romans Paul develops the idea of two streams of humanity: the repentant and the unrepentant. We saw how Paul establishes that there are two sections in Israel as well as among Gentiles. He establishes (as we saw in our chapter 3) that the only basis for real righteousness is Christ's work and faith in God – not works. Then, in Romans 4–8, Paul leaves the theme of the two streams of humanity in order to deal with the mechanics of justification and salvation finishing with thoughts on the future of the Church. In chapters 9–11 Paul returns to deal with the Jewish question in more depth, and so returns again to the theme that there are two sections in Israel, and God now has made the one lump of Israel into two separate vessels.

Paul notes that the Jews are *pursuing* (Romans 9:31) or *seeking* (Romans 11.7) a declared right-standing before God. They are in fact, so obsessed with it that, in comparison, the Gentile interest is as nothing:

> What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law… For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone [who has faith]. (Romans 9:30-32; 10:3,4. The words 'who believes' have been replaced by 'who has faith' for greater clarity.)

Romans 10 continues to explain that all the ‘work’ necessary has been done by Christ. Confession and faith in him are all that is needed. Then, in chapter 11, Paul returns to the contrast between faith-grace and works-law:

> Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace [*the NKJV here adds a clause not in the Greek*]. What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it. (Romans 11:5-6)

What Israel sought was obtained only by those who had sought it in God’s way (by faith) and so had obtained his grace. Many rabbis believed that entry into the nation of Israel (by birth or choice) and acceptance of the ‘works of the Law’ (in particular the sign of circumcision, diet and sabbaths), in itself signified God’s declaration of their right-standing before him and their entry into his ‘election’ purposes for Israel the chosen people. Paul denies this, for to be part of the ‘election’ of the nation is insufficient; a person must also be part of the ‘election of grace’. How can a person do this? Paul does not reiterate it in Romans 11:7, but he has already given us the answer: it is by confession and faith. God did not issue some arbitrary fiat as to who should partake of the election of grace. Grace is given to those who seek it in God’s way of repentance and faith-relationship.

This may be seen in Paul’s development in these chapters of the ‘remnant’ idea in the Old Testament. In Romans 9 he uses various allegories to show that not all of Israel are living up to what their name, heritage, and election signify. In Romans 9:21 he affirms that although, in Jeremiah’s parable of the potter, God treats nations as units, he has now divided the lump of Israel to make two vessels. Paul

then makes a digression dealing with Gentiles, and returns to deal with Israel in Romans 9:27-29:

> Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved. For he will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth.’ And as Isaiah said before: ‘Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah’.

This quotation is from the very first chapter of Isaiah, where the Lord adds:

> 'If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword’… ‘Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and her penitents with righteousness. The destruction of transgressors and of sinners shall be together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. (Isaiah 1:19-20,27-28, RSV)

Only those who repent and are faithful will form a remnant to rebuild the nation. Thus he later says:

> And it shall come to pass in that day, that the remnant of Israel, and such as have escaped of the house of Jacob, will never again depend on him who defeated them, but will depend on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the Mighty God. For though your people, O Israel, be as the sand of the sea, a remnant of them will return. (Isaiah 10:20-22)

If the Lord had not let the faithful remnant live, then the nation would have ceased to exist – just as Sodom did. These passages of Isaiah certainly vindicate Paul's assertion that there has always been a believing and an unbelieving part within Israel.

Turning to Paul's other reference we find it in 1 Kings 19:17,18:

> … whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.

Strictly literally, the Hebrew in both these verses is in the past tense, but both verses clearly refer to future events (the LXX reads: 'you shall leave in Israel seven thousand men'). The meaning is that in the coming civil war, amidst all the carnage, God will preserve seven thousand men who have stayed faithful to him. As is common in Hebrew, the coming events promised by God are regarded as so certain as to be put in the past tense. Paul himself recognized this practice (cf Romans 8:30) and must surely have understood its usage in Kings; although in Romans 11:4 he translates the Hebrew literally: 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'

Paul's citation of this particular incident may reflect some of the personal anguish he felt for Israel: although so many of the Israelites have rejected his gospel, his heart yearns for his people. As a true Hebrew his whole being revolts at the idea that God has cast off his people (Romans 11:1; 10:1). So he turns to consider the time when, as far as Elijah was concerned, things looked even blacker. Elijah thought that he alone was left; God must now have given them up. Yet God could say that seven thousand were still faithful to him and would be spared in the coming judgment meted out by

his two anointed kings and his prophet. The story, then, illustrates two things. It shows that there has always been a faithful and an unfaithful section in Israel. It shows that even in the blackest periods many have remained faithful.

What decided whether or not a person was part of this remnant? Isaiah had testified that much of the Law was kept even by those whom God condemned (Isaiah 1:10-17 and cf Matthew 23:23,24). Elijah says that the altars and methods of fulfilling the Law have been destroyed, and since the seven thousand lived in the northern kingdom they did not even have the Temple. Yet God accepted them – so it could not have been 'works of the Law' that made them right with him. Paul does not draw out these points in Romans 11, but simply says in 11:5-7:

> Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace, and if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace... What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded.

This shows some resemblance to Romans 4:14-16:

> For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void… Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed

The phrase 'according to' (Greek: *Kata*, with accusative) is rather imprecise, but clearly to Paul a blessing that has to be appropriated by faith is still 'according to grace', in contrast to one that depends on works of the Law. Works makes 'void' both grace and faith, for grace and faith are complementary. Thus from God's point of view what distinguished the remnant was that they were living on a principle of grace; while from their own point of view the path to living in grace was through repentance and faith.

Has God cast off his elect nation of Israel? No, for there is also within the nation a remnant who are *choice* as far as grace is concerned, an election of grace. It is not enough to enter into the choice nation, one must enter also into the *chosenness* of grace. Israel, apart from the remnant, did not manifest the right-standing they sought, because they sought it through mere external conformity to ritual and law and not through faith. Only the remnant who sought it in God's way achieved it. The rest were blinded to the clear indications of the messiahship of Jesus. In Romans 11:8 Paul quotes the prophecy:

> God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see.

So does this mean that God stops them repenting? No it does not. Paul also says:

> But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:14-16)

To the rabbi Paul it must have seemed extraordinary that when his unbelieving fellow Jews read (say) Isaiah, the Messiahship of Jesus was not obvious. They were 'blinded,' but if they turned to the Lord in true repentance then he was confident that the blindness or veil would be removed.

Because they focused on works of the Law as central, they 'stumbled' at the 'stumbling stone' (Romans 9:33; 11:11). Paul asserts, however, that this stumbling is not final (Romans 11:11), but that eventually the temporary hardness on the part of Israel will cease 'and so all Israel will be saved,' Romans 11:26. Cranfield's commentary lists the four options for the meaning of this:

i) all the elect, Jews and Gentiles

ii) all the elect of the nation of Israel

iii) the whole nation Israel, including every individual member

iv) the nation Israel as a whole, but not necessarily including every individual member (vol ii p 576).

Cranfield goes for iv) and rejects i) out of hand because he says that 'Israel' must mean the same in verse 26 as in verse 25 where it refers to the nation. Yet in Romans 9:6 Paul has said 'They are not all Israel who are of Israel' using the same term differently even in the same sentence. We believe i) is the most likely meaning. It is interesting that NT Wright (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, p 689) says that he has now come around to the same view. Paul goes on in 11:26-7 to speak of a deliverer 'turning ungodliness from Jacob', a kind of composite quote from Isaiah 59:20-21. But other new Covenant prophesies have similar apparent reference just to national Israel:

> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

Hebrews 8:10 very plainly applies this to the New Covenant – *now* at the present time – and the assumption is that it applies both to Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ who look to Jesus as their great high Priest.

So Israel the nation remain the nation descended from Abraham, and to them naturally belong the promises and the Land of Israel. But the true Israel, the spiritual people of God, are the Church – Jews and Gentiles – the body of Jesus the Messiah.

The Election of Christ

The election of Christ shows differences as well as similarities to the other elections already dealt with. In the book of Isaiah God speaks of the coming Messiah in similar terms to those used about Israel. To Israel he says:

But you, Israel, are my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen... You are my servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away. (Isaiah 41:8-9)

We may note that the chosenness of Israel is linked with their task of servanthood in a high percentage of times that it is mentioned, for example 1 Chronicles 16:13; Psalms 89:3; 89:19; 105:6; 105:42,43; Isaiah 65:15.

Jewish theology regarded the nation of Israel as representative humankind, fulfilling the task in which Adam and Eve failed. The 'suffering servant' parts of Isaiah were applied to Israel (see also *The New Testament and the People of God* by NT Wright where this is explained in great detail). The theology of Jesus, Paul and the apostles saw the Messiah as focusing in himself the election task of Israel for the nations – the true 'seed of Abraham' in whom all nations would be blessed. So later parts of the servant songs of Isaiah, whilst still in some senses referring to Israel, referred in greater focus to the Messiah:

> Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One
> in whom my soul delights! I have put my Spirit
> upon him; he will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.
> (Isaiah 42:1)

The Messiah, like the nation, was chosen to do a task. *He* was chosen to be the suffering servant who would be a light to the Gentiles. The same idea recurs in Isaiah 49. In verse 3 God says: 'You are my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' He seems, however, to be giving this task to

Israel's Messiah, for he is the One who fulfilled Israel's task of bringing God glory.

The first of the tasks assigned to him is to 'bring Jacob back' and gather Israel to God (v5). The second task is: 'I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be my salvation to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:6; see also Luke 2:32). The next verse again introduces the idea of the chosenness of the Messiah to whom God speaks – though the LXX introduced it even earlier in the passage by translating verse 2: 'He has made me a choice (*eklekton*) arrow.' We also, incidentally, see a reference in verse 2 to the type of weapon the Messiah will use: he has made my mouth like a sharp sword.

But, although the Messiah has been chosen for a task, there is no strong idea of *selection* here. It would be strange if not blasphemous to think of God as passing by other 'possible candidates' for the Messiahship. The nearest that the Bible seems to come to such an idea is in Isaiah, where the Lord says that he 'looked but there was none to help' and so his own right arm brought him victory. But this is far from a passing by of other 'candidates' – it is a total lack of them! Jesus was *the* eternal Son. No one else was good enough to pay the price of sin. The word 'chosen' implies not selection but *belovedness* and *appointment* in this context.

We may understand this better if we realize the close connection between the words *eklektos* (chosen) and *agapētos* (beloved) in reference to Christ. This is shown most clearly in the way in which the Gospel writers translate into Greek the words which God spoke, (presumably in the Aramaic language) during the transfiguration of Christ. Matthew renders it:

> This is my beloved (*agapētos*) Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him! (Matthew 17:5, NASB).

Mark is similar:

> This is my beloved (*agapētos*) Son, listen to him! (Mark 9:7, NASB)

Luke, however, renders the same words using the Greek word for chosen:

> This is my Son, my Chosen (*eklelegmenos*) One; listen to him! (Luke 9:35, NASB)

We thus see that when the word ‘elect’ or ‘chosen’ is applied to Christ, its primary meaning is not one of selection, but one of belovedness. The point may also be illustrated from Matthew’s rendering of Isaiah 42:1. The Hebrew of Isaiah reads:

> Behold, my Servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom my soul delights.

The LXX quite naturally renders the word ‘chosen’ by the Greek *eklektos*, but Matthew does not follow the LXX in this instance. Instead in 12:18 he renders the Hebrew using the Greek word *agapētos* (beloved), thus:

> Behold! My servant whom I have chosen, my beloved (*agapētos*) in whom my soul is well pleased!

Matthew, therefore, uses the word *beloved* as a substitute for the word *chosen* in this context. This type of interpretation of the word chosen is not unlike that of the LXX itself when if speaks of choice silver (Proverbs 8:19) or describes a beautiful girl as ‘choice as the sun’ (Song of Solomon 6:10 – *eklektos* is used in a free rendering of a Hebrew word meaning ‘pure’ or ‘clear’). The emphasis is not on selection, but on the value set on the object described.

We may, at first, find it strange that Matthew has apparently rendered a Hebrew word meaning ‘uphold’ by a Greek word meaning ‘chosen’. It may help us to understand this if we note that the Greek word which Matthew uses is not the normal word for chosen, but a rarely used word *hairetizō*,

which is from the same root as *haireō* meaning to ‘take’ or to ‘take up’ and so we can see that there is at least some connection, even if Matthew’s rendering is a free one.

Only three other verses in the New Testament refer directly to Christ’s chosenness. In two of them the connection with belovedness is marked (the other reference is Luke 23:35, where Luke renders the Aramaic words of the crowd as: ‘let him save himself if he is the Christ, the chosen of God’). So, in 1 Peter 2:4 we find that Christ is: ‘a living stone… chosen by God and precious’ and in 1 Peter 2:6 that he is ‘a chief cornerstone, elect, precious’. The double linking of the election of Christ to his preciousness to God, ie his *belovedness*, shows us the connotation of the term.

We must, therefore, bear this link in mind when we consider the election of Christ. Since also the Church is elect in Christ we will find that the same link is important to the next part of this chapter.

The Election of the Church

The central idea in the election of the Church may be seen from Ephesians 1:4 – it is that we are chosen *in Christ*. The Church is elect because it is in Christ, and *he*is elect. There is, moreover, a task involved in the election. The previous verse of Ephesians states that God has 'blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.' This is, indeed, a blessing, but it is also a call to battle. As we saw in chapter 3 in our first volume, it is in the heavenlies that the battle against powers of wickedness is raging (Ephesians 6:12). Being chosen in Christ implies that we are to fight in the armour which he wore as Messiah, the armour of God (Ephesians 6:11; Isaiah 59:17). This is our calling, our vocation, and God's chosen task for us in Christ. We have already seen how the words of Isaiah 49 apply to the Messiah, describing his task as to bring back Israel, and to act as a light to the Gentiles. We know that the Church also has to act as the 'light of the world' just as Christ is the ' light of the world' (compare Matthew 5:14 with John 8:12). It is not surprising, therefore, to find Paul and Barnabas applying Isaiah's words about being a light of the Gentiles to their own task as part of Christ's body, the Church (Acts 13:47 quotes the LXX of Isaiah 49:6). They have taken up the task of the chosen One of God, for they are part of his body and share in his chosenness. We also find that God's description of the Messiah in Isaiah 49:3 as One, 'in whom I will be glorified' may be extended to the Church in Christ. Thus in Ephesians 3:21: 'to him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus to all generations…'

Later in the Church's history rather different ideas arose concerning the election of the believers, perhaps because the original word meanings became obscured – in part this was because for post-5th-century theologians, Latin rather than the Greek was the language used for the New

Testament. Since the early fifth century a most common idea concerning election is that it determines who should *become* Christians, ie who should repent. As such God became pictured as selecting some to be made to repent, and passing over others whom he could equally well have selected had he so wished (the spread of this new system, introduced by Augustine, and it's fallacy, is dealt with in detail in chapter 7). This idea remains all too common but is simply not taught in Scripture. The Bible does *not* say that we are chosen *to be put into* Christ, but that we were chosen *in* Christ. Our election is not separate from his election. The meaning of Christ's election was certainly not that he should repent, and since it is this same election that we share in Christ, how can it be anything to do with why we repented?

It is true that although our repentance earned or merited nothing, God, in his grace and mercy, placed us in Christ (to share his election) because we repented. But it is an inverse logic that ascribes the repentance itself to the election. Christ's election implied two things for him: a) a task, and b) a belovedness. This is what it also implies for us when we share in that election.

This comes out strongly in Ephesians 1:3-14:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according

> to the riches of his grace which he lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight he made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his kind intention which he purposed in him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose who works [energises] all things after the counsel of his will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of his glory. In him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation -- having also believed, you were sealed in him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of his glory. (NASB)

This passage shows us how we must be careful never to belittle the work of Christ for us. Christ is belittled if we think that God first forgave and redeemed us and then put us in Christ; we should rather believe that it is only in Christ that we have received redemption and forgiveness. Christ is also belittled if we think that God first chose us and then put us in Christ; it is rather that those in Christ share in his election, and so are chosen in him. There are, in fact, many, wonderful things that the Church has *in Christ*:

a) 1:3; 2:6 – we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings and made to sit in the heavenly places in Christ.

b) 1:4 – we have been chosen in Christ.

c) 1:6 – we have been accepted with God's grace in Christ.

d) 1:7 – we have received redemption and forgiveness in Christ.

e) 1:11; 1:13 – we have received an inheritance and a guarantee of that inheritance in Christ.

f) 2:13 – the Jews and Gentiles have received a unity of reconciliation in Christ.

g) 3:12 – we now have boldness and access to God with confidence in Christ

A second major point from Ephesians is the association of our position and heritage in Christ with a task. In 1:3 and 2:6 we find that we are seated in Christ in the heavenlies, which is where the battle is at present raging (6:12). In 1:5 we find that it is in and through Christ that we have received our destiny of 'adoption'. As we saw in chapter 14 in our first volume, this adoption refers to our future revelation as sons of God who have been conformed to the image of his Son – this revelation is to release the creation from its present bondage. In 1:11 this predestiny is quite naturally linked with the inheritance we have received in Christ: that as co-heirs with him we shall have the task of reigning with him (also see chapter 5). We have also (1:14) received a guarantee or seal of this inheritance in the form of the Holy Spirit, or Spirit of adoption. Neither chosenness nor predestination concern how we came to be Christians. Chosenness concerns our present position and task in Christ. Predestination concerns our future task and inheritance, with and through him.

One last point to note from this passage, is a hint rather than an explicit teaching. We have seen how the chosenness of Christ emphasized belovedness rather than selection, here in Ephesians 1:6 we incidentally see the connection: 'his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved' (NASB). The grace received in the Beloved is

placed in close juxtaposition with our sharing in his chosenness or belovedness.

The connection is much stronger in other passages. For example, we read: ‘Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies… (Colossians 3:12). We also read: ‘knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God’ (1 Thessalonians 1:4). The link is even found when Paul uses another word for chosenness: ‘we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you…’ (2 Thessalonians 2:13). This is a rather different context, but shows the strength of the association of ideas between belovedness and any concept of chosenness. The connection is even seen in other uses of *eklektos* – for example, Acts 15:25 refers to sending ‘chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul’, and Romans 11:28 says: ‘concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers’. Certainly we must at least conclude that when *eklektos* is used of the Church, no less than when it is used of Christ, the implication of belovedness rather than of selection is suggested.

The emphasis on our chosenness being in Christ is deeply embedded in most of the eleven New Testament references to the election of the Church. In 2 Timothy 2:10-12 we read:

> Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is a faithful saying: ‘For if we died with him, we shall also live with him. If we endure, we shall also reign with him.’

These verses are paralleled in Romans 8:17,18. Their meaning is that the elect are those who in Christ will achieve the future salvation, the liberation of creation with

eternal glory, and the reigning over it with Christ. The Christ-centeredness of election is apparent.

Paul also mentions election in Romans 8:32-34:

> He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God...

It is important to remember that the issue of 'no condemnation' was first raised in Romans 8:1: 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.' There is no condemnation to the ones 'in Christ', and when Paul returns to this theme in Romans 8:33,34 he naturally refers to 'God's elect'. They are chosen in Christ, and so are free from condemnation. The link becomes even clearer if we consider Isaiah 50:6-9:

> I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord God will help me; therefore I will not be disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed. He is near who justifies me; who will contend with me? Let us stand together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near me. Surely the Lord God will help me; who is he who will condemn me?

In this passage Isaiah is speaking of *the Messiah*, the elect One of Isaiah 49:7. Paul, however, in Romans 8:31,33-34, applies these words to *the Church*, 'God's elect'. Surely the thinking behind this is that the elect ones are able to say, 'Who shall condemn?', because they are in Christ, the elect servant of God, who alone could say such a thing in his own

right. We are elect and free from condemnation only because we are in the Elect One of God. Later, in 16:13, in the *only* reference to any individual in such a context, Paul greets ‘Rufus, chosen in the Lord’. Who knows why the apostle felt Rufus in particular needed to be encouraged like this – but note that here again he says ‘chosen in the Lord’, not ‘chosen to be made to repent’.

The implications of being chosen *in Christ* may be made more clear by analogy, and it might be best to begin with an analogy implied in Scripture itself – God’s choice of Jacob. As we discussed above, the descendants of Jacob were not chosen *to be put into* Jacob; rather, they were chosen *in* Jacob. Their chosenness was not distinct from his chosenness. Individuals were chosen only because they were part of the chosen nation; the election was a corporate one. This is even more clear if we consider Gentiles who became proselytized into the Jewish nation and faith.

We have already looked at a good example of this in the person of Ruth the Moabitess. In becoming an Israelite she became part of the chosen nation. She was now chosen *in* the nation of Israel. This did not mean that she was chosen to be put into Israel, for though the opportunity was God-given, that was her own decision. Rather, she became chosen *in* Israel, and Israel’s election had now become her election. Likewise all other proselytes entered into Israel and so shared Israel’s election.

An obvious parallel exists between this and the Christian’s election in Christ. When people enter into Christ then not only does his death become theirs, but his election also becomes their election. They are chosen *in him*, and this chosenness was established even before the foundation of the world. But to be chosen *in* him is not the same as being chosen *to be put into him*. The validity of this analogy with the election of Israel as a nation seems to be implied by the

apostle Peter. He first mentions election in 1 Peter 1:1-2, calling his readers ‘elect according to the foreknowledge of God’. He returns to the subject in chapter 2, noting first Christ’s election and then their own. As a further connection, note that Christians are ‘living stones’ just as Christ is (1 Peter 2:4-5), and they are elect just as he is (v4,6,9). This is logical, for as living stones they are being built into the ‘Temple’ of his body, the Church of which he is the foundation and cornerstone, so as part of that building they share its election. Just as the corporate nature of election is often underemphasized, so the corporate nature of our ‘Temple-hood’ is often underemphasized. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul also calls us ‘God’s building’ (v9), and says ‘you are the Temple of God’ (v16). The word ‘you’ here is plural, but ‘Temple’ is singular. The Church *collectively* is God’s Temple, built on the foundation of Christ. The Church as a whole is an organism with Christ as head – an organism built of living stones. To become part of that building, through God’s grace, is to share in its election.

Paul also draws a close analogy between their position as Christians, and that of Israel. They are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people of God (1 Peter 2:9-10), descriptions first applied to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6. Peter makes more mention of the election of the Church than any other New Testament writer, and it is significant that he chooses deliberately to maintain its close analogy with the election of Israel as a nation. He also, of course, tells them in 2 Peter 1:10 to be diligent to make their calling and election firm adding ‘for *if* you do these things you will never stumble.’ Peter had heard the words of his Master ‘Abide in me…’ – this is the way to fulfil the believer’s call and election, and make it firm.

The prime point is that the election of the Church is a corporate, rather than an individual thing. It is not that individuals are in the Church because they are elect, it is

rather that they are elect because they are in the Church, which is the body of the elect One. Ruth was not chosen *to become* an Israelite but in becoming an Israelite she partook of Israel's election. A Christian is not chosen to become part of Christ's body, but in becoming part of that body he or she partakes of Christ's election. Though God, in his foreknowledge, may have known which individuals would repent and so be joined by him to Christ's body, this is not at all the same thing as picking them out to make them repent.

What God demands of someone is not that they should earn salvation by good works; it is not even primarily that they should have faith; what God demands of a person is *repentance* (Acts 17:30). When we tell a person to 'Repent and believe…' then the priorities are right. The Holy Spirit takes the initiative by urging repentance. If a person chooses to repent rather than resist or reject the Spirit, then God gives the free gift of regeneration and rebirth as an unearned and unmerited divinely wrought miracle in their lives. God puts them into Christ and grants them a faith-relationship with himself – again this is his free action, neither merited nor earned by their repentance.

God's choice is not of individuals to make repent; it is a corporate choice of the Church in Christ. Peter recognizes its corporate nature, and again treats it as such in his last mention in 1 Peter 5:13: 'She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, (or 'co-elect') greets you'. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol 2, p 191) details Peter's use of 'elect', adding:

> It is certainly not said that from all eternity the world has been divided into the predestined and the reprobate. What is said is that everything depends on whether one is willing or not to believe in Christ and obey him.

Another analogy may be drawn from the time of the flood. Noah was the only righteous man and so he alone found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8,9). God chose Noah to start a new world when the existing one had been destroyed: ‘Then the Lord said to Noah, ‘Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation’’ (Genesis 7:1). In a sense, therefore, Noah’s family were ‘chosen in him’. It was not that God selected seven people to be made into Noah’s family. Rather, because they were his family they shared in his election. Similarly we might metaphorically be said to share in the election of Christ because we are joined with him as his family. We are chosen in Christ.

Those in the Early Church seem to have quite clearly the concept of being chosen in Christ, before it was distorted by the Augustinian new theology in the 5th century. Ignatius, for example, wrote soon after the apostolic age. At the beginning of his letter to Ephesus, the corporate nature of our election and predestination comes out strongly. He writes:

> Ignatius to the church at Ephesus... being blessed through the greatness and fullness of God the Father, and predestined before the world began, that it should be always unto an enduring and unchangeable glory; being united and chosen through his true passion, according to the will of the Father…

We see here Ignatius’ vision of the corporate nature of our destiny and election. It is not that selected individuals have been destined to join the Church, but rather that the Church as a whole, as a unit, has received a future destiny. Similarly notice that Ignatius does not say ‘chosen to be united’ or even ‘chosen and united’ – he says: ‘united and chosen through (Jesus’) true passion.’ The unity is put, logically,

before the election, and the election is attributed to Christ's achievement as the elect One.

The teachings of the apostles are even more clearly represented in the first epistle of Clement. This epistle is one of the earliest non-canonical Christian writings in existence. It was never regarded as inspired Scripture, but was held in great respect by the Early Church and even appears in one of the three main early codices of the Bible. It is, in fact, a letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth, though Clement is universally accepted as one of the leaders in Rome who may have compiled it. The writer is accepted as being one of the immediate successors of the apostles, and he shows good understanding of salvation by faith (also see chapter 7 below). He clearly grasps the apostolic teaching that our election is 'in Christ,' like other privileges, though he slightly changes the emphasis. This change of emphasis is in that instead of saying in (*en*) Christ, Clement says through or by (*dia*) Christ. Since we are elect in Christ it is only because of, or through him that we are elect. Election in Christ implies election 'through' him. Therefore Clement says:

> God… who has chosen our Lord Jesus Christ, and us through him to be his special people… the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you, and with all that are anywhere named by God through him. (1 Clement 24:1-4)

Here Clement directly links the election of Christ with the election of those who are chosen 'through him'. We note also the reference to Christians as God's 'special People', making this passage reminiscent of 1 Peter 2. Christ's election comes to us through him because we enter into him. 1 Clement 1:1 reads: 'to the church of God which is at Corinth, elect, sanctified by the will of God through Jesus Christ…' 1 Clement 21:15 refers to: 'those who are chosen

by God through Jesus Christ…' In a similar vein we read: 'Wherefore, we, being a part of the Holy One, let us do all those things which pertain to holiness' (1 Clement 14:1). In 13:6 Clement uses the interesting phrase: 'Merciful Father, who has made us to partake of his election.' What could be clearer? One cannot be made to 'partake' of a selection – both the meaning of election and its relation to being 'in Christ' are reflected here. Lastly, there is 1 Clement 20:13-14:

> And again in another place he says: With the pure you shall be pure, (and with the elect you shall be elect), but with the perverse man you shall be perverse. Let us therefore join ourselves to the innocent and righteous, for such are the elect of God.

This again surely shows a highly developed sense of the corporate nature of our election.

The same understanding continues in the leading second century Christian writers, such as Clement of Alexandria. Clement of Alexandria uses a similar mode of expression to Clement of Rome:

> This blessedness came on those who had been chosen by God through Jesus Christ our Lord' (*Stromata*, book 2).

In summary, we see that the consistent apostolic and Early Church teaching was that Christians are chosen only in and through Christ. There is never any hint that they were chosen to be put into Christ. Rather, as members of his body they share in his election.

Preferred to Salvation

As may be seen from the list given at the start of this chapter, the application of *eklektos* to believers is not frequent. There is no indication in any of the verses that election involves a divine decision about who should believe. 2 Thessalonians 2:13, which actually uses a different word for 'chosen', is sometimes cited as having such an implication, so it may be useful to consider this verse in some detail.

The word used here for 'chosen' is *heilatō*, from *haireomai*, which is used (always in the mid voice) only three times in the New Testament. In the other two, Philippians 1:22 and Hebrews 11:25:

> … it has the weakest meaning, 'prefer'. This corresponds to its frequent use in classical Greek…' (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol 1, p 534)

Indeed, in Philippians it is not even an actual choice, but an expression of preference. Now the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* unaccountably goes on to suggest that the same word in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 has some 'specialized meaning' which is found nowhere else either in Scripture or in classical Greek. But the word really just seems to mean setting a mark of preference on them, setting them aside for the coming salvation, and this is in line with all the other uses.

It is, in fact, difficult to base very much on this verse for there are two different renderings of it, both of which are well supported. One of these is *ap archēs* (from the beginning) and the other is *aparchen* (firstfruits). Both are well attested and the context could allow either meaning, so a final decision seems impossible. We have, therefore, tried

to consider the implication of each of the two renderings in turn.

1) Ap archēs (from the beginning)

The passage under consideration then reads:

> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of his mouth and destroy with the brightness of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working [*energizing*] of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning (*ap archēs*) chose (*heilato*), you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which he called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught… (2 Thessalonians 2:8-15)

The phrase *ap archēs* is used in two main contexts in the New Testament:

> a) to mean from the beginning of creation – eg Matthew 19:4; 2 Peter 14; 1 John 3:8
>
> b) to mean from the beginning of something more recent; eg Luke 1:2; 1 John 2:7.

In which of these senses should we understand 2 Thessalonians 2:13? It is sometimes suggested that Paul's thought is similar to that in Ephesians 1:4 ('he chose us in him before the foundation of the world'), and that by 'from the beginning' he means the beginning of creation. There are three main reasons why this seems to us to be unlikely. First, it is difficult to see why Paul should have said 'before' the creation in Ephesians and 'since' the creation in Thessalonians. Second, he does not use the word for 'chosen' used in Ephesians (*eklektos*), but a different word as noted. Third, he uses the word *archē* to imply a time in only two other places – and neither of them means 'since the beginning of creation'. The first of these places is in Acts 26:4, where he means 'since his youth onwards,' and the second, the only use in the epistles, is in Philippians 4:15-16:

> Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities.

This is very significant, since Paul's first journey to Thessalonica is specifically mentioned as the 'beginning of the gospel'. Thus when he tells the Thessalonians: 'from the beginning God chose you' it would seem obvious that he means the beginning of the gospel.

We must also consider the meaning of the various other terms Paul uses: 'salvation', 'sanctification', 'belief in the truth', and 'chosen'.

The word 'salvation' must be seen in the light of the great interest in the Thessalonian epistles in the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is used only in 2 Thessalonians

2:10,13; 1 Thessalonians 2:16, and 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9. The last reads:

> … as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This shows that the ‘salvation’ is a future event, like also 2 Timothy 2:10: ‘Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.’ This shows the link between election and the future ‘salvation’ of those in Christ, when the sons of God shall be revealed for the liberation of the creation and the glory of the children of God (cf Romans 8). It is this future event Paul has in mind as 2 Thessalonians 2:8 also indicates.

The word ‘sanctification’ is used here, and also in 1 Thessalonians 4:3,7 where Paul told them: ‘this is the will of God, your sanctification…For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness (sanctification).’ Sanctification, like calling (see 2 Thessalonians 1:11 and below), is something which (as God’s will for him or her) a person may accept and live up to, or reject. As such Paul urges them to walk in the way of acceptance.

The phrase ‘belief in the truth’ emphasizes the comparison between the true Christians and the false. The false ‘did not receive’ love of the truth, that they might be saved, for they ‘did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.’ The true Christians will be saved by belief in the truth, for they received the word of the truth which works in them (cf 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:13). The false Christians will not obtain salvation, but this is not because God does not want them to, for God ‘desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.’ It is rather because they themselves preferred unrighteousness to truth – and so God has allowed them to become deceived

by the pretended wonders of the false prophets who work according to the energizing of Satan.

The word for ‘chosen’ as we have noted is not the usual Greek word used *eklektos*, but *haireomai*. Both other places in the New Testament where it is used (Hebrews 11:25 and Philippians 1:22) indicate a person taking one of two paths to follow or groups to align with, and do not seem immediately helpful to our understanding of the passage we are considering. There is, however, a derivative *hairesis* which is used more often. This is the word for ‘sect’ – a group which is divided off from others: eg the Sadducees (Acts 5:17) the Phraisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5) or (according to some Jews) the Christians (Acts 24:5, 24:14) Paul says that there must be such ‘factions’ in order that the genuine Christians may be recognized (1 Corinthians 11:19). The true Christians in Thessalonica, then, have been *divided off* by God from those who follow the energizing of Satan. and his pretended signs and wonders. They are, in a sense, a ‘sect’ – but they are the one true sect who will obtain salvation through sanctification of spirit and belief in the truth. God divided them off in this way right from the beginning – also showing that they were the true chosen group by the power of the Holy Spirit working in them and the true assurance he brought (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). As a group they had received the true marks of God’s approval. Another word associated with the same word group is *haireō* (to take). Perhaps there is a hint of God ‘taking them’ or ‘separating them’ as a group, to achieve his purpose through separation (sanctification) of spirit and belief in the truth.

In summary, if the correct reading is *ap archēs* we take its meaning to be that from the beginning God divided off those who were willing to repent and believe in the truth from those who preferred unrighteousness. The true believers have God’s word working powerfully among them;

the false follow the pretended signs and wonders that Satan energizes. Eventually there will be a final confrontation of God and Satan, good and evil, when those who follow God will obtain the salvation of themselves and the creation, and the glory of Christ, while those who follow Satan will receive damnation.

2) Aparchen (firstfruits)

The other possible reading in this verse is *aparchen*. Paul does not use the phrase ‘from the beginning’ (*ap archēs*) anywhere in the epistles, but uses ‘firstfruits’ (*aparchen*) six times. This (and see especially Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:15) indicates that it may well be the correct rendering in this context too (compare also James 1:18). If this is the correct rendering then we might read (as RSV margin): ‘God chose you as the first converts.’ However, the meaning would in this case be little different from that already outlined under the other rendering. It would simply increase the emphasis that they were ‘chosen’ or ‘separated off’ as those who were willing to accept the truth, ie as the first converts.

