

The Priorities of Jesus

by

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ONE

The moment of truth. Picture me sitting at my desk, pencil in hand, with a blank sheet of paper before me. I have completed my training and my first curacy, and have just been appointed to oversee not one but two daughter churches. Now that I am finally in charge of a church, how can I set about running it in a way which would satisfy me, let alone satisfy God? What should my guiding principle be? Can I express it clearly, ideally in just one sentence?

I have attended churches ever since I can remember. One of my earliest memories is of helping to stack the prayer books and hymn books in the village church after the evening service on a Sunday night. The red books lived on one shelf, the dark blue books on another. I enjoyed sorting them out; it was something I could manage. But when it came to having charge of a church myself some thirty years later, I knew I needed to think carefully. Leading people in the ways of God was not going to be a simple matter. For one thing, people are more complicated than hymnbooks and prayer books. They do not like being sorted, preferring to make their own arrangements, understandably. At one time in my life, I had felt drawn to becoming a librarian; perhaps I should have stayed with this instinct.

However, here I was, sitting at my desk with my sheet of paper. I had belonged to a dozen churches during my life. Various experiences had already helped me to decide that their approaches contained flaws. I believed that we needed a new and more radical agenda. I also wanted to discover the way forward myself, because I did not trust the views of other leaders. The guiding principle for church leadership that I was looking for was too important for me to accept second hand.

I little realised what a long process I had started on as I began to wrestle with this problem. It was to provoke fifteen years of study and reflection, and would involve much unexpected pain. In the end, I have come to some far-reaching conclusions. I believe these should be made public. My aim in writing this book is to present these insights to you, explaining how I gradually came to hold these opinions.

Most of what I have learned about God and his church has involved throwing overboard what I had previously taken for granted. This process began one afternoon when I was five years old. Several of us were running around in the garden. The game was not going my way at all. My friends, at least that's what I had thought they were, had seized control of the game in such a way that I felt totally excluded. This was my garden we were playing in! I felt so upset and angry that I went indoors, marched into the little room we called the telephone room, stood facing the door of the wardrobe where the outdoor clothes were kept, put my hands on my hips, and said with passion, "Oh God, why does everything always have to happen to me?"

Even as I said it, I was inwardly surprised at myself. I had never talked to God like this before. I understood about praying in church, but this was different.

The moment the words left my lips, I had my answer. I imagined God replying with feeling, "Well, I like that! What about all the ways I have looked after you;

three good meals a day, a loving family, nice house and garden...?” My frustration melted away, and I smiled broadly. I turned away, embarrassed. How unreasonable I had been! I ran off outside and continued the game.

Looking back now, I see in this first encounter with God an initial challenge to many misconceptions I had inherited about him. My childish mind had picked up that God was someone to address once a week, in a building set aside for the purpose. The idea that he was interested in me or was looking after me day by day never entered my head.

I did not want his involvement in my daily life either. This became clear to me when I was a teenager. By then we lived in a different part of the country, and in the church we now attended there was a curious custom. Just before the end, the Vicar would put in an extra prayer that was not in the book, which began like this; “Oh God, grant that as we leave thy house, we may not leave thy presence, but with thee may always dwell...” I did not like this at all. I did not mind giving up one hour a week to God, although I had to admit that I found the Sunday service an endurance test. But now there was this new threat. There was no way that I wanted God muddled up with the rest of my week, thank you! This was a prayer I wanted no part in, and I took to saying so under my breath when that particular moment in the service arrived. My attitude was See you next week, God, and not before.

Here again was a misconception, that God wanted to interfere with my life and spoil it, and that the thing to do was to keep him at arm’s length. I had not learned much at the wardrobe door.

When I was sixteen, it was time to be confirmed. At least, that was what I thought. I was at boarding school. Other boys went in for it, and there seemed no reason why I should not do it as well. I found the confirmation classes surprisingly interesting. However, one aspect troubled me. We all had to have a personal interview with the school chaplain, a man I found rather distant and forbidding. During my interview, he asked me, “Pennant you do say your prayers at night, don’t you?” “Yes”, I lied. This seemed wrong. If I was going to be confirmed, I ought to pray at night, surely. I decided I had better get started, and tried to say some prayers.

I had also lied two years earlier when I was in the cabin of the sailing boat. My brother and I had gone on a Christian cruise on the Norfolk Broads. I did not know about the Christian part of it in advance – if I had, I would not have wanted to go. There were talks every night which passed over my head. The sailing part was quite fun, provided there was a little wind, but not too much, and it was not raining. On the final morning, I was called down to the bottom of our boat. The skipper, who was another teacher at my school, wanted to talk to me on my own. I did not like being singled out like this; I found him no easier than the chaplain. He asked me, “Do you want to become a Christian?” I never felt so awkward in my life. This was embarrassing! How could I escape? He was clearly ready for a long session, and it seemed to me that the quickest way of getting out of the cabin was to say yes rather than no. So I said yes. He seemed very pleased, and said a prayer over me. Then he gave me some Bible reading notes. There was a passage to be read each day. I was not too thrilled about this as it suggested an ongoing commitment of some kind. He also proposed that now I had become a Christian, maybe the paperback book of horror stories I had been reading all week was not a good idea. I was a bit troubled by the idea that being a Christian would affect what I did and did not do, but I had not been enjoying the stories much, so I did not mind leaving them off. I had only read the book because other boys I knew had been reading it. I did not know what to

make of it all, but the teacher seemed so pleased that I thought maybe I had done something good by saying yes.

Over the next two years, the teacher would occasionally stop me to hand over the next instalment of notes. This was always an embarrassment, as I had never looked at the previous ones.

Two years on, the week of the confirmation finally arrived. We had to go on what they called a quiet day, where you were not allowed to talk. I did not look forward to this at all. We had to think in silence in a large room for a long time. Another endurance test. Part of the regime was to attend a series of four talks by a visiting speaker. We all filed into the chapel for the first one, and he began.

“For most of you boys, what you are going to do this weekend means nothing at all. You will keep it up for about three weeks, and then you won’t go to communion again. You don’t really mean anything by the step you are taking.” There was more in the same vein, which I don’t remember.

I was incensed. Who did he think he was to insult me like that? In fact, I felt so indignant when we had gone back to our room for silent thinking that I determined to prove him wrong. Boys used to stand up and go out of the room occasionally, presumably to visit the toilet. I had the impression that for some of them it was a way of relieving the monotony. It gave me my chance. I got up and made my way out, but instead of finding the toilet, I turned my steps back towards the now-deserted chapel. I walked in, stood and looked at the altar, and said out loud, “I give my heart to God.” To my total surprise, I had an immediate sense that this offer was accepted. God was pleased with what I had said. As I made my way back to my seat, I knew that something important had just happened. I had made a discovery that God was real, and was prepared to listen to what I said, and to respond. I was really taken aback by this. There was clearly more to God than I had ever imagined.

You may be wondering what all this has to do with our subject, which is the nature of a church. How is my past history relevant?

What was becoming increasingly clear to me from these early experiences was that I was confused about God. Although I acknowledged his existence, I did not want him making demands of me. When I did gradually get drawn in to a relationship with him, everything I began to discover was a surprise to me. To put it bluntly, for all my church attendance and my background, I did not have a clue as to what God was really like. I did not realise it at the time, but when I made the commitment as a teenager just before confirmation, I was starting out on a long road of slowly growing understanding. Many misconceptions would have to go. Much of my behaviour would have to change, starting with my tendency to tell lies to get myself out of a fix.

By the time I was ordained some eighteen years later, I thought that the long process of discovery was now complete. I now knew what a church was. The weekly meetings, called services, were a time that people set aside to worship God, to grow in their Christian life through teaching, and to support each other by meeting together. If you were especially keen and had the time, you did not just attend on Sunday morning – you went through the process again on Sunday evening. It was also good to attend midweek, at a home group. Studying the Bible was a good thing to do at these meetings. I had learned to lead these groups myself. Then it was good to perform Christian service as well, if possible; in the Summer, I used to help on holidays with a Christian emphasis for young people. I had also helped on two campaigns to welcome overseas students to our country. I could even spell

evangelistic without having to think, and explain to people what it meant. Everything was fairly clear now, I thought.

Little did I know! There was still much to discover, and much to unlearn. My early encounters with God had set a pattern which has continued ever since.

When I was at Theological College, other students would sometimes ask me what sort of a parish I was looking for when I got ordained. It was a good question. I decided that I would be no use in some situations. I had heard of charismatic churches where people waved their arms in the air while they sang. I was not an emotional person, I thought, and if I went to a church like that, I would be frustrated with the people, and they would be frustrated with me. No, the thing to do was to find a church where people stood normally and wanted to be taught from the Bible. I felt at home in this environment. At college, I had focused on learning Greek and Hebrew so that I could read the Bible in the original languages. It had taken me about four years after my confirmation to come to accept that the Bible was the word of God, a book through which God spoke. I set myself to read it and master its contents. I felt I had something to offer people of a similar persuasion. I was ready to accept that I had been very muddled once, but by now I was not only sorted out myself; I was in a position to help other people.

How wrong I was! For all my knowledge of the Bible, my theological training, the books I had read, the home groups I had led, and my understanding of the nature and role of churches which I had acquired, there were plenty more surprises in store. The first of these came at my first staff meeting the day after I was ordained.

“I want you to go on this conference,” I was told. I looked at the brochure. It was called Signs and Wonders, and was the annual conference of a body called Anglican Renewal Ministries. Fair enough, I thought; this was to be a part of my continuing training. I was rather impressed by being sent on a conference. This church clearly had its act together. I was not so sure about the subject; it seemed to be to do with healing the sick by laying on hands. This seemed outlandish to me. I could imagine this kind of activity might take place in a far-flung mission field, perhaps in remotest Borneo, but not in England. I thought that people who were keen on this kind of thing must be rather gullible, and probably unintelligent. As such it would be a good thing to have practice in trying to understand them and accept them, as I needed to learn how to get on with all types of people in my calling. There might therefore be some value in going, but the subject matter would probably turn out to be a waste of time.

About a dozen people from our church were also going to the conference. After we had found our rooms and settled in, there was an introductory session before supper. One representative from each church was to say how things were going where they had come from. One after another, people stood up and said variations on “There are great goings-on in Grimsby” or “The work is wonderful in Wolverhampton”, and such like. I found this rather irksome, and I was concerned that the conference speakers would take it for granted that everyone was persuaded about this healing doctrine, which might encourage a lax attitude and lack of focus, so when it came to our church’s turn, I stood up and said, “We are in reasonable shape, but you will have to work very hard to persuade me that there is any value in this subject, as frankly I am highly dubious” or words to that effect. One unexpected result of this was that over the four days of the conference, whenever I was in a queue for food or a drink, someone in front or behind would gently turn to me and say, “How are you getting on with it so far?”

At supper on the first evening, as a matter of politeness, I asked the man sitting opposite me what he did for a living. He told me he had just taken early retirement. When I asked him why, he explained that he had been leading a research team made up of scientists in the fields of biology, electricity and light. Their work had to do with developing visual display machines that would project computer images onto the wall. He explained about the difficulties of increasing the speed of response – a certain number of frames per second were necessary for the projection to prove acceptable. It was all rather beyond me. The team had been averaging twenty-five patents a year for the last twenty years, he said, and he had had to retire early because industry and big business were clamouring so hard to have all this technology available by yesterday that he could no longer take the pace, so he had handed over to a younger person. I could not understand much of what he said, but it occurred to me later that perhaps my idea that the people on the conference would turn out to be gullible and unintelligent was wrong. I had better listen carefully to the proceedings.

At the end of the first full session that evening, the speaker asked us to stand with our arms held out, and invited the Holy Spirit to come. I found this a strange notion, but I could not fault it. I tried desperately hard to relax and “be open”. Then I tried to stop trying. It was no use. Although there were varied phenomena in the hall, nothing happened to me. I was disappointed but not surprised. Eventually I became aware how tired my arms were, and lowered them.

However, during the night I had a vivid dream. I was a schoolteacher once again. It was morning break and I was in the staff toilet standing by the basin, about to wash my hands. The electric clock on the wall stood at 1113. In two minutes time, the clock would trigger the fire alarm for ten seconds, and I knew that I then had to face a class of thirty-two pupils who were brand new to the school for their first lesson with me. I also knew that I was completely unprepared. I had no idea at all what I was going to teach them. I felt totally inadequate.

However, there was an even more pressing problem. There were fifteen or twenty spines sticking into the palm of my right hand, rather as if I had just tried to befriend a porcupine or a spiky cactus. They were made of metal. I was pulling them out one by one. They came away without pain. But there was one right in the centre of my palm which was much longer and more deeply embedded than the others. The man at the next basin beside me had seen what I was doing, and said, “You will never be able to pull that one out.” “Oh yes I will,” I replied, because even in my dream I knew that we were at a healing conference. There would be no problem!

Sure enough, I drew the deeply embedded object vertically out of my palm with no pain and without it leaving any scar. I looked at the piece of metal, and saw that it was a brand new key, all shiny. It reminded me of a key for a bicycle lock. I discarded it on one side of the basin surround. Then the dream ended.

I found this dream so striking that I recounted it to several people next morning. By lunchtime, I decided that there was a message in it, which ran, “The key to this situation is in your hand; don’t neglect it.” I never have neglected what I learned as a result of that conference. It is the reason I have written this book. It is important to me that my life does not come to an end unexpectedly without my having shared what I have discovered.

Many of the conference members claimed to have been healed one way or another by the end of the four days. One of these was someone I knew – she said her colitis had cleared up. I was struck by an elderly lady who had been blind in one eye from the age of seven, but who now claimed to be able to see out of it. I did not

know what to make of it all; was all this activity really flowing from the God that I had known for so long? Or was it all a delusion?

My main problem with the conference material was why there should be such an emphasis on healing, but no reference to casting out demons. Surely the two went together in the gospels? If one was for today, here and now, why not the other? Again, there was a lot of reference to spiritual gifts. I knew that Paul had encouraged the Corinthians to seek the higher gifts, especially prophecy. If the spiritual gifts were available today, which was a new idea to me, then why was no-one mentioning the importance of prophecy? I felt very uncertain about it all.

However, one point that was made challenged me. The speaker reminded us that Jesus had told his apostles that they were to teach their disciples what he had commanded them, at the end of Matthew's Gospel. One of the things Jesus had commanded the twelve was to heal the sick. This meant it was part of the church's role today to teach believers to heal the sick. I found I could not fault that argument.

It took me four months of further reflection before I finally accepted the basic premise that believers should heal the sick, and became comfortable with the idea of laying hands on people myself, in obedience to Jesus' instruction. The first twenty-five people I prayed over saw no improvement to my knowledge, but after that there seemed to be positive results. Nobody got worse after my ministrations, as far as I know. Although I felt awkward to begin with, I gradually came to feel comfortable about offering to lay hands on people that had health problems.

However, it did not escape my notice that here was another big area of Christian thought of which I had been entirely unaware. I had thought I was sorted out by now! I began to wonder how much more change, growth and development might prove to be in store for me.

One emphasis at the signs and wonders conference was that "Jesus only did what he saw his father doing." We were encouraged to sense what God wanted to do in any situation. As a result, I became more interested in hearing the voice of God.

I had already made a start with this. When I had been a schoolteacher, before going forward for ordination, I had sometimes been asked to give a short address at the school assembly; a kind of thought for the day. I took this responsibility very seriously. At that time, it was my habit to read the Bible and pray in the early morning before setting out on the day. My mind would frequently wander during these sessions, but I now I began to experience a strange thing. Often, I would find myself thinking about what I might say at the assembly that was due in a few days time, and ideas would begin to form while I was meant to be praying. This happened sufficiently often for me to start relying on getting the theme of the assembly while my mind was wandering during my early morning prayer time.

Then one week it went wrong. I was due to speak on the following Tuesday morning. No idea came before the weekend. Even on the Monday morning, there was nothing. I thought that perhaps some event during the day would give me a lead, but by bedtime on the Monday evening, I still had no inspiration. Perhaps a lead will come in the morning, I thought. But when I prayed next day as usual, there was still nothing. I travelled to the school and took the register with no idea of what I was going to say five minutes later. This was getting ridiculous. What on earth was I going to do?

After registration I made my way along the passage towards the assembly hall, and met the RE teacher on the way. It was she who had asked me to speak; it was her job to get staff members lined up for this task, generally against their will. "This

may sound extraordinary,” I said, “but I have no idea at all what I am going to say in the assembly in a few minutes time.”

“Oh, sorry,” she replied, “I forgot to tell you – the assembly has been cancelled.”

I was really struck by this. No assembly, so no message. This episode confirmed my growing suspicion that I had been hearing from God in my prayer times. I decided then and there that for the rest of my life, I would never speak at a Christian meeting without the conviction that I had received the core of what I was saying through hearing from God.

This conviction was a good one. I wish I could say that I had always kept to it since. On some occasions I have felt more confident that what I was saying was inspired than on others. But the belief that God might speak today and that I could listen to him had taken root.

I also came to hear his voice in other ways. During my second curacy, there was the opportunity for people to be confirmed at the mother church once a year. On one occasion, when I made the announcement and asked those interested in being confirmed to have a word afterwards, a lady I knew well came forward. She had suffered some kind of brain injury in the past, and was rather slow in speech. She wanted to join the confirmation class. I thought this was not a good idea; her presence might make it difficult for the others, so I put her off. She was very disappointed. As I turned away from her, the thought came clearly into my mind, “That’s oppression.” I was not entirely clear at that moment what oppression was, although I had read the word in the prophets and picked up that it was a bad thing. I quickly turned back to her and said that on second thoughts there would be no problem – I was sure we could find someone who would give her a lift to and from the meetings. She was very relieved. We duly fixed up transport, and she attended the classes and was confirmed. I never heard that there was the slightest difficulty. I was so glad that I had been keen to hear God speaking and was able to have my unkind attitude corrected.

By now I was getting used to having thoughts which I believed to be God speaking to me. However, on one occasion in my first curacy, I had heard God speak with an audible voice. It happened in this way.

The church was holding a week of meetings in the community, and the youth group was to go into a local school, to share with the school Christian Union during their lunch hour. I sat at the back of the meeting, while our youth group leader spoke to the young people. Afterwards, as I was walking out of the school, I wondered why it was that I never seemed to end up with the chance to do some evangelism. I would love to have spoken at that meeting. I felt quite disappointed.

My route took me through the school hall, and as I entered it through one door, a member of staff happened to come out of a door close by, and we ended up walking along shoulder to shoulder. It was most strange. At that moment, the thought came into my mind, “Speak to this man about his soul.”

This meant something to me. I had read a biography of D. L. Moody, the American evangelist, and I knew that he would not let the day end without speaking to someone about Christ. I have always been scared of doing this one to one, for fear of being ridiculed. I decided to ignore the thought and pretend that I had not heard anything. I felt very tense walking along beside this stranger.

