

JOURNEY of INSIGHT

An Invitation to Christianity

Carl Jacob

Second Edition

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This book is dedicated to my late father, whose wisdom was ahead of his time.

Preface to the Second Edition

In the original edition of this book, I tried to capture the true meaning of Christianity as I believe Christ had intended it to be understood. My position has been neither one of literal fundamentalism nor new-age spiritualism, but simply that of a person seeking the truth. Although I was writing from a current perspective in the setting of modern developments, I had found that the original message of Christ is universal and compellingly applicable to the present time. The experiences of the past decade have continued to reinforce this conviction. Nevertheless, it was becoming increasingly apparent that a number of issues needed to be addressed, expanded or clarified, and I felt that the time had come for a thorough rewriting of the book.

Although many who read this book will already have a natural interest in the subject, it is aimed particularly at those who have abandoned their religion or are searching for something to believe in. Its purpose is not to win converts to any specific denomination, but to communicate what I consider to be of great importance as clearly and widely as possible.

Although the Scriptures were drawn on extensively as source material, referencing was applied more sparingly to avoid cluttering the text. The precise wording of any quotation may vary according to the 'version' of the Bible used and one is reminded that the translation of ancient languages is not an exact science. I have attempted to avoid as much specialised language as possible. I believe that a reader's natural sensitivity to truth, together with a practical and tangible approach by the writer, is much more helpful to understanding than any amount of jargon and terminology. To me, it is significant that Christ taught in the common language of the day, indicating that truth is for everyone, not only for a select group of intellectuals. Nevertheless, the writing is intentionally very concise, and for most effective appreciation, the book needs to be read carefully and thoughtfully.

The general use of the masculine form is not intended to exclude the feminine but to avoid distracting repetitions of phrases such as 'he or she'. For similar reasons, where 'Father' and 'He' are used in relation to God, they are compromises because there is no personal form that includes both genders. The words, 'we' and 'us', should be interpreted to mean human beings in general.

This book invites the reader on a journey of insight into the meaning of Christianity. As insight inevitably depends on its source of light, I hope that what I have written will encourage more people to study the Gospel of Jesus Christ in greater depth, and that his words will enrich their lives as they have mine.

CEJ
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INTRODUCTION

It is regrettable that relatively few people who call themselves Christians ever take the time to study the teachings of Christ for themselves. Many of them are content to practise watered-down versions of Christianity while others treat the message of Christ as if it were a 'smorgasbord' where anyone can ignore whatever is inconvenient or unappealing. The majority appear to maintain little or no contact with their church communities and a large number eventually reject Christianity altogether. Similar patterns are evident in other religions.

There are many reasons why people might abandon their religion:

- It does not solve their problems or deal adequately with issues that concern them.
- It appears to be out of touch with reality and irrelevant to our times.
- With 'advancing science' they see no further need for religion.
- They had unpleasant experiences associated with it.
- It appears to prescribe a life of continual suffering and heavy burdens.
- Every pleasure was associated with feelings of guilt.
- They see hypocrisy, corruption and perversion among the clergy.
- They are more attracted to other things.
- They cannot see its effect in the lives of others.
- They cannot see a need for it in accomplishing their goals.
- They are unable to accept the teachings or the rules.
- It is not socially acceptable among their peers.
- It has become more fashionable to dabble than to be committed.
- They had practised it only for external reasons.
- They see it as inhibiting their personal growth or their freedom.
- They do not get the proof their intellect demands.
- They perceive it as demanding impossible perfection.
- It is associated with hell and damnation.
- They lacked encouragement from those around them.
- They fear the subject and perceive it as overwhelming.
- They do not find the church services stimulating.
- There was little community spirit and mutual support.
- It failed to provide an adequate explanation for the meaning of life and existence.

The decision may be understandable and often the religion is rightly rejected for it bears little resemblance to what it was originally intended to be. On the other hand, sometimes people do not look deeply enough and are swayed by inappropriate criteria.

Possibly none of these apply to the reader and he is simply interested in pursuing his understanding. Either way, it may be fruitful to return to some of the important basics and build from there.