Calling and Election

Sometimes associated with ‘election’ are words from the Greek word group *klētos*, *kaleō*, *kaleomai*, and *klēsis* which are often translated ‘called’ or ‘calling’. In classical Greek it can mean an invitation (though usually a named invitation rather than an open one), and according to *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*:

> It also means name, either when a man is being addressed… or when a name is bestowed. (vol 1, p 271)

In the Old Testament LXX it very often means naming – either of things or of persons. It can also mean a commanding call though again according to *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*:

> Men can refuse to obey the call of God (Isaiah 65:12; Jeremiah 13:10); they can refuse to hear it (Isaiah 50:2; Jeremiah 7:13) or seek to avoid it (Exodus 3:11; 4:1,10,13; Jeremiah 1:6). (vol 1, p 272)

In the New Testament it can sometimes just mean invited (1 Corinthians 10:27) or a Royal invitation/summons (eg Matthew 22:3). It can also mean ‘named’: eg ‘he shall be called a Nazarene’ (Matthew 2:23). With the special significance of names in Hebrew thought, there was great meaning in the Lord’s words to Peter: ‘You shall be called Cephas’ (John 1:42). This was the ‘calling’ of Peter, almost equivalent to setting a vocation. In similar vein are the words: ‘Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’ (Luke 2:23). Paul speaks a fair amount about divine calling:

> *1 Corinthians*:
>
> Paul, called (*klētos*) to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God… to those who are

> sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (*klētois*) to be saints, with all who in every place call (*epikalumenois*) on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord… (1:1-2) I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called (*kaleisthai*) an apostle. (15:9)
>
> *Romans:*
>
> Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called (*klētos*) to be an apostle… (1:1) among whom you also are the called (*klētoi*) of Jesus Christ; to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called (*klētois*) to be saints… (1:6-7) We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called (*klētois*) according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called (*ekalesen*); and those whom he called he also justified… (8:28-30, RSV) that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him who calls (*kalountos*), it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger…' (9:11-12) even us whom he called (*ekalesen*), not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As he says also in Hosea: 'I will call (*kaleso*) them my people, who were not my people… where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they shall be called (*klethesontai*) sons of the living God'. (9:24-26)

Romans 9:24-26 makes it clear that in Paul a divine 'calling' is a naming – whether a naming 'Israel' or 'apostle' or 'saint' or 'my people' or 'sons of a living God'. This naming/calling is to a post or office or lifestyle which we are free to choose to try to fulfil and live up to, or not. Thus in Ephesians 4:1,

Paul urges us to walk worthy of our naming/calling. ‘Live up to your title’, we might say. Other New Testament writers extend this, and make clearer its parallel with election – which is also appointment to a position or task. John notes the love of the Father that ‘we should be called children of God!’ (1 John 3:1, compare 1 Corinthians 1:2), and those who overcome with Christ are ‘called and chosen and faithful’. (Revelation 17:14). Peter speaks of ‘he who called you’ (1 Peter 1:15; 5:10), says we are ‘called’ to suffering (2:21), and we should ‘make [our] call and election sure’ (2 Peter 1:10).

Jesus uses the word group a lot, and in the full range of meanings from ‘invite’ to ‘name.’ One of his most cryptic uses is in ‘many are called, but few are chosen’ (Matthew 22:14). Since he uses ‘call’ throughout the passage to mean ‘invite’ (22:3; 22:9), it seems likely that this is what it means here. Jesus refers to God’s elect (Matthew 24:22; Mark 13:20, etc), and his meaning here seems to be simply that many are invited but few become the elect. What Jesus’ parable does seem to say is that:

1. The kingly invitation or ‘calling’ certainly was not irresistible – many refused (even though this brought bad consequences).
2. The king does not instruct his servants to pick and choose whom to invite (that is the whole point).
3. There is no reason to suppose that this general invitation was not genuine – the guest was not ejected because he had no genuine invitation but because he had not accepted the conditions of entry (presumably a royally provided garment). This garment surely represents the work of Christ in us and is therefore the mark of those who are ‘chosen in him’.

We cannot, of course, press parables too far (Augustine, sadly, used ‘compel them to come in’ to justify forcible

conversion), but there is nothing here to portray either calling or election as some kind of irresistible decree that a person should repent and believe. There is also no reason to assume that the meaning of ‘called’ here is the same as that used by Paul when he speaks of our ‘calling’. Even in the same book it may be used differently. The lesson for us, however, seems to be the same as that in 2 Peter 1:10: ‘be even more diligent to make your call and election sure.’ Kittel’s *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* looks at the stories in i) Matthew 21:28-32, ii) Matthew 21:33-43 and iii) Matthew 22:1-14. Kittel sets the scene for the meaning of the ‘election’ in the wedding invitation story, by referring back to the meaning of ‘election’ in the previous two stories:

> The very word εκλεκτος (*eklectos*) shows that the invitation implies an obedience according to grace. The condition of the wedding garment is given a solid interpretation by the trilogy as a whole, 21:31: ποιειν το θελημα; 21:43: ποιειν τους καρπους, but because he brings disobedience to the wedding, and does not have the conduct which corresponds to blessing, he cannot be a real participant. Election is fulfilled only in obedience, hence we do not have here a static doctrine of election but a dynamic theology which is oriented to the right attitude of the elect. To receive gifts is of no avail if there is no readiness to obey. Thus the concept of election is set in living history. It demands responsibility and decision. (vol 2, p 186)



Chapter 5: Foreknowledge and Predestination

Introduction

The ultimate object of this study is to analyse what the Bible means when it talks of God's foreknowledge and predestination of us. In chapter 14 in *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*, we looked carefully at 'predestination' and saw that it means that God 'sets a horizon' – in the context of the Church a horizon that we will be conformed to the image of his Son and will rescue creation But it is linked with 'foreknowledge', and we will look in this chapter at what this means.

The earliest Christian commentators thought that it meant God foreknew something about us, and *on this basis* gave us the remarkable destiny of conformity to his Son. This is not quite the same conclusion we shall reach, but it is not unlike it. If this had been the only current view of the question, this present study might have been shorter or even omitted altogether. If you have always assumed that it meant something of this kind you may wish to skim-read the early parts of this chapter.

There has arisen, however, a quite different view of foreknowledge, which like so much else, has gained acceptance with a number of traditionalist scholars and theologians – especially those in Augustinian/Reformed traditions. This is so markedly different from the Early Church view that it was decided to include here a study on the word. It is unfortunate that much of the study is a destructive analysis, for all the evidence is that this new view, like all the other traditionalist redefinitions of Greek

and Hebrew terms, is simply wrong. This is technical, and this plan may help to follow it:

- This part sets out seven shades of meaning of the word *ginōskō* (=know) as we understand it to be used in Scripture.

- This part considers the suggestion that *ginōskō* can mean ‘choose,’ and the verses commonly cited to illustrate it. Our conclusion is that this meaning only ever occurs insofar as it is an integral part of a relationship.

- This part considers the use of the word *proginōskō* (=foreknowledge) as applied to subjects other than the Church.

- This part considers the ‘new’ view of foreknowledge mentioned above and finds it unacceptable.

- This attempts to make a positive contribution to understanding the concept. Many readers may find this interesting even if they find the earlier parts too technical.

- The last part looks at more recent developments in ‘presence’ theology, and whether God knows all the future.

Meanings of ‘Know’ in Scripture

The word ‘foreknowledge’ is made up of the two Greek elements ‘previous’ (*pro*) and ‘knowledge’ (*ginōskō*). The Greek word *ginōskō* (like the English ‘know’) can have many shades of meaning. It is not always possible from the context to distinguish between these. Nevertheless it will be beneficial if at the beginning of this study they are identified so that we may keep them clear in our minds. Then when we come to consider foreknowledge the various possibilities will be clear to us. In the present part, therefore, we examine the various uses of the word *ginōskō* at the time of the apostles. Examples are given from the Greek New Testament, and also from the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Old Testament, which was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament which was familiar to the apostles and their contemporaries. It is not any more authoritative than any other translation, but will certainly help our understanding of what the Greek words concerned meant to the apostles:

1) *Perceive* (usually knowledge of facts).

1 John 3:24: by this we know that he abides in us, … Mark 13:28: you know that summer is near… Luke 7:39: This man, if he were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is.

2) *Understand*

John 8:43: Why do you not understand my speech? John 10:6: But they did not understand the things which he spoke to them Acts 8:30: ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ (In some cases this may be difficult to distinguish from 1); in other cases it may be closer to 6) below.)

3) *Experience or follow*

Micah 3:1: Is it not for you to know justice? (LXX) Micah 4:9: Why have you experienced calamities? (LXX) Zephaniah 3:5: He knows not injustice by extortion (LXX) Hebrews 3:10: But they have not known my ways.

4) Acknowledge

Deuteronomy 33:9; He acknowledged not his brothers and refused to know his sons (LXX) 1 Chronicles 25:9: And now Solomon my son, acknowledge the God of your fathers (LXX) Job 19:13: My brothers have stood off from me and acknowledged strangers rather than me (LXX) Jeremiah 3:13: Nevertheless acknowledge your iniquity (LXX) (See also Genesis 38:26; 1 Kings 10:24; Isaiah 33:13; 59:12; 61:9; Jeremiah 14:20; Daniel 4:22-29, where 'acknowledge' seems a preferable rendering.) Sometimes it may be difficult to distinguish this from 5) or 6), eg in Acts 19:15: And the evil spirit answered and said, 'Jesus I know (*ginōskō*), and Paul I know (*epistamai*); but who are you?'

5) *Recognize* – personal or impersonal objects

Luke 24:35: how he was known of them in the breaking of bread… Matthew 12:33: a tree is known by its fruit… 1 Kings 20:41: And the king of Israel knew him, that he was one of the prophets. (LXX)

6) *Knowledge of persons* – implying understanding of them

The word *ginōskō* can be used to imply thorough understanding of a person, knowledge about him or her. When used in this sense the object of the verb is a personal one, but there may be no relationship involved. Matthew 25:24: I knew you that you are a hard man…(literally). John 2:24-25: Jesus did not commit himself to them because he knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for he knew what was in man. John 1:47-48: 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!' Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?' John 5:42: But I know you, that

you do not have the love of God in you. Psalm 138(139):1-2,6: O Lord you have examined me and known me. You know my sitting down and rising up; you understand my thoughts from afar…the knowledge of you is too difficult for me. (LXX) Jeremiah 12:3: But you Lord know me (Hebrew: know and see me); you have examined my heart before you. (LXX) This knowledge or understanding of a person may, of course, be a result of personal acquaintance (eg Matthew 25:24). But equally well it may be without any acquaintance or relationship (eg John 2:24; 5:42). This is important. It shows that intellectual understanding and knowledge of a person may be all that is implied, even if the object of the verb is personal. There may be no implication at all of a relationship. The Hebrew word for 'know' (*yā ḏ a'*) seems also to be used in this way (eg 2 Samuel 3:25; 7:20; 17:8) but the LXX usually paraphrases this for clarity. It may not be possible in all cases to separate this meaning precisely from the concept of an acquaintanceship, eg compare Nathaniel above to Genesis 29:5: Know you Laban?… And they said, We know him. (LXX) Nonetheless there is a marked difference in some cases.

7) Knowledge of persons – special relationship

1 John 2:4: He who says, 'I know him', and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 1 John 4:7: everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Matthew 7:23: 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!' Deuteronomy 34:10: And there rose up no more a prophet in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face (LXX) (compare Exodus 33:11-12,17) Hosea 6:3-4: we shall arise and live before him and shall know him; let us follow on to know the Lord… (LXX) (see also Hosea 8:2) It is, of course, also in the context of a special relationship that we have the following Genesis 4:1: And Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived… (LXX)

Luke 1:34: Mary said to the angel, How can this be, since I do not know a man?

Can ‘Know’ Mean to Choose?

In addition to the above meanings it has become part of a tradition that the Greek *ginōskō* often means some kind of ‘election’, with implications that it really means to select. We have not yet found *anyone* claim to see such a usage outside the Bible, but such assertions are made on the basis of biblical usage. The suggestion is that the Old Testament Hebrew *yāḏa’* or *yd’* (and thus the LXX *ginōskō*) evidences such a meaning, and that it has thus passed over into New Testament writings. It is, therefore, on the basis of biblical literature and word usage that the suggestion must be assessed. As we shall see, it is in particular on a small group of verses that the supposed equation of ‘know’ and choose is based, with Amos 3:2 (which uses Hebrew *yāḏa’* = know) usually produced as the star turn.

It is interesting to see that various modern standard reference works seem unenthusiastic to sceptical about this view of *yāḏa’* in Amos 3:2.

David Green (1994) leaves it as ‘ambivalent’:

> We find *yd’* in Amos 3:2 as an expression for the special relationship between Yahweh and Israel or election to service: ‘You only have I chosen from all the families of the earth.’ Despite the Deuteronomistic language, Amos 3:2 does not use the election term *bḥr* (cf Deuteronomy 7:7; 14:2) but rather the ambivalent term *yd’* for the special association of Yahweh with Israel or with individual leaders. (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*)

Mark Biddle (1994) is a bit more specific:

> In reference to the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, esp. in Amos 3:2 (cf Also Deuteronomy 9:24 and see Hosea 13:5…), *yd’ approximates bḥr*

> ‘to choose’ without becoming a termino-logically distinct alternative to this verb: instead *yd’* here refers only to an intimate knowledge. (*Theological Lexicon on the Old Testament*)

VanGemeren (1996) is even more specific, first stating:

> In the broadest sense *yd’* means to take various aspects of the world of one’s experience into the self, including the resulting relationship with that which is known. (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol 2, p 410; the article is by Terence Freheim)

Then of the Amos 3:2:

> The vb is used for God’s relationship to Israel as a people, ‘You only have I known’ (Amos 3:2, NRSV), and with individual leaders (Abraham, Genesis 18:19; Moses, Exod. 33:12; Deut. 34:10 [‘face to face’]; David, 2 Samuel 7:20; Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:5). This usage does not focus on election in a narrow way but on the relationship in its fullest sense. To know ‘by name,’ on the part of either God or humans (Exodus 33:12; Psalm 91:14) refers to closeness, not to a badge of identification.

In other words, any element of ‘choice’ is as a part of a *relationship* in any such use of *yā ḏ a*.

This recent movement in Old Testament scholarship is welcome, but unfortunately there remain in circulation large numbers of New Testament commentaries and reference works which blandly state as fact the tradition that ‘know’ (*yā ḏ a*) can mean ‘choose’ without any particular sense of relationship. Thus Bultmann in Kittel (1964-76):

> In this connection (*yā ḏ a*) can mean ‘to elect,’ ie, to make an object of concern and acknowledgement… The corresponding use for

> knowledge on God's part in the sense of election which is so characteristic of the Old Testament, is occasionally found, most clearly at 2 Timothy 2:19… This usage is the furthest from ordinary Greek and was later abandoned.' (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 2, pp 698,706)

One would think that strong evidence would be needed to read into a biblical term something so far from both secular and Early Church language usage. None whatsoever is given.

Brown (1986) likewise introduces 'election' – though also qualifies it:

> When God knows a person (Jeremiah 1:5) or a people (Amos 3:2) he chooses or elects him (cf Numbers 16:5, LXX). This knowledge understood as election is gracious and loving… but it demands a personal response (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol 2, p 394)

Now of course any free agent (God or human) *can choose* with whom to have a special relationship – *provided that* the person so chosen reciprocates the desire and choice. But the 'knowing' focuses on the relationship, not the choice in the abstract – as VanGemeren and others have highlighted. There are, however, still in circulation many commentaries which simply assume that 'know' = 'elect', and apply this to foreknowledge. For example, Moo (1996) cites as 'outstanding examples' Genesis 18:19, Jeremiah 1:5, and Amos 3:2 – he also wrongly states that the verb 'foreknowledge' does not occur in the LXX, forgetting that the LXX includes what he regards as Apocrypha. JI Packer gives a similar comment in Douglas (1980):

> The Hebrew verb *yā ḏ a*, ‘know,’ which is used of various acts of knowing that, in idea at least, imply and express affection (eg relations between sexes and the believer’s acknowledgement of God), is used to denote God’s election (ie his taking cognizance of persons in love) in Genesis xviii. 19 (see xv); Amos iii. 2; Hosea xii. 5 The Gk: *proginōskō* ‘foreknow,’ is similarly used in Romans viii.29, xi. 2 to mean ‘forelove’ (cf also the use of *ginōskō* in 1 Corinthians viii. 3 and Galatians iv. 9). (*The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p 357)

Packer gives no reason why we should adopt the odd rendering ‘taking cognizance of persons in love’ rather than simply ‘know’ in its normal sense.

Gordon Wenham’s commentary again substitutes ‘chosen’ for ‘know’ in Genesis 18:19, and in support of ‘know’ ‘in the sense of to ‘choose, elect’’ puts:

> cf Amos 3:2; Exodus 33:12,17; Deuteronomy 34:10; 2 Samuel 7:20.

This is even more bizarre than the usual proof texts – since the reference in these is God’s knowledge of Moses ‘face to face’ and David’s close relationship with God. To claim that they mean to ‘choose’ rather than to have a relationship seems odd.

Brown in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (vol 2, p 394) rightly asserts (contra Wenham) that Deuteronomy 34:10 means ‘to have a confidential relationship with another person’, but again goes on to cite Jeremiah 1:5, Amos 3:2 and Numbers 16:5 (LXX) as supposed instances of ‘knowing’ meaning to ‘choose’ or ‘elect’. In none of these verses is it the obvious meaning.

Cranfield in his commentary (vol 1, p 431) states plainly of ‘foreknow’ in Romans 8:29 that it is:

> … to be understood in the light of the use of *yā ḏ a* in such passages as Genesis 18:19; Jeremiah 1:4; Amos 3:2, where it denotes that special taking knowledge of a person which is God’s electing grace.

Dunn (1988) p 482 is a little more circumspect on foreknowledge in Romans 8:29:

> … (*proginōskō*) obviously means more than simply foreknowledge, knowledge before the event (as Acts 26:5 and 2 Peter 3:17…). It has in view the more Hebraic understanding of ‘knowing’ as involving a relationship experienced and acknowledged…; hence commentators regularly and rightly refer to such passages as Genesis 18:19, Jeremiah 1:5, Hosea 13:5, Amos 3:2…

Dunn does not tell us how to make sense of having a relationship with *someone* (not with an idea about someone) before they exist.

Some writers refer to ‘common’ usage, others to ‘frequent’ usage, and yet others to ‘very marked and very clear’ usage. The impression one might get is that the use of ‘know’ to imply election is common and clear in the Old Testament and Bible generally. This is simply not true. The Hebrew word *yā ḏ a’* (know) is used about 770 times in the Old Testament – in about 500 of which the LXX used the Greek word *ginōskō* to translate it. In the New Testament the word *ginōskō* is used about 220 times. Yet advocates of this idea that ‘know’ means to ‘choose’ seem able to cite very few references in support. We have analyzed in the pages that follow the four most plausible Old Testament and two most plausible New Testament verses usually cited in this way and shown that this is an odd way to interpret each of

them. The obvious conclusion is that if ever there are implications of ‘choice’ they form part of a special relationship. There can be no simple equation of election’ or ‘choice’ with *ginōskō*.

Amos 3:2-3

> You only (or LXX ‘especially’) have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.

Taken without regard to context it would seem that a meaning for this verse *could* be preserved if one replaced ‘known’ with ‘chosen.’ We know that Israel *was* the chosen nation, and ‘You only have I chosen…’ would be a true statement. However, the context of Amos shows clearly that what is involved is *not* merely choice but a special relationship. A special relationship is, of course, usually set up as a result of a choice (ie perhaps the choice of the dominant party and the agreement of the other). But a relationship itself is certainly more than a choice. The two concepts may not be equated. In Amos 2:10-12 the Lord says:

> Also it was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt, and led you forty years through the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. I raised up some of your sons as prophets, and some of your young men as Nazirites Is it not so, O you children of Israel?’ Says the Lord. ‘But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink, and commanded the prophets saying, ‘Do not prophesy!’

As far as concerns Israel, God ‘made himself known to them’ in Exodus 2:25; 25:22; 29:42; 30:6; 30:36; Numbers 12:6; 17:4; Deuteronomy 9:24 LXX (The Hebrew sometimes differs). The Lord is complaining in Amos that, in spite of the

special relationship he opened with them, and in spite of his special care and protection for them as a nation, they have spurned his favours and broken the covenant. For this reason their judgment shall be the greater. He reiterates his theme in Amos 3:1-4 (compare 2:10):

> Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?

The Lord is referring to his personal knowledge of them, a relationship established when he brought them out of Egypt. The thought is similar to Hosea 13:5 in many ways. It is because as a nation they have known God in this special interactive way that the results of their sins are the more serious. The next verse seems to re-emphasize that this previous entry into a special relationship explains God's present special dealings with them. The Hebrew reads: 'Shall two walk together unless they have met by arrangement?' The LXX reads: 'Shall two walk together at all unless they know one another?' (The word know here is derived from *ginōskō* and means to 'define the boundaries of their knowledge of each other.') What exactly does this mean? We notice that it is followed by a series of examples showing how one thing signifies previous occurrence of another; eg a trumpet sound means that trouble has come to a city. Similarly, we take it, two people do not walk along together (in friendship or relationship) unless it is by prior agreement. The Lord God has already defined his relationship with Israel, when they agreed to the covenant with him and he knew them in the wilderness. This explains his special interest in them now.

The prophet is, therefore, surely referring to a personal relationship. If he were merely talking of choice, why should he go on to talk of two walking together by mutual agreement? To know someone in the sense of personal relationship does imply, of course, that some kind of choice has already been made. God knew Moses face to face because he had chosen Moses for a special position. But the word ‘know’ in this sense certainly means much more than choice. Likewise, it must be insisted, the prophet refers in Amos 3:2 to their special personal relationship with God, and not merely to God’s choice of them.

Hosea 13:5

> I knew you in the wilderness, In the land of great drought.

It would seem far more natural to take this to imply a personal relationship rather than merely a choice. Would the Lord really say: ‘I chose you in the wilderness…’ when as we know, his choice of Israel was made long before that time? Surely he refers to his continual relationship with them there. The Septuagint, Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate all emphasize this by rendering it: ‘I tended you as a shepherd in the wilderness in an uninhabited land’ – which is, incidentally, a better parallel to the next line. But perhaps the most important point to note here is that the whole book of Hosea is about a broken relationship (see, eg 8:2-3 also 6:3; 7:15; 11:1). Hosea and his unfaithful wife provide the object lesson for this (chapter 3), and God said that the Israelites had forsaken ‘knowledge’ (*epignōsis*) of him (Hosea 4:1-6). All this constitutes very clear evidence that a broken relationship was what the prophet had in view. Again, this special relationship may imply that a choice had already been made, but it is much more than a choice. There seems no grounds for supposing a concept of ‘choice’

outside that which is integral to a special personal relationship.

Genesis 18:17-19

> And the Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him.’

The various versions appear to take this verse quite differently. The KJV and Young seem to interpret it along lines similar to the Septuagint. The KJV simply reads: ‘For I know him, that he will command his sons…’ The term ‘that’ does sometimes have a weakened meaning, eg Isaiah 44:9; Hosea 8:4; Psalm 51:4, and so the KJV/LXX rendering may be possible. This weakened sense is, however, very much the exception, it seems more natural to take it to mean ‘in order that’.

What then is its meaning?

The ESV and RSV put in a footnote that the meaning of the Hebrew word is ‘known,’ yet use ‘chosen’ in the text without further explanation. The NIV, following its usual theological bias, doesn’t even bother with a footnote to tell its unwary readers that it has altered ‘known’ to ‘chosen.’ The NEB gives a more understandable rendering: ‘I have taken care of him on purpose that he may charge his sons…’ Yet even this, perhaps, does not go far enough.

What we must do is to consider verse 19 in the light of the whole context. To substitute ‘chosen’ for a word that certainly means ‘known’ in all secular literature and some

900 other biblical uses would surely require a lot of evidence? In actual fact, ‘known’ fits the context better, and there is not a shred of any such evidence. The Lord’s statement: ‘I have known him, to the end that he may command…’ does not occur in a vacuum. It is given as the reason for God’s decision to reveal to Abraham his plans about Sodom. If God were, as the ESV/NIV/RSV implies, merely referring to a *choice* of Abraham, why should this be any ground or reason for God to reveal his plans to him? The choice of a person is not necessarily any reason to confide in him. On the other hand a special relationship or friendship with a person is an obvious reason for confiding in him. This, surely, is what the Hebrew means here. Of course a person reveals his plans to his special friends – and Abraham is the ‘friend of God.’ In James 2:23 this description is applied to him because, in his ongoing faith relationship with God, he believed that promise which the Lord mentioned in Genesis 18:19 – and matched his belief with action. This, then, gives us the natural understanding of this verse. The Lord asks: ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I do, seeing that I plan to bless the world through his descendants? For in order to bring this blessing through him I have ‘come to know’ him.’ The Lord’s reference is not so much to his choice of Abraham, nor even to the plan which that choice involved, but rather to the fact that during the course of that plan he has befriended Abraham and therefore should confide in his friend. J Skinner, in his commentary on Genesis (p 304), wrote:

> Yahweh reflects, as it were, on the religious importance of the individual beside him… *For I have known* (ie ‘entered into personal relations with’, as Amos 3:2, Hosea 13:5) him in order that, etc.

Derek Kidner puts it very well in his commentary (p 132):

> The question *Shall I hide*…? proves Abraham the 'friend' of God (Isaiah 41:8) by our Lord's own criterion (John 15:15), and the expression *I have known him* (19, rv) re-emphasizes it; it virtually means 'I have made him my friend'.

No one, of course, would deny that God *did* choose Abraham, or that his friendship with Abraham was a result of his own free choice. But it is one thing to say that God's 'knowledge' of Abraham was a result of his 'choice' of him; it is quite another thing to say (as the ESV/RSV/NIV) that his knowledge of Abraham was *equivalent* to his choice. It is the friendship itself, and not the choice prior to the friendship, that is the ground for God's confiding in him. The words 'For I have known him' refer to the special relationship (friendship) and not merely to a choice. There is not the slightest linguistic or contextual reason to change 'know' to 'chosen', and it is sad that the NIV and ESV, which claim to be translating what is there, have simply followed a baseless human tradition.

Jeremiah 1:5-6

> 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.' Then said I: 'Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth'.

The sense of the word know here would seem to be similar to the sense in which Jeremiah himself uses it in 12:3

> But you O Lord know and have seen me, you have tested my heart… (see also 6) above).

The LXX seems to indicate this sense when it translates the Hebrew word *yāḏa'* (know) not by *ginōskō* but by *epistamai*. The latter means to 'understand fully' or 'know through and through.' The verse means, then, that God fully understood Jeremiah's nature, and on this basis 'set him

apart’ (ie ‘sanctified’ him) even before his birth. Why does the Lord begin his words to Jeremiah by assuring him that he fully understood his nature even before he was born? The answer is seen in Jeremiah’s immediate reaction to God’s words about ‘appointing him as a prophet.’ Jeremiah exclaims: ‘Ah, Lord God, behold I cannot speak!’ Surely, says Jeremiah, there must be some mistake – I would be hopeless at such a task! How gracious of the Lord to begin his message to Jeremiah with the personal reassurance that he *knows* him better than he knows himself, that his appointment has long been planned on the basis of that knowledge. God did, of course, choose Jeremiah before his birth – for a choice is involved in the sanctification. But his knowledge is the basis of the choice (ie sanctification or setting apart). It is by no means to be equated with it. There may, perhaps, be a good parallel between Jeremiah 1:5-6 and John 13:18 – ‘I know whom I have chosen.’ Christ’s appointments, like his Father’s, were made with a thorough understanding of the one appointed.

Summary Old Testament

This study has been to analyse in what sense we might see some connection between ‘election’ and the Hebrew word *yā ḏ a’*, and thus what implications could be passed on to the Greek *ginōskō*. Out of 770 uses of *yā ḏ a’* in the Old Testament the four most commonly cited were considered. Our own conclusion was that three of them clearly refer to a special relationship and the fourth to a thorough understanding rather than a choice. Further, although the LXX uses *ginōskō* 600 times to translate *yā ḏ a*’, in only one of these four most commonly cited ‘proof texts’ is *ginōskō* used The LXX paraphrases Hosea 13:5; in Genesis 18:19 it uses *oida* and interprets it entirely differently; in Jeremiah 1:5 it uses *epistamni*. Only in Amos 3:2 does it use *ginōskō*, and in that one it definitely seems to mean a special personal relationship.

Would we be justified, then, in speaking of the word *ginōskō* having a ‘common’ and ‘very clear’ implication of electing grace in the Old Testament? Surely not if we meant by this that the Old Testament usage might have led Paul to use *ginōskō* to mean ‘choice’ – even if he meant that this choice would later lead to a relationship. If, on the other hand, we intended only to imply that *ginōskō* could mean a special relationship which might *involve* a past choice, then this would be true enough. But we must be sure to remember that it is the special relationship, rather than merely the choice, that is meant by *ginōskō*.

New Testament use of *Ginōskō*

We may look now at the two Pauline references most commonly cited to connect *ginōskō* with election. Both are plays on words, and we must look very carefully at their contexts to grasp their meanings.

1 Corinthians 8:1-4

> Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know But if anyone loves God, this one is known by him. Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols…

This is one of the few verses, if not the only one, out of the 221 times *ginōskō* is used in the New Testament, where it could even make an apparent sense if ‘known’ were replaced by ‘chosen’ – though actually none of the translations try to do this, and there is absolutely no reason to suppose that Paul means ‘chosen by God’ here. He certainly would not have expected his readers to take it in this sense, for this sense is not found either in secular Greek usage, or in the LXX. Paul is explaining how a Christian may know that meat sacrificed to idols is no different from other meat, but there is no reason to be puffed up with this knowledge. Paul emphasizes that any action in such external matters cannot, of itself, commend or ‘discommend’ anyone to God (v8). It is not a person’s own knowledge that matters, but whether he is ‘known’ by God. This could mean ‘recognised’ or ‘acknowledged’ (as the NEB takes it) or it could mean a relationship It probably means the latter because of we look at Galatians 4:9 (quoted below) the same phrase ‘are known by God’ implies relationship.

Galatians 4:8-9

> But then, indeed, when you did not know (*eidō*) God, you served those which by nature are not gods But now after you have known (*ginōskō*) God, or rather are *known* (*ginōskō*) *by God*, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? (Galatians 4:9)

There is no justification for rendering the two *ginōskō* terms here as ‘choose’. Not only would Paul never have expected them to take it to mean this, but if it is just that they have *chosen* God then why should they not change their minds or incorporate elemental spirits? The NEB taking both *ginōskō* terms to mean ‘acknowledge’ is linguistically possible, and it could mean this. The most obvious meaning, however, is that they have been in a family relationship with God himself, so their return to such bondage is unfathomable Longenecker comments:

> 'To know’ is not used in any mundane sense of either ‘to perceive’ or ‘to acquire knowledge about’ but in the biblical sense of ‘to experience’. For in being ‘sons of God’ (3:26) and having ‘the Spirit of his Son’ (4:6) Galatian Christians had come to experience God in the intimacy of a family relationship. (*Galatians*, p 180)

This seems by far the most likely meaning here.

Summary

We remember that there are 770 instances in the Old Testament of the Hebrew *yā ḏ a'*, and 600 LXX and 220 New Testament instances of *ginōskō*. Out of these we have considered the six verses most frequently (and so presumably the most plausibly) cited to illustrate the suggestion that 'know'' has connotations of election or even that it can actually mean to choose. What should we conclude?

There is *no* evidence that any of these (or indeed any other) verses ever use *ginōskō* simply or even mainly to mean 'chosen.' There is, in other words, no place in the Bible where the sense intended by the writer would not be radically changed by putting 'chosen' instead of *yā ḏ a'* or *ginōskō*. The continued practice of those translations doing so is based on nothing but traditionalism. The question of whether the word might have some kind of vague *connotation* of election is more difficult. From the verses considered we would conclude that there could (eg in Amos 3:2) be such connotations, but that they would come *as an integral part* of a special relationship – not as a concept separate from one or prior to it Personally we can see no reason to believe that any such thing was in the writers' minds.

Foreknowledge

The Greek word foreknowledge (*proginōskō*) is made up of the two Greek elements ‘previous’ (*pro*) and ‘knowledge’ (*ginōskō*). In general Greek literature it simply means ‘knowledge in advance,’ or sometimes ‘prognosis’ in the medical sense. We can find this eg in Thucydides ii. 64.8; Plato, *Rep*. iv 426c; Aristotle, *N. Ethics* 6.2; the noun *prognosis* came to mean a prediction based on a diagnosis.

In the Early Church the term was sometimes used as another word for prophecy eg in Justin Martyr (*Dial*. 39.2) and Clement (*St Romans* ii. 12.54.1). When used of God it seems always to mean knowledge in advance – usually of events or situations. We find this in eg Clement of Rome: 2 Clement 9.9; Irenaeus of Gaul: *Ag. Heresies* xxiv chapter 2; Justin Martyr: *Apol*. 1 xliv; Hermas: *Commands* 4,3,4; Origen: *Ag. Celsus* Bk. 2, chapter 20 (and see also Josephus *Ant.* 8.8.5.10 and 15.10. 5.4-5).

Sometimes it is connected with his full understanding of us, eg in 2 Clement 9.9: ‘For he has foreknowledge of all things and knows what is in our hearts.’ Something similar is written by Justin: ‘…until the number of those foreknown by him as good and virtuous is complete’ and ‘For he foreknows some about to be saved by repentance.’ Justin: *Apol*. 1 xlv & xxviii. Origen thought God’s foreknowledge to be of our ‘character and fitness’ (*Philocal*. xxv. 2), though would, of course, have seen this as due to relationship with God.

The Early Church was, we note, emphatic in its denial that foreknowledge implied any predetermination of events. Thus Justin Martyr says:

> So that what we say about future events being foretold, we do not say it as though they came about by fatal necessity; but God foreknowing all

> that shall be done by all men, and it being his decree that the future actions of men shall all be recompensed according to their value, he foretells by the Spirit of prophecy that he will bestow meet rewards... (*Apol*. 1 xliv)

He also says:

> But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall be certainly punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably wicked, but not because God had created them so. (*Dial*. cxli 20)

Origen says:

> I shall take from the Scriptures the predictions regarding Judas, or the foreknowledge of our Saviour regarding him as the traitor…' (*Ag. Celsus* Bk. 2 chapter 20)

and then proceeds to argue that this foreknowledge in no way implied compulsion.

Jerome, notwithstanding his withering attack on the 'Pelagians', is also clear on this point:

> For Adam did not sin because God knew that he would do so; but God, inasmuch as he is God, foreknew what Adam would do of his own free choice. (*Ag. Pelagius* Bk. 3; Jerome of course, wrote in Latin.)

