

Chapter 20

More from God's own correspondents

There is a regular BBC programme called 'From our own correspondent'. As its title suggests, the Corporation's reporters send in their observations, made in various parts of the world and usually offering interesting little pictures of life in different, often war-torn, countries. Sometimes they analyse how the situations they describe came about and may include powerful interviews with people still living through them. The correspondents all know that the BBC is behind them, making sure that their pieces come over as clearly as possible for those properly tuned in. Tuning in is so important if we are to hear a message clearly.

The New Testament correspondents give us clear reports about some aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They tell us how it was first received and what a difference it made and will still make, when its truth is properly heard, understood and acted on. We are told how the good news spread as far as Europe, but we also read of the riots, arrests, storms at sea and shipwreck that could have hindered the work without the workers knowing the enabling of the Spirit of Jesus. The reporters were very conscious of the Holy Spirit's inspiration and overruling, making sure that what they wrote was clear enough for a tuned in and serious reader to understand.

Messages from Paul

The major New Testament correspondent was Paul, who wrote 13 of the letters we find there. Besides his great letter to the Romans, he wrote eight more to other young and growing churches as well as three pastoral letters in which he gave kindly advice to two young church leaders, Timothy and Titus. He explained to them how leaders should behave and what they should teach others about Christian belief and behaviour. The shortest of his epistles was to a man named Philemon whose runaway slave had been converted to faith. Paul asks the man's old master to take him back, not as a criminal but as a new brother in Christ.

Paul's frequent use of the messianic title 'Christ' (for example throughout his letter to the Ephesians) means that this academic rabbi had no doubt about Jesus being the Messiah. He had not come as the freedom fighter many had hoped would be sent to liberate Jews from Roman rule. Regardless of race, gender or status, the kingdom brought in by Jesus, the Christ, is the kingdom of God, not man. Its citizens are united as those who have trusted in his Son's sacrifice to release them from their bondage to sin.¹ By making Jesus their Lord they have entered his kingdom and found a new life.

Just as Jesus had said that the Spirit gives birth to spirit, calling this 'being born again', so Paul speaks of believers becoming a new creation, their old life replaced by a new life and way of living.² Instead of physical circumcision being the mark of commitment to God, as under the old covenant, the new life should be marked by full agreement from the heart to cut off selfish priorities and, in gratitude and love, to worship Jesus as Lord.³ It will be he who finally judges how people have lived their earthly lives.⁴

Paul spelt this out very clearly when writing to the Galatians, who had been tempted to think that they needed to keep some parts of the old law as well as simply trusting that Jesus had done all that was necessary to save them from the consequences of sin. We can do nothing to save ourselves but, once committed to him, his Holy Spirit will enable us to bear good fruit instead of bad.⁵ Unlike demonic spirits whose objective is to cause hatred, distress and destruction, the Holy Spirit produces very different fruit in our lives, the first and foremost being self-giving love. He teaches us more about following God's ways and will never lead us away from following Jesus as demonic spirits would try to do, using the instruction of false teachers.

Jesus had promised his disciples that one day he would suddenly return. In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul warns us all to live each day as if this could be the day he will arrive, preparing to welcome him at any time. In this way we shall look forward with confidence to his coming, when even the dead will be raised. All those who have put their trust in him will go to be with him for evermore.⁶

Other New Testament documents

Among the eight letters of the New Testament not written by Paul, the one to the Hebrews is a major book of uncertain authorship, written, as its name suggests, to newly converted Jews. It complements the gospel story by explaining more fully how the old covenant has given way to the new one. It would be more fully understood by those already familiar with the Old Testament books of the law of God, from Genesis through to Deuteronomy, with all the detail that these books give about the hundreds of former religious and ceremonial laws. Instead of thinking it is by struggling to keep these old laws that we will be made right with God, Hebrews shows that we have wonderfully free access to him made possible by the work of Christ Jesus. There is no more need for the annual Day of Atonement, when the high priest made ritual animal offerings to cancel out everyone's sins. Jesus became the highest priest of all when he offered himself to God to pay for the sins of the world, not just for one year but for all time. Faith in his sacrifice frees those who trust him from the burden of sin. On that basis there is now no further need to depend on any other priest's intervention for us.

Because of Jesus' mediation each of us may now have confidence to approach God and find a gracious response.^{7,8} The old covenant has given way to a new one although there are still laws to be kept, summarised by what Jesus called the greatest of them, the twin commands to love God completely and to love neighbours as we love ourselves.⁹ His other rules for life harmonise with these two and we'll take a closer look at them now and go into more practical detail later on.

To love is to relate

The words 'love' and 'relationship' are often narrowed in our culture to refer to sexual partnerships, but all those who love and serve God are being restored to his image, not blending in with that of the surrounding culture. We relate to a three-in-one Godhead, each of the three being knit together with the others in self-giving, interactive and creative love, made visible for us in the life of God's Son, Jesus. This other-centred love models the way we should love God and each other.

Loving God

In one of his letters, the apostle John, says very plainly, 'This is love for God: to obey his commands.'¹⁰ John had seen for himself how Jesus had done this to the end of his earthly life, whatever it cost him. His resurrection had won a great victory over sin and death, a victory he now shares with those who love him.¹¹ Love of God is shown in action, not just by a declaration in words.¹² When we start to love God through his indwelling Spirit, our consciences are sensitised to recognise clear right from definite wrong as we find that he has written his laws into our minds and hearts.¹³ Yet we are not robots, simply doing what we have been programmed to do, and there will be times when our choices are less clear cut.