The Search for Truth

Within human nature there appears to be a yearning for a kind of knowledge that is consistent, dependable and permanent; a knowledge that can form a deeper foundation for life puts everything else into perspective and will not have to be unlearned again later. It may be described as the 'quest for truth.'

There are those who believe that the truth is to be found in one of the great scriptures or the writings of some philosopher. Many hold that science is the only pathway to its discovery, while others who have become disillusioned with traditional approaches might turn to mysticism. A number of people follow a guru they revere or use various techniques to try to discover truth within themselves. Each of them will generally find a measure of both enlightenment and disappointment, for no single perspective ever reveals the complete picture, only fragments that are visible from certain points of view and obscured from others. In every source, one also confronts the problems of credibility, error, obscurity, ambiguity and relevant ignorance as well as all the natural difficulties of communication - even if we assume that there is complete sincerity and no intentional deception.

Every person who seeks the truth has a religion or philosophy in the practical sense, even if it is informal and evolving. It embraces what he believes he has found and its implications for the way he should live. While most people are guided into one of the established systems through their social environment, some make a voluntary choice.

Why would a person *choose* to be Christian rather than Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Shinto, Bahai or perhaps adopt some very simple or non-spiritual philosophy? The answer depends partly on the scope of one's interest. This can range from an extremely limited view that is focused on nothing more than the isolated superficial self in the immediate present, to one that is eternal and universally inclusive of everything in its greatest depth. Religions are like maps with suggested paths. For a person near the first extreme, almost any rough sketch will be adequate and very little trust will be needed. On the other hand, someone who desires, or is forced by circumstances, to move beyond his own familiar territory, will probably want one that is more comprehensive and more trust will be required. The common assertion that all religions are equally good is generally meaningless and unhelpful, for as in science, some theories (maps) must eventually emerge as more credible. A comparison of various belief systems is beyond the scope of this book, however, a person who is seriously facing this question should try to learn enough about each of his options and draw his own conclusions. Naturally, there will be areas of disagreement that cannot be resolved until more conclusive indications emerge sometime in the future, but he may find that most of them contain something useful and a number of them have much in common. It is hoped that after reading this book and investigating any other sources according to his inclinations, he may be more enlightened.

The Relativity of Truth

It has become popular in some circles to reject the existence of absolute truth, and one regularly hears statements like, 'it may be *your* truth but it is not *mine*'. Unfortunately, such assertions tend to suggest that truth is arbitrary. If that were indeed the case, its relevance to life in a greater context would be extremely limited and it would hardly be worth pursuing. We can only function effectively as a community to the extent that some perception of truth is shared and extends beyond our limited selves.

There is often some misunderstanding of relativity. This is best explained by an example. Suppose that I believe the earth is flat, and you think it is round. In this instance, the truth is clearly not relative to each of our preferred beliefs, but it *is* relative to the scale of observation: Within a small area the shape of the earth may be reasonably flat, while over a much greater distance the curvature becomes more obvious. Truth may be subtle, elusive or the subject of vigorous debate. It can be relative in the sense that it may need to be qualified, but it is never arbitrary.

Christianity and Truth

In the final analysis, being a Christian involves seeking to live well in a deeper, more comprehensive and enduring sense and this subject is considered more fully in the next chapter. However, our inner state of being cannot be separated from its contributing factors such as meaning, security, peace of mind, personal growth and effectiveness in day to day living, and all of these ultimately depend on truth. Truth, however, is not simplistic, for in that case there would be little to learn. In the light of our earlier discussion it would be reasonable to assert that the whole truth in any instance is more likely to be perceived through the unity, harmony and relatedness of several different perspectives.

The sincere Christian naturally accepts Christ as the centre of truth that is essential to his vitality. Nevertheless, he welcomes truth whatever its immediate source. In this respect, Christianity must encompass what is true and good in all religions, philosophy, science and everything else. Properly speaking, there is no 'Christian truth' as distinct from any other truth. There is only 'truth'.