We can find no hint in any of the Early Church writings that 'foreknow' was ever interpreted in the sense of the post-Augustine theologians who tried to equate foreknowledge with choice or election. It may be useful to bear such background in mind, for the evidence on the word from the Bible itself is small. In the Old Testament (LXX) it is not used at all, though the LXX does use it five times in the Apocrypha. These five apocryphal uses are as follows:

i) Wisdom 6.13: The most difficult of the five. Literally it would read: ‘She (wisdom) goes before those desiring to be known before.’ The meaning would seem to be: ‘She goes before those who desire her, making herself first known to them,’ but it is difficult to glean very much from this.

ii) Wisdom 8.8: ‘She (wisdom) foresees (or foreknows) signs and wonders and the issues of seasons and times.’

iii) Wisdom 18.6: ‘That night was made known beforehand to our fathers…’

iv) Judith 9.6: ‘all your ways are prepared, and your judgments are in your foreknowledge.’

v) Judith 11.19: ‘for these things were told me according to my foreknowledge.’

Apart from the first one (the meaning of which is difficult to determine), all of these uses indicate a simple knowledge in advance.

In the New Testament *proginōskō* is used only seven times, and these we must now consider. We may begin by looking at the five times when it is used of subjects other than the Church:

2 Peter 3:17

> You therefore, beloved, since you know *this* beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked.

Most versions have something similar (except the NIV which changes it to ‘being forewarned’). Literally it is ‘*you therefore beloved foreknowing beware*…’ The meaning of ‘known’ here is clearly that given above, the knowledge of events. This is the sense of the word common in secular and Early Church writings. Peter is telling his readers to beware,

for they know in advance what will happen and that people will try to give Paul's writings strange and devious meanings. True enough, alas, not least when he uses the word *ginōskō*.

Acts 2:23

> Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.

This use of the word is similar to 1) in referring to foreknowledge of events. God made his plans in the light of what he knew would happen. God's plan to deliver up his Son to them was made in the knowledge that they would crucify him. Linguistically we can compare the LXX Judith 9.6; 'Your judgments are in your foreknowledge.'

1 Peter 1:18-20

> … knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For he was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you. (NASB)

The NKJV 'foreordained before the foundation of the world' or NIV 'He was chosen before the creation of the world,' have no linguistic basis whatever apart from the spurious arguments that *ginōskō* can mean 'choose' that we have already seen to be fallacious

Literally the Greek reads:

> were you (plural) redeemed… with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and unspotted – Christ's – foreknown, indeed, before the foundation of the

> world, and manifested in the last times because of you.

Peter's grammar here is not entirely consistent, and his exact meaning is unclear. From the sentence structure it would seem that the 'foreknowledge' would naturally refer back to the noun 'blood'; but in fact Peter makes its Greek form agree with the word 'Christ's'! Does he mean, then, that God foreknew Christ before the world began? The Father did, of course, have a relationship with the Son before the creation – and to interpret Peter to mean this would be quite linguistically consistent with the present word study. It does seem, however, that there would be little point in Peter stating this truth here.

The context of his words may help us. He has been saying that the suffering and death of Christ (which achieved our salvation of faith) was something that prophets of old dimly saw and sought to understand (1:10). In 1:11 he refers to prophets 'forewitnessing the sufferings of Christ'. Even angels desire to look into such matters. It is with this in mind (he says) that we should set our own aim and hope – knowing that we were redeemed by Christ's blood, for which the Old Testament sacrificial lamb was merely a picture. He follows this with the words: 'foreknown, indeed, before the world, but manifested in these last times for you.' The whole context is not one of God *choosing* anyone, but that the whole thing was known about and witnessed to in advance. God foreknew the redemptive function of the Messiah before history began, but its actual manifestation did not come until the New Covenant. The contrast is between 'knowing' and 'manifesting' and this we take to be Peter's meaning.

Paul similarly talks of a manifestation of God's method of redemption by Christ's blood, implying that God foreknew it all along. (Romans 3:25). The epistle to the Hebrews further indicates that God established the sacrifices in Israel as a

foreshadow of the redemption by blood which he foreknew would come (Hebrews 9 etc). John, in the Revelation, emphasizes that the redemption through the blood ‘as of an unspotted and unblemished lamb’ was always in God’s mind, by calling Christ the ‘lamb slain from the foundation of the world.’ (Revelation 13:8)

This is, therefore, how we would understand Peter’s words in 1 Peter 1:20. He could refer to a prior relationship of Father and Son, but this seems irrelevant to the context and unlikely to have been his intention. In any event there is certainly no reference here to ‘foreordination’ or ‘predestination.’

Acts 26:4-5

> My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know They knew me (*proginōskō*) from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Paul’s manner of life was well known to all the Jews. He adds, therefore, ‘pre-knowing me from the first.. how that.. I lived a Pharisee.’ It is difficult to know how far Paul means relationship-knowledge and how much knowledge about him here. As he trained under Gamaliel, *some* of them could well have known him in the sense of personal relationship. But the reference is to ‘all the Jews,’ and the knowledge therefore seems more likely to be thorough understanding as in John 1:47 or 5:42 The foreknowledge implies knowledge *about* the manner of life he lived from his earliest days. This certainly has no connotations of ‘selection’ here.

Romans 11:2

> God has not cast away his people whom he foreknew.

Like the previous instance, here the object of the ‘previous-knowledge’ is a personal one. It could mean either of the following:

> 1) *Relationship knowledge*: God entered into a personal relationship with Israel before their later unbelief to which Paul refers. Thus God ‘foreknew them’ or ‘knew them of old’ in the sense of the verse we have just looked at on Paul. This is a linguistically possible meaning but we should note three things about it. First, it is not necessarily implied by the fact that the object is personal. Second, if it is true, it does not mean that God entered in some former time into a relationship with the Israelites *of today*, it, means that he entered a (two-way) relationship with the Israel that existed in early Old Testament times, and he regards the present Israelites as integral with it. Third, there would be no reason to bring in a concept of choice other than that which is an integral part of a special relationship.
>
> 2) *Thorough knowledge about*: When God made the promises to Israel he ‘knew’ them in the sense of that thorough understanding of John 1:47 and 5:42. This meant that he foreknew there would be two basic groups at the time of Christ: the remnant and the others. In spite of this knowledge, God made the promises and so will not go back on them now.

James Dunn in his commentary well states:

> God knew the character of his people before he chose them as his people, and that means he also foreknew their frequent unfaithfulness to God, including their large-scale rejection of the gospel That is why their rejection of the gospel makes no

> difference to God's commitment to them. (*Romans 9-16*, p 645)

One of the key points to remember is that this is, of course, a collective or community 'foreknowledge.' It is nothing about selecting individuals to *become* Israelites. 'His people' means Israel. It is the nation *as a whole* which God has not 'cast off'. Paul later (11:15) does speak of a 'casting off' of part, but emphasizes this is temporary. Clearly he did not regard it as an eternal decree of some individuals to perdition.

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Turning now to God's foreknowledge of the Church:

1 Peter 1:1-2

> To the… elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father

Romans 8:28-30

> We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (RSV)

God's foreknowledge of those in the Church predates their election and predestination. Since God chose them, in Christ, before the creation (Ephesians 1:4), it would seem that they were foreknown even before the world began. What, therefore, does 'foreknow ' mean here? Theologians have suggested various alternatives:

> 1) 'Foreknow' = 'forechoose'

This can be with or without an element of actual relationship at the time of choosing:

a) God ‘chose’ them individually before they were born but the relationship itself was not implied in that pre-knowledge, ie ‘foreknow’ simply means ‘pre-select’.

b) God selected them as part of having an intimate relationship with them before they were born.

2) ‘Foreknow’ = ‘Knowledge about individuals’

Again there are two forms of this:

a) God foreknew them as individuals in the sense of knowing something specific about them eg that they would repent.

b) He foreknew them in the sense of knowing all about them and understanding fully their characters and weaknesses.

1) ‘Foreknow’ = ‘Forechoose’?

The various versions of this view are based on the idea that as *ginōskō* implies ‘choose’ or ‘set apart,’ so *proginōskō* implies some kind of ‘setting apart beforehand’ or ‘election’. On this view the ‘choice’ was made long before those who were chosen existed.

Now we have seen that to interpret it as ‘choice’ would depart (as all commentators agree) from all secular usage, and that in 770 Old Testament cases of *yāḏa’* and 600 LXX and 220 New Testament uses of *ginōskō* in the Bible there is no instance of it simply meaning ‘choose’ unless implicit in an existing relationship. There is therefore virtually no chance that any New Testament reader would take ‘foreknow’ to mean simply ‘preselect’. This means that 1a) is just not possible. Paul would have said ‘fore-selected’ or ‘fore-consecrated’ had he meant any such thing.

Now in some verses of the Old Testament *yāḏa’* or *ginōskō* (and Amos 3:2 is the obvious one), it speaks of a relationship in which there *may* be some implication of a choice being involved. But the point is that God has *known* them in relationship – if there is any idea of choice this is not the central point. Would view 1b), based on this, make sense?

The first thing to note is that if God really did this, then the relationship must have depended on a prior choice – whereas Peter makes the election dependent on the foreknowledge. More seriously, if God has *always* been linked with us in a special relationship, how was this changed by our new birth? The Bible seems to regard us as enemies and strangers who, being reconciled by the blood of Christ, have been born again into a living relationship with God. How can this be so if God *always* had a personal relationship with us? One possible answer is that God’s relationship was broken off when we were born – but this

seems a rather devious explanation! Surely Paul would not have wrapped up in the one word foreknowledge a doctrine not given anywhere else in the Bible?

In any case, it is doubtful whether there is any meaning at all in speaking of having a relationship with a person who does not yet exist. The reference is to God foreknowing *them*, ie in relationship not just thoughts about them. Jesus said: 'With God all things are possible' but Scripture tells us of things that God cannot do (2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:13,18; James 1:13) so we must not apply these words blindly. God can do the humanly impossible, eg changing water into wine. But there is nothing inherently *meaningless* in thinking of a liquid changing its properties. God can do the impossible, but to put 'God can' in front of nonsense does not make it meaningful. Having a relationship with someone who does not yet exist is not impossible but gobbledygook – and putting 'God can' in front of it does not alter this.

The whole line of thinking in 1b), therefore, seems to us to be conceptually meaningless. Unless Paul wished to imply the pre-existence of the human soul/spirit (which would be an incredible doctrine to wrap up in one word without further mention), we cannot see how that could mean that God had a relationship with someone before they existed. This would be like saying God could make a tripod with four legs – this is not an 'impossibility' it is a nonsense.

How 1a) and 1b) are muddled together to try to make it sound plausible is illustrated in Moo's commentary (pp 532ff). He asserts that the New Testament usage of foreknowledge 'does not conform to the general usage'. He claims that the verb used with God as subject in the New Testament means 'enter into relationship with before' or 'choose, or determine before'. He admits that this interpretation of the term is 'somewhat strange against the

background of broad Greek usage' but claims that it 'flows naturally from the use of *ginōskō* in the LXX to translate the Hebrew *yā ḏ a'* when it means intimate relationship' – citing the most common Old Testament 'proof texts' (Genesis 18.19; Jeremiah 1.5; Amos 3.2). Somehow, from uses of 'know' which at most mean choice *as part of* intimate relationship, he arrives at the assertion that 'the difference between 'know or love beforehand' and 'choose beforehand' virtually cease to exist' (p 533). He then places the timing of this preselection before the foundation of the world. In our terms, he has argued that 'know' sometimes implies choice within an intimate relationship, but then passing through 1b) arrives at 1a) which is pure pre-selection.

The dilemma for this view is simple. If it means 1a) then there is no linguistic basis for it whatsoever and no first century reader would have so understood it; whilst if it means 1b) it is both nonsensical and implies a continual relationship unchanged by conversion.

2) ‘Foreknow’ = ‘Knowledge about Individuals’

This is one of a ‘passive’ sense, ie as implying a thorough understanding but not an action on God’s part. JB Phillips renders Romans 8:29:

> God, in his foreknowledge, chose them (ie those who love him) to bear the family likeness of his Son…

In other words, God has set the destiny of those who love him in the full light of his foreknowledge of them and their characteristics.

As we saw above, Justin Martyr took view 2a) which implies knowing something specific about them. To Justin it was that they would be ‘good and virtuous’ but he sees this as not something in themselves but that they would be ‘saved through repentance’. Even Pelagius (unlike the mythical ‘Pelagians’ invented by Augustine) does not suggest it is foreknowledge of a perfect moral life, but just ‘those whom he had foreknown would believe’ (De Bruyn *Pelagius’s Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, p 112). The basis he suggests is not works but faith, the destiny is not earned but given. In a sense this may be true, but we doubt that anything this specific was in Paul’s mind and it does not fit the context very well. For this reason 2a) seems to us unlikely.

The word ‘know’ can, however, mean a general thorough understanding of someone. Jesus ‘knew all men’ (John 2:24) and this is explained as ‘he knew what was in man’ (John 2:25). This is not something *specific* about them, but a general knowledge. Sometimes, but only sometimes, inference is then drawn from this general knowledge to knowledge of some specific point about them (eg in John 5:42). The word ‘foreknow’ is similarly used of Paul in Acts

26:5. Here the object is personal ‘foreknowing *me*’, with the implication that it means all about Paul.

Thus interpretation 2b) is grammatically in accord with biblical usage. It also fits into the context of Romans 8:29, as we may now consider.

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In our *Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory*we gave an outline of Romans. Chapter 8 begins with the Christian’s freedom from condemnation, and how thus the Spirit breaks sin’s power over him. Then Paul talks of walking in the Spirit, and the Spirit’s method of operating in Christians. From 8:17 we begin to see the future task for which Christians are intended – their revelation as sons of God, which will release creation. In verse 23 he notes that we also, though we have the Spirit of adoption, wait as eagerly as the creation for the future time of adoption (or ‘son-placing’) when we shall be revealed as sons. As we wait we ‘groan’ inwardly, longing for the coming time when goodness and beauty will triumph (v23). Yet we do not know how to pray as we ought, how to express these groanings and longings for our world. So the Spirit partakes in and shares our prayers, with groanings too deep to be put into words (v26). God understands the Spirit’s ‘groanings’ because the Spirit intercedes on our behalf according to God ’ s own designs (v27). For we know that God’s Spirit works in everything for good, *together with* those who love God and are called (or named or given a calling) according to his purpose (v28). Verse 29 begins with ‘because’ (Greek: *hoti*) referring back to the previous verse and giving the grounds for our knowledge:

> Because whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son…

We must be sure to bear in mind, here, to whom Paul is writing, whom he has in mind, and why. Briefly, he is writing to Christians, about Christians, and to reassure them of

God’s love for them and God’s desire for them to cooperate with his Spirit in working for good and in overcoming all tribulation.

We may see this by looking back at the context. In verses 16-26 Paul continually refers to ‘us,’ meaning the children of God who are awaiting Christ’s return and working for good with God and in prayer. In 8:26-30 he uses the third person as a purely stylistic change, but the similarity of idea in 26 and 27 shows that the same people are in mind. In 26 the Spirit is interceding alongside and on behalf of Christians as they work with God to bring good. Verse 28 is an encouragement that God is working with them.We know this *because* (v29) these whom he foreknew were given the destiny of conformity to Christ – and the associated destiny of freeing the creation (8:19). Paul is not concerned with something specific about them which God foreknew and is not concerned to find some distinguishing feature that explains how or why believers have received something unbelievers have not. He is concerned to assure them, *as those who love God*, that God (so to speak) knew what he was letting himself in for, when he pledged himself to bring them to conformity to the image of Christ. In a sense we might say that he has given us the destiny *in spite of* his thorough (fore)knowledge, not because of it.

The sequence in verse 30 is often misunderstood because ‘justification’ is taken as meaning to ‘make righteous but we saw in our chapter 2 that it really concerns *declaration* of right-standing. This helps to explain why it comes after the naming or calling. He speaks to those who are ‘called saints’ (Romans 1:7) – and it is the ‘saints’ who are involved in the intercession, working with the Spirit, etc in Romans 8:27. Their justification does not concern how they *became* saints, but how God declares them to be so – which is by their faith flowing out in their actions. Their justification involves being seen in faith-relation as in a sense was the human Jesus

with the Father – the final step of this process will be glorification as they are revealed in total Christlikeness for the redemption of creation. The elect of God will triumph against all opposition because God knew perfectly well what they would be like when he gave them the destiny – yet he still gave up his Son for them and will give them ‘all things’ with Christ.

Are we doubtful whether our inner groanings in prayer are of any use? Does God really want us to cooperate with his Spirit in working for good? It is astounding but we know that it is true. But how may we be sure of this? Because, although he foreknew us, although he understood all about us and our weaknesses, yet he gave us this great destiny and task of helping him to set his creation at liberty.

Overview

This passage of Paul's letter may be set out in a table to help to bring out the structure and pattern of thought:

Creation groans and travails together until now (v22)

(not only so but also)

We ourselves, groan within ourselves as we wait for this adoption (ie our 'son-placing,' or revealing as sons of God)

(likewise)

The Spirit also takes share in our weakness (for we know not how to put our groaning into words) by himself supplicating on our behalf with groanings which cannot be put into words

(But)

God (who knows our hearts *knows* what the Spirit means by these groanings (v27) *because* it is *according to God's own will* that the Spirit makes his intercessions on our behalf (v27)

(And)

We *know* that in everything God (or God's Spirit) works for good in cooperation with us (those) who love God and are named (called) according to his purpose. (v28)

because us (those whom) he fore*knew*, he gave the destiny of conformity to the image of his Son (v29)

(and) us (these whom) he gave this destiny he also named

(and) us (these whom) he named he also declared in right-standing with him

(and) us (these whom) he declared right, he also glorified (ie will certainly glorify, v18)

What then shall we conclude?

That i) if God be on our behalf who can oppose us? (v31)

ii) if he even gave us his Son for us, will he not give us (with Christ – as his co-heirs v17) all things? (v32)

Let us note again that in this passage Paul is not at all concerned with the question of why or how they as individuals became Christians, nor with why anyone else did not. He is talking to them, as Christians (ie *as part of the Church in Christ*) of the future plans of God for them as a group. He is saying that these plans were made in full knowledge of what the Church would be like, in all its weaknesses.

Predestination

What is the meaning of predestination? In chapter 14 of *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*, we saw that the Greek word *proorizō* means a 'marking out beforehand.' Actually it does not even imply inevitability. Greathouse in his 2008 Romans commentary (p 276) quoted J Agar Beet's 1890 commentary (p 257), 'The boy marked out for one trade may enter another,' and such a meaning is not precluded by the word *predestine* in this context.

Even if we do suppose that it is inevitable, however, it means God has marked out a destiny for 'those who love him'. This does not mean that he has determined *who* will love him and who will not. As we have seen in chapter 5 of Volume 1, his clearly stated will was that none would perish but all would come to repentance. We have seen how Luke tells us that God had loving plans for a group of unbelievers, which they rejected for themselves (Luke 7:30). Had they accepted these plans they surely would have received the marking out for a destiny in their Messiah, which they failed to obtain because they resisted the Holy Spirit, refused to repent, and rejected that Messiah. Paul does not specifically say this, for he rarely uses the word *proorizō*, and only in a context of believers. But his Jewish concept of God's plans and election purposes would fit this concept well.

In any event he makes it clear in Ephesians 1 that this destiny is corporate, it is marked out for us *in Christ*. We have seen above in chapter 4 how our election was not as individuals, but was an election *in Christ*, the elect One. Ephesians 1:4-5 might be literally rendered: 'He chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him; in love, predestinating us to the son-placing through Jesus Christ to himself'. The destiny marked out for us is obtained by those in Christ, and is obtained through Christ. Romans 8 also reflects this, for Paul

begins in verse 1 by referring his comments to those ‘in Christ.’ Ephesians also shows us that, even if God planned this destiny for all men (and Christ died for the sins *of the world*) the inheritance is obtained only in Christ; Ephesians 1:11 reads:

> … in whom also we obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of him who energizes all things according to the counsel of his will.

In brief, whatever destiny God has for man, it is achieved only in Christ. God did not simply select people to receive a destiny. His whole eternal purpose is accomplished only in Christ. Our inheritance is obtained and our destiny worked out in Christ, and this destiny was set out by God in the full light of his foreknowledge of the failings those who would receive it.

With this great destiny in store, a destiny made in a full understanding of our natures and weaknesses, we may indeed see that nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Does God Foreknow Everything?

Christians believe that God is ‘omniscient’, that is, he knows everything which can be known. Much of traditional theology has taken it that this includes all future events – and this has then been seen to be in conflict with any real idea of human freewill. Now, however, there is increasing questioning of whether ‘knowing everything which can be known’ includes all future events – some of which may be yet to be determined. There are two aspects of background to this question about time and the future: theological and Scientific – and they are connected.

The first century Jewish philosopher Philo, as far as we know, first expounded the idea that, since time is only known through movement in space, God created time along with the physical universe.

> Philo: ‘Time began either simultaneously with the world or after it.’ (See Colson and Whitaker 1929, p 21)

Though Philo was a devout Jew, this really arose in development of his Platonic ideas. The idea, adopted by Augustine, Boethius, and fairly standard in western theology, involved a sophisticated philosophical notion of time, and also became associated with the idea that God was ‘timeless’.

In the 20th century science rediscovered the mystery and complexity of time. In Einstein’s universe, time flows at different rates according to the motion of its framework. This only becomes obvious at high speeds of motion – at substantial fractions of the speed of light. However, if two people are moving past each other at (say) half the velocity of light, then their ‘times’ will be going at different rates – paradoxically each slower than the other. There is, then, no

universal timeframe throughout even this universe – let alone any others there may or may not be.

Now the relationships of a creator-God to time could be any of the following:

> 1) He could share a universal time-frame, common to himself and the universe.
>
> 2) He could be outside time – having no time frame or sequence at all
>
> 3) He could be 'omni-timal' – present in all physical time frames concurrently
>
> 4) He could have sequence but no time frame.

The first of these is perhaps the general unreflective view. The second is the traditional Augustinian concept of God. But something like the third or fourth has seen something of a revival in recent years. We will first outline some aspects of these, and then comment biblically on it.

Two separate groups, with both of whom we have had some contact, have moved this. The first is a group of philosopher/scientist/theologians in the uk, in particular Richard Swinburne, Keith Ward, John Polkinghorne, and Arthur Peacocke. We have much sympathy with the theologies of first three of these – though a lot of reservations about Peacocke's. In the usa has arisen a group associated with the 'Openness of God' concept, including Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, and Greg Boyd. Their basic point of departure is that God is *omniscient* in the sense that he knows everything there is to know. Knowing all that can be known' is actually the wording of the LXX of Ecclesiasticus 42:18-21:

> For the Lord knows [*egnō*] all that can be known [*pasan eidesin*], and he beholds the signs of the world [or 'the everlasting'] declaring the things

> that are past, and for to come, and revealing the hidden things. No thought escapes him, neither is any word hidden from him. He has garnished the excellent works of his wisdom and he is from everlasting to everlasting…'

The future, however, according to the 'openness' view is partially indeterminate. This means that certain aspects of it depend on human freewill choices. Some of the Pharisees, according to Luke, rejected God's plan for themselves. Until they made that choice, their future was not determined – and if it was not yet determined then it could not be known by God. It was not a part of *what there was to know*. Only the present and past is *knowable*, the future is not yet determined.

Now by all this they do not mean, of course, that nothing at all can be known about it. God himself purposes to do certain things – and since God is faithful his intended actions will happen. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and there will be a revealing of the sons of God. It is which particular people will accept this plan, and which will (like those Luke mentions) 'opt out' which is not known in advance. God is a powerful master strategist, and he will bring in his plans in general by some means or other. Greg Boyd has developed the idea that because God is so brilliant, he does not know which particular outcome will result from human free choice but he has a strategy to deal with any possible outcome This is like a Grandmaster chess player does not know what his opponent will move, but knows what he himself will do whatever the move is. In other words God does not know in advance how people will exercise their moral choices. In one place he even expresses surprise at their unrepentance:

> I said, 'Surely you will fear me, you will receive instruction'-- So that her dwelling would not be cut

> off, Despite people everything for which I punished her. But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds. (Zephaniah 3:7)

But God is never unprepared. He will never say ‘Oh dear I never thought of that!’

It is not always clear whether advocates of this openness view stand within 1) or 3) or 4) above. But the essential point is that God is not ‘outside time’ and does not know *everything* in advance

How can we assess these views biblically? The problem with the timeless God is that it is hard to see how he could *react* to anything. And if he can never *react* to anything, it is hard to see how he could form anything that could really called a *relationship*. Relating is central to being personal. It is not so much that we can find one ‘proof text’ about this. It is rather that the whole Bible speaks to us of a God who acts and reacts, who changes his mind according to the reactions of human beings. If God really is outside time, then it is hard to see how he could do any of these things described in Scripture, and, indeed, how he can be a person at all. With the laudable motive of magnifying God, Augustinian theologians like Paul Helm have actually depersonalized him. He becomes emotionless, reactionless, impassive, unchangeable – and timeless. He becomes the ultimate candidate to fail the Turing test which distinguishes a machine from a person.

For these reasons we cannot accept the ‘timeless God’ concept without, at least, serious modification.

On the other hand, there do seem to us to be complexities in God’s relationship with time. This is not because to him ‘a thousand years is as one day’ and ‘before Abraham was I am’ (both of which can be interpreted in other ways), but because of prophecy. Prophecy could, of course, work in various ways not implying literal foresight:

- God may predict things which he knows he can do (eg a virgin shall conceive).

- Some things can be reasonably predicted from the way things are in the present (eg Jesus' prediction that the Temple would be destroyed).

- Prophecy may be general prediction with multiple fulfilment, based on an understanding of basic principles of good and evil (eg the multiple fulfilment of 'the beast' in Revelation).

Sanders in his stimulating book *The God Who Risks*, runs through such ideas – particularly emphasizing the third. In many instances these three explanations are certainly plausible, but we wonder whether *all* instances can be so explained. Passages like Isaiah 53, claims Sanders, were not obviously about a coming Messiah or all the Jews would have expected someone like Jesus. We don't find this convincing. In science, for example, people can 'fail to see' what is actually 'obvious' – but this does not mean that when eventually someone does 'see' it then this is purely subjective. It is hard to see to what Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 applied within the prophets' own experiences, and they correlate with features of Jesus' death which *no one* could have reasonably predicted a thousand years earlier (in the case of the Psalm) without foresight. Sanders' attempts (p 101) to cast doubt on its reference are frankly unconvincing. Whether the Hebrew is obscure or not, the LXX has 'they pierced my hands and feet' so this was how it was taken by the Jews in the third century BC. Sanders neglects to mention this.

Likewise Sanders attempts to explain away Jesus' prophecy that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crew (p 135). Granted a knowledge of human nature in general and Peter in particular, granted that having prophesied it God could engineer occasions for Peter to make denials – it

still seems a bit far-fetched to deny foresight. Even more telling, the prophecy of Jesus about Peter's death in John 21:18-19, seems very hard to explain away without any kind of foresight. Perhaps such instances are rare, but we see no reason to deny that sometimes the veil of time may be lifted. The problem seems to be a kind of 'all or nothing' mentality here. Either God can see absolutely all the future or else he can see none of it. But how can we know that this is so? There is nothing inherently *illogical* about God seeing some but not all things. We should beware of beginning from philosophical dictums (in this case 'all or nothing at all') rather than experience and biblical revelation.

All theologians, of course, try to make one Scripture fit with another. Where there is apparent contradiction, then we should try to look for interpretations which alleviate it. This is, indeed, true of any coherent system. Thus we find clear biblical evidence that God *changes his mind*, and that he wants all people to repent, and this seems to us to undermine eg the view of 'predestination' which is taken by Augustinian/Reformed theology. But this is trying to make Scripture consistent with Scripture – not with some prior philosophical dictum. Theologians like Augustine, Paul Helm, and (as Sanders notes p 67) even others who are not really of their camp, begin with an inviolable philosophical dictum that God is immutable, unchanging, etc, and then force the evidence of Scripture into this framework, however implausibly. There is a danger that Sanders may be doing the same – except that his inviolable dictum is that God cannot possibly really foresee *anything* in the future. The evidence of Scripture then has to fit into this new basic philosophical dictum. Yet *neither* philosophical dictum is self-evident, so why assume either? There do seem to be Scriptures which show that God does not foresee *everything* – how else could he change his mind? But there is nothing in

Scripture which says that God cannot genuinely foresee *anything*, so why is it so important to prove this?

We obviously share much of the viewpoint of the Sanders' school – though our views are not derived in any way from it but from our own independent study of Scripture (and our first edition of the present work predated it). We agree that the picture in the Bible is of a 'risky' universe, that God is truly personal and relational and so *reacts*, and *changes his mind* according to human responses and actions. We agree that God is probably not 'timeless' in the traditional Augustinian sense, though we might want to discuss more the nature of his time-relation, whether it is time or just sequence.

We do not see that 'foreknowledge' offers any particular problems to Sanders' views since what is foreknown is generally corporate, and does not necessarily imply individuals or details. William Lane Craig in *The Only Wise God* argues for genuine foreknowledge, but Rice in Pinnock et al in *The Openness of God* and Sanders, seem to us to answer his arguments in terms of God's knowledge of his own intention and the general or corporate nature of what is foreknown. Thus in Romans 11:2 and 8:29 the traditional timelessness view would imply that foreknowledge of the group is equivalent to foreknowing all the individuals. This would perfectly well fit with our interpretation 2b) above. Sanders, however, would emphasize the corporate nature of the foreknowledge – God foreknew there would be a group who would love him and what they would be like, but not necessarily which individuals would be in it. Though this is not essential to our view 2b), it is perfectly consistent with it, and we do not particularly see any problems for Sanders' position in these particular verses.

We do not, however, wholly take the same viewpoint as Sanders. We agree that God is not 'timeless' in the sense of

without sequence, and does not foreknow *all* the future, but we do not see the need to strive to ‘prove’ that God has no genuine precognition of the future at all – nor are we presently convinced that such demonstration can be made consistent with all the incidents in Scripture. In some of the prophecies at least, it seems as though the veil of time has been lifted.

We need a certain humility in thinking about these things. Immanuel Kant saw ‘time’ as one of the categories of human cognition – part of phenomenal knowledge but not necessarily part of ‘things in themselves’ Open theologian Sanders (in Thomas Jay Ord’s *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Encounters Science*) also notes that our human experiences are embodied, and therefore limited With something as basic as the Higgs Bosun that glues things together only being ‘found’ in 2012, we have a lot to learn yet about time, matter, and the universe We guess we are semi-open theologians at the present time (whatever that is). We sometimes distinguish our own views as ‘Relationist’ in the sense that, whilst God will not redirect people’s basic moral choice to accept or reject his unmerited grace to them, he may affect other human choices if he so decides. He acts in the world of human affairs.

Summary on Foreknowledge and Predestination

Paul intends us to be encouraged at the thought that the destiny which we have *in Christ* is part of a plan formed long ago by God, and that he foreknew the nature of, the weaknesses of, and the glories of the Church. Nevertheless, he chose to give those who love him the destiny in Christ of conformity to the Son of God, and the redemption of creation through the revealing of the sons of God. In all the theological discussion about the precise meanings of foreknowledge, and exactly how and how much God can foresee the future, we should not lose sight of this. Theological understanding is not a substitute for getting on with the actual job, nor for joining the creation as it waits with ‘eager longing’ for the coming revealing of the Sons of God.



Chapter 6: Hardening and Unbelief

The Basic Issue

In *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory* chapters 11-12, we looked in context at Romans 9:18:

> Therefore he has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens.

How should we approach the understanding of verses like this, which, when taken in isolation, seem puzzling? We noted in that volume the kinds of good principles of interpretation set out in such books as William Klein et al *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* and Grant R Osborne *The Hermeneutical Spiral*.

Taking a considered overview we would suggest several basic guidelines for this present verse:

> - The 'broad picture' of truth can be gained from reading (without commentaries) the whole sweep of Scripture.
>
> - Within this, individual verses must be in general harmony, and there is an onus on us to find such a harmony.
>
> - In doing so, verses need to be considered in context and in the light of scholarly understanding of language and literary genre.
>
> - This should not, however, lead either to emptying verses of all meaning or of standing them on their heads.

What this means for this particular verse was that it should be understood in the light of a number of things.

1. God's stated attitudes

The New Testament tells us that God ‘desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). This reflects what God said to Ezekiel (18:23):

> 'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,’ declares the Lord God, ‘rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?’ (NASB)

This is not a view based on isolated verses, but is the picture from a general reading of Scripture.

2. God’s will and human wills

Again, the whole storyline in Scripture portrays an interplay of the desires and plans of God as an agent, and the reactions of human agents. This is noticeably true in the events to which Romans 9:18 (and Exodus 33:19) relates. The scenario is Pharaoh’s defiance of God before God is ever said to act on him, and of a choice offered to the Israelites who (unlike Moses who reacts positively to his call) do not react as God wishes. If Romans 9:18 were to imply that ‘really’ God is a kind of puppet-master who is pulling all the strings, this would make the whole thing a charade. Paul’s concern is not to prove that God predetermines everything, but to assert that God is *acting* as a free agent in history. Yahweh is not merely a vague ‘process theology’ type God who vaguely influences but is fairly ineffectual. He is not a deistic God who has designed a deterministic world in which *everything* is predetermined (either theologically or through material laws). Rather, he is a powerful God who upholds the universe but who also *acts* in *particular* instances on the stage of history. As we saw in chapter 1, he has wills and plans which will ultimately triumph but which individual humans can resist, oppose and opt out of.

3. God’s strategy in human history

This whole section of Romans 9 is not about individuals ‘getting right with God’. It is not about individual eternal

destinies. It is about the divine action in human history as God unfolds his plans to prepare for and send Jesus the Messiah to bear the sins of the world. The ‘hardening’ of Pharaoh and the ‘mercy’ on Moses are not about them going to heaven or hell, but about their roles in those unfolding plans for Israel through whom ‘all nations of the earth will be blessed’. In context, the verse does not mean that God made Moses repent but stopped Pharaoh from doing so. God would rather that Pharaoh had ‘returned from his ways and lived,’ but what God did was to confirm Pharaoh in the path he had chosen and strengthen his resolve to act on his evil inclinations even when sheer prudent self-interest would have militated against it.

4. A weight of linguistic and scholarly evidence

It is our contention that the basic lines we have taken above are well borne out by linguistic and scholarly evidence. Some of this we looked at briefly in chapter 11 in *Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory*, but here we will give a little more detail.