We got to the end of the hall, and I went my way and the staff member went his. I was just breathing a sigh of relief, when the words came. “When are you going to start obeying me?” It was an audible voice, not just an impression. It came from inside my stomach.

I felt dreadful, and not just for one day or two. Hadn't I been trying to obey God for a long time? Wasn't it my aim to obey God? I was most upset for several days. I clearly needed to look at myself long and hard. I needed correction! The only consolation was that the voice had come from my insides, which implied that God was at home in me, despite every failure and weakness of mine.

By now, you will have formed a pretty negative impression of me, as someone who thought he knew so much but actually knew so little, and who was arrogant, unkind, and generally useless. I wanted to do so well, but fell very far short. This was the person who was sitting with his pencil poised over a blank sheet of paper, wondering how to lead a church.

It would be nice to say that this negative assessment was an opinion I shared at that time, but the reality is that it would be many more years before I was ready to admit my failings. However, there may have been some sense of my own inadequacy in my attempt to come up with a guiding principle. I did not want to run the church according to my own ideas; that was too dangerous. I probably had many more areas that needed sorting out. I did not want to adopt someone else's model either. That would be to repeat the mistakes I was only too aware of in other churches. The teaching at the conference that we were to discern what God was doing in any situation had chimed in with my own experience of hearing from God. This seemed better. So it was that I decided that this church was to be run on the lines not of what I thought was good, nor upon what others wanted, but on the lines that God wanted. We would discover this by listening to God.

The blank sheet had long since disappeared by the time I was finally ready with my answer in a succinct form. My father and brother were lawyers, and I had been impressed with the importance of the oath taken by witnesses as a means of getting at the truth. So it seemed natural to express my guiding principle in these words:

The aim of the church is to do the will of God, the whole will of God and nothing but the will of God.

TWO

Looking back, I don't know that I ever expressed this principle in this form to anybody before now. This was a mistake. How much better it would have been to discuss it with the other leaders. I was much too independent. I did not know how to work in a team. I really did not have much of a clue about how to proceed.

Nevertheless, I encouraged us all to find out the will of God. We set ourselves to hear from God. No meeting went by without people sharing their impressions in words and pictures. There was no shortage of material to work on.

I was aware that everything that was shared needed to be tested. This was easier said than done. I was also aware that it was possible to be sincerely wrong. When I was a student, twenty years before, I had been at a loose end one afternoon, and after praying about it, I sensed that it was the right thing to go and call on a friend. His rooms were a ten minute walk away. When I finally got there, I was most disconcerted to find that he was out. I must have mis-heard. This troubled me for two or three days.

I recalled this when I met some Christian leaders who strongly disapproved of any attempts to hear from God. The revelation of God was complete with Scripture, which was not to be added to, they asserted. Private revelations were to be strongly resisted. I agreed with them about Scripture being complete, but I was not so sure about their view of private revelations.

An episode in my first curacy had been instructive to me. There was one afternoon when I needed to pay a visit to two people, both of them recently bereaved. I also planned to wash my hair afterwards. As I was setting off, the thought came to me that I should wash my hair first and visit afterwards. This seemed absurd. I had discovered from experience that it was better to let my hair dry naturally rather than towel it vigorously as I had done as a boy. The idea of using a hair dryer never entered my head. "I can't visit these people with wet hair!" I thought, and dismissed the thought.

I set off on my route, arrived at the first house and rang the doorbell of the elderly man. I was most surprised to find him not at home. Never mind, I thought. I decided I would call on the other one first. However, I already had a bad feeling about it. Sure enough, there was no reply when I pressed her doorbell. She was out too. There was nothing for it but to trudge home. When I was within fifty yards of my door, the lady in question came sailing down the hill towards me in her car on her way home, and waved cheerfully as she passed by. I felt a complete fool. Why had I not listened to instructions? If I had washed my hair first, both visits would probably have been achieved without trouble. As it was, I had blown it. What was the use of trying to listen to God and then ignoring him when I thought I knew better? What had I got to lose by taking God seriously, except looking as if I had just washed my hair but not dried it?

Now it seemed to me that when the charge about adding to Scripture by private revelations was made to me a few years later, the argument of the critics had a weakness. I could not see how my hearing an instruction to wash my hair before going out visiting rather than afterwards might compromise Scripture. The fullness of the revelation of God in the Bible was not affected by this episode, to my mind.

I could see why they wanted to preserve Scripture from being diminished, and shared their concern. I understood clearly that hearing from God was no substitute for absorbing the written word of God. I was not quite sure how the relationship

between these two activities might be best expressed in practice in the day to day life of the church, but despite what they said, there did not seem to me to be grounds for discounting hearing from God today.

All the same, there were other features of our practice that worried me. One was that although we had a flood of words and pictures, there tended to be a dearth of interpretation. Unlike the prophet Samuel, of whom it was said that no word of his fell to the ground, much of what we shared seemed to fall by the wayside. The critics had pointed out that in the Old Testament era, a false prophet whose words did not come to pass was to be stoned. This was sobering. On the one hand, I wanted to encourage people to learn how to hear from God and be ready to make mistakes. On the other hand, it was not good to encourage the idea that anything was acceptable, and if nothing came of what was shared, who cared about that. There were some issues here that needed to be thought through.

Once again, there were instructive instances that spoke to the matters I was concerned about. I clearly remember one occasion when I attended a healing service in a church. Those wanting the laying on of hands were invited to come forward at a certain point and be prayed for. A considerable number of people took up the opportunity, and I became aware that something special was happening. Judging from appearances, most of the people were experiencing the intervention of God in a powerful manner, and I felt sure that a great deal of good was being done. I happened to know that things were very far from right in that particular church, and it astonished me that the bad state of affairs had not dried up the blessing of God which I could plainly see in front of me. I prayed about this, and as I did so some words floated into my mind, "...God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked." The words seemed familiar; they had a biblical ring. When I got home, I lifted down my concordance and found the passage. They were words of Jesus, talking about God being merciful to good and bad alike.

This incident was most helpful to me. It did not simply explain what had been going on that evening. I was realising more and more how worthless and wicked I was as a person, let alone as a leader. Now I could understand that my shortcomings would not cancel God's kindness towards me. There was no need to feel disqualified by my failings.

When I thought about it, this word had not fallen to the ground. In fact, it had not even been made public. If it had been spoken out in the meeting, then people might have thought that it had no application, but in fact it proved valuable to me. Might something similar be happening in other instances where nobody appeared to respond to what was shared?

Another incident which had the appearance of being a revelation with no application has stayed in my mind. One Sunday evening, a word was given out in the service, "Back to the Future!" Then twenty minutes later, it was given out again by the same person. Nothing appeared to come from it at the time, and I imagine that most people forgot about it when they left the meeting.

When I got home, the first thing I saw as I walked in through the front door was a video on the hall table which was not ours. I picked it up; it was the film *Back to the Future*. This seemed more than a coincidence. I discovered that the video had been lent to my son. I decided I had better watch it with him.

We saw it the following afternoon. I could only stay for about an hour. The last words spoken by one of the characters just before I had to leave were, "It's a good thing that we don't know what's coming in the future, because if we did, we might not be able to handle it." I wondered at the time if that was a message for me.

Looking back now, I can say that this was an accurate forecast of the difficult times ahead for me. More than once since, when life has seemed insupportable, I have drawn comfort from those words. God knew what was coming, and was in control.

I hope I managed to report back to the lady who spoke out the phrase that her words had not been in vain, for her encouragement; I don't remember whether I did or not. Even if I did, I am sure that there was no announcement about it in the service the following week. This meant that almost all the people who had been present when the word was given out remained unaware of its application. I decided that although it would be easy to decide that most of the words and pictures shared were not helpful, in the absence of proof to the contrary, it would be better to conclude that in most instances we did not know the outcome. It would not be right to turn away from sharing revelations simply because of a lack of apparent take-up.

I continued to reflect on what the critics had said. Then I remembered the passage about two or three witnesses. An insight from just one source did not carry the same clout as one from two or more independent sources. This might be a helpful means of grading the importance of what was shared.

We had an example of this one Sunday evening. Near the beginning of the service, a lady announced, "He must increase and I must decrease." I recognised these words as ones which John the Baptist had said about Jesus. About twenty minutes later, a different lady said, "He must increase and I must decrease." Stupid woman, I thought, why wasn't she listening earlier?

When the event was over I happened to share my irritation with someone else. "Oh no," came the reply, "the second lady came in late to the meeting. She had not heard the first lady." This caught my attention. The message had come in duplicate. Here was something definite to get hold of. Whatever else we did, we needed to be sure that Jesus was growing more important in our church and we were growing less, I thought.

Then it was my turn to experience the combined weight of several witnesses. I had been at a Christian conference and brought home about twenty boxed sets of tapes. I put them on the bookstall for people to borrow, created a book where one could sign the tapes in and out, and explained the following Sunday morning what I had done. I told them about the conference and the inspiring message. I encouraged people to browse and see if there was anything that interested them.

The way things were arranged, it required a three metre detour from the shortest exit route at the end of the service to have a look at the bookstall. I could not help noticing how many people failed to turn aside when it was time to leave. With some of them, I even formed the impression that they were making a point of keeping away from the tapes. They did not want this teaching, thank you! I found this very hurtful. Maybe I was mistaken in my enthusiasm for all this material, but the least people could have done was to have a browse, it seemed to me.

Next day, when I was driving my children into town, I found myself reflecting on the event. I became indignant, and thought to myself, "These people look as if they have committed their whole selves to God, but actually all they have committed is two fingers." I had meant by this that they had only given a tiny part of themselves to God, but a moment after I had framed the thought, I grasped a second, much more offensive interpretation of the words I had used. I was shocked; I had not meant to be so rude. Then I became aware of the words of the song that was filling the car. We were playing a tape of Christian songs for children, with words addressed to God, which ran at that moment, "... and I care that much about you." The sense of the song was one of adoration and worship, but again I became aware

of a second, highly insulting meaning of these words in common use. All this time I was driving onwards. It was soon time to pull up at a roundabout. There was a car in front of ours queuing to get on. I could hardly believe my eyes as we drew up behind it; there on its rear bumper was a sticker in Scottish tartan in the form of a V sign. Churchill's wartime gesture of victory had likewise acquired a second offensive meaning. I detected the same theme again.

The idea that the church people were in violent and hostile rebellion to God had come to me despite myself, and immediately been confirmed by two witnesses. Was this really the case? I was so horrified by what had happened and its implication that I did not mention this episode to anyone for eighteen months. It was only much later that I realised something else. I had been thinking about our own local church people at the time. But suppose the words had a wider application. Despite my own desire to serve God, was it not true that part of me was ready to rebel at a moment's notice? Was I not included in this hostility to God? Could it even be that the attitude of the whole national church was one of giving God two fingers? I felt dismayed by my reflections.

By now I had no doubts that God spoke today, and that I and others had heard from him in various different ways. Despite this, I was still left with a difficulty. It seemed to me that the amount of revelation about which we could be clear was insufficient as the basis for a church programme. Maybe someone more in tune with God would have been able to hear better, as it were, but as far as I was concerned, trying to form the entire agenda of the church in this way was not practical. Although hearing from God had its place, some additional way forward was called for.

At about this time, it happened that I gave a talk one Sunday evening on the passage in Mark where Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." In retrospect, it was to prove something of a turning point for me.

During my talk, I asked those present to call out any instances in church life today where they thought we followed the traditions of men rather than the commands of God. I had been expecting a few instances, but I was surprised by the volume of comments that came, considering that we were a fairly select group of people. There were not more than twenty-five of us present. I listed their observations on the overhead projector. The sheer volume of areas we had identified were a cause for reflection, it seemed to me. I went home later in a thoughtful mood.

At some time over the next twelve hours, I found myself imagining the silverware that we used for Holy Communion, standing on the holy table with the bread and wine ready in place. What seemed odd about what I saw was that there was nobody standing there to administer it. My first reaction was to smile at this. I was aware of several attitudes that had been taken by different branches of the church. Some clergy liked to stand at the West end of the Holy Table when celebrating, seeing themselves as offering the elements to God on behalf of the people. Others stood at the East end, so that the congregation could see what was happening. Perhaps they felt they were acting on God's behalf. Others again were not happy with either of these positions, because of their implications, and therefore liked to stand at the North end, in an attempt to be neutral. About the only stance that had not been adopted was to celebrate at the South end! However, what was striking in what I saw was that nobody was standing anywhere near the bread and wine at all.

Thoughts on these matters had come to my attention recently because this was a time when discussions were taking place as to whether women should be ordained priests. One objection to this proposal came from people who maintained that since Jesus was a man, only a man could represent Jesus by consecrating the bread and wine. I had not been happy with this idea, having discovered a verse in Zephaniah, which ran, "When God celebrates a feast, he consecrates the worshippers who are present." It was not the bread and wine which needed to be made holy, I considered, but the people!

Now I was confronted with the idea that maybe nobody at all should consecrate the bread and wine.

It was only a day or two later that I thought of something else. During the service, it was the practice for us all to declare, "We are the Body of Christ", quoting Paul. Instead of the consecration being performed by one person on everyone's behalf, the whole assembly should do it, I thought. I expressed it in this form; "It is the body of Christ that makes the bread and wine become the Body of Christ."

I wondered whether this was a new idea. I had not come across it before. At an early opportunity, I visited a theological library to consult the leading books on the subject. I was pleased to discover that in every book I looked at, the author regretted the impression given in today's practice that the bread and wine were consecrated by an individual. This was exciting. I sensed that a revelation was helping us to improve on a man-made tradition.

I looked carefully at the service to see if what I was considering was out of order, and noted that as long as the president said the words, it did not matter where he was. So next Sunday, feeling rather fearful, I explained that from now on, I would no longer stand by the bread and wine when we came to that part of the service, but say the presidential words from within the body of the people, to emphasise that it was all of us together that made the sharing of bread and wine in memory of Jesus a valid experience. I hoped nobody would mind. In the event no-one batted an eyelid. Perhaps they did not grasp the significance of what I was saying. Perhaps they saw it as yet another daft idea!

I soon got used to the new practice, and nobody seemed to mind. I hoped the day would come when we could all say the words together, but in the event, we never did; I don't remember why. Rather feebly I did not share my thoughts with any other clergy for fear that someone higher up the church structures would say that this practice was unacceptable. Then I would be faced with possible conflict.

Here for the first time was an area of church life where we were doing what we "saw the father doing", rather than following human ideas, our own or those of others. Perhaps I should not be too hasty in thinking that our insights were insufficient to fill out the agenda for the church. Rome was not built in a day. I hoped there would be more insights. I little realised what lay in store.

THREE

One morning in November, when I was sitting at my desk, the phone rang. It was a member of the church. She sounded very concerned. "David, we must do stuff for the homeless," she said. My heart sank on hearing these words. I did not need any more problems! This was a something I could do without. However, I had been keen to emphasise that in our attempts to hear from God, there was no reason why the pastor should be the one to get the message.

A short story in Ecclesiastes had caught my attention. It was about a city under siege. There was a wise old man living in the city who knew how it could be saved, but because nobody listened to him, the city fell to the enemy. They could have been saved if the leaders had been ready to hear.

At my first service when I was appointed, which happened to be on Christmas Eve, I had done a sketch. The theme of it was that most churches operated like a London bus. There was one driver, one person to take up the collection, and all the others were passengers sitting in rows facing the front. These were the days when buses had two staff rather than one! We were not to be like that, I said. We were the body of Christ, in which every member had an important contribution.

So although during the phone call I felt like replying "Go away," what I actually said was "Well done; please keep listening to what God has to say to us, and keep me informed." I felt rather pleased with myself.

The following Sunday, I was to speak on Luke chapter fourteen. When I came to prepare, I noticed that some of the verses seemed in line with what our church member had been saying about the homeless, so I rang her and asked if she would be prepared to share with us all when we reached a certain verse. She agreed.

When it came to the point and she stood up, it was even worse than I had feared. She encouraged us all to open our homes for homeless people who had nowhere to go, quoting Isaiah. I cringed inwardly. How could I encourage people to take the homeless poor into their house in this way? Some of these people were dangerous.

I had never had much idea of what to do with tramps. One had rung our doorbell soon after we had arrived. He asked for food and help. I did not know what to do. After a moment's thought, I told him that it was my job to look after his spiritual needs, not his physical ones. I showed him the way towards the town centre and said that very likely he would find some help there. I may have mentioned the police station; I forget. He looked crestfallen, and trudged away. A long time afterwards I learned from a friend that when tramps find an unwelcoming situation, they put a mark outside the house to warn other homeless people not to call there. I wondered if my attitude to the man had caused him to mark our house, and that was why we had never received any further visits from such people.

Looking back now, I feel most ashamed of my heartless attitude. How could I have been so mean? I simply wanted an excuse to get rid of the man. I did not want to get involved with someone in obvious need. How awful.

There had been one other more recent occasion when tramps had come to my attention, in a rather unexpected way. I had become disappointed with our Sunday morning worship. Our service lasted an hour and a quarter, and for most of that time, I found it was a case of working hard in order to warm the people up. Although everyone looked pasty-faced and gloomy at the start, by the end, there was a trace of pink and some enthusiasm and involvement apparent on people's faces.

I found myself thinking of a game we had played as children called Keep the Kettle Boiling. Three of us had once found a large pile of hay which had clearly been put there for our benefit, so we jumped on it in turns. The game was to be sure that there was always someone jumping, without a gap between us. This meant you had to pick yourself up in a hurry and join the back of the very short queue, or the pattern of jumping would break down. We kept it up for a few minutes before we tired of it and looked for something else to do. I wonder what the farmer thought when he saw the state of the hay after we had gone.

With the worship in our service, it felt to me as if we were trying to brew a cup of tea in the Arctic Circle. After we had done a lot of standing about and stamping of feet in the bitter cold, with the gas flame on full blast, the water would finally become tepid, then even warm, and finally, joy of joys, reach boiling point. Don't forget to heat the pot! Then quickly pour in the water, swirl it round, and pour out the tea. Oh dear, nobody thought to heat the tin mugs in advance, which have a profoundly chilling effect. Oh dear, the milk is frozen; better drink the tea black, even though I thoroughly dislike that. Is there any sugar? We gulp down the disappointing brew and pretend to enjoy it. Then the next time we want a cup of tea, we find the water in the pan has frozen solid, and the whole lengthy process has to be gone through again.

Our worship should not be conjuring up these images! We need to keep the kettle boiling, I thought. I found myself thinking of the shops in the town. I expect to find them all open during the daylight hours, well stocked, with trained staff ready and eager to serve me. Why were the churches empty and locked up for most of the week, in contrast? Could we not do better than the shops? Why not have twenty-four hour worship, so that people could turn up at any time and enter an ongoing atmosphere of praise to God, and come and go when they pleased?