Matters of medical ethics illustrate this when sometimes a decision seems to hang on a choice between two less than good options. Is the risk of serious handicap implicit in prolonging the life of an extremely preterm infant worth the physical cost to the baby, the emotional cost to the parents and the cash costs to the service provider? Does the value of a life made in the image of God mean that all stops must be pulled out? How would we decide what to do in an economically impoverished country? We need to be alert to the Holy Spirit's promptings, coming often, but not only, as we read God's word or seek to act on the principles he gives there. Praying with those who understand the issues may help to alert us to actions that would either fall short of his perfect purposes or move towards their fulfilment.

Bridging the gap

Years ago a ferry was sinking close to land but still just too far for many people to make the leap to safety. One of the passengers, a big tall man, stretched himself across the gap to make a human bridge and so saved a number of lives. How grateful those people must have been. This is a little picture of God's loving answer to the dilemma created by sin and its deadly consequences. Jesus laid down his life to bridge the gap between us. As rescued and forgiven sinners, we should be more than grateful, responding to his love with ours. This commitment to self-giving love should mark our approach to ethical dilemmas, but is much costlier than making a snap decision.

Whatever our work setting, such problems may be resolved as we ensure that creative inter-relationships are well guarded both for the one who is often at the heart of the dilemma and those within the surrounding circle, be this made up of family, professionals or other team members. A list of pros and cons can be helpful but will need wisdom to balance out, and there we have access to the mind of Christ.¹⁴ When possible, a personal encounter is always better than bald messages or heated phone calls. Jesus came in person.

His love at work in us will encourage us to keep his commands, though when (not just if) we fail and confess the fault, he will forgive.¹⁵ Love, the first attribute of the Spirit's fruit mentioned by Paul, continues to act as the bridge between us, keeping the relationship alive. It comes full circle when it includes others.¹⁶

Loving our neighbour

Other people, whether living next door to us or not, count as our 'neighbours'. We should also aim for other-centred relationships with them, from business contacts to babysitters, cleaners to consultants. In a medical setting, professionals will relate to patients as whole persons, with names, minds and spirits as well as bodies, instead of just calling in 'the next case'. To be treated personally puts the cared for at ease and improves the carer's job-satisfaction. Building relationships creates a better way of life, an approach modelled by Jesus and formed in us by our three-in-one God. We are made in the image of God and the inter-relational love shown within the Trinity shows us the on-going attitude we are commanded to hold with our varied 'neighbours' near and far. We'll return to this later.

Other letters, found towards the end of the New Testament, are written by our old friends Peter and John, with two from *James* and *Jude* who were brothers of the incarnate Jesus. The last book of the Bible describes an amazing vision of John, his *Revelation*. Despite the very different style of writing from John's Gospel this is generally thought to be the same author, now a very old man. He was exiled to the island of Patmos to curtail his missionary activities, but his spirit roamed free. Revelation was written at a time of increasing persecution

for the young churches so first John warns and encourages seven of them. He then takes off in strange and visionary language to tell of revelations made to him about events still to come before Christ returns to reign over a new heaven and earth.¹⁷ Those who love Jesus will be with him to worship, serve and even reign with him for evermore.¹⁸ Our finite minds cannot quite grasp all this but the great reality is that we are promised that we shall arrive in the presence of our Lord Jesus, and will then be made like him.^{19,20} Until then, while we look forward to that day, we are committed to following in his steps, guided and strengthened by his Spirit, and loving him whom we have not yet seen.

The Bible ends with a clear prayer for our Lord's return, and for the grace of the Lord Jesus to be with God's people. To the words 'Come, Lord Jesus', the appropriate response must surely be a resounding 'Yes!'

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul spelt out the purpose of his ministry:

*'My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'*²¹

We shall see next whether we can find for ourselves that hidden treasure to which Paul refers though, like all treasure-seekers, we need to be serious about it.

For further thought

- When we need a guidebook we choose one with a reliable reputation. The Bible is a reliable spiritual guide. Have you started to read it yet?
- Different translations of the Bible are available in bookshops and via websites such as www.biblegateway.com.

Further resources

- Wyatt J. *Matters of life and death (2nd edition)*. London and Leicester: Christian Medical Fellowship & Inter-Varsity Press, 2012
- Schluter M, Lee DJ. *The R option*. Cambridge: The Relationship Foundation, 2003.

References

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|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Galatians 3:28 | 12. 1 John 3:18 |
| 2. 2 Corinthians 5:17 | 13. Hebrews 8:10-13 |
| 3. Colossians 2:9-12 | 14. 1 Corinthians 2:16 |
| 4. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 | 15. 1 John 1:5-10 |
| 5. Galatians 5:16-26 | 16. 1 John 4:16-17 |
| 6. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 | 17. Revelation 21:1-4 |
| 7. Hebrews 9:11-15 | 18. Revelation 22:3, 5 |
| 8. Hebrews 4:15-16 | 19. 2 Corinthians 3:18 |
| 9. Matthew 22:36-40 | 20. 1 John 3:2 |
| 10. 1 John 5:2-5 | 21. Colossians 2:2-4 |
| 11. 1 Corinthians 15:56-57 | |