Early Scholars and Hebrew Thought Forms

It is worth making the point here that the kinds of understanding we advocate are far from new. Experts on Hebrew language and thought have long tried to help us understand how the Old Testament writer saw this overall process. In a very useful analytical commentary on the Hebrew of Exodus, Kalisch wrote:

> As the external, often accidental, occasion of an event is mostly more obvious, even to the reflecting mind, than its primary cause or its true (often hidden) originator, it has become a linguistic peculiarity in most ancient, especially the Semitic, languages, to use indiscriminately the former instead of the latter, so that the phrase 'I shall harden the heart of Pharaoh' means: I know that I shall be the cause of Pharaoh's obstinacy – my commandments and wonders will be an occasion, an inducement to an increasing obduration of his heart. And the compassionate leniency of God, who, instead of crushing the haughtiness of the refractory king with one powerful blow, first tried to reform him by various less awful punishments, and who generally announced the time of the occurrence of the plagues by the words, 'Behold I shall afflict tomorrow' in order to grant him time for reflection and repentance; this clemency on the part of God increased Pharaoh's refractoriness; it was to him a cause of prolonged and renewed resistance (*A Historical and Critical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1858)

If this is, as Kalisch implies, a Hebrew or Semitic trait, then it is little to be wondered that a similar line of interpretation was adopted by the great Hebrew-Christian scholar, Dr Alfred Edersheim, who wrote:

> It is indeed most true that ‘God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that he be converted and live;’ and that he ‘will have all men come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.’ But ‘he that being often reproved hardens his neck, shall be suddenly destroyed, and that without remedy.’ The same manifestation of God which to the believing is ‘a savour of life unto life,’ is to those who resist it ‘a savour of death unto death.’ As one has written, ‘the sunlight shining upon our earth produces opposite results according to the nature of the soil.’ In Scripture language: ‘the earth which drinks in the rain that comes oft upon it, and brings forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receives blessing from God: but that which bears thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.’ Or, as a German writer puts it: ‘It is the curse of sin that it makes the hard heart ever harder against the gracious drawing of the Divine love, patience, and long-suffering. (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol 2, p 61)

These two Hebrew scholars, then, both took the implications of the words in Exodus to be along these lines. God is the overall agent of the process in the sense that he knowingly enters into the process which brings it about through the reaction of Pharaoh.

Dr GA Chadwick in his analytical commentary gave the following explanation:

> When Moses received his commission, at the bush, words were spoken which are now repeated with more emphasis, and which have to be considered carefully. For probably no statement of Scripture has excited fiercer criticism, more exultation of

enemies and perplexity of friends, than that the Lord said, ‘I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he shall not let the people go,’ and that in consequence of this Divine act Pharaoh sinned and suffered. Just because the words are startling, it is unjust to quote them without careful examination of the context, both in the prediction and the fulfillment. When all is weighed, compared, and harmonized, it will at last be possible to draw a just conclusion. And although it may happen long before then, that the objector will charge us with special pleading, yet he will be the special pleader himself, if he seeks to hurry us, by prejudice or passion, to give a verdict which is based upon less than all the evidence, patiently weighed. Let us in the first place find out how soon this dreadful process began; when was it that God fulfilled his threat, and hardened, in any sense whatever, the heart of Pharaoh? Did he step in at the beginning, and render the unhappy king incapable of weighing the remonstrance’s which he then performed the cruel mockery of addressing to him? Were these as insincere and futile as if one bade the avalanche to pause which his own act had started down the icy slopes? Was Pharaoh as little responsible for his pursuit of Israel as his horses were, being, like them, the blind agents of a superior force? We do not find it so. In the fifth chapter, when a demand is made, without any sustaining miracle, simply appealing to the conscience of the ruler, there is no mention of any such process, despite the insults with which Pharaoh then assails both the messengers and Jehovah himself, Whom he knows not. In the seventh chapter there is clear evidence that the process is yet unaccomplished; for, speaking of an act still future, it declares, ‘I will

harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt’ (vii. 3). And this terrible act is not connected with the remonstrance’s and warnings of God, but entirely with the increasing pressure of the miracles. The exact period is marked when the hand of doom closed upon the tyrant. It is not where the Authorised Version places it. When the magicians imitated the earlier signs of Moses, ‘his heart was strong,’ but the original does not bear out the assertion that at this time the Lord made it so by any judicial act of his (vii. 13). That only comes with the sixth plague; and the course of events may be traced, fairly well, by the help of the margin of the Revised Version. After the plague of blood ‘Pharaoh’s heart was strong’ (‘hardened’), and this is distinctly ascribed to his own action, because ‘he set his heart even to this’ (vii 22,23).

After the second plague, it was still he himself who ‘made his heart heavy’ (viii 15).

After the third plague the magicians warned him that the very finger of some god was upon him indeed: their rivalry, which hitherto might have been somewhat of a palliation for his obstinacy, was now ended; but yet ‘his heart was strong’ (viii 19).

Again, after the fourth plague he ‘made his heart heavy’, and it ‘was heavy’ after the fifth plague (viii 32, ix 7).

Only thenceforward comes the judicial infatuation upon him who has resolutely infatuated himself hitherto.

But when five warnings and penalties have spent their force in vain, when personal agony is inflicted

in the plague of boils, and the magicians in particular cannot stand before him through their pain, would it have been proof of virtuous contrition if he had yielded then? If he had needed evidence, it was given to him long before. Submission now would have meant prudence, not penitence; and it was against prudence, not penitence, that he was hardened. Because he had resisted evidence, experience, and even the testimony of his own magicians, he was therefore stiffened against the grudging and unworthy concessions which must otherwise have been wrested from him, as a wild beast will turn and fly from fire. He was henceforth himself to become an evidence and a portent; and so ‘The Lord made strong the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them’ (ix. 12). It was an awful doom, but it is not open to the attacks so often made upon it. It only means that for him the last five plagues were not. disciplinary, but wholly penal. Nay, it stops short of asserting even this; they might still have appealed to his reason; they were only not allowed to crush him by the agency of terror. Not once is it asserted that God hardened his heart against any nobler impulse than alarm, and desire to evade danger and death. We see clearly this meaning in the phrase, when it is applied to his army entering the Red Sea: ‘I will make strong the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall go in’ (xiv 17). It needed no greater moral turpitude to pursue the Hebrews over the sands than on the shore, but it certainly required more hardihood. But the unpursued departure which the good-will of Egypt refused, their common sense was not allowed to grant. Callousness was followed by infatuation, as even the pagans felt that whom God wills to ruin he first

drives mad. This explanation implies that to harden Pharaoh's heart was to inspire him, not with wickedness, but with nerve. And as far as the original language helps us at all, it decidedly supports this view. Three different expressions have been unhappily rendered by the same English word, to harden; but they may be discriminated throughout the narrative in Exodus, by the margin of the Revised Version.

One word, which commonly appears without any marginal explanation, is the same which is employed elsewhere about 'the cause which is too hard for' minor judges (Deuteronomy i 17, cf xv 18, etc). Now, this word is found (vii 13) in the second threat that 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart,' and in the account which was to be given to posterity of how 'Pharaoh hardened himself to let us go' (xiii 15). And it is said likewise of Sihon, king of Heshbon, that he 'would not let us pass by him, for the Lord thy God hardened his spirit and made his heart strong' (Deuteronomy ii 30). But since it does not occur anywhere in all the narrative of what God actually did with Pharaoh, it is only just to interpret this phrase in the prediction by what we read elsewhere of the manner of its fulfilment.

The second word is explained in the margin as meaning to make strong. Already God had employed it when he said 'I will make strong his heart' (iv 21), and this is the term used of the first fulfilment of the menace, after the sixth plague (ix 12). God is not said to interfere again after the seventh, which had few special terrors for Pharaoh himself; but from henceforth the expression 'to make strong' alternates with the phrase 'to make heavy.' 'Go in unto Pharaoh, for I have made heavy

his heart and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs in the midst of them' (x 1).

It may be safely assumed that these two expressions cover between them all that is asserted of the judicial action of God in preventing a recoil of Pharaoh from his calamities. Now, the strengthening of a heart, however punitive and disastrous when a man's will is evil (just as the strengthening of his arm is disastrous then), has in itself no immorality inherent. It is a thing as often good as bad – as when Israel and Joshua are exhorted to 'Be strong and of good courage' (Deuteronomy xxxi 6,7,23), and when the angel laid his hand upon Daniel and said, 'Be strong, yea, be strong' (Daniel x 19). In these passages the phrase is identical with that which describes the process by which Pharaoh was prevented from cowering under the tremendous blows he had provoked.

The other expression is to make heavy or dull. Thus 'the eyes of Israel were *heavy* with age' (Genesis xlviii 10), and as we speak of a weight of honour, equally with the heaviness of a dull man, so we are twice commanded, 'Make heavy (honour) thy father and thy mother'; and the Lord declares, 'I will make myself heavy (get me honour) upon Pharaoh' (Deuteronomy v 16, Exodus xx 12, xiv 4,17,18). In these latter references it will be observed that the making 'strong' the heart of Pharaoh and the making 'myself heavy' are so connected as almost to show a design of indicating how far is either expression from conveying the notion of immorality, infused into a human heart by God. For one of the two phrases which have been thus interpreted is still applied to Pharaoh;

but the other (and the more sinister, as we should think, when thus applied) is appropriated by God to himself: he makes himself heavy.

It is also a curious and significant coincidence that the same word was used of the burdens that were made *heavy* when first they claimed their freedom, which is now used of the treatment of the heart of their oppressor (v9).

It appears, then, that the Lord is never said to debauch Pharaoh's heart, but only to strengthen it against prudence and to make it dull; that the words used do not express the infusion of evil passion, but the animation of a resolute courage, and the overclouding of a natural discernment; and, above all, that every one of the three words, to make hard, to make strong, and to make heavy, is employed to express Pharaoh's own treatment of himself, before it is applied to any work of God, as actually taking place already. (*The Book of Exodus*, pp 112-117)

Modern Linguistic Evidence and Hebrew Background

In chapter 11 of *Volume 1:God's Path to Victory*, we noted that Pharaoh had already made his moral choice of direction in oppressing God's people before ever God did any action on him in 'hardening'. In the present chapter we want to look more closely at the three different Hebrew words used for 'hardening' in the passages. The root forms of the three words are *chazak*, *kabed* and *qashah*. The various conjugations of Hebrew verbs (Hiphil (hi.), Piel (pi.), Qal, etc) are not only spelled differently, but may have rather different meanings. To make this study easier for the English reader a Hebrew verb has always been signified by the root form whatever its conjugation. Biblical Hebrew, of course, had no vowels, and so chazaq can also be transcribed as *ḥ zq* and *kabed* as *kbd*, etc.

In regard to the general usage, it will be useful to bear in mind that *qashah* is used only twice, once with God and once with Pharaoh as agent. Of the other two, VanGemeren notes in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*:

> Usually with *kbd* a human being hardens his own heart, but in Exodus 10:1 God takes responsibility for it. (vol 2, p 578)
>
> As the text stands, *kbd*mostly refers to Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart, and *ḥ zq* to God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Correspondingly, in 1 Samuel 6:6 the narrator retells Pharaoh's own act with *kbd*, and in Joshua 11:20 God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart with *ḥ zq*. (vol 2, p 750)

Considering now the three terms each in turn:

1) *Qashah* (or *qšh*):

- Basic meaning: Stubborn
- Agent: *God* – Exodus 7:3; *Pharaoh* – 13:15
- Reference: To whole process not to any specific instance

The basic meaning of the Hiphil form is given by VanGemeren as ‘make hard, heavy.’ He adds:

> The word *qšh* is used in the sense of stiff-necked (Deuteronomy 10:16; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chronicles 30:8; 36:13; Nehemiah 9:16,17,29; Jeremiah 7:26; 17:23; 19:15; Proverbs 28:14; 29:1). Its use in connection with Pharaoh’s heart has been especially noted; eg Exodus 7:3, ‘I will harden Pharaoh’s heart’; 13:15, ‘When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go.’ (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol 3, p 997)

The general sense seems to be stiff and unbending, obdurate. Proverbs 28:14 contrasts for us the one who ‘fears the Lord always’ with the one who ‘hardens his heart’ and will therefore fall into trouble. The root is used only twice (Exodus 7:3 and 13:15); in one case the agent is God and in the other it is Pharaoh. In both cases it refers to the whole general process during which Pharaoh became progressively more set in his chosen path. In neither case is the word used to refer to any particular time or incident.

2) *Kabed* (or *kbd*):

- Basic meaning: Heavy/Immovable/Stubborn
- Agent: *God* – Exodus 10:1; *Pharaoh* – Exodus 8:15; 8:32; 9:34; 1 Samuel 6:6; *None* – Exodus 7:14; 9:7

- Reference: To obduracy – God confirming Pharaoh's choice.

VanGemeren (vol 2, p 577) states: ''weight' is the central meaning of which the other uses are applications' and gives 'to honour, make heavy' as the key words. Green states:

> The root *kbd* encompasses a wide range of meanings, which can be derived primarily from the basis meaning 'be heavy'... Twice (Exodus 9:7; Isaiah 59:1) the qal is used with 'heart' or 'ear' to express stubbornness. The hiphil... functions primarily as the causative of the qal... The verbal adjective (Exodus 7:14) and the qal (Exodus 9:7) express the state of stubbornness; the hiphil (Exodus 8:11,28[15,32]; 9:34) describes Pharaoh's stubborn reaction. In Ex. 10:1, however, it is Yahweh who hardens Pharaoh's heart; and in Isaiah 6:10,74 the prophet is commanded to harden the heart of the people. (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol 7, p 19-21)

Usually it is Pharaoh who makes his own heart stubborn/unresponsive. The *only* single time God is given as the agent is in 10:1, and (as we saw in chapter 11 in *Volume 1: God's Path to Victory*) this is immediately after Pharaoh has 'made stubborn' his own heart for the third time – and that having now for the first time recognized that he is in the wrong. There is actually a further nuance in the Hebrew which is not conveyed by the English. The meaning of the Hiphil form of the verb, like the Piel, could consist of urging or causing others to do something. It may often be represented by such phrases as 'to permit to', 'to declare to', or 'to help to' (See Gesenius, or other standard grammars). This, perhaps, explains why Young in his literal translation gives 'I have declared hard' as the sense in Exodus 10:1. Davidson's *Hebrew Grammar* (1956, 24th edition, p 95) specifically lists a declaratory meaning as a

possible one for the Hiph form of verbs. Perhaps Young understood by it that the Lord actively accepted, and would further and utilize Pharaoh's 'heavy' heart for his own ends of revealing himself through increasingly wonderful signs.

Yet we would like to be cautious here, for this is obviously not a matter of word meaning but of grammar, and therefore discernible only to the expert. HL Ellison and DF Payne, both scholars of Hebrew, have informed us of their dissatisfaction with Young's rendering in this particular case (Exodus 10:1). Perhaps, therefore, the best we could do would be to quote the comment very kindly supplied to us by Dr Payne on this:

> I think that in general one could tell whether a specific causative verb was strictly causative or merely permissive, but perhaps not always. The fact that with the verb challah ('to live') both causative conjugations can be used both in the sense of giving life and also of preserving life suggests to me that the Hebrew language structure did not make it easy to draw a distinction between causation and toleration. Exodus 9:16 confirms my judgment on this. All that I could personally deduce therefore from, eg Exodus 10:1 is that God actively desired and organized Pharaoh's obstinacy, that he was 'behind it,' if you like, and that the obstinacy was fully part of God's plan; I could not however deduce from the statement itself whether Pharaoh had any volition in the matter or not. I don't imagine it mattered to the biblical author whether God caused Pharaoh to be obstinate or merely purposefully tolerated it. (Judges 3:12 seems to be a rather similarly ambivalent statement, which could mean that God allowed Eglon to become strong.) But from the

> story as a whole I would certainly deduce, as you do, that Pharaoh was far from being an automaton.

How far, then, one should insist on the actual translation of Young is open to question, but the whole context shows that it is a pretty fair view of what happened. Here is no instance of God making some arbitrary decree that a person should be unrepentant.

c) *Chazaq*(or *ḥ zq*)

- Basic meaning: Strengthen/Make Firm
- Agent: *God* – Exodus (4:21); 9:12; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:4; 14:8; 14:17; Joshua 11:20; *None* – Exodus 7:13; 7:22; 8:19; 9:35
- Reference: To Pharaoh being or being made firm in his

Green states:

> We take as our basic meaning ‘be/become strong,’ from which all other meanings that are found can be derived… (vol 4, p 307)

The basic meaning of this word group is one of ‘strength’ or ‘strengthen’, but it is also used in contexts where we would use words like ‘encourage’ or even ‘repair’. VanGemeren states that the verb occurs 390 times and gives the Piel meaning as:

> Strengthen, fortify, reinforce, repair, support, assist, encourage… When the obj. of the pi. is *lēb*. heart or *pānim* face the reference is to obduracy. (vol 2, p 64)

The Hebrew word does not carry any of the evil or cruel connotations conveyed by the English phrase ‘hard-hearted.’ The phrase ‘strengthened his resolve’ would perhaps be a nearer English equivalent than ‘hardened his heart.’ The renderings in the main text of the NKJV, RSV,

ESV, NIV, NASB of ‘harden’ when it refers to Pharaoh are therefore unfortunate. Elsewhere the most common rendering is one such as ‘strengthen’. Young’s Literal translation has ‘strengtheneth the heart of Pharaoh’, and some of the more free translations (eg the *Message* and *Good News*) have ‘made stubborn’ which is really more to the point.

The Piel form of the Hebrew root *chazaq*(or *ḥ zq*) is used 7 times of Pharoah and the Egyptians and 55 times of other subjects For the 55 other subjects the overwhelmingly most common rendering in all the versions of the NKJV, RSV, ESV, NIV, NASB is ‘strengthen’ or ‘encourage’ or ‘repair’. In these versions the term ‘hard’ is used only three times:

> i) Joshua 11:20, where the context is of battle, and God (*chazaq*) their hearts to continue fighting
>
> ii) Ezekiel 2:4, where the Israelites are said to be hard hearted
>
> iii) Jeremiah 5:3, where they made their faces hard

Ezekiel 2:4 latter speaks of a (*qashah*) forehead and a (*chazaq*) heart. Ezekiel 3:7 switches this and speaks of a (*chazaq*) forehead and a (*qashah*) heart. Thus the phrase using ‘forehead’ or ‘face’ seems similar to that using ‘heart’ as VanGemeren indicates in the quote given above.

The full text of Ezekiel 3:7-9 is:

> But the house of Israel will not listen to you, because they will not listen to me; for all the house of Israel are impudent [(*chazaq*) forehead] and hard-hearted [stiff (*qashah*) heart]. Behold, I have made your face strong (*chazaq*) against their faces, and your forehead strong (*chazaq*) against their foreheads. Like adamant stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not be afraid

> of them, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they are a rebellious house.

In actual fact the root *ḥ zq* is contained in the very name of the prophet ‘Ezekiel’ – and it didn’t mean he was wicked! It was all basically about obstinacy and determination – with Ezekiel’s determination set against that of Israel. It is not particularly about moral repentance or lack of it. Again, outside the references to Pharaoh, most versions (eg NIV) give ‘stubborn’ or ‘obstinate’ rather than ‘hard-hearted’ or ‘hard-faced’ which have different connotations in English. The phrase with Pharaoh’s heart itself is consistently and more sensibly rendered ‘make obstinate’ by the NEB and ‘make stubborn’ by the JB. Modern technical commentaries tend to give the same, eg the John Durham’s *Exodus* Word series commentary gives ‘obstinate’ or ‘stubborn minded’, whilst WH Gispen’s *Exodus* notes that the hardening in 4:21 is ‘lit.: ‘I will make strong’.’ This is not about any change in Pharaoh’s mindset. It is about courageous obstinacy to persist in his evil path even when complete futility of resistance against God became ever more apparent as the plagues progressed and self-interested prudence would have dictated capitulation.

All this detailed study, then, corroborates our understanding in our *Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory* chapters 11-12. Romans 9:18 asserts the radical freedom of God to determine his own strategy. To Moses he affirms that he is the one to choose to whom to make special self-revelation – because he knows best what the effects will be. Concerning Pharaoh, God’s strategy was to strengthen Pharaoh’s resolve in a process which led him into a foolish obstinate defiance, and demonstrated God’s deliverance of Israel. It was not about God deciding on individual eternal destinies, nor about determining who should or should not ‘turn from his ways and live.’

Our ‘Relationist’ views are fully in accord with this account of Pharaoh:

a) God does not ordain the basic human choice of whether to accept or reject his free and unmerited grace – and sometimes may not know the future outcome of that choice

b) God can direct human choice when it does not concern whether or not to repent and turn to faith – it is one of the ways in which he ‘acts’ in the world.

Early Christian Teaching

By ‘early’ we mean here within a couple of centuries of the death of Jesus – we don’t count (say) the 5th century as ‘early’. One of greatest early Christian writers was Irenaeus (c130-200). Irenaeus’ work *Against Heresies* was of crucial importance in preserving mainstream Christianity, and he did more than any other to establish the New Testament itself. One of the things he wrote in *Against Heresies* was this:

> For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of his, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes, cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in him, and follow him, he gives a fuller illumination of mind… If therefore, in the present time also, God, foreknowing the number of those who will not believe, since he foreknows all things, has given them over to unbelief and turned away his face from men of this stamp, leaving them in the darkness which they have chosen for themselves . . . As the Word spake to Moses from the bush ‘And I know that the king of Egypt will not give you leave to go unless compelled by a strong hand (Exodus 3:19)… And for the reason that the Lord spake in parables, and brought blindness upon Israel, that seeing they might not see, since he knew the [spirit of] unbelief in them, for the same reason did he harden Pharaoh’s heart. (*Against Heresies*, chapter xxix 1&2)

Slightly later came the renowned teacher Origen (c185-254). Origen spoke and wrote in Greek and also read fluent Hebrew. Origen notes that it is heretics (like Marcion) who

argue that Pharaoh had no freewill – which would effectively have removed his moral responsibility as far as the Early Church was concerned. Origen's own suggestion is not dissimilar to those of Kalisch and Edersheim given above:

> But since… we [regard God] as one who is at the same time good and just, let us consider how the good and just God could harden the heart of Pharaoh. See, then, whether, by an illustration used by the apostle in the epistle to the Hebrews, we are able to prove that by one operation God has mercy upon one man while he hardens another … 'The earth,' he says, 'which drinks in the rain that comes oft upon it, and brings forth herbs suitable for them for whom it is dressed, receives blessing from God; but that which bears thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh to cursing, whose end is to be burned.' As respects the rain, then, there is one operation; and there being one operation as regards the rain, the ground which is cultivated produces fruit, while that which is neglected and is barren produces thorns. Now it might seem a defamation for [the rain] to say, I produced the fruits, and the thorns that are in the earth;' and yet, although a defamation, it is true. For, had rain not fallen, there would have been neither fruits nor thorns; but having fallen at the proper time and in moderation, both were produced. The ground, now, which drank in the rain which often fell upon it, and yet produced thorns and briars, is rejected and nigh to cursing. The blessing, then, of the rain descended even upon the inferior land; but it, being neglected and uncultivated, yielded thorns and thistles. In the same way, therefore, the wonderful works also done by God are, as it were, the rain; while the differing purposes are, as it

were, the cultivated and neglected land, being [yet], like earth, of one nature. And as if the sun, uttering a voice, were to say, I liquefy and dry up,' liquefaction and drying up being opposite things, he would not speak falsely as regards the point in question; wax being melted and mud being dried up by the same heat; so the same operation, which was performed through the instrumentality of Moses, proved the hardness of Pharaoh on the one hand, the result of his wickedness, and [proved] the yielding of the mixed Egyptian multitude who took their departure with the Hebrews… And it is not absurd to soften down such expressions in accordance with common usage: for good masters often say to their slaves when spoiled by their kindness and forbearance, I have made you bad, and I am to blame for offenses of such enormity.' For we must attend to the character and force of the phrase, and not argue sophistically, disregarding the meaning of the expression. Paul accordingly, having examined these points clearly, says to the sinner: 'Or despise you the riches of his goodness and forbearance, and longsuffering: not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? but, after your hardness and impenitent heart, treasure up unto yourself wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.' Now, let what the apostle says to the sinner be addressed to Pharaoh, and then the announcements made to him will be understood to have been made with particular fitness, as to one who, according to his hardness and impenitent heart, was treasuring up unto himself wrath; seeing that his hardness would not have been proved nor made manifest unless miracles had been performed, and miracles, too, of

> such magnitude and importance. (From the Greek version of Origen's *De Principiis*, Book 3, chapter 1, the Greek being more reliable than the Latin translation by Rufinus.)

We may not exactly follow these lines of thinking, but both these early teachers clearly lay the blame for Pharaoh's rebellion against Pharaoh himself.

The Hardening of Israel

The immediate context of Paul's comments in Romans 9 about the 'hardening' of Israel relates also to later comments on the 'hardening' which has come on part of Israel. In Romans 11:7-11 Paul writes:

> What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded Just as it is written: 'God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day' ...
>
> ... have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.

We know that there were those, like Paul himself, who turned, because of Israel's unbelief, to preach with renewed vigour to the Gentiles. In spite of his call as the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Galatians 2:8), throughout Acts Paul preached to the Jews first. His words in Acts 28:26 show that the paucity of their response stimulated him to turn to preach to the Gentiles. There is also another way in which the unbelief of the Jews may indirectly have increased the impact of the gospel on the Gentiles. As a result of the Wrath which came on Israel the Temple was destroyed and the nation dispersed. This helped to destroy the power of those who taught that converts must become 'Judaized' to be saved, and thus a stumbling block to potential converts was removed.

But do Paul's words imply that Israel's unbelief was irresistibly ordained by God in order to stimulate such preaching? Is Paul's opponent making a reasonable point when he asks in Romans 9:19: 'Why does he still find fault, for who can resist his will?' As we have seen, Paul angrily

repudiates such misrepresentation of God in Romans 9:20. In Romans 11 he talks of Israel's blindness, but his own actions demonstrate that this blindness is not irresistible. He is intending to stimulate some of them to repentance by emphasizing his ministry to the Gentiles. His object is that all Israel shall come in. (Romans 11:26) What did the apostle intend then, by his quote from Isaiah about the blindness that was sent on Israel?

It may help our understanding of this if we look at the way in which the Lord himself used the same quote. It came at a crucial point in Christ's ministry to Israel, at the time when he first began to use parables in his teaching. His disciples asked him why he had begun to use parables, and the Lord used the quote from Isaiah in his reply. All three synoptic Gospels record the incident:

> And the disciples came and said to him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' He answered and said to them, 'Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for

> assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10-17)
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> But when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parable. And he said to them, ‘To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them. (Mark 4: 10-12)
>
> Then his disciples asked him, saying, ‘What does this parable mean?’ And he said, ‘To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that ‘Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand’. (Luke 8:9-10)

As may be seen, Matthew gives the fullest account, Mark’s is an edited version of the incident, and Luke gives little more than a passing reference.

It may come as a surprise to some of us to discover the reason given by the Lord for his use of parables. It is not, as might have been supposed, to clarify his meaning, but to disguise it! Let us look more closely at what he says:

What is disguised?

Jesus says that he is veiling the ‘secrets of the kingdom of heaven’. He is not concealing the need for repentance. He is not concealing the way to a relationship with God. He is not concealing something that would enable them to go to heaven instead of to hell. He says, in fact, that many

prophets and people in right-standing with God (Matthew 13:17) longed to know these secrets, but could not. It cannot, therefore, be necessary to know them *in order to be* right with God. They are the secrets about the kingdom of heaven and they concern what God is doing now in history and what he will do in the last times.

From whom is it disguised?

The Lord's meaning was disguised from anyone who did not come to him to ask what he meant. From Mark we discover that there were others, besides the twelve, who came to ask him about his meaning. He explained it to those who asked, but the general populace were not interested. Jesus implies that they had already suppressed knowledge of the need for repentance. His words about them might be paraphrased: 'This people's heart has grown cold; they have closed their eyes in order to avoid having to recognize and understand that they need to turn and be healed'. The secrets of the kingdom of heaven are veiled to those who will not recognize their need to repent.

Why is it disguised?

Jesus gives the principle here: For 'whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.' The Lord is being rather cryptic here, for one cannot literally take from someone who has nothing. His meaning is that those who already have a relationship with God will receive also the secrets of the kingdom. Those who are without God will soon be in an even worse position than they are at present.

This does not fully explain Jesus' motives in using parables, and some clues are found elsewhere. He had already instructed them: 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces' (Matthew 7:6).

These words apply particularly to Jesus at that time. What would have happened if he had openly claimed to be the Messiah and the chief heir in the kingdom of heaven? This pearl would have been trampled underfoot, and then they would have turned on Jesus himself – such a claim would almost certainly have brought arrest and trial. To avoid this happening before his hour came, the Lord disguised the pearls he taught and kept his enemies uncertain of his meaning. Thus, for example, in John 10:19 we find them divided over what he meant. In John 10:24 they came to him and asked him directly if he was the Messiah. His reply in John 10:25-30 was again equivocal, but he implies that those who are right with God will understand his meaning. The Lord makes the same point after his reference to the swine and the pearls: ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8) Anyone who went to Jesus to ask his meaning was given it. In short, his followers learned Jesus’ meaning from his own lips (Mark 4:10-20) or perhaps from God their Father (John 6:45) and his enemies did not understand it at all.

From these references we may learn three important facts. First, the reason for unbelief was that they closed their own eyes in case the truth were uncomfortable. Second, the Lord taught in parables so that the spiritual among his hearers would be stimulated to inquire about his meaning, while the truth would be concealed from his enemies and from the disinterested. Finally, it relates to what modern scholars see as the central focus of Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees. To him all religious practice should flow from *relationship* with the Father. Understanding of secrets of the kingdom comes from seeking it from the Father.

In the Gospel of John we find this theme coming out strongly. Only those in Israel who are spiritually discerning

and in relationship with the Father are able to understand what Jesus is teaching. As early as John 3 a hint of it is contained in Jesus' cryptic reply to Nicodemus. The latter says he knows that Jesus has come from God because of the signs he does (v2). Jesus' reply is that a man cannot even see the signs unless he is born again, that is, one must be born again to 'see the kingdom of God' (v3) and (in the language of Matthew) to 'understand its secrets.' In John 4 the Lord talks in parables of spiritual things and even his followers do not understand. He talks of 1iving water' (v10) and 'his meat' (v32) and the 'harvest' (v35), and his hearers are puzzled.

In chapter 6, things begin to come to a head. First, the people misunderstand the sign of the feeding of the five thousand (see v14-15,26-27). Jesus goes on to explain that he is the true bread of life (v35). At this saying the Jews 'murmured' or 'grumbled' concerning him (v41). They were still looking at the subject in an earthbound sense, examining Jesus' human ancestry and not understanding the spiritual truths:

> Jesus therefore answered and said to them, 'Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God'. Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. (John 6:43-5)

To understand the thought here, we must remember the situation in Israel at that time. Broadly speaking there were two groups of people: One group were seeking to establish their own righteousness without regard to faith or to the mind of God on the question. The other group contained those who had received John's baptism of repentance, and in *faith-relationship* were waiting for God to reveal his

coming kingdom. The epitome of this latter attitude is seen in Simeon who was, according to the Bible, righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him (Luke 2:25, NASB). This was truly one who was taught by God and learned from him. We know, of course, what happened: the Father *drew* him to Jesus and he knew that this was the Messiah. An interesting parallel is found later in the story of Lydia. She was one who worshiped the true God, and Paul found her at a place of prayer. Just as Simeon knew that the Messiah had come at last, so the Lord opened the heart of Lydia to Paul's message, and she knew that he brought tidings of God's anointed, the Saviour of the world. (Acts 16:13-15). Cornelius is, perhaps, an even more striking example of a righteous person whose prayers were acceptable to God, and who was therefore led by him to seek and accept Christ (Acts 10:30-32).

The same type of principle applied during Jesus' ministry. As Isaiah prophesied, all the Jews were given God's teaching, but only those who listened to God and learned from him would be drawn to Jesus. What Jesus is saying to his hearers is this: 'Don't murmur among yourselves and try to analyse what I say. Go to God and let him teach you my meaning. If you do this then he will give you understanding and draw you to accept me.' This is one of Jesus' continuing themes throughout John 6 and 7, and it shows similarities to the topic we have already covered in Matthew 13. Those who come to Jesus will have the meaning explained to them; those who go to God will hear and learn from him. Those who are disinterested or enemies of Christ and the Father will simply be unable to understand his meaning. All these ideas were in our original first edition of this work, and the New Perspective on Paul (which we have looked in our present chapters 2-3 etc) has really confirmed it Jesus' difference from his critics is not that they are 'Pelagians' and he isn't, it is that he wants everything to begin from and

depend upon *faith-relationship* with the Father. It is those in a faith-relationship who the Father will draw to acknowledge Jesus himself as the Messiah.

The pattern continues from John 6:47 throughout the rest of the chapter and beyond. They are still using their own minds and strength to try to understand him. Jesus explains that it is the Spirit and not the flesh which brings life and understanding (v63 – one must be born of the Spirit to see the Kingdom). Christ knows, of course, that some do not believe and that Judas will betray him. He says therefore:

> But there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray him. And he said, 'Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to me unless it has been granted to him by my Father'. (John 6:64-5)

Jesus knows that some of them do not believe, and this is his reason for telling them to go to the Father and learn from him of the truth.

Many of those who have been following him turn back at this point because they cannot understand him. His own brothers do not understand that his strategy is to conceal his mission because his hour is not yet come (John 7:4-6). All Jerusalem is in a turmoil because of the difficulty of comprehending the veiled allusions in his teaching. Then Jesus begins to speak in the Temple:

> Jesus answered them and said, 'My doctrine is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone wills to do his will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on my own *authority*. (John 7:16-17)

This is the point. The difficult sayings and parables over which they are murmuring are not really those of Jesus; they

belong to God. If anyone really wanted to do the will of God, then God would show him what the teaching meant. Those Jews who are really seeking God's will for their lives, ongoing in a faith-relationship with him, will be drawn by God to come to Christ. Later, Jesus adds:

> He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God. (John 8:47)

Jesus is continually using a veiled manner of teaching, and this makes the book of John difficult to comprehend. Perhaps it is partly because of this that misunderstandings have sometimes arisen over a few of the verses in John 6. They have sometimes been supposed to have some connection with the election of the Church. One may see, however, that in their context the concern of the references to the Father 'drawing people to Jesus' is with pious Jews at that time. This helps to explain the paradox that many Jews rejected their own Messiah. They rejected him because they had closed their eyes and came neither to Jesus nor to the Father for explanation of his teachings.