This project would need a lot of bands playing the songs in rotation, I realised. This was how I thought of worship at that time. It would be beyond the resources of our village. Nevertheless, I was looking into a possible move to a city parish just then; there it might be easier. Maintaining continuous worship would require the commitment of a lot of people, but it could be done, it seemed to me. I became quite excited by the idea.

We tried a limited experiment one Sunday afternoon, from four until ten p.m. We split our musicians into three bands, and divided the time between them in forty minute slots. I hoped that people would turn up and join in for a spell and then leave when they wanted. However, our numbers were so small that by the time half of us were involved in the bands, there were not many people left to be the ones coming in and finding the worship already under way. Never mind. At least we tried it once. Nobody asked for the experiment to be repeated.

One day when I was thinking about my idea of never-ending worship, visualising the scene in a city centre church, I noticed that in my thoughts a tramp had come in from outside. In fact, he was the only one in the building at that moment, apart from the musicians. This mental image troubled me at first, but after a moment or two, I realised that he had probably come inside the building because it was warm and dry. He was standing there quietly, not causing any bother. Why shouldn't he come in? It seemed fine. It would be no problem. Let him come in.

Some time in the weeks following the phone call about the homeless, I wondered whether the presence of the tramp I had imagined in my thoughts had a wider implication. It was all very well to have continuous praise going on. But what about

the people who lived on the streets? Was God asking us what we were going to do about the destitute in a practical way?

I soon realised I knew nothing about homeless people at all. There seemed to be a small army of people moving round the country, living outside, that we all tried to ignore. However, I had a sense that getting involved with them could prove to be very costly. I wanted to be sure this really was the direction that God was leading us in. In the meantime, we took collections for a local hostel for the homeless. For our Christmas carol service that year, I made sure the chancel was littered with large cardboard boxes in addition to the usual Christmas tree and the scores of candles hanging above our heads decorating the church, to focus our thinking on homeless people.

It took me eighteen months before I was finally convinced that care for the homeless was to be a main concern of our church. The event which finally decided me was an early morning prayer meeting which just three of us attended. At the end of the meeting, both the other two shared things that came to them. One said that as he had been looking up at the rafters, he had seen the church as an upturned Noah's Ark. Although it was new to him, I had come across this thought before. I had seen a sixteenth-century woodcut on exactly this theme in a text book at theological college. The words of the song came back to me; "And they all went into the ark, for to get out of the rain." What a wonderful image of the church, as a refuge for homeless people, I thought.

I forget the other contribution, but it also helped convince me. What they said had a galvanising effect on me. Their words confirmed the way my mind had been moving over the previous months.

I finally opened my mouth to the people. Maybe opening our homes to homeless people was beyond us, I said, although I was not sure about that, but the least we could do would be to keep the church open twenty-four hours a day during the coming winter for people who had nowhere else to go. I had noted that in the days of the temple in the Old Testament, David had appointed two hundred and ten doorkeepers. I suggested that if we could find two hundred and ten people willing to come for one night a month in rotation, we would be able to man the building. That seemed a reasonable target in our wider area, I maintained. We were in touch with a number of other local churches, who might each supply ten or fifteen people on an occasional basis. Our part of the South East has sometimes been called the Bible belt because the number of Christians is higher than the national average. With vision and determination, I suggested, this project would be possible. What did people think?

I got no takers at all. Even the two who had been at the prayer meeting with me were against the scheme. This was hardly surprising, on reflection, as one was a prison governor and the other a police sergeant. They knew the homeless from experience, unlike me.

People had all kinds of objections. "The building wasn't put up for this purpose", said one. So what?, I thought. "You don't have asbestos on your doors," said another. We could put some on, it seemed to me. "We can't afford to heat the building all winter," said another. This seemed a fair point; our finances were not good. The most helpful objection, I thought, because of its honesty, was a blunt one; "We don't want these people in our village."

Despite the negative response, I raised the idea at the weekly staff meeting. I was not hopeful. The other staff were not keen on the idea. I think it may have been then that I discovered that I was the curate in charge without hyphens. I did not even have

the status of curate-in-charge with hyphens. The distinction between these two states was new to me, but it made little difference in practice. The bottom line was that I had no authority. This seemed like the end of the road. What was I to do now?

With my legal background, I did see a way in which I could have gone ahead alone, despite the objections. At one point in the service of Evening Prayer the words “Silence may be kept” were printed in the book. There seemed no reason why I should not start an evening service, reach the point where I would announce the silence, and then leave it to run indefinitely. I did not think that any lawyer would be able to dream up a way of forcing me to bring a service to an end, even if it were to last twenty-five years. And if the silence was broken by the odd sound or two, who cared about that? All of us often make mistakes. Indeed, if the bedlam of scores of homeless people warming their mittened fingers on bowls of hot soup became too much, I would always be able to call out, “Don’t forget that we are observing silence here!” It might have had a limited effect for a minute or two. It would have been sufficient to outmanoeuvre opponents.

No, it was out of the question. I was happy with the idea of David Pennant *contra mundum* if necessary – indeed, I quite welcomed the notion. I have come to recognise that there is a perverse streak in my nature which likes to question what everybody else takes as being read. I know nothing about Mathematics, but my favourite words in algebraic proof are “Suppose not”, which I once heard used to make a point in one of the annual Christmas lectures for children on television. Indeed, I suspect that it was because I was prepared to consider impossibilities that I was able to accept things from God that others found difficult. But I realised I could not fight everyone on this one. I could not open a church for homeless people single-handed. I would have to drop the idea. This was very difficult as by now, I was sure we had heard from God regarding the homeless, and that this meant practical action of a costly nature. But the people did not want to know. I did not know what to do. I just had to drop the scheme.

It so happened that during the following winter we had one of the coldest snaps I can remember. One bitterly cold afternoon, I was asked whether it would be alright to run the heating overnight to prevent the pipes from freezing up and bursting. I agreed. I happened to need to go in to the church at half past seven the following morning. I wore my mountain boots for the two hundred yard walk from our home because the frozen ground was so treacherous. I wrapped up as warmly as I knew how! When I let myself in through the vestry door, I was staggered to find that the building was roasting hot. I had thought the pipes were going to be left on a low setting. It was so hot in the church that I had to take off my coat and sweaters and strip to my shirtsleeves. I realised that we could not afford to heat the building for the homeless, but this did not apply when it came to preserving the central heating system.

I had a week away with my family just after Christmas, when the cold spell was at its most intense. I was glad to be away. I did not allow myself to wonder how many homeless people died that week. Some years later, when I heard of street children in a distant tropical country overseas being rounded up and shot by government officers, in order to cleanse the neighbourhood, I reflected that at least we did not do that over here. Later again, I realised we did not need to; with our climate, homeless people die off without needing a helping shove from a gun. I had learned by then that life expectancy on the streets is low.

In the meantime, where was I to go from here? Listening to God was all very well, provided we liked what we heard, but when it became too costly, it seemed

people did not want to know. I had not foreseen this possibility. I felt at a complete loss. It seemed to me that my policy of hearing from God as the key to church life was now in tatters.

Once again, I was wrong!

FOUR

At some time while the affair of our attitude to the homeless was in process, I had finally begun to ask a question which I might reasonably have asked a whole lot sooner. If you recall, the clinching argument for me at the signs and wonders conference had been that the church should heal the sick because Jesus told the twelve to heal the sick, and they in turn were to teach other disciples after them to do what they had themselves been taught. We learn this from the end of Matthew's gospel. When Jesus had risen from the dead, on his final appearance to the twelve, he instructed them to make disciples of all nations, adding the words "and teach them to observe what I have commanded you."

I had accepted this as being relevant to healing the sick. Some four years after the conference, I finally managed to ask whether there might be other commands that Jesus had laid on his followers that we were ignoring today. The place to look was in the gospels.

This area of enquiry was a new one for me, for two reasons. Despite my reservations, I had accepted that the churches in the United Kingdom were operating on roughly the right lines. I accepted that the main part of their role lay in running services, which for most people implied weekly attendance on Sunday. I did not imagine that there was anything suspect about this pattern. I did not need to check for myself what Jesus wanted his followers to do. There was no need to reinvent the wheel, I thought.

Secondly, for many years, I had understood the Gospels to be accounts of the life of Jesus. These were informative, but if you wanted to find Christian teaching, you needed to turn to the letters of Paul and the rest of the New Testament, where the implications of the life and death of Jesus were hammered out. The Gospels contained story, but it was the epistles that contained theology. I did not expect to find many commands at all in the Gospels. Nevertheless, it was worth checking to see what Jesus had actually instructed his followers, as there might be some that had been overlooked.

I set myself to make a list of Jesus' commands. This was easier said than done. In a number of places, it was hard to say whether Jesus was giving a command or just sharing an insight. On close inspection, a number of the things I thought he had commanded turned out not to have been addressed to the disciples at all. Some were addressed to the Pharisees. Others came in the parables. Others again were directed at the crowd. Even the command to love God with all your heart which I had always considered central was addressed to a Teacher of the Law rather than the twelve, I noticed. I found that intriguing.

In the end, I decided to take the words of Jesus literally. My list would be limited to the commands he gave to the twelve recorded in the gospels. I would not even include indirect statements; I would stick to occasions when he used the imperative tense. That way I could be sure that everything on my list fell into the category of something Jesus wanted his followers to do.

I sat down with my Bible and a sheet of paper. Here is the list I came up with.

Jesus' Commands to his Disciples in the Gospels

Matthew

- 1) 4:17 Repent
- 2) 4:19 Follow Me
- 3) 5:12 Rejoice at persecution because of me
- 4) 5:16 Let your light shine before men
- 5) 5:17 Do not think I came to abolish the Law and the Prophets
- 6) 5:24 Be reconciled to your brother before you offer a gift
- 7) 5:24 Leave your gift before the altar
- 8) 5:25 Settle with your adversary before getting to court
- 9) 5:29 Gouge out your eye rather than sin
- 10) 5:30 Cut off your right hand rather than sin
- 11) 5:34, 36 Do not swear by anything
- 12) 5:37 Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No, 'No'
- 13) 5:39 Do not resist an evil person
- 14) 5:39 Turn the other cheek
- 15) 5:40 Let a man take your tunic
- 16) 5:41 Go with a man an extra mile
- 17) 5:42 Give and lend to the one who asks you
- 18) 5:44 Love your enemies
- 19) 5:44 Pray for those who persecute you
- 20) 5:48 Be perfect as your heavenly father
- 21) 6:1 Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men
- 22) 6:2 Do not announce your gifts to the needy with trumpets
- 23) 6:3 Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing when you give to the needy
- 24) 6:5 Do not pray so as to be seen by men
- 25) 6:6 Pray in your room in secret
- 26) 6:7 Do not pray babbling like pagans
- 27) 6:9 Pray using the "Lord's Prayer"
- 28) 6:16 Do not fast so as to show this to men
- 29) 6:19 Do not store up treasures on earth
- 30) 6:20 Store up treasures in heaven
- 31) 6:24 You cannot serve God and money
- 32) 6:25 Do not worry about food, drink and clothes
- 33) 6:33 Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness
- 34) 6:34 Do not worry about tomorrow
- 35) 7:1 Do not judge others
- 36) 7:5 Take the plank out of your own eye before removing your brother's speck
- 37) 7:6 Do not give dogs what is sacred nor throw your pearls to pigs
- 38) 7:7 Ask, seek and knock
- 39) 7:12 Do to others what you would have them do to you
- 40) 7:13 Enter through the narrow gate

- 41) 7:15 Watch out for false prophets
- 42) 8:22 Leave the dead to bury their dead
- 43) 9:38 Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field
- 44) 10:5 Do not go among the Gentiles or Samaritans
- 45) 10:6 Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel
- 46) 10:7 Preach the message 'The kingdom of God is near'
- 47) 10:8 Heal the sick
- 48) 10:8 Raise the dead
- 49) 10:8 Cleanse those who have leprosy
- 50) 10:8 Drive out demons
- 51) 10:8 Give freely
- 52) 10:9 Take no money for the journey
- 53) 10:10 Take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff
- 54) 10:11 Search for and stay with some worthy person when you enter a town, until you leave
- 55) 10:12 Greet the home with your peace as you enter
- 56) 10:14 Shake the dust off your feet of those who will not welcome you
- 57) 10:16 Be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves
- 58) 10:17 Be on your guard against men
- 59) 10:19 Do not worry about what to say on arrest
- 60) 10:23 Flee to another place when you are persecuted
- 61) 10:26 Do not be afraid of those who call you Beelzebub
- 62) 10:27 Speak out openly what I say secretly
- 63) 10:28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body
- 64) 10:28 Fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell
- 65) 10:31 Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows
- 66) 10:34 Do not suppose I came to bring peace on earth
- 67) 13:18 Listen to what the parable of the sower means
- 68) 13:43 Hear, if you have ears
- 69) 14:16 Give the 5000 something to eat
- 70) 14:18 Bring the five loaves and two fish to Jesus
- 71) 14:27 Take courage! Don't be afraid (disciples in boat)
- 72) 14:29 Come (Peter over water)
- 73) 16:6, 11 Be on your guard against the teaching of the Pharisees and Saducees
- 74) 16:23 Get behind me, Satan (Peter)
- 75) 17:7 Get up (disciples on the mountain), don't be afraid
- 76) 17:9 Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead
- 77) 17:27 Take the coin from the mouth of the first fish you catch and pay the temple tax
- 78) 18:10 Do not look down on one of these little ones
- 79) 18:15 Show your brother his fault if he sins against you
- 80) 18:16 Take one or two others along if he will not listen
- 81) 18:17 Tell the church if he will not listen
- 82) 18:17 Treat him as a pagan or tax collector if he still will not listen
- 83) 19:14 Do not hinder little children from coming to me
- 84) 20:26 Be a servant and slave to other disciples if you want to become great among them
- 85) 21:2 Go and untie the donkey and colt, and bring them
- 86) 24:4 Watch out that no-one deceives you

- 87) 24:6 Do not be alarmed at wars and rumours of wars
- 88) 24:16 Flee from Judea to the mountains when 'the abomination that causes desolation' is in the holy place, taking nothing with you
- 89) 24:20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter
- 90) 24:23, 26 Don't believe anyone who announces the Christ at that time
- 91) 24:32 Learn from the fig-tree how to recognise these events
- 92) 24:42 Keep watch, because you don't know what day your Lord will come
- 93) 24:43 Understand about the owner being ignorant of the time the thief was coming
- 94) 24:44 Be ready for the Son of Man's unexpected arrival
- 95) 26:18 Go to a certain man to prepare for the Passover
- 96) 26:26 Take and eat; this is my body
- 97) 26:27 Drink from the cup
- 98) 26:36 Sit here while I pray
- 99) 26:38 Stay here and watch with me
- 100) 26:41 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation
- 101) 26:46 Rise, let us go
- 102) 26:52 Put back your sword
- 103) 28:10 Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee
- 104) 28:19 Go and make disciples of all nations
- 105) 28:19 Baptise the disciples
- 106) 28:20 Teach them to observe all I have commanded you

MARK

- 107) 1:15 Believe the good news
- 108) 4:24 Consider carefully what you hear; with the measure you use, it will be measured to you - and even more
- 109) 5:19 Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you
- 110) 6:31 Come to a quiet place and rest
- 111) 8:7 Distribute to the 4000
- 112) 9:39 Do not stop one who works miracles in my name because he is not one of you
- 113) 9:50 Have salt in yourselves
- 114) 9:50 Be at peace with each other
- 115) 11:3 Tell them the Lord needs the colt
- 116) 11:22 Have faith in God
- 117) 11:24 Believe that you have received whatever you ask for in prayer and it will be yours
- 118) 11:25 Forgive anyone you hold anything against, when you stand praying
- 119) 13:10 The Gospel must first be preached to all nations
- 120) 13:33 Be alert

LUKE

- 121) 5:4 Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch
- 122) 5:10 Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men
- 123) 6:27 Do good to those who hate you
- 124) 6:28 Bless those who curse you
- 125) 6:35 Lend to your enemies without expecting to get anything back
- 126) 6:36 Be merciful
- 127) 6:38 Give
- 128) 7:50 Go in peace
- 129) 8:50 Don't be afraid; just believe and she will be healed
- 130) 9:14 Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each
- 131) 9:23 Deny yourself and take up your cross daily if you would follow me
- 132) 9:60 Let the dead bury their own dead but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God

- 133) 10:4 Do not greet anyone on the road
- 134) 10:7 Do not move around from house to house
- 135) 10:8 Eat what is set before you
- 136) 10:20 Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you
- 137) 10:20 Rejoice that your names are written in heaven
- 138) 11:35 See to it that the light within you is not darkness
- 139) 12:15 Be on your guard against all types of greed
- 140) 12:24 Consider how God feeds the ravens
- 141) 12:27 Consider how the lilies grow
- 142) 12:33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor
- 143) 12:35 Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning
- 144) 13:24 Make every effort to enter through the narrow door
- 145) 14:26 Hate your mother and father, wife and children, brother and sisters, and your own life, if you would be my disciple
- 146) 14:33 Give up everything you have if you would be my disciple
- 147) 16:9 Use worldly wealth to gain friends
- 148) 17:10 You should say 'we are unworthy servants' when you have done everything you were told to do
- 149) 17:32 Remember Lot's wife
- 150) 18:1 Always pray and never give up
- 151) 18:6 Listen to what the unjust judge says
- 152) 20:46 Beware of the teachers of the law
- 153) 21:28 Stand up and lift up your heads when these things begin to take place
- 154) 24:49 Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high

JOHN

- 155) 1:39 Come and see
- 156) 4:35 Open your eyes and look at the harvest fields
- 157) 6:12 Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted
- 158) 11:39 Take away the stone
- 159) 11:44 Take off the grave clothes and let him go
- 160) 12:7 Leave Mary alone (after she poured out the ointment)
- 161) 12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me

- 162) 13:14 Wash one another's feet
- 163) 13:15 Do as I have done for you
- 164) 13:34 Love one another
- 165) 14:1 Do not let your hearts be troubled
- 166) 14:1 Trust in God; trust also in me
- 167) 14:11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me
- 168) 15:4 Remain in me
- 169) 15:9 Remain in my love
- 170) 15:20 Remember the words I spoke to you; 'no servant is greater than his master'
- 171) 15:27 You also must testify
- 172) 16:24 Ask and you will receive and your joy may be complete
- 173) 19:26 - 27 'Dear woman, here is your son... Here is your mother'
- 174) 20:17 Do not hold onto me; go and tell my brothers
- 175) 20:27 Put your finger here
- 176) 20:22 Receive the Holy Spirit
- 177) 21:6 Throw your net on the right side of the boat
- 178) 21:10 Bring some of the fish
- 179) 21:12 Come and have breakfast
- 180) 21:15 - 17 Feed my lambs... take care of my sheep... feed my sheep

My first reaction on completing this list was one of astonishment. I had had no idea that Jesus gave the twelve so many specific instructions. Even when I had pruned out all the repeats, commands that came in more than one gospel, I was left with one hundred and eighty. I had not expected this many at all.