Christianity is not a closed book of rules and tenets, but a way of thinking, acting and living. It is a foundation for building and a pathway of exploration. It is about life and all of its experiences, human strengths and weaknesses, ideals and the very imperfect reality. It is directly or indirectly connected with *everything*. Another way of saying this is that a relationship with Christ can be the cornerstone of one's life and the immovable reference point. However, like the ability to reason, it is not a substitute for on-going education and personal development, but intended to assist in their achievement. While Christianity

guides, cautions and enlightens, it does not seek to diminish our freedom of thought and action overall, but *ensure it and increase it* with truth and wisdom.

* * *

Two questions are of immediate relevance: ***'Where does the search for truth begin?'***, and ***'How is accepting and following Christ conducive to fulfilment and enduring happiness?'***

The answer to the first question is 'anywhere', and this book is intended to be helpful in that endeavour. However, one must first appreciate the essential difference between telling the truth and a lie, and between honest communication and intentional deception. One must cease to regard deliberate falsity as an acceptable means of accomplishing goals. Without these, a person will not be sensitive enough to recognise truth when he encounters it. Like anyone else, the Christian cannot avoid the natural problems of identifying truth, but he should at least be committed to its pursuit and try not to enlarge the problem for others.

The second question can only be addressed by learning what it means to live the Christian way, putting it into practice and observing the results for oneself. It is hoped that the following chapters will provide a useful and meaningful perspective.

Chapter 1

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

'For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few there are that find it.'

(Matt. 7:14)

Happiness is the ultimate aim of all human beings, and without the hope of achieving some measure of it, life is devoid of direction and meaning. If not conducive to someone's eventual happiness in some way, even the highest of ideals, the most espoused of relationships and the noblest of deeds would be a complete waste. Unfortunately, people of countless generations were indoctrinated that unless they are perpetually serious and heavily burdened they are not living good Christian lives. They were instilled with a fear of seeking their own happiness lest they be doomed for their selfishness. These were regrettable misrepresentations of the Christian message. If there is any problem with the quest for happiness, it is not with the fact that we desire it, but how and where we try to achieve it and the depth of happiness for which we are prepared to settle. This chapter focuses on the pursuit of happiness as an underlying theme of Christianity.

The State of Happiness

Because it is very personal, the state of happiness is difficult to define and analyse objectively. Some have described it in vague but intuitively meaningful terms such as 'when you like yourself and everything that is important to you.' Others summarise it as having health and love, and although this is no less valid, it gives us little useful understanding.

At any given time, a person's conscious awareness is occupied by thoughts that involve memories, imagination or new information, and by complex patterns of sensations, perceptions and feelings. This 'state of awareness' is the combined outcome of the external 'realities' and our 'inner world' that consists of our basic human nature and our learning in its variety of forms that include knowledge, attitudes, habits, beliefs, values, hopes and our deepest inclinations that may be called character. ***A person is happy to the extent that he likes or enjoys what he is consciously aware of at the moment.*** The awareness might be explicit and tangible, or subtle and indefinable, and sometimes unhappiness is not so much the result of anything specific that the person *dislikes*, but rather something that is missing that he may not be able to identify. Clearly, the intensity of happiness (or misery) can lie anywhere between two extremes.

The contribution of our inner world in shaping the conscious experience helps to explain how it is possible for the feeling of happiness to alter without any change in the more objective realities. It partly accounts for the paradox that one person may be happy in a slum while another can feel desperate in the midst of kindness and luxury. It also supports the notion that our state of mind need not be completely at the mercy of circumstances, as captured in the words, 'pleasant thoughts make happy people'. Thus we may recognise that our internal state of being is to a significant degree within our own control.

The powerful impact of our present conscious experience provides a strong temptation to try to manipulate it directly through drugs, alcohol, distraction, entertainment, self-talk, rationalisation and a large variety of forms of escapism. Naturally, people prefer to turn off unwelcome states of mind and switch on what is more pleasant, but the overwhelming evidence is that short-cuts work only in the short-term.