This also explains the paradox that the purpose of Jesus' mission was to 'give repentance to Israel' (Acts 5:31; cf Acts 11:18). This saying of the apostles could only be taken by their hearers to mean that the *whole* nation of Israel was given the gift. Their words to the council are barbed: 'You killed Jesus, but God raised him up to give all Israel (including you as its head) repentance.' The gift was, of course, refused by many – especially by those who Luke says rejected for themselves God's plan for them to receive the baptism of repentance (Luke 7:30) – but it was offered to all. The first century Clement of Rome beautifully said:

> Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious his blood is in the sight of God: which being shed for our salvation, has obtained

> the grace of repentance for all the world. (*1 Clement* 7:4)

Later in the Gospel of John we find another reference to the Isaiah 6 passage quoted in Matthew:

> But although he had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with *their* eyes, lest they should understand with *their* hearts and turn, so that I should heal them’. (John 12:37-40)

There is a difficulty in interpreting this passage, for the second of the apostle’s quotes does not appear as such in any of our versions of Isaiah. The first words ‘He has blinded their eyes’ may have been taken from Isaiah 29:9-12. In that particular context God is said to have confused the minds of the nation’s seers and prophets because they honoured him with their lips but not in their hearts. The following verse, Isaiah 29:13, is particularly relevant to the Jews at the time of Christ. It may be, therefore, that John is quoting this passage and adding to it the words from Isaiah 6:10 which we have already examined. This may be the correct interpretation, but it does leave the following problem: The text says: ‘He has blinded… lest… I should heal them’. Why should it change from the third person to the first person if God is the subject in both cases? This might be explained if we adopt another possible interpretation. In verse 31 of the same chapter John has been talking about the ‘Prince of this world'. It may be that *he* is the agent who is blinding their

eyes. Some support is given to this view by what is said by Paul:

> But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away… But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. (2 Corinthians 3:14-4:4)

The blindness in this context is blindness to the meaning of the prophecies of the old covenant – blindness to the Messiahship of Jesus. Paul makes it clear, however, that the blindness does not remove the individual's responsibility in the matter. They are unable to recognize Jesus as their true Messiah, but the basic lack in their lives is not *insight* but *repentance*. When any of them repents, when he turns to God, then the Lord will remove the veil; the flood of enlightenment will come. The cure for blindness is repentance.

The same principles apply today. The Bible tells us to repent and believe. If we repent, God will help us to see and believe in his Son. We may be sure that John agrees with Paul on this point, even if we are not entirely certain of some of his meaning. It is clear that John 12:40 does not mean that God has made it impossible for the Jews to believe in Christ, for, having said that their eyes are blinded, John then adds: 'Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in him'. It was clearly their own fault if they did not understand and accept Jesus, for their hearts were far from

God. It is thus that we understand 1 Peter 2:8. The people were disobedient to God, and so were appointed by him to stumble at Jesus.

In summary then, the reason for unbelief which came on a part of Israel was that they themselves closed their eyes lest they should see the uncomfortable truth. Since their hearts were far from God, the secrets of the kingdom and the Messiah's task were hidden from them. Only those who were 'of God' learned from the Father (or from the lips of the Saviour himself) the meaning of his words and coming.

The cure for those who did not understand was not more study, but that they should turn to the Lord. When a man turned to the Lord, the veil was removed, he was healed of his blindness and he could see that Jesus was the Messiah.

Postscript

It is interesting to note the two main contexts in which Isaiah 6:10 is quoted in the New Testament. In Matthew 13 it is quoted at the time when Jesus changed from teaching openly to using parables. Because of people's unbelief, Jesus began to disguise his teaching so that only those who were of God would seek and find understanding. It was a time when, as it were, he turned away from the nation as a whole to teach only those who were spiritually discerning.

The other great turning point at which Isaiah 6:10 is quoted is Acts 28:26-28. Paul, like Christ, quotes the text in full, upbraiding them for closing their eyes to avoid understanding. 'Very well,' he seems to say, then know that God's salvation is sent unto the Gentiles, they will listen to it.' This seems to mark the time when he turned from his countrymen to a more intensive ministry to the Gentiles. Not that he does this in malice, but in the hope that they will be made jealous and so be led to repent.

Both Christ himself and his servant Paul lay the blame for unbelief (amongst Jews or Gentiles) with the unbelievers themselves. Both imply that since these have closed their eyes they will also lose the privilege of receiving the message of the kingdom. It will be given to those whose hearts seek God. Only when a man turns to the Lord is the veil removed and the secrets of God's kingdom revealed.

God's wrath came upon many Israelites because they would not repent. Nonetheless, God's wrath was not for its own sake, for he had another purpose in view. As we have earlier noted, he used them as a vessel of no-honour to demonstrate to the world the results of rejecting him. He endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction in order that he might make known the riches of his glory upon the vessels of mercy. For God has

committed them all to disobedience, that he might have mercy on all (Romans 11:32).

> Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his counsellor?’ ‘Or who has first given to him and it shall be repaid to him?’ For of him and through him and to him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen



Chapter 7: Some Key Erroneous Traditions

Tradition

Jesus taught us (Luke 24:27) the need to carefully ‘interpret’ the Scriptures, applying good principles of exegesis to see how all of Scripture points to God’s Messianic plan to save humanity and the world. Part of this is to look at the way in which other Christian scholars have looked at various passages. But there is also a danger. The Pharisees had an extremely high view of Scripture and studied it avidly, but Jesus said that some of their traditions ‘made the word of God of no effect’ (Matthew 15:6 etc). We need to beware that our own evangelical ‘traditionalism’ does not do the same thing. If we have ‘traditional’ ways of looking at some biblical terms and concepts, where do these come from and are they part of a sound basis of teaching?

This present chapter is going to set out the ways in which, in general, the Early Church leaders, who were true to a Scriptural view of faith and salvation, unanimously believed that God had given humans the freedom to choose whether to reject or accept God’s will and plan for them to repent and accept the free and unmerited offer of salvation and the forgiveness of sin through the One who died for the sins of the world. This changed in the early 5th century through the influence of one of the greatest philosophical geniuses of human history: Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine was a sincere and very religious man, and we should not judge but should leave it to the Lord to determine how Matthew 25:40 may or may not apply to him. He was also a philosophical genius, some of the things he said were deeply thought-provoking and profound, and we can understand how his whole theological matrix could appeal to systematic theologians. Some of these, indeed, may feel it is preposterous even to question his basic theology. But, in fact, the scriptural, cultural, and linguistic evidence all point to the conclusion that his theology was

fundamentally flawed, and that where it was novel it was simply wrong. Much error was based on his lack of knowledge of Hebrew, and viewing Greek through the Latin; some may have been remnants of his earlier philosophies. So much of it was wrong that it is hard to avoid the impression of caricaturing it. Some of these errors have been touched on throughout our two volumes, but let us here summarize some of his major ones:

- A new interpretation of ‘justification’ to mean a process of ‘being made right with God,’ based on a Latin misunderstanding (see above in chapter 2).

- A new interpretation of the key Greek phrase *pisteus Iėsou Christou* which says ‘faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah’ as a supposed ‘objective genitive’ to mean ‘faith in Jesus Christ’ which obscures some key teaching in Romans (see above in chapter 3).

- The invention of an original sin doctrine of inherited guilt based on a Latin mistranslation of Romans 5:12 and a reference to Psalm 54:5, which says nothing of the kind

- A completely innovative use of the phrase ‘compel them to come in’, together with an argument from the involuntary nature of infant baptism, to advocate the use of ‘fear of punishment and pain’ to compel non-conformists to join the Roman Catholic church.

- A novel consequent support of a state-enforced church with imprisonment and torture (in his terms ‘pain’) to enforce its beliefs. This contrasted with the Early Church and later Anabaptist view of the Church as a voluntary organisation joined by those who had faith.

- A novel interpretation of ‘LOVE’ towards nonconformist Donatists and others as meaning the use of punishment, exile and pain to force them to become good Catholics. This followed a view of *Armor Dei* as a

love of God which forced faith on an arbitrarily selected elect.

- An unbiblical refocus on the individual's need to get right with God in order to get a ticket to a spiritual heaven – though anyone would do so only if God had selected them.

- A novel reinterpretation of predestination and election (different from the Early Church) to mean an arbitrary selection by God about whom to send to heaven.

- A novel idea that 'faith' is a 'work' and consequent conclusion that God must force faith on an arbitrarily selected elect by what was later called irresistible grace.

- A denial of the universal Early Church teaching that God gave us freewill whether to accept or reject his free offer of grace, and a misrepresentation of this as a doctrine of 'works'.

- A consequent novel teaching that everything that happens – including sin – is what God both wants and causes to happen. This was based on a prior philosophical dictum, backed by a slightly garbled version of a very general assertion about God's power made in the Psalms.

- A teaching that a baby baptized by a drunken heretic would have original sin washed away and so be saved (if it then died) by the faith of the whole Catholic church who knew nothing about it.

- A personal abandonment at his conversion of his devoted and loving longstanding common-law wife (who had also become a devout Christian) to marry someone of higher social standing.

- A teaching that sex even within marriage is always shameful, and should be avoided unless with the

specific aim of having children – but even then we should try not to enjoy it.

- Advocacy of the teaching that Mary was sinless and always remained a virgin.

- An encouragement of the suppression of any understanding of hell other than torment for unending time (though, unlike so much else was of his teaching, this was not a novel doctrine).

All these are documentable, and indeed have been referenced in our two volumes. Yet, even in recent years, many commentaries are full of references to Augustinian theology, and books are written praising his supposed restoration of Pauline theology. The baggage he left the Church also affects multitudes of Christians who have barely heard of him. Surely now it is time to expunge this, and return to New Testament theology. In this book we have looked at the biblical picture of the way God has worked out his strategy in human history. This has incidentally involved consideration of topics like human freewill, God's sovereignty, the meaning of election, justification and faith. We have had cause in this process to be highly critical of the Augustinian theological baggage which appears to make the word of God of none effect. How readers may react to this may depend on their particular traditions, and how far they are prepared to question them,

There may be readers from some traditions (for example, Wesleyan or Nazarene or Mennonites) who are glad to find a serious biblical study from a perspective sympathetic to their own, even if they may not agree with all of our conclusions.

There are many other readers who have instinctively from their own reading of scripture arrived at understandings fairly similar to ours, and are glad to engage with a rigorous

exploration of the various passages that deepens and confirms their impressions.

There may, however, be some readers whose instinctive reaction to our work is less positive.

First amongst these, there are those who have barely heard of Augustine, and wonder why we bother talking about him. The answer to this is that Augustine was undoubtedly one of the great geniuses of history, whose work radically transformed the theology of Western Europe. The eminent scholar Alister McGrath (who is more sympathetic to Augustine than we are) writes in *Iustitia Dei*, ‘‘*All* medieval theology is ‘Augustinian’ to a greater or lesser extent’. Later he adds:

> It is certain that no writer, other than those of scripture, has exercised so great an influence over the development of western Christian thought as Augustine of Hippo. (*Iustitia Dei*, p 24)

In his later *Historical Theology* (2nd Edn) McGrath again says Augustine is probably ‘the greatest and most influential mind of the Christian Church throughout its long history’ (p 25). Sadly this is probably true. Augustine deeply affected both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology – though they picked some different parts of his theological innovations to emphasize. Both Luther and Calvin were profoundly influenced by Augustine, though they differed both in temperament and over various points of theology (McGrath gives a careful account of some of these differences, though they are not all that relevant to our present work as we have little sympathy with any of the variations). Augustine’s distinctive doctrines still abound throughout commentaries today (eg Douglas Moo’s *The Epistle to the Romans* is full of citations to Augustine). The ‘filter down’ effect means that many evangelicals (in many different countries) who have never heard of Augustine have been theologically influenced

by him without even knowing it. Our present chapter will make them more aware and better able to critically consider this impact.

Finally, there may be those who have been brought up with or adopted a traditionalist ‘Reformed’ perspective on Church and theological history. This can operate at any level from a conscious scholarly level to an unconscious absorption of various myths about Church history. They may have come to assume that any ‘deep’ Bible study has to be Reformed. To such, the notion that Augustine (and with him Luther and Calvin) had fundamental theological misunderstandings varies from the slightly shocking to the unthinkable. To these readers we can only plead that they consider the actual evidence seriously. As Christians we must follow the truth wherever it leads us.

Early Church History

When we were students we both independently came across a popular version of Church history which ran something like this:

> 1) From the last part of the first century to the 5th century AD, the Early Church wandered away from the pure Pauline doctrines of justification by faith, and held to some form of works-righteousness.
>
> 2) Augustine restored the pristine truth of the gospel and established the true Catholic Church.
>
> 3) During the medieval period the Roman Catholic Church again wandered away, and the pure truth was lost until restored dramatically by Martin Luther.
>
> 4) True evangelicalism is basically the theology of Luther and/or Calvin.

We set this out starkly because it is a seriously distorted version of history. Looking at the list given above of wildly unbiblical doctrinal novelties introduced by Augustine, to present him as restoring New Testament faith is absurd. The picture of the Early Church is no less inaccurate. What the evidence shows is:

> 1) The Early Church (ie first 3-4 centuries) well understood that salvation was by repentance and grace, justification by faith, and forgiveness on the basis of the death and blood of Christ the Saviour.
>
> 2) Augustine at first was orthodox, but from around 400 AD developed a theological schema almost unrecognizable as Pauline. Part of his novelty was the encouragement of state persecution and suppression of more biblically-based groups.
>
> 3) At the time of Luther there were both radical biblical alternatives to Catholicism (eg Anabaptists) and stringent criticism from within (eg Erasmus). What

Luther did was to establish an alternative *state church* – with all the apparatus of repression of dissent.

4) The figure in the evangelical revival who affected its effectiveness and direction most profoundly was John Wesley – whose theology was eclectic but was influenced by the Early Church and radical (eg Moravian) influences, and who identified primarily with Arminius, *not* Calvin or Luther.

Therefore, we need to set out the truth on some of these issues.

The Early Church

The great divergence between Augustine and earlier Christian writers is generally accepted. Actually, Augustine cannot really be called an ‘Early Church father’, since he was some 350 years after Paul – further than we today are from King Charles II. Unlike some key earlier figures, he spoke a different language, struggled with Greek, and knew little or no Hebrew. It is therefore very surprising that so many writers conclude that he got it right and effectively everyone else before him got it wrong. Take the following by K Stendhal for example:

> It has always been a puzzling fact that Paul meant so relatively little for the thinking of the Church during the first 350 years of its history. To be sure he is honoured and quoted, but – in the theological perspective of the West – it seems that Paul’s great insight into justification by faith was forgotten. (*Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, p 83)

This is quoted with apparent approval by McGrath in *Iustitia Dei* (p 19), who describes the ‘pre-Augustinian theological tradition’ as ‘having taken a highly questionable path in its doctrine of justification’ (p 18). This meant that they had a ‘curious and disturbing tendency’ to ‘minimise original sin and emphasize the freedom of fallen man’ (p 20). McGrath virtually writes off anything before Augustine, barely mentions Justin, doesn’t mention Clement of Alexandria or Origen at all, mentioning only Irenaeus (c180 AD) as representing the gospel more accurately than earlier figures.

More popular books on Church history can contain the same kind of idea. For example, MA Smith in *From Christ to Constantine*, suggested of Clement of Rome:

> Salvation is seen to be based on faith and works; for example Rahab is said to have been saved by faith and hospitality. Perhaps the particular situation called for emphasis on faith being accompanied by suitable actions, but it does seem that Paul's doctrine of salvation through the grace of God alone was not well understood. (p 26)

Now Paul wrote to the Roman church in about 58 and Clement's epistle was sent from Rome in about 96. It would seem almost certain that some of the original recipients of the epistle to the Romans would still have been in that church. Are we seriously to believe that they failed to understand the central teaching of the epistle Paul wrote them?

When, moreover, we look at the first epistle of Clement, our amazement at this allegation increases. In 1 Clement 7:4 we read:

> Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious his blood is in the sight of God: which being shed for our salvation, has obtained the grace of repentance for all the world. Let us search into all the ages that have gone before us; and let us learn that in every one of them our Lord has still given place for repentance to all such as would turn to him.

In 1 Clement 32.4 we read:

> And we also being called by the same will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves, neither by our own wisdom, or knowledge, or piety, or the works which we have done in the holiness of our hearts: But by faith by which God Almighty has justified all men from the beginning; to whom be glory for ever and ever, amen.

Could Paul's doctrine be more firmly or clearly stated? Even in the passage referring to Rahab we later read that the spies 'gave her, moreover, a sign: that she should hang out of her house a scarlet rope; showing thereby, that by the blood of our Lord, there should be redemption to all that believe and hope in God.' We might, even, compare the clarity of this emphasis on the efficacy of faith through Christ's blood, with the analyses in some of the books in the New Testament itself. Clement refers to Rahab being saved by 'faith and hospitality'; James, like Clement talking about the importance of hospitality, says 'What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?... thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead' (James 2:14). Clement, perhaps following James, says that Rahab's faith is the kind of faith that leads to action – the only kind of faith that saves. If we are to view Clement as one who 'did not understand' Paul's doctrine of grace, then surely James must be classed as one who did not understand it at all? Smith's comments about Clement are at best misleading and at worst slanderous. Yet Smith's book was published by the IVF publishing house, which was associated with the evangelical student movement.

The Reformed/Augustinian ideas of grace have led to many similar kinds of statements made against Early Church figures, even though even more 'extreme' statements emphasizing the importance of behaviour can be found in the New Testament itself, for example in James' epistle and Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). James himself came under suspicion from the Reformers, as his emphasis on conduct was something of an embarrassment to them.

In 1522 Luther published his translation of the New Testament. In it he moved Hebrews and James out of the usual order, to join Jude and the Revelation at the end, and

differentiated these from the other books which he considered ‘the true and certain chief books of the New Testament’. He wrote of James:

> He does violence to Scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture. (*Works*, vol 35, See eg John Dillenberger, (Ed) *Martin Luther : Selections from His writings*)

He included it because it ‘has some good passages’ and some may like to read it, but he evidently did not consider it to be inspired but as an ‘epistle of straw’ with ‘nothing of the gospel about it’ (*Works*, vol 35, 362). It does not agree with his Augustinian ideas of grace. In editions after 1530 Luther tactfully withdrew some of these extreme comments, but there seems to be no evidence that he ever felt clear about the authority of James, even if at times he could preach from the ‘good bits’.

Calvin in the start of his commentary on James says that he is ‘inclined to receive’ the epistle, but rather woefully remarks that: ‘he [James] seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behoved an apostle to be.’

Only background like this can help explain some of the wild and ridiculous accusations made against Early Church figures by those like Smith quoted above – though, of course, we have no reason to suppose that Smith shared Luther’s views about James. These accusations are perhaps worst when directed against writers like Justin Martyr. While reading some commentators you might almost get the impression that Justin was a ‘liberal’ theologian, barely Christian. The truth is that Justin’s writings are intensely biblical. He shows good knowledge of both the Septuagint and the Hebrew Old Testament, as well as the New. His love for Christ shows through in every paragraph, and he is quite clear on the necessity of Christ for salvation. He shows deep

understanding of Paul's ideas, and his defence of Christ's divinity from the Old Testament is outstanding. Christians sometimes criticize him for his quotation of pre-Christian philosophers, but in doing so they seem to forget to whom he was addressing his works. Justin addressed the intelligent pagans – unlike the apostles whose recorded words were mainly to Jews or Christians, and so didn't need to use such quotations. Acts 17 is perhaps the only passage in the New Testament in which the intelligent pagan is addressed – and here Paul himself quotes with approval two pre-Christian philosophers on the nature of God. Paul quotes Epimenides and also Aratus, the latter of which is similar to a phrase in Cleanthes' famous hymn to Zeus. If we frown on Justin for such quotations then shouldn't we also frown on Paul? Justin, like Paul, is often misunderstood. Take, for example, Justin's teaching on the 'Word'. John 1:9 was taken seriously by Justin (compare Augustine, whose rather bizarre interpretation is given below). Justin says:

> We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we had declared above that *he is the Word* of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived *reasonably* are Christians… as among the Greeks Socrates… and among the barbarians Abraham… (*Apology*, i xlvi)

At first sight it could seem that Justin is suggesting salvation through our own reason, but this simply isn't so. The common rendering 'reasonably' should strictly read 'with the Word' (*meta logou*), ie with Christ as the pre-existent Word of God. Justin is saying that Socrates, like Abraham, was justified through his association with a Saviour whom he never knew by name. McGrath. In his *Historical Theology* (p 74) rightly notes what Justin really meant.

Not all Christians would agree with Justin that some (like Socrates) may be saved through Christ but without hearing

about him, but we have given strong biblical reasons in our chapter 2 above for understanding Paul to be saying this in Romans 2. The view has been held by many orthodox Christians, such as Campbell Morgan and JND Anderson in recent times. Even Augustine himself seems to accept such a view in *The Predestination of the Saints* 17 and a letter to Deogratias of 409 AD. As to Justin's choice of Socrates, from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, we see about the best instance in antiquity of a 'natural theology' of the one true God who deserves worship and service. Only God knows, but Socrates seems a good candidate to fit the kind of description given by Paul in Romans 2 of those who will receive eternal life.

So let us now look at some of Justin's words in his dialogue with Trypho, who was a Jew and possibly a rabbi. We may compare them with the apostolic teaching, especially with that of Paul. Justin says:

> I purpose to quote you Scriptures, not that I am anxious to make merely an artful display of words; for I possess no such faculty, but God's grace alone has been granted to me to the understanding of his Scriptures, of which grace I exhort all to become partakers… (*Dialogue*, lviii).
>
> And you deceive yourselves while you fancy that, because you are the seed of Abraham after the flesh, therefore you will inherit the good things announced by God to be bestowed through Christ. For no one… has any thing to look for, but only those who in mind are assimilated to the faith of Abraham (xlvi, cf Romans 4:12).
>
> But though a man be a Scythian or a Persian, if he has knowledge of God and of his Christ, and keeps the everlasting righteous decrees, he is circumcised with the good and useful circumcision,

> and he is a friend of God… And we, who have approached God through him, have received not a carnal but a spiritual circumcision, which Enoch and those like him observed. And we have received it through baptism, since we were sinners, by God's mercy; and all men may equally obtain it (xxviii and xliii, cf Romans 2, etc). 'What need, then, have I of circumcision, who have been witnessed to by God?' (xxix, cf Galatians 4:9)

Justin, however, like Paul, does not object to Jewish Christians keeping the Law, provided that they neither seek salvation or sanctification through it nor compel Gentiles to keep it (xlvii).

> For Isaiah did not send you to a bath, there to wash away murder and other sins, which not all the water of the sea were sufficient to purge; but as might have been expected, this was that saving 'bath' of olden time which followed (was for) those who repented, and who no longer were purified by the blood of goats and of sheep... but by faith, through the blood of Christ, and through his death, who died for this very reason, as Isaiah himself said, when he spoke thus: 'The Lord shall make bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the nations and the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God' (xii).

To Justin, the 'blood of Christ' as purifying the sinner was crucial, and Justin continues with a moving quotation of Isaiah 53. Justin does not focus on the term 'justification' because it does not mean 'being made right with God', but he defines a 'righteous man' in Jesus' terms as one who loves God with all his heart and his neighbour as himself – ie in terms of faith-relationship (*Dialogue* 93). It is not about 'works of the Law' or ritual:

> As Isaiah cries, we have believed, and testify that the very baptism which he pronounces is alone able to purify those who have repented; and this is the water of life. But the cisterns which you have dug for yourselves are broken and profitless to you. For what is the use of that baptism which cleanses the flesh and body alone? (xiv)

Compare this with:

> Baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21)

We can compare Justin's biblical view of baptism with the view of Augustine (see below) that babies are saved against their will by baptizing them.

Justin speaks of Christ as:

> The only blameless One, through whose stripes those who approach the Father by him are healed… (xvii)

He is, of course, aware that neither he nor his Jewish opponents take what we have called a 'Pelagian' view:

> For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the Law of Moses, 'Cursed is everyone who continues not in all things that are written in the book of the Law to do them.' And no one has completely done all, nor will you venture to deny this… (xcv)

Augustine, as we will see, believed in inflicting pain on people to make them good Roman Catholics; Justin took another line:

> … you hate and murder us who have believed through him in the God and Father of all, as often

> as you can. And you curse him without ceasing, as well as those who side with him; while all of us pray for you, and for all men, as our Christ and Lord taught us to do, when he enjoined us to pray even for our enemies, and to love them that hate us, and to bless them that curse us (cxxxiii).

This was no idle boast from one who was later flogged and martyred. Jesus told us to recognize his true followers by their fruit. These passages from Justin help us to see both his personal character and his strict acceptance of Pauline teachings. His *Dialogue* continually refers to the universal sinfulness of humankind and impossibility of living a perfect life (ch 95), the cross as God's method of dealing with sin (ch 40, 86, 90, 91, 97, 111, 131), to the spiritual circumcision of heart which Christ gives to those who believe in him (ch 15,16, 18, 24, 28, 43, 114, 137), to faith (ch 13, 24, 139), to repentance (ch 26, 35, 40, 83, 95, 100, 109, 117, 133, 141), to forgiveness of sins through being washed in the fountain (ch 44), to the healing through Christ's stripes (ch 12, 47, 95, 137), and so on… Above all he urges Trypho and his fellow-Jews to repent (ch 117) and to 'become acquainted with Christ' their Messiah (ch 8, 44).

Now in view of all this it is little short of astounding to read in Smith:

> To Justin, conversion was mainly an ethical and rational thing, concerned with a change of attitude and behaviour. (*From Christ to Constantine*, p 82)

What possible basis is there for this outrageous remark? There seems little basis in the *Dialogue*, for Justin's plea to Trypho is for repentance and faith, not for a change of ethical code. Could it be Justin's use of rational argument? But then we read time and time again in Acts that the apostles argued and disputed with the Jews (see for example Acts 6:9-10; 9:29; 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8, 9;

24:25 and in our book *Reason, Science and Faith*, ch 1). Could it be that Justin quotes pre-Christian philosophers? But so does the apostle Paul when he addresses the type of person for whom Justin wrote in his *Apology*. Could it be his belief that the Christian does not find God's commandments a burden? But the apostle John says almost this very thing (1 John 5:3). Surely to Justin, no less than to the New Testament writers, conversion was a *moral* and a *spiritual* thing, involving repentance, divinely wrought regeneration, forgiveness on the basis of the blood of Christ, and a new relationship with the only One through whom men could come to God. Early Church figures like Clement and Justin fully accepted the doctrine of salvation by faith.

Smith was repeating a then all too common myth that the Early Church had all strayed from the truth, which was restored to its pristine New Testament state by Augustine. This is demonstrably and scandalously untrue. The Early Church leaders all emphasized repentance and faith, and salvation as by the work and blood of Jesus dying on the cross; Augustine (as we shall see) introduced some weird and novel doctrines.

The Early Church and Freewill

Alister McGrath clearly states:

> The pre-Augustinian theological tradition is practically of one voice in asserting the freedom of the human will. (p 20)

This is actually true for *all* the divergent branches of Early Church theology, in *all* areas into which the Church was carried. As we noted in chapter 1, the term ‘freewill’ was coined, like ‘trinity’, as part of an elucidation of ideas clearly implicit in scripture. Not a single Church figure in the first 300 years rejected it and most of them stated it clearly in works still extant. We find it taught by great leaders in places as different as Alexandria, Antioch, Athens, Carthage, Jerusalem, Lycia, Nyssa, Rome, and Sicca. We find it taught by the leaders of all the main theological schools. In *Early Church History to AD 313*, H Gwatkin demonstrates that even where divisions existed, in every case the parties on each side taught ‘freewill’ (perhaps the most obvious breakdown is into language/culture: Greek: Justin, Athenagoras, Clement, Origen; Latin: Tertullian, Jerome; Syriac: Titian, Bardaisan). The only groups who rejected it were heretics like the Gnostics, Marcion, Valentinus, Manes (and the Manichaens), etc. In fact, the Early Church fathers often state their beliefs on ‘freewill’ in works attacking heretics. Three recurrent ideas seem to be in their teaching:

1. The rejection of freewill is the view of heretics.
2. Freewill is a gift given to man by God – for nothing can ultimately be independent of God.
3. Man possesses freewill because he is made in God’s image, and God has freewill.

This ‘freewill’ was true freewill, not merely a ‘compatibilist’ one. It was never seen as a freedom to independently live

an ethically perfect life, but rather as a freedom to accept or reject the grace of God. We have below set out some passages from writings of leading Early Church figures. Each is accompanied by a very brief explanation of who the writer was, but for further explanation the reader should see any standard work. It might just be useful to mention first that early Christian writers are sometimes called ‘Apologists’, from the Greek *apologia* which means a speech for the defence. The English word, however, may be misleading because they were not ‘apologising’ for anything, but rather were making a frontal attack on paganism and defending Christians against some of the wrong charges laid against them.

Justin Martyr (c100-165 AD)

AM Renwick calls Justin ‘the greatest of the early apologists, a most earnest Christian and a true lover of learning’ (*The Story of the Church*, p 29). J. Quasten calls him ‘the most important of the Greek apologists of the second century and one of the noblest personalities of early Christian literature’ (Patrology, vol i, p 196). NR Needham states ‘Justin was the greatest of the second century apologists’ (*2000 Years of Christ’s Power: Part One: The Age of the Early Fathers*, p 85). Henry Chadwick says: ‘Justin Martyr occupies a central position in the history of Christian thought of the second century’ (*The Early Church*, p 79).

As a philosopher, Justin had sought the truth in various schools but remained unsatisfied. Then in Ephesus he met an old man who talked to him about the Lord. He says that ‘it seemed as if a fire was kindled in him.’ Still wearing his philosopher’s cloak, but now on fire for the Lord, he won many with his testimony. Finally, a rival (anti-Christian) philosopher accused him of being a Christian to the city Prefect. The Prefect threatened Justin with flogging and

execution, and jeeringly asked him if he thought he would ascend to heaven. Justin replied: ‘I don’t *think* so, I know and am fully persuaded of it.’ Thus he received martyrdom.

Justin mentions ‘freewill’ in several works, for example in *The Sovereignty of God*, but here we will quote only one instance. This is from the work that Chadwick calls ‘the most substantial extant work by a second century Christian’ (p 66).

> *Dialogue* cxli: God, wishing men and angels to follow his will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness. But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall certainly be punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably (wicked), but not because God created them so. So if they repent all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God.

We note that this is not about any supposed freewill to ‘live a good life’, but a freedom to repent or not repent and obtain unmerited divine mercy.

Irenaeus of Gaul (c130-200 AD)

Irenaeus was the first of the great Fathers of the period 180-250. He was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna who in turn was a disciple of the apostle John. The importance of his work *Against Heresies* in saving the Church from the doctrines of the Gnostics cannot be exaggerated (this description so far is a semi-quotation from *The Story of the Church*, by Renwick). Jaroslav Pelikan calls him ‘unswervingly orthodox’ (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600),* p 70). Chadwick says (p 80) ‘With Irenaeus the shape of Christian theology became stable and coherent’. Needham (p 97) calls him ‘the first great Christian theologian of the Patristic age’.

Against Heresies XXXVll: This expression, ‘How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not’, set forth the ancient law of human liberty, because God made man a free (agent) from the beginning, possessing his own soul to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will (toward us) is present with him continually… in man as well as in angels, he has placed the power of choice…

… man is possessed of freewill from the beginning, and God is possessed of freewill in whose likeness man was created…

Athenagoras of Athens (2nd century AD)

Athenagoras was an Athenian philosopher who became a Christian. He was by far the most elegant, and certainly at the same time one of the ablest, of the early Christian apologists (see the introduction in the *Anti-Nicene Library, Patrology*, vol i, p 229 by Quasten). Needham (p 83) says he was 'one of the clearest, most forceful and persuasive of the apologists'. The *Embassy* was written in about 177 AD.

> *Embassy for Christians* XXIV: Just as with men who have freedom of choice as to both virtue and vice (for you would not either honour the good or punish the bad; unless vice and virtue were in their own power, and some are diligent in the matters entrusted to them, and others faithless), so is it among the angels.

Theophilus of Antioch (2nd century AD)

Theophilus became Bishop of the important centre in Antioch about 169 AD. He wrote an apology for Christianity, addressed to Autolycus. He seems to have been the first writer to have used the term 'trinity' to refer to the Godhead (or 'triad', cf Chadwick, p 86). 'His works were highly thought of and before long were studied in the west. Irenaeus and Hippolytus made use of them before Tertullian' (L Duchesne, *Early History of the Church*).

> *To Autolycus* xxvii: For God with power over himself made man free, and now God vouchsafes to him as a gift through his own philanthropy and pity, when men obey him. For as man, disobeying, drew death on himself; so, obeying the will of God, he who desires is able to procure for himself life everlasting.

Tatian of Syria (flourished late 2nd century AD)

Tatian was at first Justin's pupil. Soon, however, he became independent. This is seen in that, unlike Justin, he condemned all pagan philosophy as totally evil. He returned to Syria as a missionary, and composed the *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the Gospels. This work, and his influence, were of great importance in early Syriac Christianity. His followers followed a very strict rule of life and soon split off from the Greek church. Tatian wrote:

> *Address*, xi: Why are you 'fated' to grasp at things often, and often to die? Die to the world, repudiating the madness that is in it. Live to God, and by apprehending him lay aside your old nature. We were not created to die, but we die by our own fault. Our freewill has destroyed us; we who were free have become slaves; we have been sold through sin.

Bardaisan of Syria (c154-222 AD)

There is some question as to exactly how far Bardaisan was fully mainstream. The Early Church historian Eusebius wrote:

> Bardaisan, a most able man and highly skilled disputant in the Syriac language, composed dialogues against the followers of Marcion… At an earlier stage he had belonged to the school of Valentinus, but later he condemned it and refuted many of its fanciful ideas… For all that the taint of the old heresy stuck to him to the end.

However, MA Smith, usually very critical of Early Church figures, wrote:

> Perhaps one of his (Tatian's) converts was Bardaisan who was born in Edessa and was converted about 179. Bardaisan was strongly against the determinism of much Greek philosophy, and he strongly attacked Marcion. He is also the first known Syrian hymn writer. Like Tatian he was an enthusiastic missionary, and the Syriac churches probably owed much of their strength to leaders like these. Despite the fact that they came under the suspicion of Greek Christian writers, these men were probably orthodox Christians with a number of odd ideas. (*From Christ to Constantine*, p 56)

So *was* he a mainstream Christian? Figures like Clement and Justin Martyr clearly were, but the problem with Bardaisan is that his works have largely perished, and we are reliant on what opponents said he said. Some of his views, and certainly some of his followers' views, were probably unorthodox. We have included the Syrian Christian writers, however, to show that even fringe groups taught freewill. Only total heretics like Marcion and Manes rejected it. In any event Bardaisan wrote:

> *Fragments*: 'How is it that God did not so make us that we should not sin and incur condemnation?' – if man had been made so, he would not have belonged to himself but would have been the instrument of him that moved him… And how, in that case, would a man differ from a harp, on which another plays; or from a ship, which another guides: where the praise and the blame reside in the hand of the performer or the steersman… they being only instruments made for the use of him in whom is the skill? But God, in his benignity, chose not so to make man; but by freedom he exalted him above many of his creatures.