Had other people noticed this? I wondered whether there were books on the subject of Jesus' commands. I soon discovered that books on the ten commandments which Moses brought down the mountain were two a penny. I was once at a Christian meeting where there was a table full of recent paperbacks for sale at the back. Out of the thirty different titles, I noted that two were on the ten commandments. This seemed a high proportion to me. In contrast, when I looked in libraries and bookshops, I failed to find a single book on the subject of the commands of Jesus. This seemed very odd, given that Jesus stated specifically that he wanted his commands to be noted and followed.

I decided to look at the list and see what emerged. Clearly, some instructions seemed limited to the time when they were given. Few of us would feel the need to search out a man with a jar on his head today. The list could perhaps be pruned with advantage. Nevertheless, I chose not to edit the list for the sake of completeness, for fear of striking something out which ought to remain. You can prune it if you wish, but be careful if you do. In my opinion, followers of Jesus should see themselves as under the commands of Jesus, not above them.

Rather than striking commands out, a more promising approach might be to create a shortlist, by deciding which commands on the list are the most important ones. Would you like to decide which you think are the most important three? The reason will become clear in a moment or two.

Once again, I have chosen not to go down this path of highlighting certain commands. If you agree with me that in the light of Jesus' remark, the commands of Jesus deserve more attention than they have traditionally received, then this is an activity that deserves care and thought and discussion. Personally, I would rather do the investigation myself than be presented with someone else's findings in a book,

so I have left this project up to you. It will help you grapple with the material for yourself. Indeed, why not start from scratch, and make your own list of commands using your own criteria. I don't doubt that there are better ways of constructing it.

Despite all its shortcomings, the list as it is has its uses. Its main advantage is that because of my somewhat wooden-headed literal approach, at least no-one can accuse me of misrepresenting Jesus. All his direct commands are there.

I once gave a copy of the list to a group of about seven Christian people and suggested that we all choose the three most important commands on it, and pool our findings. I proposed that the resulting summary of Jesus' instructions might provide a foundation on which we could construct a church if we wanted. We would be agreed on what was vital, apart from anything else, and unity is a source of strength.

Everyone thought it was a good idea. We all read through the list for several minutes. As their most important three, the group produced Follow Me (no. 2), Seek first the Kingdom of God (no. 33), and Love one another (no. 164). I asked you to select your three so that you could compare your own opinion with theirs. If you hit the jackpot, award yourself a gold star.

I then dropped something of a bombshell into the meeting. I told them they were all wrong! They indignantly asked who I thought I was to criticise their choice of the most important commands. It was rather fun. In reply, I pointed out to them that it is not up to us to pick and choose what is of key importance in this way; it needs to be Jesus who chooses which are the most important commands, and he has done that in number 106. He has said that all the commands are to be taught. So the most important three commands are number 106 and number 106 and number 106. Nobody wanted to argue with that!

I did this little ploy with the group to point out something I had noticed, that it is very easy for a "Pick and mix" mentality to creep into our churches. The churches that exist tend to be run along lines that people like. Indeed, if your church programme is what people want, then you can hope to attract members. This was not my idea at all; I wanted a church to be run along lines that Jesus likes.

What about my own reactions to what I had discovered through drawing up this list?

The first command on the list to strike me was to do with raising the dead (no. 48). I had become interested in this subject a few years earlier following the signs and wonders conference. One Sunday morning during my first curacy, I spoke about it with enthusiasm from the pulpit. There was no reaction as far as I could tell. Perhaps people had already decided that I was a bit cracked.

Then during the following week, my wife and I were driving on a stretch of urban dual carriageway, with a speed limit of 40 mph, when I saw a figure lying in the road ahead in the left hand lane. Things looked far from right. I decided to slow up gradually and put my hazard lights on, and then come to a halt just short of the figure so that the cars behind would pull out into the right hand lane. I got out, and it soon became clear that an elderly husband and wife had been waiting for a bus to take them to a hospital appointment when the lady had simply collapsed into the road. Someone had already rung for an ambulance, which arrived while we were talking. The men quickly attended to the lady and gathered her up into the ambulance. I noted that although they had begun by putting an oxygen mask on her, they soon took it off again. Her face looked a strange colour. I had explained to the man that I was a Christian minister, and I offered to pray for him. He did not refuse. I said I was sure everything would be alright, although inwardly I had my doubts. It seemed fairly clear to my wife who stayed in our car that she had died. I don't

suppose I was any help to the man at all. The ambulance soon set off, with the husband riding in the back, and everything returned to normal. The whole episode had lasted perhaps three minutes.

After this event I had a funny feeling for the rest of the day. It was the first time I had witnessed death. One aspect which troubled me was that this crucial moment in the life of this couple had made so little impact on the rest of us. Anyone driving along just four minutes behind us would have remained entirely unaware of the drama. I thought of the way the water closes over a stone that has been dropped into a lake. There are a few ripples, and then calm is restored. Doubtless her friends and relatives would have been affected, but is that all that the passing of this lady's life mattered to the rest of society?

One thing which had not seemed to be an option was for me to pray for the lady to come back to life again. Clearly, the subject of raising the dead was not something to be flippant about. I felt overawed when actually faced by death.

Now I had my list, however, I noticed a strange thing. Whenever Jesus had encountered a funeral, he raised the dead person back to life again. He instructed the twelve to raise the dead when he sent them out on their mission. When a young man wanted to follow Jesus after burying his father, the reply was "Leave the dead to bury their dead." I looked in vain for any encouragement to his followers to assist in burying the dead.

This was disconcerting. It was part of my job to take funerals. I had worked hard at them. Generally the person who had died was a stranger to me. I would call on the family, try to set them at their ease, and discover what I could about the deceased. Then at the service, unless a member of the family wanted to give a tribute, it fell to me to give a review of the person's life. I used to introduce my words with a carefully chosen phrase; "I did not know so-and-so myself, and in what I say now, I am relying on members of the family." In this way, if I had been primed with false information for the sake of appearances, at least people would realise what had happened. I felt that I had a reasonable gift for listening carefully and then feeding back a life story with some accuracy.

I recall one occasion when a particular family were thrilled after the service; they said it was almost as if I knew him. This was a man with several Christian names. I had forgotten to ask what he was known as when I visited the family. Thankfully, I remembered to ask the widow when she arrived at the door of the crematorium how he was known. "Eddie", she said. It was his second name. I had been within a hair's breadth of referring to him throughout by his first name. My capacity for making a mess of things seemed unlimited, matched only by God's kindness in rescuing me from disaster.

My attitude when taking funerals was that by being as sensitive as I could, I could ease the pain of the family. I hoped I was having some success. I had been alerted to the importance of this by a funeral of an elderly mother I took early in my first post. When I visited the lady's daughter a few weeks after the event, she confided in me. "I really feel I can talk to you," she said. I felt pleased. She added, "much the worst thing when my mother died was the thought that the vicar was coming round." I felt both honoured and humbled by her words. I resolved at that moment that whenever I took a funeral from then on, I would aim to be as unthreatening and as human as possible towards the family, to ease the strain of the situation for them.

Now, however, I was gaining a different perspective. Jesus never asked his followers to be involved in funerals at all. In fact, he wanted that job left to "dead

people” as he put it (no. 132). I had accepted that it was a part of the work of the church to assist people when deaths occurred. The gospels seemed to be giving me an entirely different viewpoint. Was the reality that by taking funerals I had actually been opposing God? When I consulted my list, it seemed to my simple mind that despite my good intentions, I had been doing precisely the opposite of what Jesus asked his followers to do. Since my ordination, I had buried around two hundred people and not raised a single one.

There had been one lady whom I really wanted to pray over, that she would come back to life. She had died of an illness in her forties, in particularly distressing personal circumstances. After the service, I stood staring at the crematorium building for a long time, wondering whether I had the courage to go in to the furnace room and hold up proceedings while I prayed over the dead body. In the end I decided I could not manage it. I expect the truth is I was frightened of what people would think. My prayers would probably fail. I would be misunderstood and would look stupid. The relatives might be upset or worse.

I always tried to choose a text for my address that related to the events of the person’s life when taking a funeral. On this occasion, I had spoken on the words “Many waters cannot quench love” from the Song of Solomon. I could not help noticing that the three weeks which followed the service contained a striking number of heavy downpours. Whenever I was out on foot, there would be torrents of drenching rain. It was as if heaven was weeping, it seemed to me. Were the tears for the pain of the person who had died? Or over my failure to pray over her that she might live? Or over the fact of death? With my new perspective, I wondered whether maybe they were over my understanding that the church’s role was to bury the dead rather than raise them.

Once again, I began to sense that difficulties lay ahead. I had begun to grasp a while earlier that there were many practices in church life which Jesus had never asked for. One example was bell ringing. I enjoy the sound of a peal of bells myself, but I was aware that this was an example of an activity which had somehow become attached to the church rather than proceeding from it. My predecessor had insisted that our solitary small bell should not be rung before services; perhaps he had similar feelings to mine. After I had been in post for a few months, the church warden approached me, and asked whether the bell could now be rung again. I did not feel happy about it. How was tolling a bell for five minutes before the morning service going to advance the kingdom of God? It felt like a retrograde step. But on the other hand, did I really want to oppose the ringing of the bell and risk damaging relationships with the people? Was it worth making an issue out of it? I felt uncertain. Despite my reservations, I could not think of a convincing reason for saying no. There seemed to be no harm in it, so I said yes. However, the incident taught me that trying to put away practices in our church life which did not spring from Jesus was not going to be an easy task. I felt held back by the weight of tradition. I found myself imagining an athlete whose top half was straining forward, but whose feet were buried in concrete. That was how our church felt to me.

I once read that if the barnacles that fasten themselves to the hulls of ships are not cleaned off from time to time, their weight can eventually sink the ship. I could think of many barnacles in church life. One area concerned jumble sales and fund-raising events. Jesus had told his followers not to worry about their needs but to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness (nos. 29-33). I was persuaded that a church should adopt this attitude to finance. I had been struck by reading the life of Hudson Taylor, a missionary to China in the nineteenth century, who once said

“Depend upon it, God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supplies.” He refused to take up collections at his meetings; he wanted nobody to feel pressured into contributing. God did indeed supply all their needs. It was an inspiring story. We made a point of not having a collection plate passed round during services for this reason. People should give as they were prompted to, not as we asked.

Now I had got my list, and noted that burials, which were part of my job description, actually went against what Jesus taught. What about other duties I had. Dare I look to see if they were part of Jesus’ plan?

Baptism seemed to have a place – Jesus told the twelve to baptise the disciples they would make (no. 105). I came to dislike our system, where babies went through baptism without having chosen it themselves. On too many occasions, I had the feeling that the sponsors making promises on their behalf were not sincere, although I had no proof. I used to impress Ecclesiastes chapter five on them – “vows paid to the Lord should be kept” – but with little apparent result. My predecessor had been successful with several unchurched couples who had brought a baby for baptism and found faith themselves in the process. I don’t believe I ever managed this.

The idea was that later on, the infants were to assert the promises themselves at their confirmation. This worked well enough; in my own case, it had constituted a wake-up call, as we saw earlier. However, it was a big disappointment to me personally, when I attended a different church for some years later in life, to find I was not allowed to do anything because my baptism and confirmation were not recognised. I would need to be baptised again. I knew somebody in a similar situation who had become involved in teaching in the Sunday school in his church when he was approached by the leaders and told he would either have to go through adult baptism or stop teaching. Faced with this requirement, he chose to go ahead with a baptism as requested. When I asked him about it, he told me that his main feeling at the time of the baptism had been one of anger. This did not seem right to me. I searched my conscience long and hard for a period of some years, but could not gain any sense that Jesus wanted me to go through an adult baptism. I too felt annoyed; it seemed to me that I was being pushed into a baptism I had not chosen because of someone else’s conscience, not my own. The similarity with infant baptism, where the candidate himself had no say, seemed striking.

It so happened that I was unable to play any active part in that church for other reasons, but I still found the experience very painful. I found myself picturing a trench in a barren landscape, about five feet wide, stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see, with the bottom too far down to be visible, and myself stretched out across it with my feet on one side and my head on the other. Trying to get myself wholly onto one side or the other seemed fraught with danger. It was all I could do to keep my body rigid to avoid falling in. But even in the midst of my predicament, I was fully aware of one thing; there was no chance of an earthquake or similar happening to bring the two halves of the landscape together. For all our talk of unity with other churches, Christians were hopelessly divided over baptism.

I hated the pain of it, and I also found the emphasis on this most marginal of Jesus’ teachings out of proportion. Baptism hardly appears in the Gospels. Jesus mentioned the subject just once. I felt sad he mentioned it all. Perhaps this command is a candidate for pruning off the list? No, he requested it, so it needs to be done. In addition, Peter mentioned it specifically on the day when the Holy Spirit came and the crowd wanted to know what they should do. But maybe we could agree that different attitudes to baptism are not a sufficient reason for division. Surely the

mode of baptism is not that important. Why not let people decide according to their own conscience rather than being subject to someone else's?

What about marriage, the third of my occasional duties? I could see no reference to marriages in the list. Jesus had things to say about marriage, so it seemed legitimate to talk about Christian marriage, but there was no hint that his followers were to be involved in tying the knot. In the kind of church I envisaged, which aimed to do the will of Jesus without additions, not only burials, but also marriage services would have no place. This was all beginning to look rather scary. What had I embarked on? I was approaching the time for a move. What bishop was going to be keen to appoint someone who was reluctant to take weddings and funerals for reasons of conscience? What was going to happen?

There was no encouragement in the list regarding church buildings. I was pleased about this. My brother had pointed out to me years before that the Christian church has always been strongest when it did not have buildings to maintain. Ever since then I had thought of church buildings as a disadvantage rather than an advantage. They so easily become the focus of the work, rather than a means of assisting the spread of the Gospel. This meant that when the smaller of the two churches I had charge of was burned down one Sunday night, and we had to move into the village hall for eighteen months, I thought there were advantages for us in addition to the obvious sadness over the loss of the building. However, I did not find others who shared my view, and when it became apparent that the insurance money would pay for a new building, everybody apart from me wanted to rebuild on the site we owned. The site had many disadvantages. It was small, stood away from where people lived, and had virtually no parking space. I believed we should be more adventurous, and attempt to do something new rather than repeat the old pattern, which had always looked as if it would never flourish. I found I was in a minority of one. The whole episode was most painful for all of us.

In the end, I was able to shift my position following a Sunday morning when we turned the whole service over to prayer. We abandoned the liturgy, left the village hall and walked around on the site praying in silence, staring at the burnt-out shell. At one stage I sensed God say, "I will build my house." Afterwards, when we met in the village hall for a de-briefing, a man shared a verse from Chronicles which chimed in with my thoughts about our lack of commitment in addition to mentioning Solomon building the temple. This helped to convince me that we should go ahead with a double building project, as I put it; we were not only to put up bricks and mortar (everyone breathed a sigh of relief), but we were to be rebuilt ourselves as a body of people in full commitment to the Lord.

I was thankful to be let off the hook. But I could not help observing that there appeared to be many church people whose agenda for church life was influenced by other things than the commands of Jesus to his followers. At around that time I listened to a tape, where the speaker talked about a group of believers in the United States who had suffered a similar experience of arson. The attitude of his people had been, "we want our little church back", he said. This summed up what I observed perfectly!

I had naively assumed that if people were only shown what Jesus asked his followers to do, they would immediately fall into line with it. I was finding that it did not work out like that at all in practice.

I had set myself the goal of a church where Jesus' will reigned supreme. On the one hand, the things I was discovering were exciting to me. On the other hand, although some people shared my excitement, the new teaching seemed to arouse

resentment and even hostility in others. In particular, it was causing problems in our family. My wife felt very threatened by my change of views. So did I, but I trusted God to work things out somehow. Surely he wanted a church which did the will of Jesus.

I continued to reflect. Holy Communion, an important part of my work, was on the list (nos. 96-97). Jesus invited his followers to share bread and wine as his body and blood at the last supper. Here at least we seemed to be obeying Jesus! However, when I thought about it, our practice did not have much in common with the original occasion at the last supper. In my first curacy, the vicar once invited us to come forward to receive the bread and wine with the words "Come and join in the meal." My reaction was that a morsel of bread and a sip of wine was very poor as meals go. What had happened to the practice of having a proper meal together, and then remembering our Lord at some point, almost as an aside? The meal seemed to have gone, and an hour's worth of liturgy had taken over. I was once told by a senior clergyman that the service of Holy Communion was only valid if it contained collect, epistle and gospel. I could not understand that at all – the collects were written fifteen hundred years after Jesus' lifetime. How could they be mandatory? Why don't we regard the meal as mandatory? Going through the liturgy week by week was not easy. It was hard to keep it fresh - everyone knew what was coming next, and any attempts to vary the procedure to liven it up were likely to be frowned on by somebody. There was the added thought that in reality, people only had two or three hours a week to commit to church, and to be using up that time as we did in ways which did not actively advance the kingdom of God seemed unhelpful to me.

Wherever I looked at our practices and compared them to the list, it seemed to me that we focussed on what Jesus considered unimportant. Our central concerns and his were different. This was confirmed for me one day when I happened to see a list of standing orders for Rural Deans on a notice board. There were ten or twelve numbered points. At the head of the list was the requirement that if the Rural Dean discovered any instance of a lay person celebrating communion, it was to be reported immediately to due authority. I would not have imagined that this was the most important function of a Rural Dean myself. I remembered hearing of a church where the vicar failed to arrive one Sunday morning, so a lay person had gone ahead and led the service of Holy Communion. The fall-out from that was described as horrible. Never get involved in that business whatever you do, I was told!

So much fuss about something Jesus barely mentioned. Our priorities seemed all wrong. I realised that my former attitude, that the churches of our country had been operating on roughly the right lines down the years, did not stand up to scrutiny. I did not know it then, but these somewhat scary insights I was having were just a start. I had hardly begun on what would turn out to be a long process of reflecting on our practices and traditions.

FIVE

We had absorbed the idea of worship being central to the life of the church, as had many other churches up and down the country. Oddly enough, it was an article in the diocesan newspaper, in which a bishop stated that the main focus of the church was to be a worshipping community, that set me thinking. The only thing I knew about that particular bishop was that he had taken an important decision of which I strongly disapproved. I was not going to accept something he said without thinking it through for myself. I therefore decided to see what instructions Jesus had given his followers about worship. Imagine my horror when I looked down my list of commands and found no reference to worship. I checked carefully. Perhaps I had missed something. It soon became clear that Jesus never raised the subject of worship once with the twelve.