Our concern for the future also exerts a considerable influence. Whether the possibilities that we imagine are valid or not, they can evoke very strong feelings, especially if we perceive them to be likely or inevitable. When we face the prospect of something terrible we can be frightened by the thought of it becoming a reality. Likewise, we might be elated with the promise of further delight. For better or worse, our present happiness will tend to be affected by what we believe the future holds in store.

Happiness is dynamic in that conscious awareness is always changing and has the potential to develop and grow. In endeavouring to maintain our comfort zone we may be inclined to take the radical course of ignoring or shutting out the unpleasant realities around us and behaving as if they did not exist. Although this might be conducive to preserving sanity in extreme situations where a person can do nothing about them, as a general habit it undermines the effective pursuit of greater happiness. It suffocates compassion, stifles the ability to extend our limited consciousness and hinders our working towards a more *inclusively* harmonious reality. Collective human experience has shown that 'exclusive' positions are never secure in the long term, for the boundaries we create remain perpetually under threat from outside or within. For happiness even to survive, let alone grow, the reality beyond our preferred awareness can never be permanently ignored.

The 'conscious awareness' concept offers a useful and intuitively appealing way of defining happiness and explaining some of the typical human behaviour related to it, but it has limitations. The really vital important thing is to find the most fruitful ways to pursue happiness, and focus on the foundations that give it greater durability and potential. These form the theme of our remaining discussion in this chapter.

Some Essentials

Whenever happiness is continuing there appear to be three indispensable elements that are always present and in balance: On-going Development, Unity and Good Experiences.

On-going Development is usually connected with learning, progress, newness, change, building, creativity and growth, accompanied by a sense of direction and purpose connected with hope. In its absence, there is likely to be a state of boredom, stagnation or even decline.

Unity involves oneness, harmony, consistency, peace, integrity, security, completeness, meaning, truth and order. Alienation and fragmentation, on the other hand, are associated with external and internal disunity of a more general kind, and convey a sense of distance and disconnectedness.

Good Experiences are welcome experiences, though sometimes only in hindsight. Normally we expect them to be pleasant and beneficial. They can range from the passive observation of something that appeals to the senses, to total active involvement leading to a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. They are highly personal and depend on a variety of factors such as sensitivity and readiness.

It is vital that development, unity and good experiences be **in harmony with one another**, or they can place future happiness in serious jeopardy. For example, certain pathways of development can lead to unforeseen disunity, like the demands of a career promotion resulting in the break-up of a good marriage. Likewise, the consequences of experimenting with addictive drugs provide a warning that not all pleasant experiences are consistent with sustainable growth. Another serious problem is our tendency to over-emphasise one element and neglect the others. For example, some people focus so much on the past or the future that they never enjoy the moment, while others seek instant gratification with hardly a thought to meaning or any form of personal improvement.

The importance of these elements and the need for balance is reinforced by our elders and supported by most of our social institutions. We are taught early in our lives to develop our abilities and fitness, not only to ensure our basic survival, but so that we can benefit from the experiences and opportunities we are likely to encounter. We are encouraged to expand our knowledge and to try to unify what we learn into a meaningful whole. These values form a major part of the reasoning behind education, training and discipline.

Basic Levels of Happiness and the Search for Fulfilment

Happiness is possible at many levels. On the survival plane, development, unity and good experiences, all hinge on the necessities of life - food, shelter,

clothing, human contact and freedom from suffering or fear. It is here that happiness is most dependent on material factors, and it is hardly surprising that at this level, happiness is strongly associated with a perception of external security. Regardless of the kind of happiness we eventually achieve, when our basic needs are threatened, our interest tends to return to this level.

Once a comfortable existence seems assured, our attention turns increasingly to other things that we believe will bring us contentment and personal fulfilment. Here, personality and natural ability, together with power, material possessions and favourable conditions are generally regarded as the keys to success. However, our control over these factors is also relatively impermanent, and any happiness that depends on them remains vulnerable. Potentially, they can make a valuable contribution to fulfilment, but only in the light of *self-knowledge* and in support of an attractive and *meaningful purpose* in life. The words of Christ, 'Seek and you shall find' (*Matt. 7:7*), are particularly relevant in this context as they convey that **everyone who actively seeks, finds what he is meant to**. We must search with an open mind, recognising that the true purpose of exploring is not necessarily to find something specific, but to reveal the hidden realities and possibilities.