Clement of Alexandria (c150-215 AD)

With Clement we are back in the definite mainstream. Clement was a presbyter of tremendous learning, both of the Bible and of secular literature. Needham (p 117) calls him ‘the first great Christian teacher in Alexandria’. He was for some time head of the Alexandrian school of Christian scholars, and is one of the most famous early Christian writers. He has sometimes been accused of placing too much stress on the intellect (see Duchesne, p 245), but we find this criticism hard to accept. For one thing, most Christian theologians and apologists place emphasis on right belief, especially in arguing against heresies. For another, Clement repeatedly makes it clear that faith is a moral issue, and a matter of decision for Christ. In *Stromata*, Bk ii chapter 2, for example, he argues strongly that ‘faith is not established by demonstration.’ Faith involves a choice and ‘choice is the beginning of action.’ Shortly after we read:

> *Stromata*, Bk ii chapter 4: But we, who have heard by the Scriptures that self-determining choice and refusal have been given by the Lord to men, rest in the infallible criterion of faith, manifesting a willing spirit, since we have chosen life and believe God through his voice.

Tertullian of Carthage (c155-225 AD)

Tertullian was the first theologian to write in Latin (though wrote some works equally well in Greek), and one of the most influential early Christian writers of the west. He later adopted the early views of the Montanists, though his Montanism did not prevent him from remaining dogmatically orthodox in most respects. His apology is arguably one of

the ablest ever written, (see FF Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*). He was strikingly different from Clement, (see for example Gwatkin, p 202) and emphasized human sinfulness (Renwick, p 41).

> *Against Marcion*, Book ll chapter 5: I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature… you will find that when he sets before man good and evil, life and death, that the entire course of discipline is arranged in precepts by God's calling men from sin, and threatening and exhorting them; and this on no other ground than that man is free with a will either for obedience or resistance.
>
> …Since, therefore, both the goodness and purpose of God are discovered in the gift to man of freedom in his will…

We note, of course, that as with all the other Early Church teachers, there is no idea that 'freewill' means the possibility of living a life without sinning. The freedom is to respond or resist God's gracious call to come to him.

Origen (c185-254 AD)

Renwick calls Origen:

> … one of the most brilliant teachers and writers ever known in the Christian Church. The son of a martyr, and reared in a fine spiritual atmosphere, he became head of the catechetical school at the age of 18 and raised it to its highest fame in spite of persecution. He loved the scriptures and showed remarkable ability in interpreting them. (p 45)

Bruce says:

> Greater still than Tertullian and Novatian was the Alexandrian theologian Origen, the greatest scholar and thinker of the Church in the first three centuries. (p 47)

Chadwick (p 100) says: ‘Origen stands out as a giant among the early Christian thinkers’, and mentions his memorizing of virtually all of Scripture. Alan Kreider calls Origen ‘the Early Church’s preeminent theologian’ (*The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, p 17).

Origen sometimes gave expression to some wild speculations, which later brought criticism on him. He did, however, distinguish clearly between his speculations and his teaching of established doctrines. Renwick says: ‘He claimed that he was loyal to the rule of faith adopted by the Church, while exercising ample liberty of expression on matters not covered by the accepted creed’ (Bruce, p 259). Professor FF Bruce also defends Origen against a charge sometimes made of non-orthodoxy on the Trinity. Origen lived before the controversy on this came to a head, but was fundamentally different from Arius. Let us, therefore, note carefully his words and reliance on scripture:

> *De Principiis*, Preface: Now it ought to be known that the holy apostles, in preaching the faith of Christ, delivered themselves with the utmost clearness on certain points which they believed to be necessary to everyone… This also is clearly defined in the teaching of the Church that every rational soul is possessed of freewill and volition.
>
> *De Principiis*, Bk 3 chapter 1: There are, indeed, innumerable passages in the Scriptures which establish with exceeding clearness the existence of freedom of will.

Gregory the Wonderworker, who was a great admirer of Origen was as clear as Origen on the freewill of man.

Novatian of Rome (c200-258 AD)

Novatian was the first Roman theologian to write in Latin. Even Smith says:

> Novatian was brilliant. He was a competent theologian, and a work on the doctrine of the Trinity survives to give an idea of his prowess. Even his enemies had to admit that he was blameless in his life, and had been a zealous worker. (p 134; see also Chadwick, p 90)

Novatian lost the election for the bishopric of Rome, and separated from the 'official' group on the issue of whether lapsed believers might be received back into fellowship. His followers, called 'Puritans', were excommunicated by the Catholic church (Eusebius, 42.5). Bruce says in *The Spreading Flame*:

> In doctrine they were strictly orthodox; Novatian himself, indeed, was one of the chief exponents of pure Trinitarian theology in the third century. (p 213)

Novatian wrote:

> *On the Trinity*, chapter 1: He also placed man at the head of the world, and man, too, made in the image of God, to whom he imparted mind, and reason, and foresight, that he might imitate God… And when he had given him all things for his service, he willed that he alone should be free.

Methodius of Olympus (c260-martyred 311 AD)

Methodius was a bishop in Lycia, Asia Minor, known chiefly as an antagonist and critic of Origen (see Duchesne, p 360).

But, although he attacked Origen's speculations, there was one point on which he (like all early Christians) agreed:

> *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* xvi: Now those who decide that man is not possessed of freewill, and affirm that he is governed by the unavoidable necessities of fate… are guilty of impiety toward God himself, making him out to be the cause and author of human evils.

Arnobius of Sicca (c253-327 AD)

Arnobius, who lived is what is now Algeria, wrote a brilliant Christian apology about 300 AD.

> *Against the Heathen*: 64. I reply: does not he free all alike who invites all alike? or does he thrust back or repel any one from the kindness of the Supreme who gives to all alike the power of coming to him? To all, he says, the fountain of life is open, and no one is hindered or kept back from drinking…
>
> 65. *Nay*, my opponent says, if God is powerful, merciful, willing to save us, let him change our dispositions, and compel us to trust in his promises. This then, is violence, not kindness nor the bounty of the Supreme God, but a childish and vain strife in seeking to get the mastery. For what is so unjust as to force men who are reluctant and unworthy, to reverse their inclinations; to impress forcibly on their minds what they are unwilling to receive, and shrink from…

Cyril of Jerusalem (c310-386 AD)

Cyril was a Bishop of Jerusalem with little claim to fame, but he shows us what the ordinary churchman believed:

> *Lecture* iv 18: Know also that thou hast a soul self-governed, the noblest work of God, made after the image of its Creator, immortal because of God that gives it immortality, a living being rational, imperishable, because of him that bestowed these gifts: having free power to do what it willeth.

Gregory of Nyssa (c335-395 AD)

Gregory was one of the most acute intellects of the fourth century, having great influence in the eastern churches. He was at the council of Constantinople (381 AD) and was nominated by Theodosius I as a norm of orthodoxy.

> *On Virginity* (3G8) chapter XII: Being the image and the likeness… of the Power which rules all things, man kept also in the matter of a freewill this likeness to him whose will is over all.

Jerome (c347-420 AD)

Jerome is considered one of the four great doctors of the Western Church and the most learned of the Latin Fathers. He was an expert on Hebrew and Greek and translated the Bible into the Latin version known as the Vulgate. His attitude to ‘freewill’ is important for three main reasons. First, he stands, like Augustine, in the Latin tradition and became a strong critic of Origen and the Alexandrian heritage. Second, as a Bible translator he had a first-hand knowledge of New Testament languages. Third, he wrote against the ‘Pelagian’ notion that freewill implied someone could (of his own will) decide to live a totally moral life. The Early Church view was that man had freewill to accept or reject God’s offer of free pardon and grace to live a holy life.

It was always understood that conversion was a spiritual rebirth accomplished by God's power, and that a man could live a holy life only in Christ. The 'Pelagians' reputedly replaced regeneration with self-effort, and such a view (even though Pelagius never held it) was rightly condemned by Jerome. But Jerome wanted to distinguish the 'Pelagian' concept of freewill from the orthodox and biblical one:

> *Letters* CXXXIII It is in vain that you misrepresent me and try to convince the ignorant that I condemn freewill. Let him who condemns it be himself condemned. We have been created endowed with freewill; still it is not this which distinguishes us from the brutes. For human freewill, as I said, depends upon the help of God and needs his aid moment by moment, a thing which you and yours do not choose to admit. Your position is that once a man has freewill he no longer needs the help of God. It is true that freedom of the will brings with it freedom of decision. Still man does not act immediately on his freewill but requires God's aid who himself needs no aid.
>
> *Against the Pelagians*, Book 111, 10: But when we are concerned with grace and mercy, freewill is in part void; in part, I say, for so much depends upon it, that we wish and desire, and give assent to the course we choose. But it depends on God whether we have the power in his strength and with his help to perform what we desire, and to bring to effect our toil and effort.

John Chrysostom (347-407 AD)

In *The Spreading Flame* Bruce writes: 'In the east there is none to match John of Constantinople' (p 329). Renwick calls

him:

> … a saintly man, an outstanding scholar, and one of the greatest orators of all time… his faithfulness in preaching repentance offended the empress Eudoxia and he… died through ill-treatment on his way as a prisoner to Pityus. (p 58)

He is eloquently clear on the topic of freewill:

> *On Hebrews*, Homily 12: All is in God's power, but so that our freewill is not lost… It depends therefore on us and on him. We must first choose the good, and then he adds what belongs to him. He does not precede our willing, that our freewill may not suffer. But when we have chosen, then he affords us much help… It is ours to choose beforehand and to will, but God's to perfect and bring to the end.

So we find striking agreement among Early Church leaders over the issue of freewill. The same teaching was held by mainstream and fringe groups, by scholars and ordinary ministers, by the Greek, Latin, and even Syrian traditions – by everyone, in short, except total heretics. They did not believe in merely 'compatibilist' freewill (as many Reformed theologians believe), but neither did they believe that people were 'free' to live ethically perfect lives and 'earn' their way to heaven (as the mythical 'Pelagians' believe). What they believed was that God had left people free to accept or reject his offer of free pardon and grace. If they accepted it, they did not 'earn' anything, for it was a free gift made purely by the grace of God. But God did not irresistibly force people to become Christians. This was the universally held view amongst Christians of all mainstream schools and persuasions until Augustine introduced his new theology in the early 5th century.

The New Theology: Augustine (354-430 AD)

It may seem surprising that after such universal agreement among early Christian writers there should be a change. Nevertheless there was, and it is interesting to see how this came about. In *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*, David Bercot seems to have independently reached some of the same conclusions as ourselves on the Early Church and the radical changes spearheaded by Augustine that permeated later theology. We sympathize with his air of outraged surprise at his discoveries, without necessarily endorsing all of his analysis.

The seeds of the change were in language itself. Alister McGrath explains that:

> The difficulties attending the translation of the Old Testament into any second language, whether modern English or Hellenistic Greek, are well illustrated by the application of semantic field theory. The semantic field of a word includes not merely its synonyms, but also its antonyms, homonyms, and homophone… The translation of a word into a different language inevitably involves a distortion of the semantic field… (*Iustitia Dei*, p 9)

McGrath applies this to two particular key Hebrew and Greek words. The first is ‘merit’.

> Whilst Tertullian is frequently been singled out as the thinker who shackled the theology of the western church to a theology of ‘works’ and ‘merit’, there are reasons for supposing that whatever blame is due may be more fairly attributed to the Latin language itself. In Greek, ‘merit’ tends to be treated as a quality, so that it is essentially adjectival… The Latin term *meritum*, however, is a participial form of *mereri*… the

> transferred meaning of this thus becomes ‘to deserve’ or ‘to be worthy of something.’ (p 14)

However McGrath adds:

> The early Latin fathers, prior to the Pelagian controversy, do not appear to have considered any real claim on the part of man to divine reward on the basis of his efforts… Despite the semantic associations of the Latin term *meritum* the early use of the term appears to have been quite innocent of the overtones of ‘works-righteousness’ which would later be associated with it. (p 109)

Perhaps by the time of Augustine salvation was really being ascribed by someone or other to unaided human ‘merit’, or perhaps Augustine just imagined it. In any event, Augustine became obsessed with the denial that human ‘merit’ was involved in salvation. Augustine speaks of the ‘merit of faith’, and so arrives at the extraordinarily non-Pauline notion that faith is itself a kind of ‘work’ and so must be a result of an irresistible gift.

McGrath also identifies a second problem with Latin:

> Augustine understands the verb *iustificare* to mean ‘to make righteous’, an understanding of the term which he appears to have held throughout his working life… although this is a permissible interpretation of the Latin word, it is unacceptable as an interpretation of the Hebrew concept which underlies it. (p 31)

This is the origin, then, of the later misunderstanding that Pauline writings which focus on justification are about *getting right with God* – a theology that is only just now beginning to be corrected as we explored in chapter 2 above.

Augustine's dramatic departure from previous Christian teaching has long been known. John Calvin, whose work was saturated with Augustine and who constantly quoted him, stated:

> But Ambrose, Origen, and Jerome were of the opinion that God dispenses his grace among men according to the use which he foresees that each will make of it. It may be added that Augustine was for some time also of this opinion; but after he had made some progress in knowledge of Scripture he not only retracted it as evidently false, but powerfully confuted it. (*Institutes*, Bk 3 ch xxii section 8)

Augustine himself wrote:

> I laboured indeed on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God's grace overcame, and I could only reach that point where the apostle is perceived to have said with the most evident truth, 'for who makes you to differ? and what do you have that you have not received? Now if you have received it why do you glory as if you received it not?' And the martyr Cyprian was also desirous of setting forth… Faith then, as well in its beginning as in its completion, is God's gift; and let no one have any doubt whatever, unless he desires to resist the plainest Scriptures, that this gift is given to some, while to some it is not given. (*Pred. Saints* 8,16)
>
> (A full list of abbreviations used for the works of Augustine can be found at the end of our present chapter.)

We should note three things from this passage. First, Augustine notes his change of view. The view for which he

formerly laboured was the orthodox early Christian view, but he was *overcome* with these new ideas.

Second, Augustine does not himself seem entirely aware of the extent of his break with the early Christian view. He here cites Cyprian, and Cyprian (c200-258 AD) is probably the only major Church figure of the first three centuries who does not state the doctrine of freewill clearly. In spite, however, of his strong emphasis on divine grace, we can find nowhere that Cyprian states Augustine's doctrine that faith is an irresistible gift, and Cyprian's statements on the importance of grace are in general terms, as in Paul's writings. Yet Augustine may have believed that Cyprian really held such views – indeed Augustine seems to have known little about early Christian writings. For example, in about 395 AD Augustine confessed in a letter to Jerome his ignorance of the teaching of even so great a figure as Origen, a confession implicit also in another letter two years later. Neither does Augustine seem very familiar with the Latin Fathers, excepting Cyprian and Ambrose whom he often quotes. Therefore he may not have realized the extent of the novelty of his ideas.

Third, it is important to note that the issue is not one of whether salvation is of works or of faith; it is one of whether faith itself is an irresistible gift. This is important, for the two issues are frequently confused. What, therefore, was the real issue between Augustine and the Early Church? To understand this it will help to summarize the *three* alternative views:

> 1) **Works**: The 'Pelagian' view, which Augustine stated like this: 'the law being given, the will is of its own strength sufficient to fulfil that law, though not assisted by any grace imparted by the Holy Spirit in addition to instruction in the Law' (*Letter to Anastasius*, c412 AD). He also stated it as: 'the grace of God is bestowed in

proportion to our own deserts' (*Gr. and Freewill* 10). (Though, as we show below, neither of these were actually the view of Pelagius, so we put 'Pelagian' in inverted commas.)

2) **Faith**: This is the Early Church view, and Augustine's own earlier view. He stated it as: 'For it is ours to believe and to will, but it is his to give to those who believe and will the power of doing good works through the Holy Spirit...' (*Pred. Saints* 7)

3) **Irresistible gift of faith**: Augustine's later view (which gained great influence in the Church) was that faith itself was an irresistible gift given by God to a few people whom he had selected on some basis known only to himself (*Reb. and Gr*. 10-16; *Pred. Saints* 7-16, etc). God could have given it to others had he so chosen (*On Lit. Gen*. 11.10; *Enchir*. 98), for it is 'rejected by no hard heart' (*Pred. Saints* 13). Without it no man could perform any good, whether in thought, will, affection, or action (*Reb. and Gr*. 3).

Views 1) and 2) are seldom properly distinguished in Augustine's writings – and we have noted the effect of referring to the 'merit of faith' and the 'merit of conversion' (eg *Gr. and Freewill* 10; *Pred. Saints* 7). This led or enabled Augustine to regard faith as a form of 'work' – he wrote: 'The apostle, therefore, distinguishes faith from works, just as Judah is distinguished from Israel… though Judah is Israel itself' (*Pred. Saints* 12). This is an amazingly un-Pauline idea, and it fails to understand the Hebrew background to Paul's writings. Paul always sets faith and works in antithesis. He makes it clear that if salvation is of works then it is earned, but if of faith then it is unearned:

> Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on him who justifies the ungodly,

> his faith is accounted for righteousness. (Romans 4:4,5)

Paul does not say that unless the faith itself were irresistible it would be works! The words: ‘to him who does not work but believes [has faith]…’ would be sheer nonsense if faith itself were a work. Paul simply assumes that faith is not a ‘work of the Law’, it earns nothing, it merits nothing. God would be quite just to damn anyone who has faith – it is of his own free grace that he forgives them and declares them righteous. The reward for works is a payment of a debt, but for faith there is no such debt; God ‘accounts it’ as righteousness. This is always the case in Pauline terms. He contrasts grace and works, or faith and works, but never faith and grace, for faith is never a work.

Augustine could find nothing at all in Paul’s writings to support a claim that faith could be a work. The best he could do was Jesus’ words:

> Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent’. (John 6:28-30)

This is taken spectacularly out of any sensible context. The people questioning Jesus are not concerned with ‘getting a ticket to heaven’ or earning God’s forgiveness and acceptance. Christians today talk of doing ‘the Lord’s work’ without in the least implying that they expect to earn salvation by doing it. They are asking him what, *as God’s chosen people*, they should be doing to live this out. This is classic ‘covenantal nomism’ in the terms of Sanders. The answer Jesus gave is intentionally cryptic and turns the questioner back to the true priority – before doing the Lord’s work we must be right with the Lord! This is the fundamental point (as we have seen) between Jesus and his

critics. He insists that everything *starts* with faith-relationship.

As we have seen, the New Testament simply takes it as read that initial purification and acceptance by God are based on faith and not *works of righteousness*, ie that good works flow from faith and right-standing, rather than act as a basis for it. Paul's great critique of justification by works concerns *works of the Law* – Augustine is reading a supposed 'Pelagianism' into an issue which really concerned the position of the Jews and Jewish Torah. In these terms to suppose that faith could be a work of the Law is really complete nonsense. To insist on this basis that faith *must be* an irresistible gift, otherwise the person of faith has somehow 'merited' salvation, is to move in a thinking and terminology totally alien to Paul – or for that matter to Jesus.

Before we continue with the 'evidence' Augustine produced for his novel schema, we might just pause to ask what Pelagius really said. Was Augustine, perhaps, just over-reacting to a dangerous 'Pelagian' heresy of salvation by self-effort? Pelikan wrote:

> The religious and moral concerns of Pelagius must be distinguished from their distortions in the writings of Augustine, and the differences between Pelagius and the Pelagians kept in view. (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, p. 313 – though having said this, Pelikan then mostly analyses Pelagius using references from Augustine!)

The apostle Paul was reputed by his enemies to say 'let us do evil that good may come.' The Early Church, the Lollards, Anabaptists like Denck and Menno Simons, John Wesley and countless other deeply spiritual men and women of God have been accused by opponents of all kinds of absurd things. Modern evangelicals, of course, recognise this – yet

all too often are prepared to anathematize Arminius and/or Pelagius on the basis of what their opponents say and without (apparently) having read any work they themselves wrote. Thus Needham wrote:

> … there were some people (according to Pelagius) who had managed to remain sinless throughout their lives by a proper use of their freewill… In fact, anyone could become sinlessly perfect if only he tried hard enough. Pelagius admitted, of course, that human beings needed God's grace in order to be good, but… for Pelagius 'grace' really meant two things (i) God's gift of natural free-will to all human beings; (ii) God's gift of the moral law and the example of Christ, which revealed perfectly how people should live… Pelagius's theology therefore made the fruits of human goodness grow almost entirely out of human free-will; entry into heaven, in the Pelagian scheme, became a just reward for living a good life on earth, rather than an undeserved gift purchased for helpless sinners by the blood of an all sufficient Saviour. (*2000 Years of Christ's Power: Part One: The Age of the Early Fathers*, p 249)

Presumably Needham got this from Augustine, but is it truth or myth? Those of us who are certain that Augustine profoundly misinterpreted Paul may be less than happy to take on trust his interpretation of Pelagius. We need to look at the actual materials of Pelagius now available. BR Rees' *Pelagius: Life and Letters* is useful, giving us a picture of the man. More useful is Theodore De Bryun's translation *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, which is amongst the undisputed works of Pelagius. We may compare the distortion of Pelagius in Augustine (and Needham and others) with what Pelagius himself writes in this:

[3:20] By works of the law he (Paul) means circumcision, the Sabbath, and the other ceremonies… [3:21] *But now the righteousness of God has been made plain without the law*. The righteousness which has been given us freely by God, not acquired by our effort, has been made plain without the written law, and, having lain hidden in the law, has been revealed with greater clarity through the examples of Christ, which are more obvious. ..[3:22] *The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*. The faith by which one believes in Christ. *For there is no distinction*. Between Jew and Gentile [3:23] *For all have sinned and are in need of the glory of God*. Because they do not have their own. [3:24] *Having been freely justified by his grace*. Without the works of the law, through baptism, whereby he has freely forgiven the sins of all, though they are undeserving. *Through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*. By which he has redeemed us with his blood from death. Through sin we had been sold to death – as Isaiah says… (Isaiah 50:1) For we were all condemned to death, to which he handed himself over, though it was not his due, so that he might redeem us with his blood… [3:26] *So that he may be just and may justify the one who by faith belongs to Jesus Christ*. Who alone has been found righteous, and also the one whom he justified, not by works, but by faith. [3:28] *For we deem that a person is justified through faith without works of the law*. ‘We are sure’ or ‘we judge’. Some misuse this verse to do away with works of righteousness, asserting that faith by itself can suffice [for one who has been baptised], although the same apostle says elsewhere ‘And if I have complete faith, so that I can move mountains, but do not

have love, it profits me nothing ’ (1 Corinthians 13:2); and in another place declares… ‘The fullness of the law is love’ (Romans 13:10). Now if these verses seem to contradict the sense of the other verses, what works should one suppose the apostle meant when he said that a person is justified without the works [of the law]? Clearly, the works of circumcision or the Sabbath and others of this sort, and not without the works of righteousness about which the blessed James says: ‘Faith without works is dead’ (James 2:26)…

[4:2] *For if Abraham was justified by works, he has glory, but not before God*. If he was justified because he circumcised [himself], then God gave him nothing, but he had glory on account of himself. Alternatively, if he carried out the ordinances, he had glory in his own eyes but not in God’s. [4:3] *For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God*. Abraham’s faith was [in fact] so great that his previous sins were forgiven him and righteousness was reckoned as credit for every one of them by faith alone, and thereafter he burnt with such love that he furnished himself works over and above them all.

[4:4-5] When an ungodly person converts, God justifies him by faith alone, not for the good works he did not have. Otherwise he should have been punished for works of ungodliness. At the same time one should note that he did not declare the sinner justified by faith, but rather the ungodly, that is, one who has just come to believe… One’s initial faith is credited as righteousness to the end that one may be absolved of the past, justified for the present, and readied for future works of faith.

(*Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, by Theodore De Bruyn, p 85)

No wonder that even the conservative scholar CEB Cranfield wrote:

> One needs neither a special sympathy with Pelagianism nor the sort of nationalistic fervour which led Milton to make excessive claims for Wyclif, to recognise in Pelagius (died after 418) the first known British commentator on Romans, a considerable biblical scholar. His commentary shows a deep and extensive knowledge of Scripture, familiarity with earlier and contemporary biblical scholarship… a by no means insignificant spiritual insight, great moral earnestness and a pleasing and succinct style. (*The Epistle to the Romans*, p 35)

Edinburgh Professor of theology James Mackey notes how Pelagius always made a point of showing that his ideas had a basis in the earlier Christian fathers, and adds:

> At least until 415 Pelagius was accepted as an orthodox Christian theologian. In Augustine's words Pelagius was a man of high renown, a close friend of Paulinus of Nola, a great orator and a most excellent Christian… There has always been much of the irrational and unfair in criticism of Pelagius, as if he touched some raw nerve… Pelagius' doctrine of grace was at once more orthodox and more complex than that with which he has been generally credited. (*An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, p 369, 399)

Pelagius was a British/Celtic monk, a holy-living, moderately ascetic spiritual man who knew and loved the Scriptures. Like that much later British figure, John Wesley, he was shocked at the ignorance and immorality of supposed

Christians and called for holiness. In *Rediscovering the Celts*, Martin Robinson says of him:

> While in Rome, Pelagius began to direct his preaching against what he felt were the lax conditions prevailing amongst the Christians in that city. In this regard Pelagius was entirely consistent with his much later Celtic compatriot Columbanus. His was a call for holiness, and in particular for the notion that it was incumbent upon Christians to strive for perfection… It is clear that there was a good deal of sympathy for the preaching of Pelagius. Not only did he win the support of Rufinus, an important leader within the Christian community of Rome, but much later, when Pelagius' views were being suppressed through the action of the emperor, nineteen Italian bishops refused to sign the condemnation of Pelagius which was being used to justify his exile. Significantly, even more substantial support for a Pelagian perspective was to be found in the Eastern church… (p 109-110)

Rev Dr Ian Bradley, Senior Lecturer in Practical Theology in St Andrews, says similarly:

> Recent analysis of his thinking suggests that it was, in fact, highly orthodox, following in the tradition established by the early fathers and in keeping with the teaching of the Church in both the East and the West. It seems rather that it was his arch-opponent Augustine who introduced new and alien concepts into Christian theology and who should more accurately be described as heterodox in his views…. In fact, from what we are able to piece together from the few sources available, most of them filtered through Augustine's less than

> sympathetic eyes, it seems that the Celtic monk held to an orthodox view of the prevenience of God's grace, and did not assert that individuals could achieve salvation purely by their own efforts…. (*The Celtic Way*, p 62)

The Celtic Church had an emphasis on spirituality and holiness (as anyone who has visited Iona or Lindisfarne will know) and Robinson notes: 'In the early Celtic tradition, baptism was usually of adults, with a service of blessing being used in relation to infants' (p 72). Though no-one suggests Pelagius was a fully-fledged baptist, emphasis on human freewill goes naturally with a view of a Church as a voluntary group rather than a natural outcome of state-enforced infant baptism, and Alan MacQuarrie says of Pelagius: 'baptism for him should be a conscious choice on behalf of the Christian believer intending to live a good life' (*The Saints of Scotland: Essays in Scottish Church History 450-1093*, p 17). He was also slated by Jerome for his view that 'women should be taught and interpret Scripture' (Mackey, p 388).

Paul Marston did some research on Pelagius in working for his MA in theology, and all the evidence is that Pelagius was a holiness theologian shocked by the sinful lifestyles of 'Christians', and then woefully misrepresented by Augustine. We are not Pelagians (with or without inverted commas) and certainly do not endorse everything he says in his commentary – but it has to be said that in turning to the above passage of his Romans commentary after reading Augustine, it seems like turning from darkness to light. Pelagius rightly discerns that in *works of the law* Paul refers to Jewish ordinances, and that in contrast *works of righteousness* flow from true and living faith. He entirely correctly, therefore, harmonizes Paul and James on works and faith. His commentary flatly and directly denies the 'Pelagian' heresies ascribed to him in the passage quoted

above, and we have to say that even the places cited by his translator as evidencing ‘Pelagian’ ideas seem to do so only if read through heavily Augustinian spectacles. Similar insights are in his work on the Christian life (cf *Celtic Christianity* by Owen Davies, p 399), though we are unenthusiastic about his emphasis on the need for penance for sins committed post conversion/baptism. Augustine himself, of course, believed that the virgin Mary was sinless – and it is often said that Pelagius thought there might be others, such as Daniel. There is nothing in the Romans commentary that indicates such a thing – and parts of it seem to imply the opposite. To refer to ‘righteous’ men shows nothing – the Bible itself speaks of Noah, Lot and Job for example in such terms without implying sinlessness. Abraham at least, the doyen of the righteous, is stated clearly by Pelagius to have had sins to be forgiven. The Christians’ God-given pre-destiny is not based on works but on foreknown faith, it is not earned but is a gift:

> On what basis, then, did he suppose God to predestine us? [8:29] For those he foreknew. The purpose according to which he planned to save by faith alone those whom he had foreknown would believe… Those he foreknew would believe he called. Now a call gathers together those who are willing, not those who are unwilling… Therefore they are called to believe through the preaching, and are justified by baptism when they believe, and are glorified in charismatic powers or in the resurrection to come…

Pelagius speaks not about foreknown ‘merits’ or ‘works’ but foreknown *faith*. Compare Pelagius’s views of faith and baptism with those of Augustine (see below) for whom the compulsion of predestination was supremely illustrated by the forcible ‘conversion’ of a baby baptized even by a drunken heretic.

Certain of Pelagius's interpretations (eg on Romans 9) seem forced (though these pale into insignificance compared with some of Augustine's). But at the least in future no one should ascribe a lot of 'Pelagian' notions to Pelagius without first reading his commentary.

In the 5th century, however, Pelagius's teachings on holiness and the Church as a voluntary group of believers perhaps had little to offer a state church, compared with the state-enforced religion based on suppression and torture that was on offer from Augustinianism – and Augustine and others succeeded in persuading the ecclesiastical/state authorities to hound Pelagius from one place to another and all but expunge his teachings (except the distorted versions put forward by his critics). Some commentators note:

> An attempt to condemn him before the Council of Diospolis (415; now Lydda) failed when the council accepted the Christian orthodoxy of his teaching. But the church in Africa [the country of Augustine] continued to attack him, and condemned him at the Council of Carthage (418) persuading the pope to join in condemning him as a heretic. (MacQuarrie, p 18)

> Pelagius' position on both these issues [ie predestination and original sin] represented mainstream orthodoxy in both the Eastern and Western Churches in the early Christian centuries. Roman Catholicism, however, enthusiastically adopted Augustinianism with the result that the doctrines of predestination and original sin increasingly became the new orthodoxy in churches throughout Western Europe. (Bradley, p 63-4)

The simple truth is that Pelagius presented an almost completely mainstream version of Christianity – whilst

Augustine’s was full of novelty and misrepresented Pelagius almost as completely as it did the apostle Paul. This is what we can now examine.

Augustine's 'Evidence' for his New System

As we progress, we will see the whole matrix of other doctrines which the genius of Augustine enabled him to construct, but his assertion that faith is an *irresistible* gift given to a predetermined group is perhaps his central novelty. We have seen his basic theological error in not understanding the Hebrew context in which Paul wrote, but what other verses did he press into support for his doctrine?

As we consider this we must note some background points. First, we note again the language issues. Regarding Hebrew language, Augustine told Memorius in a letter that he knew nothing, and relied either on the LXX or the Latin. He also wrote in his *Confessions* of his early dislike for Greek, which prevented him from developing overmuch in it. He had, further, little concern to ensure the accuracy of translations used. In about 394 AD he wrote to Jerome begging him not to waste his time in translating the Hebrew – for if the Hebrew was obscure then no one had any hope of understanding it, and if it was plain then surely the LXX translators must be right. Jerome was a first-rank, internationally famous scholar, and his somewhat withering counter to this attack on his life's work brought Augustine to modify his views. Nonetheless, Augustine's underlying attitude seems to show in his frequent use of mistranslations to introduce novel doctrines without reference to the original – even where the latter does not support his argument at all.

Augustine also accepted as inspired what we today call the Old Testament Apocrypha and so uses verses from Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, etc to support important doctrines not found in the Old Testament itself nor in the New.

Lastly, Augustine is apt repeatedly to quote a verse to 'prove' his case without being careful as to the original

context. This is spectacularly true, as we shall see, for references to ‘election’.

So here are the verses, then, that he cites to back up his central notion that faith is an *irresistible* gift given to a predetermined group selected by God. There are really only two, one of which is totally general and the other a mistranslation of the Greek.

1) 1 Corinthians 4:7:

> What do you have that you did not receive?

This is the verse that he says brought him to believe his new doctrine that faith itself is a gift, and he cites it many times. The problem is that Paul nowhere specifically applies it to the commencement of faith. One cannot, of course, take Paul’s words crassly literally – for if they have *nothing* that they have not received from God, then presumably their party spirit and proneness to boast are also gifts of God. Even if we were to apply it to faith, Paul does not say that they *had* to receive it whether they wanted to or not. But the context of Paul’s words is one of forbidding party spirit and was surely not intended to be applied to basic repentance. Would Paul really have concealed such an important teaching as faith being an irresistible gift, in such a general statement against party spirit?

2) Ephesians 2:8-9

> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and *that (toutō)* not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Augustine cites this and adds:

> That is to say, and in saving through faith, [it means] even faith itself is not of yourselves, but is God’s gift. (*Pred. Saints* 12)

Augustine's idea is that the word *that* (italicized above) refers back to the word *faith* in the previous phrase, meaning that *faith* itself is 'not of yourselves'. This sounds plausible, but there are a major and a minor reason why anyone reading Greek could not accept it. The minor reason is that, if it were true, then the words following, 'not of works, lest anyone should boast' would also refer to faith. But Paul always set works and faith in antithesis, and for him to say 'faith is not of works' would be very strange. As Andrew Lincoln remarks in his commentary:

> In Paul's thinking faith can never be regarded as a meritorious work because in connection with justification he always contrasts faith with works of the law. (p 111)

The other point about this is that the Greek linguistically cannot be interpreted to mean that the word 'that' (*toutō*) refers back to 'faith'. The words *faith* and *grace* are both feminine in gender, but the word 'that' (*toutō*) is neuter. If the word had been intended as a simple reference, back either to faith or to grace, Paul would certainly not have used the neuter form (*toutō*) but the feminine form (*hautē*) which is quite different. The best interpretation that the Greek would seem to allow is for the phrase in verse 8, 'for by grace have you been saved through faith,' to be regarded as a similar type of parenthesis to that in verse 5: 'by grace have you been saved'.