Now what was I going to do. This was getting ridiculous. Everyone knew that the church is first and foremost a worshipping community. Surely God wanted his church to worship him. I felt perplexed for several days. However, I could not get away from the fact Jesus stated that he wanted the twelve to pass on what he had commanded them; he had never given them any instructions about worship. The implication was that worship was not part of his programme. I needed to think this through carefully.

I found myself recalling our physics teacher at school. I was not drawn to physics personally, but I do remember the lesson in which electricity was introduced. The teacher had set up an experiment on the bench, in which an electrical circuit was completed, allowing a light bulb to shine, but was then overloaded, causing a piece of fuse wire to burst into flame in a spectacular fashion. Each time the fuse wire was replaced, a thicker piece would be used, which meant it did not blow so quickly next time, but sure enough, the teacher would add extra electrical items ensuring that he overloaded the circuit once more, and the fuse would blow again. I remember an old toaster was the culprit at one point. The flashes were impressive; I was pleased to be watching from a distance. He then proceeded to point out that mains electricity could kill. He told us what happened to a boy who thought it was a good idea to stick a pair of compasses into the two lower holes in an electric socket. I took his strongly emphasised advice to heart, and did not try it.

I eventually trained as a schoolteacher myself. I used to wonder what made a good teacher. I might not have gained a love of physics at school, but one thing which struck me was that my physics teacher had at least highlighted the most important thing about electricity, which was to make it clear to his audience of teenage boys that it could kill. I can still remember that lesson now. In fact, it seemed to me that the danger of electricity was the most important aspect of our introduction to it. To highlight it in the memorable way that he did must have been an example of good teaching.

Following the logic of that, if worship was the most important activity of the church, as the Bishop had written, then it seemed to me that Jesus must be considered a bad teacher, because he never raised the subject of worship with the twelve. I believed Jesus was perfect in every way. He could not be a bad teacher, I reasoned. This suggested that maybe worship was not the most important part of church life after all. In fact, if I was going to be consistent in applying my principle, I would have to say that worship did not appear to have a place in church life at all, ridiculous as that sounded at first hearing.

Several objections immediately sprang to mind. The first was that the Psalms are full of exhortations to praise God. Up until then, I had accepted what I had been told, that the Psalms were the hymnbook of the Old Testament. My view had been that our worship was a continuation of a tradition that had its roots in Old Testament times, and our practice of singing songs today was following on from the Biblical pattern. In the light of my insight, I needed to examine this notion.

On further enquiry, I realised that the Bible itself did not say that the Psalms were a hymnbook for public use. I read that David was the singer of Israel's Psalms, and that some Psalms were written by or for a handful of others. The psalms were used in the temple worship by specialist choirs and musicians. There was no indication that they had been used by wider groups of people. I also came across a recently written booklet at about this time which pointed out that only a tiny percentage of the people could have attended weekly worship in those days, namely the ones that lived within walking distance of the temple in Jerusalem. Gatherings for weekly worship were simply not available to the bulk of the population in the time of David. To call the Psalms the hymnbook of the time was to assume a similarity of culture between their times and our own which could not be sustained on closer inspection, I thought. The phrase therefore seemed to be misleading.

I looked closely at the exhortations to worship in the Psalms. "Praise the Lord!" and the like, come repeatedly. I had been impressed with the teaching of Merlin Carothers, an American prison chaplain, that praise is the ladder leading up through the dark clouds of depression into the sunshine of God's presence. I was convinced of the value of praising God in daily life. The difficulty for me was whether this should also be the main activity when the church gathered together. Should we not be focussed on doing what Jesus actually asked his followers to do rather than something he never mentioned to them, in the ninety minutes of being together?

I also noticed that in some cases, the encouragements to worship in the Psalms were linked to the requirement for godly living. "Praise befits the upright", I read, and "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." This seemed important. What was the use then of worshipping God if your life was not upright and holy? What use is it today?

A few years ago I attended a well-attended service, where the singing of the worship songs was uplifting. When it was time for the address, the speaker said, "There are three people here in adultery, and God wants you to sort it out as a matter of urgency." I had no way of telling whether he was right about this, but suppose he was. Of what value was the worship of those people to God, if taken as a whole? Was God pleased with that church singing his praises in that state? Or was he more pleased by people doing his will?

I realised that this incident related to another query I had as well. I had recalled the passage when Jesus said that God wanted people to worship him in spirit and in truth. This sounded like the end of all discussion; God wanted worshippers. But on close inspection, this was not some teaching that Jesus had opened up with his disciples. That was why it did not appear on the list. Rather, Jesus had been talking with a woman who was now with her fifth or sixth man about her adultery. Her response had been to raise the subject of worship in order to get the conversation away from her sins and onto a controversial issue – where God should be worshipped. It appeared that Jesus' words about the need to worship in spirit and truth were more of a rebuke to her than anything else. How could she be worshipping God properly while she was living in adultery?

Jesus' words here were not so much a general appeal to us all to worship the father in a certain way but more of a call for holy living, it seemed to me. This led to further thoughts. How could a burglar worship in spirit and in truth? Or a murderer? The idea was absurd. But like adultery, these were breaches of the ten commandments delivered through Moses. How much more serious for a so-called Christian, a follower of Jesus, to pose as a worshipper while at the same time ignoring the commands of Jesus! The woman focussed on worship in order to ignore the call to live a godly life. I began to wonder whether in our preoccupation with worship we might be doing the same in our turn.

Then I noted that although the command to worship did not appear, there were some remarks of Jesus which addressed this abuse of worship. He had not ignored the subject of worship altogether. On one occasion, he said of the Pharisees, "This people worships me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me." I imagine that this passage is the origin of our phrase "Paying lip service." We don't think much of people who say they are in support of a venture but who actually do nothing practical to move it forward when it comes to the point. It is all too easy to sound enthusiastic about something until it requires some personal effort. Then we tend to evaporate. Another remark Jesus made to the crowd came to mind; "Why do you call me Lord but not do the things I say?" Similarly, "Not everyone who says unto me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my heavenly father." In these statements, Jesus was highlighting our tendency to be strong on talk but weak on action. I realised that when he had spoken on the subject of worship, it was with a view to pointing out the need for life and lip to be in harmony.

These reflections brought another revealing incident to mind. A friend of mine once gave a lunch party on a Sunday in June. Twenty guests would be coming for lunch, and there was a lot to do. At breakfast, he asked his twelve-year-old son to give a hand, but the boy contrived to make himself scarce all morning despite the fact that he had nothing to do. He did not want to help.

However, at about twelve fifteen, the boy came up with a card. It was Father's day. His dad opened the envelope, and read the caption on the card – To the Best Dad in the World. His response was to be angry. He had been working hard all morning doing the catering, setting out plates and cutlery, and now he was tired, just as the guests were about to arrive. He would have really appreciated some help from his boy, but none had come. This card was no help at all! However, he did not want to hurt his son, which he knew he could easily do, so he swallowed his anger, and thanked the boy for his kindness.

I found this incident most instructive. God through Jesus has given his church a job to do. How frustrated he must feel when the response of most so-called churches is to ignore what he actually asked, and give him a lot of worship instead! Do you imagine that he enjoys it? I found I could not. Yet maybe, like my friend, he hesitates to express his anger to his people, not wanting to hurt us.

As I reflected along these lines I began to realise that worship carried on by people living in disobedience to God is more of an insult to God than anything else. I was not yet ready to say that group worship had no place in a church – that seemed too drastic, but I was beginning to realise that worship without obedience is no pleasure to God.

Then at some stage, I noticed that Jesus had given an instruction to worship after all! It turned out that the reason it was not on my list was because it was addressed to the devil. During his testing in the desert, Jesus had quoted the book of

Deuteronomy; “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” I found it intriguing that this instruction to worship should have been given to Satan but not to the twelve. I did not know what to make of that. I also noted the specific link between worship and service in the quotation. I was beginning to realise that you cannot have one without the other.

While thinking about this, I became aware that in Old Testament Hebrew, the word used for "worship" can also be rendered “service” or “work”. In Exodus, for example, the Egyptians forced their Israelite slaves to make bricks; the word rendered “service” in the older King James version appears as “work”, or “hard labour” in modern versions. The same word is translated "worship" elsewhere. I was used to thinking that the people served Pharaoh by making bricks and later on were set free so they could worship God at the mountain. I now realised that the Hebrew words used in the text also allowed me to say that the people worshipped Pharaoh by making bricks and served God at the mountain.

I found that the same dual usage was true of New Testament Greek as well. When Paul wrote to the Roman Christians urging them to offer their bodies as living sacrifices - we might say in today's idiom, to put their necks on the line for what they believed, he added that this was their reasonable "worship". One could equally translate it "service" instead. You can see this if you compare different versions.

It seemed to me that the Biblical languages themselves are telling us that there is no true worship of God without service, and also that if you are serving God, then you are actually worshipping God by your actions.

I also recalled the experience I had had in my second curacy regarding the church meeting for worship. To begin with, I had looked forward eagerly to the following Sunday, when the church would meet again. I was thrilled to be a part of what was happening. However, when it began to dawn on me that there was a core of people who appeared uninterested in doing anything other than attending for an hour on Sunday morning, and who had strong views about how the hour should be conducted, which they hoped would prevail, I was very disappointed. What was more, they seemed to be a dominating influence. In fact, before very long, I grew to dislike the Sunday morning event. I could not help feeling that for many of the people who gathered together, calling Jesus Lord was little more than a matter of form. I knew this view of mine was based more on gut feeling than on evidence. I could not see into people's hearts and motives. However, it was a feeling that persisted. I began to feel unhappy.

I remembered one telling conversation. When I had visited the church on interview, I had noted a drum kit half way up the body of the church at one side. This seemed like a good sign; if these people were sufficiently flexible to accept congregational drumming as part of the music, they must be open to change, and were not stuck in tradition, I reasoned.

Within nine months of my arrival, the drummer left the church. I was not sure why. I was rather sad about it. Months later, a group of our people were with me in the building. They told me they were so glad the drums had gone; they hated them. I then told them that the drum kit was part of the reason I had taken the job, in that their presence in the church indicated to me that the people were flexible. It was the ultimate conversation stopper; nobody knew what to say.

All these reflections were pointing in the same direction to my mind. A mathematical equation came to me, as follows;

Worship minus service equals lip service.

There was another thing I noticed as I studied the Gospels. We are told that Jesus attended synagogue, “as his custom was.” Perhaps this was the encouragement we needed to hold a weekly religious assembly. Should not the church copy Jesus?

This raised a whole new area of thought. It quickly became apparent that we did not copy many of Jesus’ actions today. On one occasion, he remarked “foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” I had never heard the suggestion made that Christians ought to make themselves homeless in order to copy Jesus. Again, it is clear from the Gospels that what little money Jesus and the twelve had was kept in a bag. There was enough for Judas to pilfer from it. However, on one occasion when the temple tax was called for, Peter was sent to catch a fish in the lake of Galilee, and was told to look for a coin in its mouth which would pay the tax for Jesus and him (no. 77). The implication is that funds were low. There have always been some believers who sensed a call to poverty, but I have not heard anyone teach that Christians have a duty to make themselves penniless in order to copy Jesus.

What about the crucifixion? Are believers to copy Jesus in that? Perhaps we are. I found that Peter said that when it came to suffering, “It is for you to follow in his steps.” Peter was encouraging his readers to accept suffering as a normal part of following Jesus. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that the idea that we should copy Jesus’ actions did not flow from him. He said we were to pass on his commands; he did not ask us to copy his actions. We do not need to hold weekly meetings just because Jesus used to attend Sabbath by Sabbath.

As I thought about this, I became aware that on every occasion when he attended a synagogue that is recorded in the gospels, Jesus showed a lack of respect for what was going on in the meeting. He would heal someone, to the anger of the religious people, or cast out a demon, which disrupted the event. Nothing ruins a funeral service so effectively as raising the dead person back to life, and Jesus did this without fail. The point of these stories was not that followers of Jesus should attend synagogue as he did, I thought; rather, they demonstrated that once Jesus had been filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, the normal routine of the synagogue was no longer sufficient to contain what God was doing. The synagogues and their services felt like the old wineskins that Jesus talked about, which could not cope when filled with new wine, but split apart.

As I wrestled with this problem of weekly gatherings for worship, my mind came at it from all angles. I turned it over for years. The Sunday morning service was so deeply embedded in my experience that I found the idea that its core activity was suspect very difficult to sustain. However, in the midst of all my jumbled thoughts, there lay the list of commands on the desk in front of me. In all my thinking, I failed to come up with any evidence that Jesus wanted his church to gather together in order to worship God. Praising God did seem important in one’s personal life and attitude, but the important thing for the church to do was to serve God. The pattern of church we had inherited was to gather together to worship God, but to leave people to serve God or not as they chose during the week, on their own. I began to feel that we should reverse this practice. It would be better for churches to leave people to worship God on their own during the week, and gather together in order to serve God and do what Jesus had asked his followers to do. That way we would be obeying Jesus.

I have been used to attending weekly worship services since the year dot. I found that it took me a long time to change my thinking on this matter. However, the day eventually came when I decided that any so-called church which made its number

one practice something other than what Jesus asked his disciples to do was so out of line with Jesus' plan for his followers that it was questionable whether it could be a real church at all. Churches which focussed on worship services as their *raison d'être* fell into this category, I reckoned.

At first, this conclusion felt very strange, and threatening. Thoughts of being able to continue as a clergyman were becoming hard to sustain. My new understanding was causing stress at home. What was going to happen to us? On the one hand, I was excited at what I was discovering. On the other hand, I was not happy about where my thoughts were leading me. I remembered the story of the prophet in Scripture who was given a scroll to eat. It tasted like honey in his mouth, but it became bitter in his stomach. I found I could identify with this. Digesting my insights, which had been so exciting to begin with, was proving far from pleasant. Nevertheless, I had committed myself to serving God along the lines he wanted. I did not want to turn back.

In my various thoughts about the church, one week when I believed I heard from God stood out for me. A few years after I had left the ministry, our family went on holiday on a barge in a part of the country I did not know during the October half term break. At one point on the towpath where we had moored for the night, there was a notice board erected. "The Churches of this area welcome you", I read. I immediately averted my gaze before reading on, so that I could enjoy this. The churches of the area welcomed me! How pleasant. But even while I was basking in this unexpected ray of sunshine, I had a shrewd idea of what was coming next. I looked back at the board, and read on. "Services are at 10.30 on Sundays at one village, and 11.00 at another village." It was as I had feared. The focus was on the gathering for worship. These were not real churches at all in my opinion. You can see how far I had moved.

A day or so later, as we chugged along, three items of our equipment fell into the water in a strange way which caused me to reflect. At about ten in the morning, I was at the tiller, when my daughter called out "Hairbrush overboard!" from the mid point of the boat. I instantly threw the control lever into full reverse, making a wonderful roaring sound and violently churning up the muddy water, to the consternation of a nearby family of ducks. The hairbrush was a purple plastic one, and floated on the water. It was easily seen and soon rescued. We went on our way. An hour later, it was the turn of the mop to fall in, and I had to backwater again. This floated too because of its wooden handle. We retrieved it. Then a little later, when we were in a lock, I was watching my son straining at one of the paddles of the top gate with a large lock key. When he had finished opening it, and the water was happily pouring into the lock and lifting us gently upwards, I saw him throw the heavy lock key onto the bank above the lock. By a strange misfortune it did a most unexpected bounce, and shot into the deep water. It sank like a stone. I was pleased to have seen it fall in myself, as my son was not to blame. It was a freak bounce.

I was dismayed by what had happened, as I had seen a lock key on sale the day before, and I knew that they were not cheap. We would have to replace it for the hire company. I felt that for the sake of my son's education, I ought to make a token attempt at rescuing the key, although I had little hope of success. It would not do for him to think I did not care about the loss. I took the boat hook, which was a long wooden pole with a metal hook on the end, and poked it down into the murky depths. The pole was buoyant and did not want to go down at all. The canal was deep, but I found the bottom when the pole was not quite submerged, and to my surprise I could feel that it was concrete rather than mud. This raised my hopes a

fraction. I moved the pole about, scraping the bottom, and came up against something hard. It seemed just possible that this was the key, but how was I going to ensnare it? I reckoned the chances of hooking it up to the surface were minute.

There was nothing for it but to try. I pulled the pole up hand over hand, and to my surprise saw that the key was coming up with it. I was sure it would slip off and sink back down before I could get hold of it, and that we would be stuck groping about for the key for another twenty minutes before abandoning hope, but to my great surprise, the key came on up to the surface and I was able to lift it out. We had rescued our key and saved ourselves fourteen pounds!

These three items falling into the canal in just a few hours caught my attention. The church was never far from my thoughts, and I wondered whether it was a message from God about the church. After reflection, I decided that the hairbrush spoke of the bride of Christ, one of the metaphors for God's people in the New Testament. Here was the church, preening itself. The focus was on her appearance and her beauty. The mop spoke of a church which served others in a practical way. There is nothing glamorous about mopping up a mess on the floor. The preoccupation was no longer with personal beauty, but with showing love to others. Finally, the lock key, whose function was to get the lock gates open, spoke of a church releasing a flood of blessing. Taken together, the three rescuings from the water spoke of how the church needed to grow. We needed to move from being a church preoccupied with itself, through focussing on love and service for others, and on to releasing the blessing of God into the world.

I am reminded of thoughts I once had at Spring Harvest, an annual Christian convention, at Butlin's Holiday camp at Skegness ten years earlier. There were several thousand of us in the Big Top for the evening meeting. During the singing, I found myself thinking about the Funsplash, the leisure pool which our children had enjoyed visiting that afternoon. The swimmer I saw coming towards me turned out to be a strange animal completely covered with eyes. It was just coming down a small chute, and was clearly enjoying itself in the water. I had never seen anything like it before. As I tried to look at it more closely, however, the image changed into a garden spray. It was one of the type that my parents owned that was attached to the end of a hose, with two arms which whirled round and round sending out two arcs of spray when the water was turned on. But while I was looking at the spray, I realised it was not on the ground at all but was flying around freely, high in the sky, with no sign of a hose attached to it. The two sprays of water going out sideways reminded me of the wings of a very small light aircraft with virtually no body. It looked like the kind of plane that might have been useful for spraying crops.

I reflected on what these pictures might mean. Again I sensed descriptions of the church. The church is indeed a strange animal! It was one thing to be enjoying the water, rather as we were enjoying the meeting, but actually, the role of the church was one of being a source of water in a thirsty world, spraying out water where it was needed. We were in the meeting that evening in order to receive a blessing. This was fair enough, but if we wanted to be worthy of being called the church, then we needed to learn how to become a blessing to others. In a similar manner to my insights on the barge holiday, the images spoke of a process the church needed to go through. Receiving and enjoying a blessing is all very well, but I recalled Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Rather than majoring on the worship of God which Jesus never called for, we needed to give priority to the service of people in the way he taught.