This would imply that the word 'that' refers back to the whole process described in verses 4-7, of God quickening us and raising us together with Christ to show his grace to us in the heavenly places. None of this, Paul says, is through works, but is a gift of God. We suggested this in our first edition, and in his thorough commentary Lincoln states:

> The parallelism of the two clauses of v 8b and v 9 suggests, rather, that both are comments about

> the introductory clause of v 8a. *touto* [this] is probably best taken, therefore, as referring back to the preceding clause as a whole and thus to the whole process of salvation it describes… (Ephesians, p 112)

Actually, Handley Moule in his early commentary notes the neuter *touto* and feminine *pistis*, and comments:

> Accordingly many expositors, including Calvin, one of the wisest and most impartial of all interpreters, do take '*and* that, etc,' to refer to the whole previous thought of our grace-given salvation. (*Ephesians Studies*, p 77)

Whether or not this is Paul's precise meaning, certainly no one who read the Greek could see any indication in this passage that the beginning of faith is an irresistible gift. We do not, of course, in these present remarks, mean to deny that there is a sense in which Jesus came 'to give repentance to Israel' (Acts 5:31) and that repentance was also 'granted' to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18). In *All Of Grace*, CH Spurgeon wrote:

> Repentance, as a natural feeling, is a common duty deserving no great praise… Jesus is exalted on high, that through the virtue of his intercession repentance may have a place before God. In this respect, he gives us repentance, because he puts repentance into a position of acceptance, which otherwise it could never have occupied.

It is undeniably true that unless God has given through Jesus the opportunity for repentance, it would be useless, if not impossible, for anyone to repent. But Peter does not say that the gift is given to a select few – he says 'to Israel,' and his hearers would clearly have understood him to mean the nation as a whole. It is obvious, however, that it was not an irresistible gift, for not all of Israel accepted it.

Likewise repentance is granted not merely to '*some* Gentiles' (as Augustine would have us believe) but to 'the Gentiles' – though some did not accept the proffered gift.

Needless to say, the gift of faith mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:9 is a gift of a special kind of faith to some but not all Christians; it is not at all connected with Augustine's doctrines.

3) Other verses

Augustine's few other 'proof texts' are mainly from the LXX, where its translation is unsupported by the Hebrew. Thus, eg

> Esther 5:1 – (cited in *Gr. and Freewill* 42; *On the Gr. of Chr*. 1.25; *Rem. Sins* 1.34)
>
> Job 14:4 – (cited in *On Orig. Sin* 2.37; *Marr. and Conc*. 2.50)
>
> Proverbs 8:35 – (cited in *Enchir.* 9.32)
>
> Proverbs 21:1 – (cited in *On the Gr. of Chr*. 1.24)

Augustine himself realized the inconclusiveness of the 'proof-texts' he cited (actually 'wildly irrelevant ' might be a better description than 'inconclusive'), and appealed rather to his whole system than to specific verses to support his case.

Before looking at his system we might ponder one question. In Paul's writings there are doubtless 'some things hard to be understood.' Yet when an idea is simple to state, it is found stated most clearly. That salvation is not earned but is a gift is stated most clearly by Paul. But the idea that faith is itself an irresistible gift is also very simple to state. Why (if he really believed it) did Paul not state it with equal clarity? Augustine thought he saw such a clear statement in Ephesians 2:8, but the Early Church read the original Greek in which Augustine's interpretation was impossible – and so

saw no such thing. Why then was Paul so vague on this question if he really believed what Augustine later taught?

Augustine's main (*and often repeated*) line of argument from his system may be briefly summarized as follows: All Christians (he argues) agree that babies are baptized to regenerate them into Christ's body, the (Roman) Catholic church. This shows, first, that they are born under the guilt of sin committed in Adam. It shows, second, that the determination of who should be regenerated does not depend on the will of those selected. What is true of babies is true also of adults. God selects some to be regenerated on some basis known only to him; it is not dependent on their own wills.

Let us now look in more detail at some of the aspects of this system.

Original Sin

Augustine's distinctive views on original sin form a useful starting point for considering his system. Jews regarded the 'fall' as a historical event, and we find eg in 2 Esdras 7:118: 'O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants.'

The Early Church never denied the seriousness of the fall or of Adam's sin, but Augustine gave an entirely different interpretation to it. De Bruyn in his work on Pelagius notes recent work which argues that:

> ... the idea of hereditary guilt conveyed by physical generation had its origins in Jewish and Christian Encratism, which deeply influenced African theology... (p. 19)

Augustine taught that when Adam sinned, all his descendants sinned *in him* and so *shared in and inherited the guilt of the act*. The main support that Augustine found for this was in the Latin version of Romans 5:12, which reads:

> By one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for in him all men sinned. (*in quo omnes peccaverunt*)

He quoted this many times, eg *Rem. Sins* 1.11; *On Orig. Sin* 2.29; *Marr. and Conc*. 1.1; 2.8, 15, 24; *Ag. Pel*. 8. Augustine repeatedly referred to this verse and thought it plain and unambiguous.

In the late 4th century Ambrosiaster in his commentary (c366-384 AD) was perhaps the first to take the 'in him' to mean that 'all have sinned in Adam, as it were, in a mass'. Physical death for all resulted from Adam's sin. But Ambrosiaster goes on:

> But death is the separation of the soul from the body. And there is another death, which is called the second, in Gehenna, which we suffer not by the sin of Adam but by the occasion of his sin; it is acquired by individual sins' (*Ad Romanos*, 5:12.3-4)

So to him our physical death results from Adam's sin, but our eternal judgement purely on our own sins.

Augustine seems to be the first to teach the novel doctrine that we inherit Adam's guilt. The basic problem with it all is that the Latin translation renders the Greek phrase *eph' ho* as 'in him', which is an impossible rendering. Sanday & Headlam insisted:

> Though this expression (*eph' ho*) has been much fought over, there can now be little doubt that the true rendering is 'because'. (*Romans*, p 133-134)

They will allow no other reading, and note that in classical writers the phrase means 'on condition that.' They also consider the suggestion that the apostle meant to imply: 'because all sinned in Adam.' But they rightly object to this:

> The objection is that the words supplied are far too important to be left to be understood. If St Paul had meant this, why did he not say so? The insertion of en Adam would have removed all ambiguity.

Cranfield in his Romans commentary (vol 1, p 276) states that Augustine's interpretation 'must surely be rejected'.

Leon Morris likewise rejects it (p 230) noting that to take it as 'in whom' 'gives a strange meaning to *epi*, and 'one man' is a long way away.' However, Morris seems to feel that the Greek aorist tense of 'sinned' in 5:12 suggests one act which must be that of Adam – though he apparently (p 176) takes the identical aorist phrase in Romans 3:23 to refer to human sinfulness in general rather than just to Adam's one sin. We are unable to explain this inconsistency.

James Dunn (*Romans*, vol 1, p 290) says that the phrase was probably ambiguous to Paul's hearers and 'Paul evidently did not think it necessary to make his thought any clearer. It doesn't seem particularly vague to us, but this view is an improvement on reading in a novel doctrine of sinning 'in Adam' which is unknown anywhere else.

Arland Hultgren (p 222) notes that this verse was 'foundational for the doctrine of original sin', and that this depended on the Latin translation of *eph' ho*. This phrase is used in three other places in Paul: 2 Corinthians 5:4, Philippians 3:12 and Philippians 4:10, where (according to Hultgren) it is a contraction for *epi touto oti* meaning 'for the reason that' or simply 'because'.

Romans 5:12 simply says:

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus (*houtos*) death spread to all men, because (*eph' ho*) all sinned

Actually *houtos* which is rendered 'thus' is used elsewhere many times in Paul eg Romans 5:18; 5:19; 5:21; 6:4; 6:11 etc. It usually means 'likewise' or in like fashion – often it is used with *kai* (and). So we could well render Romans 5:12:

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, likewise death spread to all men, because all sinned.

Plainly the sin of *Adam* had some effect on the world: Sin was let loose. But Paul describes his own 'fall' in a passage, which comes, soon after his reference to the fall of 'Adam' (5:12):

> I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came sin revived and I died. (Romans 7:9)

Sin is in our world and environment, but it was at the point where Paul ‘opted in’ that he died. The reference is, of course, to spiritual not physical death. This reflects his contemporary Philo who suggested that since after sinning Adam lived and had children, the phrase in Genesis 2:17 ‘you shall die the death’ refers to the ‘death of the soul’ which is ‘the decay of virtue and the bringing in of wickedness’.

Other near contemporary Hebrew/Christian writings reflect similar ideas. The book of 2 Baruch, which dates from around 100 AD, was probably translated (into Syriac) from Hebrew. It contains the following interesting passage:

> For although Adam sinned first and has brought death upon all who were not in his own time, yet each of them who has been born from him has prepared for himself the coming torment. And further, each of them has chosen for himself the coming glory. For truly the one who believes will receive reward. But now, turn yourselves to destruction, you unrighteous ones who are living now, for you will be visited suddenly, since you have rejected the understanding of the Most High. For his works have not taught you, nor has the artful work of his creation which has always existed persuaded you. Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become his own Adam. (*2 Baruch*, 54:15-19 tr A Kiljn (1983))

This does not, of course, prove that the apostle Paul shared this view, but it should mean that we require some real evidence that he departed from it. This is especially true since the principle was laid down so clearly in the Old Testament Law and the Prophets:

> Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin. (Deuteronomy 24:16; repeated in 2 Kings 14:6, 2 Chronicles 25:4)
>
> 'Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?’ Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all my statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:19-20)

Parents’ sins do have an *effect* on their children:

> I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5-6)

We know this is true. Sociologically, it may take three generations for the effect of particularly bad parenting to cease its effects – even though God can break into this chain if people turn to him. But the principle is clear: people are punished for their own sins. Guilt is not inherited. Yet Augustine was teaching precisely that guilt is inherited if the son is ‘in the loins of the father’ when the father commits the sin. He also taught (as we shall see) that if the baby is baptized (even by a drunken heretic) then the guilt is removed until that baby commits his or her own sins.

So what does it mean? Dunn (p 274) may be right to suggest that ‘in modern terms we would want to balance the questions of individual responsibility against the constraints of hereditary, educational and other social

conditioning,' though this still leaves us to expound the actual passage. Calvin's view was that Adam 'corrupted, vitiated, depraved, and ruined our nature…' It is, of course, possible to adopt a version of this view which does not assume (as Calvinism does) that human nature is totally depraved. Cranfield seems to adopt a version of this view, which bases the condemnation on people's own sin but sees the sin as a result of inherited sinfulness.

Romans 5:15-20 does indicate in Paul's mind a picture beyond simple example, as the 'one sin' bringing condemnation is paralleled with the 'one righteousness' bringing justification. The passage is complex, and Paul gives two warnings that the parallel is not exact (5:15 &16). Translations obscure the fact that the phrase 'one man' actually appears only once as 'by one man Jesus Christ' (5:15). This parallels the 'one offense' by and of which many died, with the 'one man' through whom many received grace. Verse 16 reads: 'judgment out of one to condemnation, on the other hand the free gift is of many sins to declare right-standing.' Verse 17 parallels 'by the one offense death reigned through the one' with 'those who receive the abundance of grace and free gift of declared right-standing' who reign in life.

We think all this reflects Paul's earlier words in 1 Corinthians 15:20: 'For since through a man death, also through a man resurrection of the dead. As in the Adam all die, so in the Christ shall all be made alive…' He then also compares the 'first Adam' with the 'last Adam' (= Christ) in 1 Corinthians 15:45, and speaks of us 'bearing the image' of one and the other. 'Adam' is seen not merely as a historical individual, but (playing on the singular or plural meaning of the word) as a corporate identity.

In Romans 5:18 we find that:

> As through one offense condemnation (came) to all men, so through one act of declaration of right-standing, declaration of right-standing (came) to all men.

Augustine often cited the first part of this, but it surely cannot mean that condemnation spread automatically to all men irrespective of their own acceptance of the sin principle which Adam released in the world. If we took it thus, then the parallel Paul deliberately makes would imply that all men automatically received justification as well. Augustine's explanation that: 'as the one embraces all men whatever, so the other includes all righteous men' (*Rem. Sins* 1.19) is a blatant forcing of the words. Surely both condemnation and justification came unto all men, and the sense of 'came unto' must be conditional on their reaction rather than as something automatic. At the same time, there seems to be a play on the singular-corporate nature of both 'Adam' and 'Christ'. In sinning like the historical Adam we express our identification with the corporate 'old Adam', in accepting God's condemnation of the 'old Adam' by entering the 'burial' of baptism (6:3-4) we enter Christ's death and the expectancy of resurrection. On the effects in 5:19 that 'many were constituted sinners' and 'many were constituted in right-standing' Dunn comments: 'the causal connection indicated thereby is non-specific and can be very loose' (p 284). We find much to agree with in the careful and lengthy comments by both Dunn and Cranfield, and (although we cannot here expand further our own precise views) the whole apparatus built on this passage by Augustine seems simply to be wrong.

Nearly all Augustine's other main proof texts for his view of original sin were from the Apocrypha. He cites Wisdom 12:10-11 (*Marr. and Conc*. 2.20) but the reference in Wisdom is not to mankind but to the Canaanites, and it says nothing whatever about sinning 'in Adam'. He cites

Ecclesiasticus 40:11 (*Enchir*. 1) but this reference is also far from clear. He cites the Septuagint (but again not the Hebrew) of Job 14:4-5 (*On Orig. Sin* 2.37; *Marr. and Conc*. 2.50; *Rem. Sins* 1.34) but the Hebrew of this verse gives no support to Augustine. Finally he cites his only biblical verse, Psalm 51:5 (*Enchir*. 46; *Marr. and Conc*. 2.50; *Rem. Sins* 1.34). The verse is easily the most plausible one he cites (and is interminably quoted in modern traditionalist commentaries to support Augustine's version of original sin). But we should remember that it was written by David after Nathan had touched his shepherd-heart, and then pronounced 'You are the man!' The story behind Psalm 51 is found in 2 Samuel 12. The Psalm is the bitter cry of a man crushed with guilt and anguish, with those words 'You are the man!' ringing in his ears. Are we to take his words as though they were sober theological pronouncements? Note Psalm 51:4:

> Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight.

David is overwhelmed with his guilt before a Holy God. But does this verse *literally* mean that David had *not* wronged Uriah but *only* God? Should we therefore use it to build up, say, a doctrine that we cannot sin against man but only against God? Surely not.

The answer to this may be obvious, but we should surely be no less unwilling to use verse 5 to defend an Augustinian theological doctrine of original sin. In any case, whatever it might be taken to imply about his parents, David says nothing of inheriting any guilt, nothing about sinning 'in Adam'. Marvin Tate in his Psalms commentary (p 19) cites the many Old Testament verses which indicate there is no 'inherent sinfulness in sexual intercourse, conception and birth'. He suggests that today it is usually understood to

imply the essential human condition of the writer, or the tragedy of people being born into a sinful world.

We might, incidentally, note that Augustine nowhere seems to face the difficulty of Romans 9:11, which says that before birth Jacob and Esau had done ‘neither good nor bad’. In *On Orig. Sin* 2.36 Augustine referred to Romans 9:11 ‘Paul says most plainly that before they were born they did neither good nor evil.’ In this we agree. Yet Augustine elsewhere stated his theory most clearly that babies *did* do evil before they were born, in sinning *in Adam*, and it is their personal participation in this sin that leads to their guilt. The extreme difficulty this presents is obvious, but Augustine simply avoided facing it by following his reference to Romans 9:11 with vague phrases like ‘the bond of ancient debt’ (of Adam’s sin). This is highly unsatisfactory – but what else could he do? He does not answer the problem raised by Ezekiel 18:20 which flatly denies that guilt can be inherited (and if we sinned ‘in Adam’ then why not in our father and grandfather too?).

Not only did Augustine have difficulty in finding supporting verses, but he also faced a crushing logical difficulty. He said that for Christians the guilt of sinning in Adam had been removed in baptism. Surely, therefore, a child born of two Christian parents had been forgiven ‘in them’ just as he or she had sinned ‘in Adam’? Augustine’s answer was twofold. First, ‘it is quite possible for parents to transmit to their children that which they possess not themselves’ (*Rem. Sins* 3.17). Second, children are born in Satan’s power because: ‘they are born of the union of the sexes which cannot even accomplish its own honourable function without the incidence of shameful lust’ (*Marr. and Conc*. 2.15). Around 401 Augustine was exalting continued celibacy as the highest state both inside and outside marriage – and proclaiming that Mary had made a vow of perpetual virginity even on entering marriage. Being married is a ‘lesser good’.

He quotes extensively from 1 Corinthians 7 but ignores verses 3 and 5 (*On Gd Marr*. and *Of Holy Virg.*). In later work he began with his mistranslation of Romans 5:12, taught that sexual intercourse from any motive other than procreation was a venial sin (*Marr. and Conc*. 1.9,16,17) and the act even within marriage was always shameful since always tinged with passion (*Marr. and Conc*. 1.5; 2.37; *On Orig. Sin* 2.42). Hebrews 13:4 is explained as meaning that the general good of marriage compensates for the evils of sex (*On Orig. Sin* 39) or that it would be pure if the only desire for sex was for children and not pleasure (*Marr. and Conc*. 27). Even here he recognizes that intercourse must involve the shame of arousal and (alas) cannot be done by pure reason. 1 Corinthians 7:5 is explained away as 'by permission' which means that there must be some sin involved in marital sex even if forgivable (*Marr. and Conc*. 18 also *Enchir*. 78). This contrasts with early Greek Patristic writing which follows Paul and Hebrews and insists on the entirely honourable status of marital sex and the desirability of its regularity in marriage. Thus only Christ (Augustine said) was born pure; since only he was conceived without sexual intercourse. (*Marr. and Conc*. 1.24). Since marital sex was defiled, it was natural from Augustine and his increasingly fanatically ascetic contemporary Jerome to develop the exaltation of Mary (who he believed to be sinless) as 'ever virgin.' Other contemporaries strongly argued that she had children by Joseph.

Infant Baptism

Augustine taught that in baptism a baby was forgiven the guilt of original sin. He said: ‘As nothing else is done for children in baptism but their being incorporated into the church, that is, connected with the body and members of Christ, it follows that when this is not done for them they belong to perdition’ (*Rem. Sins* 3.7). A baptized baby would (he said) go to heaven if it died, but an unbaptized one to hell. Whatever Christians today believe about infant baptism, most of us surely reject this particular idea of baptismal regeneration Episcopalians, for example, practice infant baptism, but the 39 Articles of the Church of England pointedly exclude any reference to infant baptismal regeneration.

Before considering Augustine’s arguments for the doctrine, we may note how important a keystone it was in his system, which came to dominate western Christianity. Although it may be logically more obvious to begin from original sin and argue to this idea of baptism, Augustine’s actual practice (given that his notion of original sin had little or no basis in Scripture) was to begin from infant baptism, and argue to original sin. Thus he based two important ideas on infant baptismal regeneration: since baptism has this effect it must remove guilt, so in the case of infants it must be the guilt of Adam’s sin. Augustine’s customary argument (eg in *Marr. and Conc*. 1.24) was that baptism and exorcism of infants was to deliver them from Satan and free them from sin. Since they had no sin of their own (he argued) it must be from original sin. This gives (he said) an irrefutable example of regeneration being independent of anything in the person’s own will (eg *Pred. Saints* 23; *Gr. and Freewill* 44; *Marr. and Conc*. 2.47).

The first of these points has already been discussed. The second is important, for one of Augustine’s main defences

of his doctrine that faith is an irresistible gift was the idea that babies were (involuntarily) saved at baptism. Thus he says: ‘Let them think what they like respecting the case of adults, in the case of infants, at any rate, the Pelagians find no means of answering the difficulty. Infants in receiving grace possess no will, from the influence of which they can pretend to any precedence of merit.’ (*Gr. and Freewill* 44). Note that the issue is phrased in terms of preceding merit (as was customary in Augustine) which entirely begs the question of whether or not faith is a ‘merit’.

This was a repeated argument in Augustine’s later works, a mainstay of his new doctrines, yet it forced him into an unfortunate position over the status of baptized infants. As we consider this let us bear in mind his oft acclamation as the restorer of simple Pauline justification by faith.

The actual practice of infant baptism, was general in the Catholic church at the time and Augustine brought no scriptures to defend it. What he needed to show was that it made the difference (if the baby died) of heaven and hell. For this he cited Mark 16:16: ‘He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned’. Of this verse he says: ‘Now who can be unaware that in the case of infants, being baptized is to believe, and not being baptized is not to believe?’ (*Rem. Sins* 1.40). Augustine specifically denied any ‘middle place’ for babies who die unbaptized (*Rem. Sins* 1.55), saying that someone ‘can only be with the Devil who is not with Christ’. He used such descriptions of babies without baptism as ‘in darkness’ (1.35, from John 12:46); ‘destined to perish’ (1.62, from John 3:16); and ‘condemned’ (1.62, from John 3:18). It seems hard, therefore, to take him other than to mean that they go to hell (which in his theology means torment for time unending).

Yet, as he wrote to Jerome in 415, infants being baptized have no faith of their own. Thus we find the following comment, also on Mark 16:16: ‘For which reason in the church of the Saviour infants believe by means of other people, even as they have derived those sins which are remitted them in baptism from other people’ (*Ag. Pel*. 40). Baptized babies, he said, ‘are rightly called believers because they in a certain sense profess faith by the words of those who bring them to baptism’ (*Rem. Sins* 1.25; also *Marr. and Conc*. 1.22). This much he stated clearly, but we also find him commenting thus: ‘Therefore an infant, although he is not yet a believer in the sense of having that faith which includes the consenting will of those who exercise it, nevertheless becomes a believer through the sacrament of that faith.’ This is in a letter to Boniface, AD 408, section 10. Once again the Latin language (*sacramentum*) enables him to introduce novel ideas impossible in the Greek of the New Testament. Augustine seems to use this idea of a ‘sacrament of faith’ as a kind of halfway measure – enough to save the infant if he died young but not if he later disbelieved. How he derived it from scripture and how it fits in with his other statements is not clear. Whatever he meant by it, he certainly implied elsewhere that infant baptism involved regeneration to life.

This brought him great difficulties. He had strongly argued that baptism was as valid if administered by a drunkard or a heretic as if by an apostle (*Letter to Vincentius*, 48). He had also argued that: ‘their regeneration is not prevented by the fact that this blessing has no place in the intention of those by whom they are presented for baptism’ (*To Boniface*, 5). Well, we may ask, if salvation is ‘by faith’, then whose faith is it in such cases? Augustine would reply: ‘The presentation of the little ones… is not so much of those by whose hands they are borne up… as of the whole society of saints and believers’ (*To Boniface*, 5). The implication, therefore, is that

a baby baptized by a drunken heretic is saved by the faith of the Catholic church who may know nothing of the event. This is part of Augustine's supposed 'restoration' of the simple doctrine of salvation/ justification by faith!

A further complication comes from Augustine's insistence that 'the [Roman] Catholic church alone is the body of Christ, of which he is the head and saviour of his body. Outside this body the Holy Spirit gives life to no one' (*Corr. Don*. 50). The Donatists (he said) held 'entirely the same beliefs' theologically as the Catholics, but Augustine thought them all damned for not accepting the authority of the Catholic church – and that the office of being a Catholic priest was more important than his spiritual state. Augustine repeatedly defended this view of their damnation using (of all passages) 1 Corinthians 13, claiming that anyone separated from the Catholic fellowship did not have love (*Letter to Donatus* (416 AD); *Letter to Theodorus* (401 AD); *On Bap*. 1.9; 4.17; *Corr. Don*. 50, etc). Catholics persecuting nonconformists, in contrast, showed 'love' because it encouraged them to be orthodox – just as God shows 'love' when he forces Christians to the good of faith. Believing this, he had then to explain how it was that baptism by heretics wrought regeneration. One answer he gave was that: 'their sins, which in that moment had been dispelled by the holiness of baptism, return immediately upon them, as though it were the darkness returning which the light has dispelled while they were passing through it' (*On Bap*. 1.19; also 3:18). How he would apply this to baby heretics is not clear, but he accepted in general that a person could have genuine regeneration, genuine piety, and even genuine faith, but without membership in the Catholic church, it could avail them nothing and they would go to hell. On this basis, of course, Augustine would have damned two of his most famous and ardent followers, Calvin and Luther (not to mention Paul Helm and modern Augustinians), for his

arguments for the authority of the Catholic church were as valid in their times as in his.

Augustine even went so far as to state that a person could be given by God the genuine ‘faith which works by love,’ could be given a genuine and not a feigned righteousness, but not be given perseverance and so fall away and go to hell (*Pred. Saints* 26; *Gift Pers*. 1; *Reb. and Gr*. 10). McGrath in his book *Iustitia Dei* p 29 notes this explicitly, but seems not to be outraged by it. Perseverance, Augustine taught, depended on whether or not God had chosen and predestined a person (*Reb. and Gr*. 14). However much faith we know we have, however well we know that God has regenerated and justified us, until the day of our death (he implied) we do not know whether he has mercifully predestined us to heaven or has justly predestined us to hell. This is Augustine’s teaching. Heirs of Augustine like Kuiper and Helm can take little comfort in their cosy assumption that they are in the elect and pre-decreed by God to bliss in a heaven. Actually, according to their mentor Augustine, they can have no idea until after they are dead as to whether they are in the elect or not – and there is nothing they can do about it. In spite of this, of course, had Augustine been able to lay hands on them, he would have had them imprisoned and/or whipped to encourage them to become good Roman Catholics.

We now see how Augustine’s main defence for his picture of faith as an irresistible gift is bound up in his whole system: original sin, infant baptism, regeneration, predestination, etc.

Election and Predestination

Some of the most distinctive and influential of Augustine's ideas, even among those who have never read any of his works, may be those on predestination and election. Briefly, he viewed election as God's choice of who should be believers (*Pred. Saints* 34), and 'predestination is a preparation for grace, while grace is the actual endowment' (*Pred. Saints* 19; also *Rem. Sins* 2.43). Thus election is God's pre-selection of some (with no reference to their own wills) to be given final salvation; predestination is God's preparation for giving them an irresistible gift of faith and final perseverance. God could have chosen and predestined others also, but for undisclosed reasons has not done so.

Augustine's novel understanding of election springs from a philosophy which begins from God determining all events. To sustain it he is forced into all kinds of unlikely, out-of-context, and forced exegesis as we shall see, which stretches even his genius. His basic attitude to 'election' is reflected in the following passage.

> He therefore, works the beginning of our faith who works all things; because faith itself does not precede that calling of which it is said… 'Not of works but of him that calls' (although he might have said 'of him that believes'); and the election which the Lord signified when he said: 'You have not chosen me but I have chosen you.' For he chose us, not because we believed but that we might believe, lest we should be said first to have chosen him, and so his word be false. (*Pred. Saints* 38)

Here he takes Romans 9:11 (which is speaking of the election of Israel): and John 15:16 (which is speaking of the election of the *twelve apostles*): and applies both comments as though they referred to the election of *believers in Christ*.

Augustine quotes John 15:16 seven times in the space of a few paragraphs, and although he recognizes that the words are addressed ‘to the disciples’ (ie the twelve), he clearly equates this election with the election of believers. Now Augustine also believed that such election brought irresistible blessing, thus:

> Those then, are elected, as has often been said, who are called according to the purpose, who are also predestinated : and foreknown. : If any one of them perishes God is mistaken; but none of them perishes, because God is not mistaken. (*Reb. and Gr*. 14)

This immediately leads him to a difficulty, for if Judas was chosen, and such chosenness brings irresistible blessing, then how could he fall away? Augustine, therefore, goes on:

> Moreover they are elected to reign with Christ, not as Judas was elected to a work for which he was fitted… When, therefore, we hear ‘Have I not chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?’ we ought to understand that the rest were elected through mercy, but he through judgment; those to obtain his kingdom, he to shed his blood!

Augustine is not simply saying here that Judas received a similar election to the others but that it had a different *effect* on him. This would be true enough, but it would not be consistent with his assertion that ‘none of them perishes, because God is not mistaken.’ Augustine, therefore, has to suppose that the election of Judas was somehow different from theirs, ie it was an election to a different task. Given his theology it is difficult to see what other conclusion he could have reached, but the distinction he tries to make is simply not supported in the scripture. The scripture says that Jesus chose *twelve* and named (or ‘called’) them apostles. It nowhere implies that the election or calling of

Judas was in any way different. Moreover, Peter says that Judas ‘fell away’ from the ministry for which he had been chosen; he does not say that Judas was chosen for a different purpose.

We must try in our thinking to maintain distinctions between ‘elections’ where the Bible makes such distinctions – and not make distinctions where it does not.

In the first passage quoted above, we may note that Augustine makes a similar confusion with Romans 9:11. This speaks of God’s election of Israel, but Augustine (true to his approach) wants to make it speak of eternal salvation. In *Enchiridion*, chapter 25, he actually makes it clear that he takes this whole passage of Romans to imply that Esau was damned and Jacob was saved. This is, however, a strange interpretation. Since the context is speaking of the two nations Israel and Edom it would imply that all Edomites were damned and all Israelites were saved. This is, ironically, *exactly* the view that Paul is attacking in Romans 9!

The words of Romans 9:11 do not refer to anyone’s eternal destiny, but to the office to which the nation of Israel was elected by God in this life.

Now if we turn to Augustine’s treatment of the verses which really do refer to the election of believers:, we find that his views are even more impossible to support from scripture. Augustine’s fundamental understanding was that election concerns God’s arbitrary decision as to who should believe: ‘Therefore God elected believers; but he chose them that they might be so, not because they were already so’ (*Pred. Saints* 34). Several features of his analysis are unfortunate. The most important of these is that he tends to speak as though the only alternative to his own view was that which he ascribes to the ‘Pelagians’. The latter he states thus:

> … they themselves think that ‘having received God’s commands we are made holy and immaculate of ourselves by the choice of our freewill in his sight in love; and since God foreknew that this would be the case,’ they say, ‘He therefore chose and predestined us in Christ before the foundation of the world’. (*Pred. Saints* 38)

But, in spite of his assumption, there is a third possibility. The three views might be summarized thus:

> a) Because of our works and merits we have earned the right to share the election of Christ (*the so called ‘Pelagian’ view – though we know of no one who actually believed it*.)
>
> b) God chose us individually before the world began, and because of that choice he gave us faith as an irresistible gift and put us into Christ (*the novel suggestion of Augustine*).
>
> c) God placed us in Christ not because we earned it or deserved it, but because in his free grace he counted our faith-relationship as right-standing. Since we are in Christ, and he is the chosen One, we are chosen in him and share his election (*the New Testament and Early Church teaching*).

Augustine was right to condemn view a), but there are serious problems in his own view – in spite of its dominance in much of Catholic and Reformed theology. What, in his view, is the significance of the phrase ‘in him’? In Ephesians the phrase ‘in Christ’ occurs 14 times, ‘in whom’ occurs six times, and ‘in him’ four times – always in reference to Christ. Ephesians 1:3 speaks of the blessings we have *in Christ*, and verse 4 is a direct continuation to add that we were also chosen in *him*. If Augustine were right then Paul surely needed only to say: ‘even as he chose us before the foundation of the world…’ But Paul in fact says: ‘even as he

chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world…' Why should Paul have added the phrase 'in him' if it had no function? As it is, its addition seems directly to contradict Augustine's view. Surely to be a 'believer' in this context means nothing else than to be 'in Christ'. Thus Augustine's words could be rendered as: 'He chose them that they, might be 'in Christ,' not because they were already so'. But Paul does not say that we were chosen to *be put into Christ*, but that we were chosen *in Christ*. If we were chosen (in Christ), then surely we were chosen *because* we were in him (and he has been chosen) – which is exactly what Augustine denied. As we already noted, the Early Church (and in particular the earliest figure Clement of Rome) spoke of believers 'partaking of Christ's election' – they understood Ephesians chapter 1 perfectly well. Augustine is giving a radical reinterpretation which simply does not fit the text.

We have already seen the confusion caused by Augustine's application to the election of the believers, of Christ's words to the twelve apostles in John 15:16. Yet it is this verse which Augustine used as the main support for his view! Thus we find him repeating three or four times an argument like this: 'I ask, who can hear the Lord saying, 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and can dare to say that men believe in order to be elected, when they are rather elected to believe…' This is the mainstay of his argument, on the basis of which he effectively ignores the phrase 'in him' in Ephesians 1:4 in the passage which *does* refer to the election of believers.

It is unfortunate that such interpretations of election and predestination are often accepted today (often without any real study) as the true biblical ones, even by those who know nothing of Augustine. Instead of taking care to see whether the ideas are truly biblical, people often merely soften their implications by saying that, of course, such doctrines are only 'one side to the truth.' This is highly

unsatisfactory, for this kind of mishmash of confused, unsustainable, and contradictory exegesis of scripture, is neither the truth nor one side to the truth.

The Irresistible Will of God

Underlying the whole system of Augustine is a basic assumption that God's will is always and inevitably done, and that man can never resist it. We see this clearly if we consider some passages in a basic handbook of Christian faith that Augustine wrote after reaching maturity, the *Enchiridion*. The passage below begins with the assertion that although it may seem unloving for God to take up and save one baby, and let another go to hell, yet all will be revealed to us in heaven:

> *Enchiridion* xxiv: Then, in the clearest light of wisdom, will be seen what now the pious hold by faith, not yet grasping it in clear understanding how certain, immutable, and effectual is the will of God, how there are things he can do but does not will to do, yet wills nothing he cannot do, and how true is what is sung in the Psalm: 'But our God is above heaven; in heaven and on earth he has done all things whatsoever that he would.' This obviously is not true if there is anything that he willed to do and did not do, or, what were worse, if he did not do something because man's will prevented him, the Omnipotent, from doing what he willed. Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen. He either allows it to happen or be actually causes it to happen… Unless we believe this, the very beginning of our confession of faith is imperilled – the sentence in which we profess to believe in God the Father Almighty. For he is called Almighty for no other reason than that he can do whatsoever he wills, and because the efficacy of his omnipotent will is not impeded by the will of any creature.

One may note two things in particular about this:

1) Augustine's use of the type of emotional argument we considered in chapter 1: 'Surely God would not be almighty if anything could happen against his will?'

2) He further supports his argument with reference to a Psalm. But in fact this seems to be a mixed quotation from Psalm 115:3 and Psalm 135:6. The context of either of these is a comparison of our God as One who hears, feels, and acts, with other gods who have neither consciousness nor power. The psalmist's mind was far from dealing with the question of whether God allows men freedom to accept or reject his offer of free salvation. But this is how Augustine intends to apply it. Thus:

Enchiridion xxv: Furthermore who will be so foolish and blasphemous as to say that God cannot change the evil wills of men, whichever, whenever and wheresoever he chooses, and direct them to what is good?

The same entanglements are reflected in that great Reformation figure, Luther. Luther's adoption and adaptation of Augustine's philosophical ideas about God's sovereignty led him to the following position:

Common sense and natural reason are highly offended that God by his mere will deserts, hardens, and damns, as if he delighted in sins and in such eternal torments, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness. Such a concept of God appears wicked, cruel and intolerable, and by it many have been revolted in all ages. I myself have more than once been offended to the very depth of the abyss of desperation, so that I wished I had never been created. There is no use trying to get away from this by ingenious distinctions. Natural reason, however much it is offended, must admit

> the consequences of the omniscience and omnipotence of God.

Part of the consequences are that when these philosophical concepts are placed side by side with the scriptural teaching on God's mercy and desire that the wicked should repent rather than be destroyed, the result is plain contradiction (though it may be called paradox). Luther draws the only possible conclusion:

> If it is difficult to believe in God's mercy and goodness when he damns those who do not deserve it, we must recall that if God's justice could be recognized as justly human comprehension, it would not be divine. Since God is true and one, he is utterly incomprehensible an inaccessible to human reason. Therefore his justice also must be incomprehensible.

As we explore in our *Reason, Science and Faith* this kind of irrationality in regard to harmonizing scripture could lead to all kinds of bizarre theology, and is against apostolic example and practice.

Augustine had, of course, to try to deal with Bible passages that flatly contradict this notion. It is interesting to see how Augustine, although a philosophical genius, entangled himself as he tried to explain these away.

> *Enchiridion* xxiv: But the Lord's language is clearer when, in the Gospel, he proves the unrighteous city: 'How often,' he says, 'would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks, and you would not.' This sounds as if God's will had been overcome by human wills and as if the weakest by not willing, impeded the Most Powerful so that he could not do what he willed. And where is that omnipotence by which 'whatsoever he willed on heaven and on earth, he

> has done,’ if he willed to gather the children of Jerusalem together, and did not do so? Or, is it not rather the case that, although Jerusalem did not will that her children be gathered together by him, yet, despite her unwillingness, God did indeed gather together those children of hers whom he would? It is not that ‘in heaven and on earth’ he has willed and done some things, and willed other things and not done them; ‘all things whatsoever he willed, he has done.’

One can only be amazed at his argument, which is:

> 1) Jesus’ words admittedly make it look as though God willed something but did not do it.
>
> 2) But the words of Psalm 135 (115?) imply that if God wanted to gather them then he did so.
>
> 3) Therefore Jesus’ words must be interpreted to mean this, whatever they might appear to mean!

This seems to be rather a bad example of inverse exposition: starting with conclusions to be read into a text. Yet what else, given his presuppositions, could Augustine have made of this verse?

> *Enchiridion* xxiv & xxvii: Accordingly we must now inquire about the meaning of what was said most truly by the apostle concerning God, ‘Who wills that all men should be saved.’ For since not all – not even a majority – are saved, it would indeed appear that the fact that what God wills to happen does not happen is due to an embargo on God’s will by the human will. Now, when we ask for the reason why not all are saved, the customary answer is: ‘Because they themselves have not willed it.’ But this cannot he said of infants, who have not yet come to the power of willing or not willing. For, if we could attribute to their wills the

> infant squirmings they make at baptism, when they resist as hard as they can, we would then have to say that they were saved against their will… Accordingly, when we hear and read in Sacred Scripture that God ‘wills that all men should be saved,’ although we know well enough that not all men are saved, we are not on that account to underrate the fully omnipotent will of God. Rather, we must understand the Scripture, ‘Who will have all men to be saved,’ as meaning that no man is saved unless God wills his salvation: not that there is no man whose salvation he does not will, but that no one is saved unless he will it… Thus also are we to understand what is written in the Gospel about him, ‘who enlightens every man.’ This means that there is no man who is enlightened except by God.

Again we are amazed by his argument, which is:

> 1) It looks as though God’s will that all shall be saved is not done.
>
> 2) But babies are saved at baptism against their will.
>
> 3) The ‘fully omnipotent will of God’ must not be ‘underrated.’
>
> 4) Therefore the words ‘God wills that all men should be saved’ really mean ‘Any men that God wills shall be saved, will be.’

We note again two emotional arguments: one from contemporary Christian practice, and the other the appeal to a prior philosophical dictum about God’s almightiness. We also note that this is another use of inverse exposition. In this case, however, he afterward threw in an alternative suggestion. He suggested that perhaps all men really meant all types of men. Such a meaning for the word all is, to say the least, rare. But Augustine picked out the most likely-

looking illustration (‘every herb’ Luke 11:42) out of over 1100 verses where the word is used – apparently either not knowing or not noticing that the Greek in Luke is singular but in 1 Timothy 2:4 is plural. But, in fact, Augustine did not much mind how we interpret the latter verse, so long as we do not allow it to contradict his basic presupposition. He added: ‘We may interpret it in any other way we please, so long as we are not compelled to believe that the Omnipotent has willed anything to be done which was not done.’ The prior philosophical dictum must be preserved, at whatever cost to making of none effect the word of God by our tradition.

The last section we will look at is:

> *Enchiridion* xxvi: These are ‘the great works of the Lord, well considered in his acts of will’ – and so wisely well-considered that when his angelic and human creations sinned (that is, did not do what he willed, but what it willed) he could still accomplish what he himself had willed and this through the same creaturely will by which the first act contrary to the Creator’s will had been done. As the supreme Good, he made good use of evil deeds, for the damnation of those whom he had justly predestined to punishment and for the salvation of those whom he had mercifully predestined to grace. For as far as relates to themselves, these creatures did what God wished not to be done; but in view of God’s omnipotence, they could in no wise effect their purpose. For in the very fact that they acted in opposition to his will, his will concerning them was fulfilled. And hence it is said that ‘the works of the Lord are great, well considered in all his acts of will,’ because in a way unspeakably strange and wonderful, even what is done in opposition to his

> will is not done without his will. For it would not be done did he not permit it (and, of course, his permission is not unwilling but willing).

What is Augustine saying here? He is not merely saying that God permits men and women to disobey his will, but then seeks to bring good out of this. Clement of Alexandria could well (and did) say something of this kind, but such an idea would hardly fit in with Augustine's theology. What he is saying is that God's will for sinners is accomplished in their disobedience of his will. (Perhaps in anticipation of our complete puzzlement at this, Augustine calls it 'strange and wonderful.') But is this really a restoration of Pauline doctrine, or is there rather some connection with the rigid determinism that had always fascinated Augustine? MA Smith admits: 'The rigid fatalistic determination of Manichaeism was to appeal to the young Augustine' (p 158). This idea of God's will always being done was very strong indeed also in Roman Stoicism, the philosophy that had great appeal to the 'Roman' mind.

The examples of inverse exposition quoted from *Enchiridion* are far from rare in Augustine. Another example, picked at random, comes from a letter to Boniface: 'For the apostle says: `Quench not the Spirit:' not that he can be quenched but that those who so act as if they wished to have him quenched are deservedly spoken of as quenchers of the Spirit.'

We may also note his loose quotation from the scriptures, from the Latin version without reference to the original language. We have already remarked on his attitude in this respect, but it is in marked contrast to men like Origen who conducted painstaking labours in the original language) or Justin Martyr who stood closest to New Testament Greek and also did research into Hebrew, comparing it in his *Dialogue*

with the LXX. It is also in contrast to Augustine’s contemporary, Jerome, whose scholarship was outstanding.

Is it Just? Is it Loving?

Is Augustine's God fair and just? McGrath notes that Augustine sees the 'hardening of Pharaoh's heart as a consequence of divine predestination', but adds:

> God determines the destinies of men on the basis of justice… The total sovereignty of God in election is maintained: man's justification is preceded by the stirring of his will by God – and God, in his wisdom, has determined only to prepare the wills of a few. (p 129)

Basically, God's actions are 'just' because *everyone* is born bearing the guilt of Adam, and everyone's natural inclination is to sin. One or both of these things is presented depending on where someone stands in the Augustinian spectrum! (see McGrath *Iustitia Dei*, p 129) Everyone therefore deserves damnation. Therefore, if God chooses even to save just a few rather than none at all then this is merciful. The model is of a fifth century absolute monarch – considered merciful if just a few from a city in guilty rebellion are spared. 'Predestination' may apply only to those pre-selected for life, but it is a free, sovereign, decision of God to leave the others hell-bound for unending suffering when he could equally well give them the gifts of repentance, faith and perseverance if he felt like it.

The real questions are not so much about justice, but whether this kind of picture fits the loving God taught by Jesus Christ. Augustine was fond of quoting Romans 11:33: 'Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!' How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! This was Augustine's stock citation when he asked himself why a God who is Love should damn those he could have saved, or why he should allow truly righteous men (who have the faith which works by love) to fall from grace and go to hell. The citation is,

unfortunately, a misleading one. The implication in this passage of Paul is not that God is always incomprehensible, but that no one can advise God or guess his plans before he reveals them. It is just such a revelation that Paul has outlined in the previous chapters (9–11) of Romans. When we consider 1 Corinthians 2, we find a similar question in verse 16: ‘who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him?’ But now Paul specifically replies: ‘But we have the mind of Christ.’ The whole point is that God *has* revealed the deep things of his Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10). It is true that the natural person cannot understand them (v14), but the person willing to be taught by the Spirit does understand God’s revelation. In the mind of Christ we *do* understand God’s mind – it is not some contradictory enigma to be revealed in heaven. Indeed, as spiritual men, we ‘compare spiritual things with spiritual’ (v13). The language resembles 1 Corinthians 14:29; we are to ‘weigh up’ different revelations, for anything that is of God is consistent with all his other revelation. Paul is saying that natural reasoning is inadequate; we must strive for spiritual understanding. But spiritual understanding is certainly not the same as total incomprehension.

Triumph through Ruthless Persecution

Compared with Jerome, Augustine's approach to scripture was casual and unlearned. Yet, though Jerome's translation was adopted by the Catholic church, it was Augustine's new and distinctive theology that mainly triumphed in Roman Catholicism and thus in western Christendom. Why was this? What made his ideas so acceptable to the state Catholicism of his day and of succeeding generations? We can hardly hope, in such a general book as this, to answer this question about which so many volumes have been written. One major factor, however, may be interesting to consider.

Within a generation or so of the conversion and triumph of Constantine in AD 312 there was a slowly increasing persecution not only of pagans, but also of non-Catholic Christians. There were, indeed, temporary lulls, but the general development of the use of force to compel 'heretics' to become Catholics is well shown by EH Broadbent's classic, *The Pilgrim Church*, by Leonard Verduin *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, and Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* [2nd edn]. The slide into persecution was not, of course, without some protest from leading Catholics. Hilary of Poitiers protested poignantly against it. When in 385 Priscillian and his followers were executed on the orders of a synod, leading Catholics like Ambrose were horrified and totally dissociated themselves from the guilty ones.

When, therefore, Augustine came on the scene there was conflicting opinion over the use of state persecution of fellow believers, though no leading Church figure seems to have approved of it or defended it. In 396 Augustine himself (then a more orthodox Christian) wrote: 'I would have no man brought into the Catholic Communion against his will.'

Yet, as he later changed his ideas about the grace of God, so he changed also his ideas on the use of force. As he came to

believe that God effects conversion against men's wills, and that God himself uses force in changing their wills from evil to good, so also he came to believe that it was right for God's servants to use force. By 408 he could write to a non-conformist who advocated freedom of conscience:

> You are of the opinion that no one should be compelled to follow righteousness; and yet you read that the householder said to his servants, 'Whomsoever you shall find, compel them to come in'. You also read how he who was at first Saul, afterwards Paul, was compelled by the great violence with which Christ coerced him, to know and embrace the truth; for you cannot but think that the light which your eyes enjoy is more precious to men than money or any other possession. This light, lost suddenly by him when he was cast to the ground by the heavenly voice, he did not recover until he became a member of the Holy Church. You are also of opinion that no coercion is to be used with any man in order to his deliverance from the fatal consequences of error; and yet you see that, in examples which cannot be disputed, this is done by God, who loves us with more real regard for our profit than any other can; and you hear Christ saving, 'No man can come to me except the Father draw him…' (*Letter to Vincentius*, 2.5)

Augustine here makes very clear the connection between the two major changes in his thinking between about 395 and 408 AD. He often repeats this argument that in persecuting non-conformists the Catholics are but following the example of their Lord, eg *Corr. Don*. 21 23, *Letter to Vincentius* 5 (408 AD); *Letter to Donates* 3 (416 AD). It is based, of course, on his new ideas about God's sovereign will. Having once come to this conclusion, Augustine was

quite resolute in his advocacy of persecution, confiscation of possessions, and *fear of punishment or pain*. To the Tribune Boniface he wrote: ‘Is it not part of the care of the shepherd when any sheep have left the flock… to bring them back to the fold of his master when he has found them, *by the fear or even the pain of the whip*, if they show symptoms of resistance?’ (*Corr. Don*. 23).

Many destitute and persecuted Donatists, understandably desperate, committed suicide by setting fire to themselves. A Donatist minister named Gaudentius, under persecution and threat of death, said he would sooner burn down his church with himself and his flock in it than become Catholic. Threatened again with death he said that he did not seek martyrdom but was prepared for it: ‘only the hireling flees when he sees the wolf coming!’ Augustine wrote to him explaining that this suicide impulse must be from the devil (citing Matthew 17:15). Then he said:

> If you suppose that we ought to be moved because so many thousands die in this way, how much more consolation do you think we ought to have because far and incomparably more thousands are freed from the great madness of the Donatist party… (*Ag. Gaud*. 7.29; see also the *Letter to Boniface*)

It is true that it was the practical success of fear and pain, rather than any theological or biblical argument, that first led him to support persecution. He wrote to Vincentius that his former opinion ‘that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ’ was overcome ‘not by the words of those who controverted it, but by the conclusive instances to which they could point’. But, whatever caused the actual change in his view, without his new theological system it would have been very hard to justify it.

In the mature Augustine, therefore, the state church found not only the *first* Christian leader of importance to advocate the use of pain and persecution against non-conformists, but they found the *only* Christian theologian of significance whose theological system would justify such persecution. It is therefore not really surprising that his new ideas made a rapid advance within the state church, by 424 they dominated the Latin sector of it, and that by 431 they were adopted for western Christendom at the third Ephesian council. It has sometimes been *suggested that* Augustine's emphasis on baptism and grace rather than responsibility appealed to times in which the unruly 'mob' had become Christian. This may be unfair to Augustine, who certainly insisted that Christianity involved some standards of behaviour. Nevertheless his strong insistence that 'tares' and 'wheat' should be left together in the Church did make it simpler for state churches to operate. It also meant that he was afraid of his own flock (see letters to Aurelius in 392 AD, Albina in 411 AD). In the letter to Albina in 411 AD he described an incredible incident of unruly behaviour (effectively a kidnapping for money) by his 'flock', in which he himself had played a dubious role and for which he showed no apparent surprise or remorse.

A number of features of Augustinian theology were particularly useful for state churches:

1) The idea that God compels belief gives a model for his servants (eg monks, priests and magistrates) to do so.

2) Infant baptism, operates as an enforced rite of entry into society for all members.

3) The visible Church therefore consists of all society – not of a voluntary group entering by free choice and faith into the community of believers. State enforcement is simply empowered church discipline.

4) The visible Church includes both the ‘wheat and the tares’ of Jesus’ parable. The ‘true Church’ consists simply of ‘the number of the predestined’. This is known to no-one but God – even faith acting by love is no guarantee they have predestinating grace.

Verduin, Pearse and others have shown how the arguments Augustine used to support persecution have been repeated throughout history by many of those who adopted other features of his system. They were used by the post-Augustine Roman Catholic church, by Luther and the German Reformers, by Calvin and his associates at Geneva, by Zwingli, and by the English ‘Reformers,’ etc. FW Farrar rightly comments:

> Augustine must bear the fatal charge of being the first as well as one of the ablest defenders of the frightful cause of persecution and intolerance. He was the first to misuse the words, ‘Compel them to come in’ – a fragmentary phrase wholly unsuited to bear the weight of horror for which it was made responsible. He was the first and ablest asserter of the principle that led to the Albigensian crusades, Spanish armadas, Netherlands’ butcheries, St Bartholomew massacres, the accursed infamies of the Inquisition, the vile espionage, the hideous balefires of Seville and Smithfield, the racks, the gibbets, the thumbscrews, the subterranean torture-chambers used by churchly torturers who assumed `the garb and language of priests with the trade and temper of executioners,’ to sicken, crush, and horrify the revolted conscience of mankind… It is mainly because of his later intolerance that the influence of Augustine falls like a dark shadow across the centuries. It is thus that an Arnold of Citeaux, a Torquemada, a Sprenger, an Alva, a Philip the Second, a Mary Tudor, a

> Charles IX and a Louis XIV can look up to him as an authorizer of their enormities, and quote his sentences to defend some of the vilest crimes which ever caused men to look with horror on the religion of Christ and the Church of God. (*Lives of the Fathers*, p 536)

Augustine himself may not have advocated using *sustained* torture, but once the use of fear and pain were accepted it was a natural extension for his later followers to make.

There is, in fact, some parallel between the pagan emperor's treatment of Christians and the Christian Emperor Honorius' treatment of non-conformists (on Augustine's advice). The severity and barbarism of the pagan tortures were, of course, incomparably greater than those advised by Augustine (though his later Roman Catholic and Reformed followers generally matched the pagan barbarism) but some principles are the same. Under the pagan emperors the Christians were accused of all kinds of immorality and crime. Augustine likewise accused groups like the Donatists of crimes – and insisted on identifying the whole movement with an extremist nationalist fringe group rejected by many Donatists. Augustine himself shows the falsity of this accusation in eg letters to: Maximin (in 392 AD), Emeritus (in 405 AD), a debate with Fortunius (recorded in a letter of 398 AD), *Corr. Don* 4.16, and his letter to the Rotagist Vincentius. Later treatment of eg the Anabaptists by Augustine's followers (Catholic or Reformed) were similar.

But the main point is that Augustine, like the pagans, was not suggesting that they should be tried for specific crimes, nor even for some vague charge such as 'incitement to sedition'. He was advocating their persecution simply for religious nonconformity. Actually in theology the Donatists were orthodox. Augustine himself admits:

> The greater part of them declare that they hold entirely the same belief regarding the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost as is held by the Catholic church. Nor is this the actual question in dispute with them; but they carry on their unhappy strife solely on the question of communion. (*Corr. Don*. 1)
>
> The issue between us and the Donatists is about the question where this body is to be located, that is, what and where is the Church? (*Cath. Ep*. 2.2)

These were ordinary Christians – whose persecution Augustine enthusiastically advocated simply because they were not Roman Catholics.

Perhaps we may at this point remember Jesus' words in Matthew 25:41-43:

> Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

Through the influence and advocacy of Augustine thousands of simple brothers and sisters of Christ (many of them children) were actually caused to be hungry, exiled, strangers, homeless, in prison, or in pain. How then may we reconcile the words of Jesus with Renwick's description of Augustine as 'the greatest Christian of his age'? How may we understand Alexander Souter's description of him as 'the greatest Christian since New Testament times'? How can we understand Needham's words: 'Many Western Christians regard Augustine as the greatest theologian to arise in the Church since the apostle Paul'? (p 230). Yet these kinds of adulatory praise seem to continue to be heaped on

Augustine even today. On what are we to base our standards of greatness?

Can Augustine be excused on the grounds that ‘he was only a child of his times’? It is difficult to do this, for leaders among his predecessors and contemporaries were outspoken against violence. Tertullian, the first famous ‘Latin’ father, had declared: ‘God has not hangmen for priests. Christ teaches us to bear wrong, not to revenge it.’ Lactantius wrote that religion could not be enforced, and words should be used rather than blows. Athanasius, that champion of the trinity, commented on Song of Solomon 5:2: ‘Satan, because there is no truth in him, breaks in with axe and sword. But the Saviour is gentle, and forces no one to whom he comes, but knocks and speaks to the soul, ‘Open to me my sister’. The Christ-like Martin of Tours and Augustine’s revered teacher Ambrose both reacted strongly against those who had executed the Priscillianists. Augustine’s great contemporary Chrysostom said: ‘Christians are not to destroy error by force and violence, but should work the salvation of men by persuasion, instruction and love’. In short, Augustine’s whole background had been one of tolerance, and he himself was a champion of tolerance early in his Christian life. He abandoned this earlier tolerance to become the *first* ‘great theologian’ to advocate violence, fear, and pain to spread the gospel. Of course it is true that his doctrinal system (as noted above) fitted perfectly into the developing view that a state church should ruthlessly persecute any religious nonconformity. In this sense he was a ‘child of his times.’ But this hardly rides well with the kind of eulogies of him cited above.

Contemporary Reactions

Even in the Latinized, state-driven, mixture of worldliness and fanatical asceticism, and general corruption, which made up the 5th century church, there were voices raised in protest against Augustine's new theology. Pelikan observes:

> … the Augustinian doctrine was not merely novel and heretical, it was finally heathen. It was a 'fatalistic theory [*fatalis persuasio*]'. It spoke a great deal about grace, but 'in the name of grace [Augustine] preaches fatalism'. Predestination was simply a euphemistic way of reintroducing a pagan notion of fatal necessity'. (p 320)

The group who opposed Augustine are called 'semi-Pelagians' – though both Pelikan (p 318) and Needham (p 251) recognize that this is misleading. 'Semi-Augustinians' is a better description. Even Augustine recognized that they were devout and pious Christians. Yet the council of Orange in 529 largely endorsed Augustine's doctrines for the state church Latin Catholicism of the West (see eg Pelikan p 327, Chadwick p 235). The orthodox church of the East (the best traditions of which put relationship above cognitive systems anyway) did not succumb – Paul K Jewett in *Election and Predestination* pp 68ff, notes the explicit rejection in the Orthodox catechism. It was also possible for someone called by Needham (p 28) 'the most outstanding Christian figure who lived and worked under Islamic rule' to diverge without fear of ruthless state persecution. This was John of Damascus (675-749) who specifically denied that God's foreknowledge implied predetermination, adding 'it is not his will that there should be wickedness nor does he choose to compel virtue'. (Schaff second series vol ix, p 42; John's *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* chapter xxx.)

Augustine’s Legacy

Many evangelicals today have been brought up to see Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the other Reformers as heroes of the faith who restored a corrupt Catholic Christianity once again to its pristine New Testament state. There are elements of truth in this, but the whole truth is more complex.

For one thing, there had been other pre-Reformation groups (eg the Waldensians, Lollards and the *Unitas Fratrum*), who had wanted a more radical biblically based Christianity. For another, there had been varying Catholics from St Francis to Jan Hus to Erasmus of Rotterdam who were critical of the Catholic church from within. What was typical of the ‘Reformers’ was that most of the well-known ones adopted variants of Augustinian theology which included:

a) A state church ruthlessly enforced (with execution, torture etc).

b) Infant baptism as compulsory entry into church/society.

c) A view of the visible Church (rather than the world) as ‘wheat and tares’, with the invisible Church predestinated and known only to God.

In general figures like Luther and Zwingli were very careful to ‘reform’ only at a rate acceptable to the ruling Prince as Meic Pearse shows in his *The Great Restoration*. They virulently attacked anyone (like Karlstadt or the Anabaptist leaders) who wanted a more radical return to New Testament Christianity.

In persecution terms, scholars like the Christian scholar Erasmus and many of the Anabaptists advocated freedom of conscience. Most Reformers, however, were as barbaric as the worst of Catholics in their torture, imprisonment, and execution of nonconformist Christians. Zwingli, for example,

in his debate with the scholarly Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier ‘decided to employ the rack as an instrument of further persuasion’ (Pearse p 71). Hubmaier was later also racked by the Catholics. In general there was little to choose between the state Catholic and Reformed churches in terms of the use of torture. There were exceptions, eg in those parts of ‘Lutheran’ Denmark and Germany influenced by Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) there were some gentler spirits. Melanchthon himself ascribed to fallen humanity, and took freewill in the sense of ‘applying oneself to grace’ – a phrase from Erasmus which Luther abhorred. Once again, rejection of the extremes of Augustinian views on grace went along with emphasis on religious toleration and winning unity by love.

So can we excuse the Reformers because ‘everyone did it’? This is implausible. Take Calvin, for example. Verduin in *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* says that when Calvin had Servetus burnt over green wood (so that it took him three hours to be pronounced dead), ‘a cry of outrage resounded over most of Europe’. A pamphlet was written asking if Christ had now become Moloch to demand human sacrifice, or if we could picture Christ as one of the constables lighting the fire… To this, Calvin’s close associate Beza could only reply: ‘Of all the blasphemous and impudent gabs!’ (Verduin p 55). An appeal to the times is not convincing. An example of inconsistency in such an appeal is found in Jean Cadier’s biography of Calvin: *The Man God Mastered* (another book published by the UK Inter Varsity Press). This first tells us: ‘For Calvin, the death penalty could be the only possible one for a zealous denier of fundamental doctrines such as the Trinity and infant baptism.’ Cadier then tells us that Calvin wanted Servetus executed rather than burned – though he omits to tell us the reason for this was that execution would have made it appear that Servetus was killed on a civil charge rather than a religious one (see Verduin p 52). In

excuse for Calvin we are told: ‘it was the opinion of all the men of the times apart from Castellion’ that such extreme heresy as that of Servetus was more deserving of severe punishment than any civil crime (p 153). Yet later we are told: ‘protests arose on all sides’ (p 162). Who made these protests if it was nearly everyone’s opinion that such punishment was justified?

It becomes still less convincing when we are told, often by the same apologists, that those like Calvin and Augustine were the most competent Bible scholars in history. Surely if Calvin could write a work hailed as the most systematic treatise on the Christian faith ever written, it is an insult to suggest that his moral teaching was not an integral part of his system but was based on some opinions of contemporary men, or the necessity to maintain a state church. John Calvin (1509-1564) was a contemporary of. Menno Simons (1496-1561). The one developed the Augustinian theology of predestination, state enforcement of belief, infant baptism, etc. The other developed a New Testament theology of freedom of conscience, freewill to accept God’s gift of grace and enter into the community of believers through believers’ baptism, etc. The one burned and persecuted people for their religious beliefs, the other lived in constant evasion of the state enforcers of Catholic and Protestant states. Who *really* understood the New Testament? Who, moreover, do we want to claim as our spiritual ancestor? If we want to pick a tradition, which one would we prefer?

There were, then, always contemporaries who rejected both the doctrines and the persecutions. Contemporary with Calvin and Luther was Erasmus, the great biblical scholar and editor of the Greek New Testament. On issues of the will Erasmus followed more the Early Church view (and quoted them in this respect), and Luther took a version of the view of Augustine (copying many of Augustine’s proof-texts and

arguments). Yet, while the Lutherans persecuted the nonconformists, Erasmus eloquently pleaded for tolerance, and said that the weapons of Christ should be gentle reproof and verbal demonstrations of error. While Luther denounced all popes as antichrists, Erasmus tried to act as a mediating influence between warring parties of Christians, accepting as true believers those in any church with genuine experience of God. Erasmus might accept much of Luther, and said: 'I have said that our salvation depends not on our deserts, but on God's grace. I highly approve of Luther when he calls us away from frail confidence in ourselves… Our hope is in the mercy of God and the merits of Christ'. Erasmus, like the Early Church, believed that salvation was a gift – but he rejected the Augustinian doctrines both of faith as an irresistible gift, and of the use of force in persecution as simply following God's example.

Carl Bangs, in *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (p 141), says Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) 'constantly portrays himself as teaching an ancient position in the Church and one widely held even among the Reformed pastors in the Low countries. He sees his opponents as innovators, not himself.' Arminius' theology was mainstream (in fact for us he approached it with too many 'Reformed' presuppositions) but he denied the essential novelties in Augustine and Calvin, and *also* eschewed the use of violence against theological opponents. He himself, suffered what Bangs calls a 'hysterical' series of attacks – one layman remarking after one debate that he would certainly rather appear before God with the theology of Arminius than the 'love' shown by one of his opponents (p 219).

Finally, there was throughout this period the 'Radical Reformation' – those (often called 'Anabaptists' because they advocated believers' baptism) who sought a more thorough return to New Testament Christianity. JD Douglas, in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*,

picks out rejection of the state church and infant baptism as their central tenets (p 38).

Apart from the atypical Müntzer rising, these people almost always abhorred state religion and enforcement. Many amongst their leaders were first rank scholars. Thus eg John Denck (1495-1527) opposed Reformed ideas of predestination and the bound will. Balthasar Hubmaier wrote an essay on freewill (see George Williams & Angel Mergal (eds) *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*) and Pearse points out that he also wrote a passionate plea for religious toleration – no academic exercise for a man racked with equal savagery by Zwingli and also later by the Catholics for his New Testament beliefs. His essay on freewill takes a very biblical position, not denying the effects of the fall but asserting God's desire that all should repent but have the gift of freewill to refuse. He also looks at Romans 9:18, and refers to Job's comforters as wrongly claiming that all 'God wills shall and must take place.' Pearse asserts that the later Lollards, the Mennonites, and indeed most of the Anabaptist figures saw freewill as the basis of decision to enter the community of believers which was the Church, and rejected Augustinian ideas of predestination (pp 27, 195, etc). Menno Simons wrote:

> What shall I say, dear Lord? Shall I say that thou has ordained the wicked to wickedness, as some have said? God forbid. I know, O Lord, that thou art the eternally Good, and that nothing wicked can be found in thee. We are the works of thy hand, created in Christ Jesus to good works that we should walk therein. Water, fire, life, and death hast thou left to our choice. Thou dost not desire the death of the sinner, but that he should repent and live. ... Thou desirest not that any should remain lost, but that they might repent, come to the knowledge of thy truth, and be saved. (JC

Wenger (ed) *Menno Simons, Complete Writings* p 75)

Simons describes as ‘an abomination of abominations’ Zwingli’s view that God first compelled the sin for which he then ordained the punishment (p 760). Zwingli regarded Anabaptism as refuted because ‘it is demonstrated that election is above baptism, circumcision, faith and preaching’ (see L Harder (ed) *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, p 503).

The Anabaptists, were known for holy lifestyles. Pearse and others point out that Lutherans became generally known for immorality. They tended (with some exceptions such as the Pietists) to think that faith was right belief and that holiness smacked of ‘Pelagianism’, love, missionary zeal and a New Testament type of faith, were persecuted, imprisoned, racked, burned, or drowned throughout this period by the Catholics *and* by Reformers, Calvinists and Lutherans of all hues. The gory details in Verduin and Pearse are almost beyond belief for those accustomed to seeing Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, etc as heroes of freedom and Reformation. Many Baptists (which is what we would call Anabaptists) had their babies forcibly baptized by Protestant and Catholic states. Thousands perished for no reason other than their biblical faith.

The tragic historical fact is that those who deny any power but God’s, and hence reduce everyone including Satan to servants of God, may (if times are ripe) finish by using Satan’s own weapons of fear, force, pain, and persecution. Although Augustine initially adopted persecution because of its practical success (and it was indeed practically successful), he himself directly linked it with his theological system. Those who (like later Catholics and Reformers) extended his ideas to tortures of utter barbarity were simply making a logical extension – the theology still excused it and the more barbaric it was the more effective it was.

Conclusions

Traditions can sometimes be good, but sometimes make of no effect the word of God. Jesus said that all men would know us as his disciples by our love for each other – and he did not mean by this torturing others to force them to agree with our theology. Much of Augustinian theology was novel, radical, unbiblical, and immoral. Its baggage should be expunged from our evangelical theology, which should return unequivocably to New Testament teaching about God and his dealings with us.

Our Judao-Christian God is a powerful God, who upholds the universe by his word of power moment by moment, but who also acts as a participant within its history. Our God is a personal God, who feels emotion, volition, disappointment, and *reacts* in turn to human actions and reactions – sometimes changing his mind. Our God is a passionate God. The passionless, impassive, unchanging all-determining god of the philosophers, superimposed uneasily onto scripture, is simply a mistake. Our call is to get back to the God of the Bible. There are, of course, mysteries, and no mere human should expect to fully comprehend God. But the biblical position is clear that God delights not in the death of the wicked but would rather he return and be saved. It is that God has made people free to reject or accept his will and plan for them, but that God has a strategy in human history which he is working out and will bring to full implementation. There will be a new Heaven and a new Earth, and his people will dwell in it as the Bride of the Lamb who is Jesus the Messiah.

Hallelujah for the Lord *pantokrator* reigns!



Works of Augustine Referred to or Quoted

Most of these are in the standard Schaff (1887), *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

Abbreviation - Title and Approximate Date

Confessions - *Confessions* (400 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 1, p 45]

On Bap. - *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* (400 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 4, p 411]

On Gd Marr. - *On the Good of Marriage* (401 AD) [Schaff 1887, vo1 3, p 399]

Of Holy Virg. - *Of Holy Virginity* (c401 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 3, p 417]

On Lit. Gen. - *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (401-415 AD) [Taylor 1982]

Cath. Ep. - *Catholic Epistle Against the Donatists* (402 AD) [Generally ascribed to Augustine]

Rem. Sins - *On the Merits and Remission of Sins* (412 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 15]

Corr. Don. - *On the Correction of the Donatists* (417 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 4, p 833]

On the Gr. of Chr. - *On the Grace of Christ* (418 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 217]

On Orig. Sin - *On Original Sin* (418 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 237]

Marr. and Conc. - *Marriage and Concupiscence* (419 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 263]

Ag. Gaud. - *Against Gaudentius* (420 AD)

Ag. Pel. - *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* (420 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 377]

Enchir. - *Enchiridion* (ie 'Handbook') (424-426 AD) [Schaff vol 3, p 237]

Gr. and Freewill - *Grace and Freewill* (426-427 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 433]

Reb. and Gr. - *Rebuke and Grace* (426-427 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 471]

Pred. Saints - *The Predestination of the Saints* (428-429 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 493]

Gift Pers. - *On the Gift of Perseverance* (428-429 AD) [Schaff 1887, vol 5, p 521]

Letters - *Letters* (various dates) [Schaff 1887, vol 1, p 219: includes *Vincentius* 382 AD, *Albina* 455 AD and *Donatus* 544 AD]

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