SIX

It took a long time, but the day finally came when I was comfortable with the notion that a church whose core activity consists of weekly gatherings for worship is not a church at all. Moreover, when I examined them closely, even some of the apparently unassailable elements of the services did not stand up to scrutiny. In the churches I had been used to, for example, a list of sick people would be read out each Sunday, and we would ask God to heal them. What could possibly be wrong with that? Surely it was good to ask God to show his mercy on sick people. However, when I came to look, I could see from my list that this was topsy-turvy; Jesus told his followers that they were to heal the sick themselves rather than ask God to do it (no. 47).

I had become comfortable with this, as had many other groups. The new way of carrying on was to start the meeting with worship, move on to Bible teaching, and then have a time of ministry at the end of the service, when people could come forward for the laying on of hands. However, I noted a recurring pattern in churches in a number of different settings. First the church would come into renewal, as we called it, and there would be initial excitement over healing the sick. However, as time passed, the numbers coming forward for the laying on of hands would dwindle, and eventually dry up altogether. The leaders would not know what to do with this, but sooner or later, they would stop inviting people forward. Then they would cease referring to healing the sick, and the day would come when you would not have known that the church had ever been excited about healing the sick at all.

I wondered whether this progression was a natural result of the fact that there were no more people left who needed healing, but it did not feel like that. I sensed that there was something deeper going on.

Now I began to have my answer to this pattern. We had behaved as if healing the sick was something which enhanced the service. We had not grasped that it was something to replace the service. The disciples were not told to heal each other behind closed doors. Somehow we had to get our focus outside the four walls of the building. At the healing conference, we had been told “The meeting place is the learning place for the market place”. This seemed admirable. However, we were very poor at ever getting out of our buildings into the market place in practice.

In our meetings, we were facing towards God, as it were. I longed for the church to do a one hundred and eighty degree turn and face towards people. My father once pointed out to me that the church spire, that familiar feature of the English landscape, was a finger pointing upwards towards God. My unspoken response was to long that all the churches in the land could be carefully turned over on their side so that the spire could point towards humanity instead. The church’s focus should be on showing love to people, and thereby obeying God, it seemed to me. For a church to be laid on its side does not seem very practical; the buildings were not designed with that in mind. They might crumble away to rubble. Perhaps this notion contains the germ of a good short story, entitled the architect’s nightmare.

The one consolation I found in our existing pattern of meetings was that when people attended on a Sunday morning, at least they were hearing Biblical teaching. It was important that we all absorb the Word of God and act upon it. It was worth gathering together if only for that part of the event.

Then one day, an awful thought struck me. There was no reference to teaching the Bible on my list. Jesus never asked his followers to teach the Bible. This implied that even teaching the Bible was suspect!

My initial reaction was one of disbelief. There must be some mistake. Once again, I was faced with a deal of reflection. Jesus knew his Scriptures very well. That was clear from the way he reacted when challenged by his critics. He would confound them by quoting from what we call the Old Testament. He clearly had the highest regard for it. He even stated that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it, and that not the tiniest part of it would be lost. Surely, then, the practice of teaching the Bible was a good one, and in line with his wishes?

I had been aware for a long time of the weakness of the sermon as a teaching medium. My mind invariably wanders at some point. However, good teaching from the Scriptures by a gifted speaker seemed an excellent thing to my mind. Was it not the role of pastors to feed the sheep? What better nourishment than Biblical truth?

It was interesting to note, however, that although Jesus could have taught the Bible of his day, he chose not to do so. Not once did he explain or clarify an Old Testament story in the gospels. Instead, it was his practice never to speak to the people without using parables. These were little stories designed to get people to think. When the disciples asked him why he did this, his response was most puzzling; he said he did it so that the hearers would not understand. Far from explaining his use of parables, this riddle about riddles was even more puzzling!

I noticed that Moses had explained that God's normal means of communicating with his prophets was by means of riddles, as well as dreams and visions. He seldom spoke clearly or face to face. Although we are told that Jesus explained everything to the twelve in private, in public, the communication was through puzzles and riddles.

I had accepted the idea that making the sense of the Bible plain to people by public teaching was a good thing to do. Now that I looked at what Jesus did, it seemed that his practice of puzzling people was the opposite. I found this most odd.

Then I began to take note of what was actually being taught today in churches. Jesus had said, "Teach them to observe all I have commanded you." I wondered how often the subject of an address would turn out to be a command of Jesus. I started to keep a tally. Over the next few years, I attended about one hundred and eighty talks on a Sunday in churches which would have prided themselves on teaching the Bible. Of all these talks, just two were based on commands that Jesus had given his followers. I was shocked.

One of these two was on the subject "Extravagant love". However, the speaker did not actually refer us to the Gospels. Perhaps she assumed that we all accepted that the phrase extravagant love summed up the attitude Jesus wanted his followers to have. So maybe I was wrong to include her talk as being one on a command of Jesus. The second talk was on the subject "Follow me". This actually cited a Gospel command (no. 2). How wonderful! However, it seemed to me that on the occasion in question, the speaker had not had time to prepare as he might have liked to. It was a Sunday evening close to Christmas. My feeling was that the talk was made up from a few anecdotes thrown hastily together. Never mind; the thing to do was to make the most of it and enjoy this unexpected encouragement to us to take Jesus' instructions seriously. It was just a bit disappointing that the speaker himself did not seem to realise that his talk was breaking new ground. I felt he had hit a bull's eye that he had not been aiming at, on a target that he did not know was there.

Now that I was listening to the talks carefully with Jesus' actual requests in mind, I realised that most of these supposed Bible talks left a good deal to be

desired. It was sad just how often the biblical text was used as an opportunity for the speaker to air his own ideas. Often the most obvious thing to note from a Biblical passage which was our supposed text remained unsaid. Worse still, I became aware of how much reliance there was on what other people had said, whether in talks that the speaker had himself heard, or in books and commentaries. Most of what we were being fed was second hand. As a wider church community, we seemed to have forgotten God's words to the prophet Jeremiah; "I am against the prophets who steal my words from one another for their own use."

Theft is a serious matter. It is the easiest thing to steal someone else's words. I have done it myself. When I was a teenager, I had heard a talk in which a speaker I admired had advised us about possessions. Rather than enclosing possessions in our grip, he said, they should be laid on the open palm of our hand. That way, God can remove them if he chooses to do so. I remembered this image, and passed it on in talks of my own more than once. It is easily done. Now that I came to reflect on it, Jesus' actual words were that no-one could become a follower of his without parting with all his possessions. This placed the responsibility on the would-be disciple to get rid of the possessions himself, rather than leave them on a supposedly open palm in the secret hopes that God would not take them away. It seemed to me that this teaching had been a way of softening the demands of Jesus and making them more acceptable to a materialist culture. I had not only taken this questionable teaching on board and absorbed it, but I also passed it on in my turn.

As I look back now, I can see that this process was troublingly similar to the spread of viruses where humans congregate. I had failed to examine a dubious idea critically because I trusted the speaker. It became part of my thinking. Then I infected others with it in my turn. I began to wonder how often unhelpful teachings spread in this way. Do we accept a teaching because it is in line with the teaching of Jesus or because we warm to the speaker? Or worse still, do we accept a teaching because it is in fashion?

This pattern of being influenced by speakers had been particularly active for me when I first found the Lord. I was thrilled with my discovery, and lapped up everything that my new teachers said. Much of their teaching was valuable, but mixed in with it were ideas that could not find support in Jesus' teaching. One was that it was good not to marry, if possible, but if you must marry, at least do not marry young. I accepted this notion to the extent that I still clung to it even when I became aware that Paul's advice on the subject was somewhat different. Another teaching I absorbed from my teachers was that prophecy did not occur today. It is hard to find support anywhere in the New Testament for this notion, let alone in the words of Jesus. I did not know that as a new believer.

One of the things which struck me about both these matters and others was the extent to which we tended to look to the letters in the New Testament for our teaching rather than the words of Jesus. Jesus said we were to teach his commands. That being the case, why was there so much reference to other parts of the Bible? The obvious conclusion for me was that if Jesus did not teach his followers something, we should not teach it either.

I found I was developing a new approach to the use of Scripture in the church. When it comes to the teaching programme, it is the commands of Jesus that are to be passed on, as he instructed. The rest of Scripture frequently illuminates those instructions. But what was not acceptable was to take material from elsewhere in the Bible about any and every subject and teach it in the church irrespective of whether Jesus wanted his followers to promote it or not. Even less acceptable was the

practice of a speaker wanting to talk on a certain subject, and then finding a passage in the Bible which more or less supported what he wanted to say. I began to realise that this happened all too frequently.

When I showed earlier versions of this book to friends, several responded that the Acts of the Apostles, to give the book its full title, show how Jesus' commands were interpreted by the twelve, and therefore point the way forward for us. We read, for example, that when Jesus had ascended into heaven, his followers spent all their time in the temple giving thanks to God, and that they gathered frequently to pray as a group. This seems like an encouragement to gather together to worship.

This approach to Biblical interpretation raises a number of questions for me. To begin with, it assumes that the stories in Acts are an example for us to copy. However, we do not treat other books in the Bible in this way; often we see in the stories a warning to avoid. The Bible itself does not tell us that the Book of Acts is a special case. Take for example the practice of drawing lots, which is used in Acts chapter one to choose a replacement apostle for Judas. I have often heard the suggestion that this was unwise, with the comment that this took place before the Holy Spirit arrived on the day of Pentecost. But if that argument is accepted, then the two references to worship in the temple and meeting together for prayer are suspect as well, as they also took place before Pentecost.

Once the Spirit arrived, however, the emphasis in the book shifts to the spreading of the good news in ever increasing circles, until it reached Rome. It is intriguing to note that when Peter and John attempted to go to a prayer meeting in the temple after Pentecost, they stumbled on the lame beggar at the gate of the temple. They never made it to the meeting. Instead, the man was healed, and the subsequent interest provided a big push forward for the good news, and the church almost doubled in size. We are told that the lame man had used to lie at the Beautiful Gate each day for a long time previously. The inference is that before the Spirit came, the believers used to walk past him without noticing him. That changed when the Holy Spirit came. After this story, the temple hardly appears in the book of Acts. Personally, instead of seeing the Book of Acts as a call to group worship, I see it as an encouragement to abandon the temple!

I believe that the reason we are all so smitten with the idea that worship is the job of the church is based on our culture rather than the Bible. If we have been reared in the UK, then we have been surrounded by buildings known as churches, dedicated to weekly assemblies for group worship, since childhood. No wonder we think worship is the main job of the church!

It seems to me that in all questions of what the church should be doing, we need to look at what Jesus said. If he mentioned it, then let it be done. If he did not, then leave it to one side.

You may remain unconvinced by this argument, and hold with the value of gifted Bible exposition. Even when one's intention is to expound the Bible text faithfully rather than to impose one's own views upon it, it is surprisingly easy to speak from Scripture in a manner that is unhelpful for a local church. Imagine a pastor preaching through the first letter of Peter Sunday by Sunday. He reaches the instruction, "Love one another with a pure heart fervently; see that you love one another." He points out that we are to do this ourselves, suggests ways of doing it, and then passes on to the next verse. We might easily be satisfied that he has given us Christian teaching on the subject of love. Did not Jesus tell his followers to love one another (no. 164)? Well yes, so he did. But this was not the whole story. He also taught his followers to love their enemies (no. 18). Peter has not mentioned this in

his letter. There was no particular reason why he should; there is no evidence that he wanted his letter to be a balanced presentation of what Jesus wanted his followers to do. Like all letters, it was written with the needs of the readers in mind. In this case, Peter was writing to those of God's people who had been scattered in other countries. Why should their needs then be the same as ours today? Perhaps they were in danger of drifting apart. Or maybe they were so busy showing love to their enemies already that there was no need to encourage them in this.

One definition of an enemy is someone who threatens you most. I find gangs of thugs who lurk in dimly lit subways at night particularly threatening. I would rather not go that way. But if we are to take Jesus seriously, then in addition to loving each other in our churches, we are committed to showing love to those outside, including the thugs. The pastor's treatment of the theme of love in the first letter of Peter was insufficient in a church setting because it ignored an aspect of Jesus' teaching on love. Instead of showing love to outsiders as well as each other, the pastor was encouraging his hearers to focus even more on the fellowship than they were already doing. The tendency of our churches to ignore the needy was being reinforced.

Unless we were perceptive, most of us would have felt that the pastor did a good job. Had he not shown us from Scripture how we were to behave? But Jesus had already given his followers his agenda for what they were to teach, and the pastor's approach ignored this. So even speaking from material elsewhere in Scripture that actually quotes Jesus but does not give the full picture of his teaching can give the church an unhelpful message. The Pastor's use of Peter's letter did not give his hearers Christian teaching, in my view.

I found this insight alarming. I had been used to the idea that teaching from the Bible was helpful to people. Now I was beginning to realise that if we call Jesus Lord, then his instruction about teaching his commands to his followers ought to take priority over everything else, even other parts of the Bible.

Knowing the Bible seems indispensable. However, the conclusion I gradually came to was that it was better for people to read the Bible themselves than to listen to others talking about it. I remember a student coming to faith, years ago. His attitude was to read a book of the Bible each day. "I read Acts yesterday," I heard him say, "and Luke the day before that. What shall I read today?" I suggest that he absorbed far more from doing that than from attending hundreds of Bible talks. In addition, what he grasped would have been untainted by the current fashion of thought in the circle of believers where he found faith.

As I reflected on the custom of churches for the people to listen to a sermon week by week, another point began to trouble me. Jesus' teaching had been provocative and puzzling, as we saw earlier. This involved his hearers; they had to wrestle with what they heard. Paul told the Corinthians that when one person was prophesying, the others should be checking it out. If there was something suspect, they were to raise it. In contrast, I was aware of a culture today in which adult believers were expected to sit quietly in their seats, absorbing teaching year after year. It seemed an unhelpfully passive process to me.

People do need to know the Bible, but the way to absorb it is to meditate on it yourself, not to have someone else doing the meditation for you. I once read that C.T. Studd, the pioneer missionary to China, India and Africa, would rise at 3 a.m., meditate on the Scriptures for ninety minutes before returning to bed, and then pour out what he had learned to the Africans sitting in a semi-circle round him, when the sun had risen. I used to think this was an excellent model for the Christian leader. Now I am not so sure. It was great for Studd himself, but I have come to realise that

for his audience, this was spoon-feeding. There is a place for spoon-feeding. I have delightful memories of twin girls aged six months being given breakfast from a teaspoon, turn and turn about. A mouthful for you, then a mouthful for you. They cooed and gurgled with pleasure in their high seats at the breakfast table. This scene took place fifteen years ago. The idea of those young ladies still being spoon-fed today as teenagers is a ridiculous one, but this is exactly the situation that we have in many so-called churches. People are expected to sit quietly in the pew being spoon-fed year after year. It is not right.

One of the slogans of the reformation in the sixteenth century was The Priesthood of all Believers. The point being made was that all believers have access to God, without the need for a priest standing between them and God, talking to God on their behalf, and talking to them on God's behalf. This Moses-like model was no longer appropriate today in the church. That we all have unhindered access to God was a helpful emphasis. Now I suggest it is time to apply it to the Bible. Believers do not need church leaders explaining the Bible for them; they need to read it for themselves.

The experience of Moses' successor Joshua is helpful here. On his appointment as leader of the people, he was told by God himself of the importance of the Book of the Law. This can be thought of as the Bible of his day. We might expect that as leader he was to set it before the people, but this is not the case. Rather he was instructed to meditate on it himself day and night. There is no hint that he was to pass on its contents in public speaking.

The dependence of today's churches on speakers was well illustrated for me a few years back. A friend asked me to name five outstanding Christian leaders of the twentieth century. I spent a few moments thinking about it, and named my five. "Exactly," said my friend in a dismissive tone. "You have named five speakers at meetings. Everyone does the same, as that is our idea of a Christian leader. Nobody ever mentions Mother Teresa of Calcutta." I felt suitably squashed. It seemed to me that he had a good point.

One matter troubled me as I thought about these things, and that was my own experience with taking the school assemblies. Had I not heard from God as to the subject I was to speak on? Did not that imply that God was in the process of public speaking? Hadn't I seen useful results from this? I remembered one assembly in a primary school I used to visit when I had talked about the blind man that Jesus and the twelve met, and Jesus' comment on it being nobody's fault he was blind. A member of staff told me afterwards that the children had met a blind person who had come into school that week, so my talk was highly relevant. She added that she found it uncanny how often my assemblies hit the mark. I did not attempt to explain that actually this was canny rather than uncanny.

However, as I thought about it, I realised that whereas every time I had had to do an assembly, there was a message to bring, I could not always say the same about my Sunday talks. Maybe this was because I was getting so used to hearing from God that I hardly noticed it was happening. That was a heart-warming thought; perhaps I was making some progress in my Christian life. But another possibility was that I was not hearing from God so much in that context, because the kind of Scriptural teaching I was trying to bring was not along the right lines. My aim was to work through Scripture. I had not been aiming to pass on Jesus' commands. I did not realise the importance of doing this until after I left the ministry. Maybe there had been less inspiration for me on Sundays because God's heart was not in what I was

doing. But if so, why had I not sensed that I was on the wrong track at the time, I wondered?

That led me to thinking about some aspects of church history which have puzzled me. How was it that the understanding of the atonement so clearly explained in Paul's letters was lost so quickly by the early church, and that fifteen hundred years had to pass before it was regained? Many generations did not realise that they were saved from their sins simply by faith in Jesus' death on their behalf, irrespective of their success in doing good works. For many hundreds of years people thought that you could only get into heaven if you were a good person. Even now, there are people who do not realise that it is bad people who get into heaven, because they put their faith in Jesus.

These misunderstandings did not come to light until Luther and Calvin came on the scene. Why didn't God alert people quicker as to what was amiss? Come to that, hundreds of thousands of lives were lost to the plague over centuries in Europe before someone began to connect the outbreaks of plagues to the rats, and first steps were taken towards prevention. Why did God not drop a hint sooner? Why was so much suffering allowed before the penny began to drop which would lead in time to modern medicine?

It seemed to me from these and other instances in history that God is very keen to avoid getting involved in human affairs. It appeared that he prefers to allow us to make mistakes, if necessary for hundreds of years, and learn the hard way, rather than interfere. He clearly values human freedom very highly. There was no reason, then, why I would necessarily have been alerted to a wrong line of action that I believed in. The words of a foolish song for voice and piano that I enjoy came to mind, written on the unlikely subject of the second law of thermodynamics:

"You can't pass heat from a cooler to a hotter, wah, wah, wa!

You can try if you like, but you're far better notter, wah, wah, wa!"

God seems to be content that we make a mess of things, I reasoned. He lets us try and does not hurry to correct us. Indeed, the whole message of this book is that by ignoring what Jesus actually said, we have ended up with a so-called church that is doing the opposite of what Jesus intended, and thought that we were doing a wonderful job on God's behalf!

I continued to try to fathom out the matter of biblical teaching. I noticed that the New Testament referred to "Those who labour in teaching and preaching." I do not doubt that there was a teaching job to do. The commands of Jesus are to be taught. But what about preaching? Was preaching the same thing by another name, or was it a separate activity? I noticed that the public speaking of Peter and Paul preserved for us in the New Testament was usually addressed to unbelievers, tended to take place in the open rather than in a building, and was often spontaneous. Maybe the word preaching implies addressing unbelievers. I wondered if my assemblies had been more a matter of preaching, hence a stronger sense of inspiration, whereas my teaching in the church, which ought to have focussed on the commands of Jesus, was not so inspired because my aim in teaching the church people was mistaken.

Once again, there was so much to think about. I found that a full understanding of the role of Bible teaching was hard to come by, as with the role of worship in churches. It was not easy for me to throw over the thought patterns of a lifetime. Nevertheless, the discovery that the commands of Jesus are seldom if ever addressed was a dismal one. Week after week, the diet would be something else. When it came to attending on a Sunday morning, I eventually found myself thinking, "I put up with the worship and I put up with the teaching for the sake of meeting the people

afterwards over coffee.” I found myself feeling more and more detached from what was going on in the service. I seldom got excited about anything that was said. My mind wandered more and more. The truth was that my heart was no longer in the meeting. Part of me wondered if I was losing my faith in Jesus altogether. Surely it should be a good experience meeting with his people on Sunday? Why was I so unhappy?

I found that attempting to talk about my insights to other people was seldom successful. They could not understand what I was trying to say, and what I did manage to say sparked off so many questions that we soon got bogged down in discussing details rather than the wider picture. In addition, people found what I was presenting a cause for dismay. This was hardly surprising, as the perspective I had gained was that almost every activity which we were attempting to do in churches was misguided. Few people wanted to hear that!

I decided it would be better to present my insights in a book, so that it could be chewed over more easily; hence this volume. Perhaps you share the dismay. Maybe you wish I had kept quiet. Then things could have gone on as they did before. I can fully understand if you have feelings of that kind.

By now, it was becoming clear that if I kept on as I was going, I could hardly proceed to become a vicar. My developing views were too much at odds with normal practice. At times, it seemed to me I was pursuing an unreachable goal. Perhaps I should bow to the inevitable and give up the struggle, and lead the church along more traditional lines. But that would mean ditching my definition of the church. I did not want to conclude that following Jesus was an impossible thing to do, and that there was nothing for it but to abandon integrity and simply carry on in the traditional manner and pretend that we were doing well. However, our whole life was bound up in my career as a minister. This left our family in a difficult place. The way ahead seemed far from clear. Life was becoming increasingly fraught.

I could not believe that all this investigation had been in vain. At the same time, I began to wonder whether I would ever get to the end of my searches. I suspected I might be nearing the end, as so much of what I had inherited had been dismantled. Then I became aware that there was one more large area outstanding. So far, I had become aware of failings in what churches do. I now needed to look carefully at what Jesus himself said about the church to find out his agenda.

SEVEN

It turned out that Jesus made just two statements about his church to his disciples, in Matthew Chapters sixteen and eighteen. I will deal with the second of them first.

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector.”

From this instruction, I grasped that Jesus regarded his church as consisting of a group of people. The only indication as to the size of the group was that it is clearly larger than two or three. A church thus consists of a group of people following Jesus.

The other remark about the church came in a conversation Jesus had with Peter. He asked, “Who do men say that I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” Jesus replied... “You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

Now the church sounds like a building, built on rock. However, this is more apparent than real. There is a play on words in the Greek here. “You are *petros* and upon this *petra* I will build my church.” Jesus appears to be saying that Peter, in the act of making a bold declaration of faith in Jesus, is the foundation for the church. Once again I noted the importance of people – in this case Peter. I learnt that the church consists of a group of people who believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

The final element was that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church. I wanted to understand this phrase. I discovered a variety of translations in English, so I turned to the Greek.

The Greek word *pule* means the gate of a city. It seemed to me there was no reason to paraphrase this word. As I see it, the image here is of hell being a city under siege. Imagine a walled city. The weakest point of its defences will be the gate. So its enemies in time of war might come with a battering ram with which to pound that gate to pieces. Such an attack is likely to be stoutly resisted, but if it is successful, then the city will be thrown open. By omitting the word gate, some of the translations lost something of this understanding, I thought.

Some people have another way of understanding the phrase, whereby hell is on the move and the church is successfully resisting attack. Either way, the inference of Jesus words, it seems to me, is that the role of the church is one of victorious warfare. Its function is to attack hell in such a way that its captives can be set free. This accords with Jesus’ own description of his calling; when he embarked on his life’s work, he said that he had come to set the captives free. Later, he said to the twelve, “As the father has sent me, I am sending you.” The followers were given the same task as Jesus himself had from his father, to release the victims of hell.

There is another way of understanding the words “the gates of hell”. In the Old Testament era, the gate of the town was the place that the leaders met to conduct business. Council meetings and the like would take place there. On this reading, the force of Jesus’ words is that the role of the church is to disrupt the councils and strategies of hell, and so overturn all their plans. Whichever way you care to read it, as a physical gate broken down, or the centre of decision making being disrupted, the effect is the same; the church’s job is to wage war on and plunder hell.

What about the word hell itself? The Greek word here is Hades, one of the two words Jesus used to describe the destination after death of those who were cut off from God. My Greek lexicon lists its meanings as the nether world, the grave and death. The other Greek word Jesus used was Gehenna, which was the name of an area outside Jerusalem which had been used for child sacrifice in the distant past, but had come to be used as the rubbish dump in Jesus' day. Jesus used other phrases to warn his hearers of a future separated from God. On one occasion he referred to unquenchable fire. On another, he spoke in a parable of the goats ending up in eternal punishment while the sheep would end up in eternal life.

It has always seemed to me that Jesus taught that there was a real and awful possibility of ending up separated from God in the most horrible state. This had impressed me so much that when I was training for the ministry I collared some of my friends and used the college's portable video equipment to make a programme called Not Hell Surely. Creating your own video was the new thing in those days. The most memorable part of the video was some footage of the council dust cart with its grinding jaws swallowing the contents of our dustbin, with the accompanying comment that nowadays, the rubbish dump Jesus spoke about is mobile and comes to our doors. It was a telling image of hell, it seemed to me.

Jesus' own mission was to save his hearers from being lost, from being thrown into the dustcart. I decided that his words in Matthew meant that the church consists of a group of believers in Jesus who take on the same role and ransack hell by rescuing people. I was dimly aware of a vast secondary literature on the nature and role of the church. I did not want to get bogged down in it. I felt that Jesus' statement about his followers ransacking hell was sufficient for me. Reading all that other material would only confuse me.

In my eyes, this view of the church's role is backed by Jesus' own life. One of my favourite accounts in the Gospels is of the man known as Legion. He was someone to avoid if you could; he was violent and dangerous. Even the strongest chains were no use in restraining him. Jesus, however, landed on the shore at the tombs where Legion lived, and in the encounter cast out his demons into two thousand nearby pigs which promptly self-destructed by running into the sea, to the annoyance of the pig owners. Here was a man being rescued from hell, which in his case had started early. When we say of an experience, "it was absolute hell," although it may not be theologically accurate, I personally have no quarrel with it. Jesus wants to save us from our lives being absolute hell, in my view, and the church should also see its role this way.

To me, the story of Legion being rescued is a beautiful example of the gates of hell giving way and releasing a captive. It is also a wonderful statement of how much more valuable a madman is than a thriving farming business. I draw comfort from it. Perhaps there is some hope for me yet!

I will never forget casting out my first demon. Following the Signs and Wonders conference, I wanted to discover about casting out demons. If healing was for today, then so was this. I was given a book called Christian Set Yourself Free. It was the story of a Christian worker from New Zealand who had been so plagued with nightmares and other deep problems that he came to believe he had a demon. Despite all his attempts, he could not find anyone else in New Zealand who would agree with him. In the end, he learned how to cast out his own demons himself. It was a long struggle, and took him eighteen months, but in the end he knew he was free. He and his wife wrote this book as a result.

While I was reading the book, I attended a clergy conference. I was very nervous of what the other clergy might think if they saw me reading it, and I would hide it in my pocket whenever anyone came near where I was sitting. It did occur to me as I did so that had it been a pornographic book, I would have behaved in much the same way. Why did I need to be ashamed of what I was reading?

During the clergy conference, I was very troubled about some songs the music group I ran was to play at a church event the following weekend. I had chosen some songs from the Vineyard movement. My fear was that I would be heavily criticised for this. I knew it was stupid, but I was so gripped by this fear that I found it hard to think of anything else. After a while, I thought there was nothing to lose by taking the book's advice and commanding the fear to leave. Why not try it? So feeling a little ridiculous, I made sure there was nobody to overhear, and said, "Fear, in the name of Jesus, I command you to leave." Instantly I found complete relief. The fear vanished. In fact, I found that even if I tried to remember what the fear had felt like, I could not. I was thrilled, not just to be free of the crippling fear, but because I had discovered that demons could affect me today, and that up to now I had not recognised them, but now that I had grasped their presence, I could drive them off. It was a great moment.

I think the church folk must have got fed up with me talking about the need to cast out demons over the following years. I mentioned it at least every month. We made some headway in doing it, but it was always a minority interest. However, here is a sad fact; in the ten years since I left the ministry, I have never heard a single reference to casting out demons coming from another pastor's lips during a Sunday service. My guess is there are so-called churches in our country where the idea has not surfaced in decades. How are we going to batter down the gates of hell and set captives free if we are so ignorant of casting out demons?

The story of Legion and the pigs provokes me. In our churches today, we sing all the time. We seldom if ever cast out a demon. Contrast Jesus who cast out demons all the time, but as far as the record goes, only sang one hymn. We read, "*When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*" In the Greek, the phrase in italics comprises just one word. Hymn-singing made it into the Gospel text, but by the barest possible margin. The fact that it is mentioned means that Jesus was aware of the practice and so could have promoted it if he had wanted to. As it is, it can hardly be seen as an important part of the Gospel. In our current emphasis on worshipping God, we have moved a long way away from Jesus.

I think the reason I like the story of Legion is because the situation then was one that I imagine most of us would like to shy away from. Jesus encourages us to get involved. It is so tempting to pretend not to hear the call, as I found with the member of staff at my shoulder, when I was fearful, and as the village folk discovered when their starry-eyed curate wanted to put up homeless people overnight in the church. But walking past on the other side is the activity of the Pharisee and the Levite, in Jesus' well known story of the good Samaritan. They represent the religious people hurrying off to the meeting, leaving the beaten-up man uncared for. How sad! But am I alone in feeling that this is what we do in our churches today, in the main?

Now that I had grasped that the role of the church was to be active in the fight against hell, releasing the captives, I reviewed what I had been taught. There were various weapons available to us in the fight against evil. Notable were the gifts of the Holy Spirit that Paul had written about to the Corinthians. One of these was speaking in tongues. Paul said it was useful to build up the believer. It would be a help, I reckoned.

I had always resisted this gift out of prejudice. As a teenager, I had formed the view that speaking in tongues was like the sugar icing on a cake. This was something to be excited about if you were a child, but adults found the sweetness overpowering. They preferred subtler tastes. I felt that the gift of tongues was fine for the immature, but I was above things like that. I asked God not to give me the gift of tongues. I was not troubled about it again after that. Looking back now, I think to myself, what an amazing attitude!

However, years later at the Signs and Wonders conference, the advice given was that when you were praying over somebody for healing and did not know what to do next, then speak in tongues. This troubled me. Paul specifically said that not everyone spoke in tongues, but the attitude here seemed to be that everyone did.

I searched out a friend of a friend who had practical experience in these matters, as I had none, and visited her in her home one evening. We discussed the theology involved. Then she said to me, "Would you like to speak in tongues?" This was not what I had expected at all. I was there for a theological discussion! I pondered for a few minutes, feeling rather scared. Why ever not, I thought? So I replied that yes I would.

She prayed over me. I remember that she said that blockage of mind was a problem in my case. It seemed to be overcome, as two strange syllables formed in my mind. I told her so. "Well then speak them out, for goodness sake!" she replied. I did so, feeling very foolish. "Say them again," she said. I did so. "Keep saying them, over and over," I was told. I kept at it. They meant nothing to me at all, which I found very difficult. Then she said that she had been in Arabia for a while, and although her Arabic was not very good, she thought that what I was saying meant Dear Father in Arabic. This seemed most strange, but I did not feel quite so bad about speaking it out after that.

I remembered that when I did my PhD, I had surprised myself by quoting from books and articles in ten languages. I had only ever studied French and German, a little Latin, and Biblical Greek and Hebrew. Perhaps that had been enough to get a grasp of other European languages. Or was it that despite my refusal of other tongues, God had given me a gift for other languages?

This experience of speaking out two strange words was no fun. I was doing something I did not understand at all. I was sent home with the instruction to keep saying my words over and over. Perhaps more words would come. I obeyed. After a day or two, I had another half dozen sounds. However, after a fortnight, there came an evening when I was quietly muttering my sounds in the hall, when I thought to myself, this is crazy! What am I doing mumbling strange sounds that I do not understand! Is this really the gift that Paul talked about? I prayed, "Lord, if you are really in this business, then please show me." I stood there, quietly repeating the sounds. As I did so, I began to sense the Lord's presence in a way I had never done before, and never have done since. In fact, the feeling grew so intense that I became convinced that Jesus was going to step out of the dining room door in front of me. I became very scared of seeing the Lord face to face, and stopped speaking. It would have been too much. The feeling gradually subsided, but from that day on, I have never doubted the validity of what I was doing. Speaking in tongues had come to stay, and it was part of my armoury.

Now, however, I came to look at my list. Jesus never made any reference to speaking in tongues, nor words of knowledge, nor the other spiritual gifts Paul mentions. But I thought we were to wage war on hell. Surely the spiritual gifts were to be employed! What now?

The first thing I grasped was that those who teach that all believers must speak in tongues are out of line. There is no evidence that Jesus himself spoke in tongues, so if those who are enthusiastic about tongues are not careful, they make Jesus himself out to be an unbeliever. This is absurd.

Then I noted that Paul's teaching on the spiritual gifts was not something he set out to promote. Rather, his letter to the believers at Corinth was in answer to the subjects they had raised with him. This implied that use of the spiritual gifts was alright if you wanted to go down that path, noting the caveats that Paul raised, but it was not a requirement by any means. You do not need to use them in order to obey Jesus. So speaking in tongues, although I found it valuable, is optional. So too is prophecy. Paul encouraged them to think of prophecy as the highest gift, and to aim for it (an interesting concept). Jesus himself was a prophet, as he showed when he responded to the unspoken thoughts of a Pharisee he was dining with. But Jesus never called on his followers to prophesy, so if you don't want to do it, you don't have to.

It also seemed clear to me that insisting on anything which Jesus did not talk about is similarly out of order. The emphasis of this book has been that churches fall short in doing the will of Jesus. But there are some practices which go beyond what he said. An example of this which came to me was the practice of rebuking territorial spirits. I have heard allegations from people I admired that there were spirits over particular places, a spirit of witchcraft over a certain town, for example. While one can find verses in Paul and the Book of Daniel as general support for the idea of ruling spirits, there is nothing like it in the gospels. So even though they might appear to be of use to the church in attacking the gates of hell, by taking on the powers of darkness, practices of spiritual warfare needed to be checked against the specific teaching of Jesus. If he did not require them, then neither should we, to my mind. It is easy for us to run on ahead in our enthusiasm, but not helpful.

The view I arrived at was that the way to attack Hell is by obeying Jesus carefully and fully. There is a story of two of Aaron's sons offering illicit fire to God when the people were in the desert. God had laid a requirement on Israel for certain people to offer fire at certain times and places. But this episode of the illicit fire was over and beyond what was ordered. The instruction yelled at us boys in the school corps came to mind – "Hold your fire!" In my very limited experience in the school rifle range, I did at least appreciate that there was a time to squeeze the trigger in the direction of the target, and also a time to obey the order, "Open your bolts and put your guns down!" The two were not to be confused.

Some may think I have been unduly dismissive of the spiritual gifts. Perhaps I have. Personally, I find them very useful; I cannot imagine how one might cast out a demon without the gift of discernment, for example. Paul encouraged his readers to seek them. Despite that, any attempt to say that the gifts are essential goes beyond what Jesus told the twelve, and should be resisted. If they needed to know anything, in preparation for making all nations his disciples, he would have told them. If he did not tell them, then there is no obligation on us. If you don't want to speak in tongues, as I did not, or don't want any spiritual gifts, don't feel bad about it. We should resist those who attempt to add to what Jesus said. It is obeying Jesus that matters.

It could for example, be nothing more than the making of a phone call that has come to your mind that proves to be the means of release for someone. Recently I played the organ at a funeral of an elderly lady. Fourteen years earlier, she had been so harassed by the young people on her housing estate that she had actually been

involved in the process of preparing to end her life, when the phone rang. It was a nephew and his wife whom she hardly knew. They had felt concerned about her, and wanted to invite her to stay for a fortnight. She went and stayed several weeks and then her nephew made arrangements for her to move to a flat nearer to them. Having family and friends around made a huge difference and her time of pain and misery passed. Her final years were happy ones. Now wasn't that a releasing of a captive from hell? This was due to the action of one couple. Imagine the power if we had a church where the aim was that all the people together should act in this way. Rather than gatherings for worship, its meetings would feel more like army briefings on the eve of military action. Isn't that a concept of church worth fighting for?

EIGHT

We have covered a lot of ground. The definition of the church that I came to believe in called for full submission to the will of God. Our earlier attempts to discover this by listening to God were helpful as far as they went, but God has spoken supremely through his Son Jesus, and it was the realisation that the teaching programme of the church comprises the commands of Jesus to his followers that was the real breakthrough. Through studying these, it became apparent that in our preoccupation with things Jesus never commanded, like worship and Bible teaching, we have hardly begun to grasp what he wants his church to do. What a challenge.

Few readers will have agreed with everything, but I stand by my central point which is that it is the purpose of God that matters in the church, not anything else. Everything that has been raised in this book flows from that conviction.

What of the future. Where do we go from here?

Somebody recently asked me, suppose your circumstances change and a return to Christian work becomes possible. How might you proceed?

I don't find this line of thought at all easy. When it comes to how a church should operate, I am very aware of the difficulty of moving from where we are at the moment. Even though I have been living with my insights for ten years, I still find it impossible to imagine the programme of a genuine church. Surely it is going to prove even harder for people who have only come to these ideas recently.

However, there is one thing I am clear about. I do not want to go down the path of thinking that the group of believers I am involved with is seeking to follow Jesus only to find when it comes to the point that we draw back. I would rather not get involved at all than go through that process again.

In the last few years I have witnessed churches shrinking back from a God-given vision sufficiently often for it to seem like a pattern. The first stage is for the minister to start talking with enthusiasm from the front about some new line of work. It involves releasing captives in the way we have identified. Then time passes, while presumably there is discussion behind the scenes. Then more time passes. We hear nothing. Then, when the subject has dropped out of church life for long enough, I finally grasp that this scheme too has been abandoned.

The process reminds me of a verse in the book of Proverbs. "Like clouds and wind that bring no rain is the man who boasts of gifts he never gives." I once had a holiday in Israel when this verse was tellingly illustrated. Our minibus was driving through an area of desert, in the Beersheba region I believe. To my surprise, some rain fell, requiring single windscreen wipe as we drove along. The guide explained that the area we were in would have rain on about three days in the year, and we had hit one of them. Just our luck! He then pointed out that the very few trees dotted around were encircled by low ridges of sand, five metres from the trunk. We passed one tree, and saw the result; it was surrounded by a shallow pool of water. The sand was arranged to save as much of the rain as possible, and this practice just allowed the few trees in the area to survive. There were more clouds about, and I expected more rain to fall, but none of them came to anything; the total rainfall lasted between five and ten minutes. Indeed, I hoped it would rain again for the sake of the trees, something I have never wanted on holiday before or since, but it did not.

Imagine the frustration of a man looking up, watching the clouds coming over, thinking each time that this next cloud would be the one to produce rain, and for

them all to sail overhead without a drop. This is how I have felt about the schemes announced in the churches I have been involved with since I left the ministry.

The church I want to see is one that is so in tune with what God wants to do that he is happy to use it to reach out to the nations. The church plants I actually witness are more like the trees I saw struggling to survive. Society is seen as hostile. We live in a desert. Church life seems to be an affair of trying to rearrange the sand in such a way that the little rain from God that has fallen on us is preserved sufficiently for us to survive another year. Something is wrong somewhere!

However, there is another important question. It is easy for me to identify faults in everyone except myself. What about me? Would I be of benefit to a church that was committed to carrying out Jesus' will to the letter? Didn't I fail myself to carry on with my own conviction about housing the homeless in the church building when it came to the crunch? I may not have had the approval of the church authorities or the local people, but I did have the key of the church door in my pocket. Maybe I should have opened the building up after all, and done my service with the long "silence". Why did I cave in? Couldn't I trust God to help? Should I have pressed ahead despite them all? What is the use of talking about obeying God if you ignore his voice when it comes to the point, as I had done when I refused to talk to the member of staff in the school hall?

I had wanted to call the project, The Church of the Ohmless. An Ohm is something to do with resistance in electricity, and this was to be a place for those who had reached the end of everything and lost all their resistance. Another memory from my physics lessons. But didn't that describe me as well? Here I was with all these dynamic ideas but unable or unwilling to carry them out. Where was my resistance? When it came to the point, I seemed to lack the amps and volts, or watt-ever. Could I ever be of any real use as a church leader?

I can all too easily imagine getting a group of people to meet together, determined to follow Jesus' instructions to the letter. It's the first meeting of something that is going to sweep the world! However, before anything happens, someone says, "Please may we sing something before we start?" I can just imagine a pleasant, middle-aged lady with a smile on her face saying it. Personally, I find it hard to turn anyone down. What harm could there be in just one song? So we sing something, and then someone else says could we sing another one, and I can't think of a way of saying no this time when I said yes before, and before long we are simply doing the same old thing we have always done. In fact, before half an hour has gone by, whatever I may look like on the outside, conducting this meeting, inside I have already decided that trying to change the habit of centuries is hopeless, and I am wondering why I ever agreed to take on this assignment and longing to be somewhere else.

I have found that reading the Gospels carefully in order to grasp what it means to follow Jesus has required mental shifts on a seismic scale. I would say that by the time I was ordained, sixteen years ago, far from being sorted out, as I imagined, I had been indoctrinated with all kinds of views which I understood to be Christian but which were nothing of the sort. I suspect I am not alone in this. The moment I gather a group of people together and say I intend to form a church, I reckon I will find myself up against every kind of obstruction from well-meaning people who know how it should be done. I feel exhausted at the mere thought of all the possible conflict!

Then there is another aspect to running a church which worries me. I once imagined myself back in the year dot, in an age when all this church tradition had

yet to emerge. As the minister, I am in the building, dressed in my sandals and toga and tidying my desk, when a lady who has just lost her husband comes in. After the usual pleasantries, she says “You know my hubby’s just died; I was wondering, could I bury him on this bit of ground just next to the church building?” I wonder what to do with this novel idea, but I can’t see any harm in it, so I let it happen. Little do I know that this practice will spread all over the globe, and that for hundreds of years after I’ve gone, buildings known as churches will be surrounded by the most inappropriate thing anyone could possibly have thought of – graves! And it seemed like such a small issue. The human capacity to turn aside from what Jesus asked his followers to do seems so marked that I wonder if we will ever be able to avoid blunders of this sort.

Dear oh dear! It all seems so difficult!

Despite all the personal pain and trauma that I experienced first time round, I still hope to return to Christian work one day. On the one hand, as they say, there is no fool like an old fool! But on the other hand, they also say, no pain no gain. Why did I ever expect Christian work to be easy? Surely it was bound to be costly? It cost Jesus his whole life. At least I now have some grasp of what church should be about. Maybe I could be of some use.

It was while I was thinking this way a few weeks back that I found myself re-reading my great great great grandfather’s Psalm. When I researched my family history a few years ago, I came across one of his books. Inside the front cover, there was a bookplate with his crest on it, containing the Latin words *sol et scutum deus*. I reckon this means “God is a sun and shield”; it seemed to me it was a quotation from Psalm 84.

John Batteridge Pearson, as he was named, was an impoverished curate who had fallen in love with Elizabeth Falconer, the Dean’s daughter. There was no hope for him in that quarter; he had no wealth at all, so he was no gentleman! Better forget about her. But no, God had other ideas. As part of his work, John showed love and compassion for an elderly widow. When she died, it turned out that she had left him all her estate. Now he was well off, and the problem of his not being a gentleman was removed.

Mrs. Falconer, his prospective mother-in-law, was so angry about this development that she stayed in bed for a whole day. However, she came round in time, and the wedding went ahead. In the end, Mrs. Falconer so grew to appreciate her son-in-law that she came to consult him about all her affairs.

I have a suspicious mind. Was this an example of simony, that horrible business of befriending an elderly person in the hope of an inheritance? I studied the documents carefully, and while it is impossible to be certain at this distance, I could find no evidence of anything other than a good character in my ancestor. Here was a Christian leader who cared for the elderly and widows in their distress. It really did seem to be an example of the way that when you are trying to follow God and are faced by a brick wall, God can open a door that you never knew was there.

It was while I was reading Psalm 84 and remembering this story that I noted what the Psalm said. “I had rather be a doorkeeper one day in the house of my God...” The context suggests a twenty-four hour period, but the two words that stood out were the ones that I have often thought to myself, “One day...” I recalled that the project for the homeless required doorkeepers. One day! Was I hearing from God again? Might all the threads come together in some way, as yet hard to imagine? Will there be a way through the brick wall, a doorway in from the cold and the rain, a doorway in for the homeless and hopeless?

Examples from the Bible spring to mind. I am reminded of David in the cave, when he was on the run, alone and helpless. However, all those who had fallen into difficulties gathered with him, and he became their leader. Together they went on to transform the nation. A foretaste of the church of the future? Perhaps Jesus' complaint that they had made his father's house a den of thieves could be reversed, by making a den of thieves into God's people. Now there's a vision worth pursuing...

It is nearly ten years since I left the ministry. During all that time, I have always hoped to come across what I regard as a church in our country. This looks most unlikely, but I am still waiting. Abraham had to wait a long time, but he never gave up hope. The promises worked out in the end.

I rest my case.

Notes

NB Page numbers in the printed edition (A5 size) For approximate page number in the A4 download version, divide by two and a half.

ONE

- 5. God looking after me... Matt. 6:26.
- 10. Meeting together... Heb. 10:25.
- 16. Spiritual gifts at Corinth... 1 Cor. 14:1.
- 16. Jesus told his apostles... Matt. 28:20.
- 17. Heal the sick... Matt. 10:8.
- 17. Jesus saw the Father... John 5:19.
- 17. Hearing the voice of God... Song of Songs 2:14.
- 21. Moody without Sankey, John C. Pollock, 1963 & 1995.

TWO

- 24. Test everything... 1 Thess. 5:19-22.
- 24. Revelation of God complete... Revln. 22:18.
- 26. No word fell to the ground... 1 Sam. 3:19.
- 27. False prophet stoned... Deut. 18:20.
- 27. God kind to the ungrateful... Luke 6:35.
- 30. Two or three witnesses... Heb. 10:28.
- 30. He must increase... John 3:30 AV.
- 32. Hostility to God... Rom. 2:1, 3:12.
- 33. Let go the commands... Mark 7:8.
- 35. God consecrates the worshippers... Zeph. 1:7.
- 35. The body of Christ... 1 Cor. 12:27.

THREE

- 38. City under siege... Eccl. 9:13-17 NEB.
- 39. The homeless verses... Luke 14:12-14.
- 39. Open our homes... Isa. 58:7.
- 46. All of us often make mistakes... James 3:2.
- 48. Too costly... Luke 14:28-30.

FOUR

- 49. Clinching argument... Matt. 10:8, 28:20.
- 50. Love God with all your heart... Matt. 22:34-40.

Parallel passages in the list of commands

- 1) Mark 1:15.
- 2) Matt. 8:22, 9:9, Mark 1:17, 2:14, Luke 5:27, 9:59, John 1:43, 21:19 & 22.
- 3) Luke 6:23.
- 9) Matt. 18:9.
- 10) Matt. 18:8.

- 13) Luke 6:30.
- 14) & 15) Luke 6:29.
- 19) Luke 6:28.
- 27) Luke 11:2.
- 31) Luke 16:13.
- 32) Luke 12:22, 29.
- 33) Luke 12:31.
- 35) Luke 6:37.
- 36) Luke 6:42.
- 38) Luke 11:9.
- 39) Luke 6:31.
- 45) Luke 10:3.
- 46) & 47) Luke 10:9.
- 52) Mark 6:8, Luke 9:3, 10:4.
- 54) Luke 9:4, 10:7.
- 55) Luke 10:5.
- 56) Luke 9:5, 10:10.
- 59) Luke 12:11, 21:14.
- 63) & 64) Luke 12:4-5.
- 65) Mark 13:11, Luke 12:7 & 32.
- 67) Mark 4:3.
- 68) Mark 4:9 & 23, Luke 8:8, 14:35.
- 69) Mark 6:37, Luke 9:13.
- 71) Mark 6:50, John 10:20.
- 73) Mark 8:15, Luke 12:1.
- 74) Mark 8:33.
- 76) Mark 8:30, 9:9, Luke 9:21.
- 79) Luke 17:3.
- 83) Luke 18:16.
- 84) Luke 22:26.
- 85) Mark 11:2, Luke 19:30-31.
- 86) Mark 13:5, Luke 21:8.
- 87) Luke 21:9.
- 88) Mark 13:14-16, Luke 17:31, 21:21.
- 89) Mark 13:18.
- 90) Mark 13:21, Luke 17:23.
- 91) Mark 13:28, Luke 21:29.
- 92) Mark 13:9, 13:23, Be alert 13:37, Watch! Luke 21:36.
- 93) Luke 12:39.
- 94) Mark 17:35, Luke 12:40.
- 95) Mark 14:13-15, Luke 22:8-12.
- 96) Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19.
- 97) Luke 22:17.
- 98) & 99) Mark 14:32-34.
- 100) Mark 14:28, Luke 22:40 & 46.
- 101) Mark 14:42, John 14:31.
- 102) Luke 22:51, John 18:11.
- 108) Luke 18:18.
- 112) Luke 9:50.
- 118) Luke 17:4.

- 128) Luke 8:48.
- 130) John 6:10.
- 164) John 15:12 & 17.
- 165) John 14:27.

- 62. Jar on his head... Matt. 14:13, see no. 95.
- 70. Many waters... Song of Songs 8:7.
- 71. Athlete straining forward... 2 Tim. 2:3&5.
- 71. Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission, Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, Morgan & Scott, London, 1919, p42
- 72. Give as prompted... 2 Cor. 9:7.
- 72. Vows to the Lord... Eccl. 5:4-5.
- 74. Baptism mentioned once... Matt. 28:19.
- 74. Peter's instruction... Acts 2:38.
- 76. Double building project... 1 Chr. 22:19.
- 78. Fifteen hundred years later... Gal. 3:17.

FIVE

- 82. Jesus perfect... 1 John 3:5.
- 83. David singer of Israel's Psalms... 2 Sam. 23:1.
- 83. Psalms by others... e.g. Psalms 89 & 90.
- 83. Specialist choirs... 2 Chr. 5:13.
- 83. Merlin Carothers, Prison to Praise, 1970. See www.merlincarothers.com
- 84. Praise befits the upright... Psalm 33:1.
- 84. Beauty of holiness... Psalm 96:9.
- 84. Worship in spirit and truth... John 4:24.
- 85. Woman in adultery... John 4:16f.
- 85. Ten commandments... Exod. 20:1-17.
- 86. Worship with the lips only... Mark 7:16.
- 86. Call me Lord... Luke 6:46.
- 86. Lord, Lord... Matt. 7:21.
- 86. Life and lip in harmony... Heb. 13:15-16.
- 87. Anger over worship without service... Isa. 1:10-17.
- 88. Worship the Lord... Deut 6:5, Matt. 4:10.
- 88. Hebrew '*abad* ... Exod. 1:14 work, Exod. 10:8, 11 worship (NIV). The Authorised Version had "serve" throughout, but rendered "worshippers" of Baal in 2 Kings 10:19-23.
- 89. Greek *latreia* (service/worship)... Rom. 12:1.
- 90. Attending synagogue by custom... Luke 4:16.
- 90. Foxes have holes... Matt. 8:20.
- 91. Money pilfered... John 12:6.
- 91. Follow in his steps... 1 Pet. 2:21. John 20:21 could also be taken as encouragement to copy Jesus.
- 92. Wine skins splitting... Matt. 9:17.
- 93. Scroll to eat... Revln. 10:8-10.
- 96. Bride of Christ... Eph. 5:22-23.
- 97. Animal covered with eyes... Revln. 4:6. The inference is that the church behaves like the animals in Revelation four, who never stop worshipping. But in heaven there is an end to death, crying and pain (Revln. 21:4), so there is no

more service to be done. Then it will be appropriate to sing. While we are on earth we can still do service, so why don't we neglect communal worship until we get to heaven.

98. More blessed to give... Acts 20:35.

SIX

- 101. Jesus knew the Scriptures... Matt. 22:29.
- 101. Fulfil the law... Matt. 5:17-18.
- 102. Pastors to feed the sheep... John 21:17.
- 102. Jesus always used parables... Matt. 13:34.
- 102. So they would not understand... Mark 4:10-12.
- 102. Dreams, visions and riddles... Num. 12:6-8.
- 103. All I have commanded... Matt. 28:20.
- 104. Prophets stealing words... Jer. 23:30.
- 105. Part with all possessions... Luke 14:33.
- 105. Unhelpful teachings... Eph. 4:14.
- 106. Paul on marriage... 1 Cor. 7.
- 107. In the temple... Luke 24:52.
- 107. Praying in a group... Acts 1:14.
- 107. Drawing lots... Acts 1:26.
- 108. Lame man... Acts 3:1-2.
- 108. Church doubled... Acts 4:4.
- 108. Every day at the gate... Acts 3:2.
- 109. Love one another... 1 Pet. 1:22 AV.
- 110. God's people scattered... 1 Pet. 1:1.
- 112. Check out the speaking... 1 Cor. 14:29.
- 112. C. T. Studd Cricketer and Pioneer, Norman P. Grubb, Lutterworth, London, 1970, p221.
- 113. Moses-like model... Exod 20:18-21.
- 113. Joshua to meditate... Josh. 1:8.
- 114. The blind man... John 9.
- 115. Bad people saved... Luke 5:32, Rom. 3:21-24.
- 116. God keen not to interfere... This makes the transfiguration of Jesus all the more remarkable, as a voice came from heaven. The disciples wanted to set up shelters, which suggests worship, but what God told them to do was to listen to Jesus (Matt. 17:5).
- 116. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, A Natural Law, from At the Drop of Another Hat.
- 117. Labour in teaching and preaching... 1 Tim. 5:17.

SEVEN

- 120. Tell it to the church... Matt. 18:15-17.
- 120. Build my church... Matt. 16:18.
- 120. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. It is interesting to note that in addition to normal New Testament usage, this word occurs in the account of the riot at Ephesus. Twice it refers to the crowd that had assembled to shout out about the goddess Diana, and once to a legal meeting of citizens where the dispute ought to have been settled (Acts 19:32, 39 & 41). All three uses imply that a feature

of the church is to gather together. Our argument is that instead of gathering for worship, analogous to the chanting crowd, the church should gather with a view to carrying out the will of Jesus, analogous to the legal meeting.

121. City-gate under siege... See the siege of Gondor in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Book five, Chapter four.
122. Set captives free... Luke 4:18-21.
122. As the father sent me... John 20:21.
122. City gate councils... Deut. 21:19.
122. Gehenna the rubbish dump... Matt. 13:40-42.
123. Unquenchable fire... Matt. 5:22, 18:8-9.
123. Eternal punishment... Matt. 25:46.
124. Legion... Mark 5:1-20.
125. *Christian Set Yourself Free*, Graham and Shirley Powell, Sovereign World, Tonbridge, 1983.
126. Hymn sung... Mark 14:26.
127. Good Samaritan... Luke 10:31-32.
128. Speaking in tongues to build up... 1 Cor. 14:4.
128. Not everyone spoke in tongues... 1 Cor. 12:30.
131. Paul answering their questions... 1 Cor. 7:1.
131. Prophecy highest gift... 1 Cor. 14:1.
131. Jesus a prophet... Luke 7:39-40.
132. Ruling spirits?... 2 Cor. 10:13, Dan. 10:13.
132. Illicit fire... Num. 3:4. It cost them their lives.
133. Seek the gifts... 1 Cor. 14:1.

EIGHT

135. Supremely through his son... Heb. 1:1-2.
136. Like clouds and wind... Prov. 15:14.
137. Make nations his disciples... Matt. 28:19.
141. Sun and shield... Psalm 84:11.
142. Elderly and widows... James 1:27.
143. David's cave... 1 Sam. 22:1-2.
143. Den of thieves... Matt. 21:13.

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