Self-discovery is a vital part of progress towards fulfilment, and requires a combination of adventurous involvement and quiet reflection. It increases our abilities to identify compatible relationships, recognise beneficial surroundings and get to know the kinds of activities to which we are suited. An awareness of our sensitivities, strengths and limitations, enables us to be more selective in terms of the situations we let ourselves get into, and we become more competent in making decisions that are consistent with our well-being.

Our purpose or '**mission**' is something that we both find and create. We must seek to broaden our awareness beyond our narrow, superficial, immediate selves and the needs of our own comfort. Combined with a growing self-knowledge, this expanding awareness of our surroundings helps us to appreciate the extent of our inter-relatedness and mutual relevance. It is here that we discover our opportunities and find the contribution we can make. We *create* our own purpose in the sense that we *choose* the objectives we believe worth pursuing and *make* a commitment. The results we achieve from useful work and the appreciation we receive from those who benefit helps to complete the cycle of fulfilment. It confirms that our existence is important to more than our limited selves. This desire to be validated, respected and valued by others is a natural characteristic of human beings that encourages cooperation and social unity, and the confirmation that we are well regarded, is a major factor contributing to feelings of self-worth.

These levels of happiness are important to the continued will to live and the ability to function effectively, and may be vital for personal growth. Nevertheless, intense as they can be, they are not enduring, and they are still not fully satisfying at the deepest levels of one's being. They extend us beyond our isolated selves, but they do not unite us with the whole of existence. They

still do not touch the very essence of life, and with few exceptions, the individual human being left to his own devices, appears to be incapable of making substantial progress beyond these levels despite a yearning to do so.

Inner Happiness

It is at the deepest and innermost levels that development has the potential to be most permanent, and it is on this foundation that the relatively transient 'joys of living' can be accepted without attachment, and more fully appreciated. Enduring inner happiness is not something that can be *found*, but is the outcome of a building process within human character. To achieve it, we need ***a willingness to cooperate with a source of wisdom greater than ourselves***, and a commitment to put whatever we learn into practice. The most important part is the doing, for without this no words of wisdom will ever become firmly ingrained in us or help to bring about the necessary changes. In the long term, elements of character such as courage, persistence, faith, love and a sense of justice, become far more crucial than circumstances, natural abilities and personality. It is also through the building of character that we become the kinds of people who can safely be entrusted with the power to achieve greater things.

In the course of human history, enough progress was made in this direction, particularly through the philosophers and the founders of some of the earlier great religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and the prophets of Judaism, to elevate mankind from the cruel law of the jungle to a thin, fragile and imperfect veneer of civilisation that frequently breaks down. Overall, the reality is that happiness, for most people, remains very precarious.

Human Nature

The most far reaching reality of the human condition is our individual and collective ignorance – we do not know enough to guarantee even the most basic levels of happiness. Guesswork and desperation, rather than enlightenment, form the basis of many important decisions, usually with unwelcome results. Our efforts are often counter-productive and create unexpected situations that become severe obstacles to further progress. When we combine this with a multitude of other weaknesses, we have some explanation for much of our frustration. The accumulated knowledge of humanity has seldom prevented society from becoming locked into stagnating or decadent patterns or following misleading pathways of 'progress' which end in total disaster. As Christ said, 'The blind lead the blind, and they fall into the ditch together' (*Matt. 15:14*).

Human beings are also prone to being enslaved, not only physically by external powers or the system into which they are born, but psychologically by their own addictions, habits, wants and fears. They trade off what is more important,

deeper and more permanent for what is superficially attractive or apparently more urgent. Many sell out their future freedom to buy the present, and by the time they learn, they are often trapped so that every avenue of freeing themselves imposes a greater risk or has a price they are unwilling to pay. At the opposite extreme we find those who can never relish the present moment for they have become completely shackled to chasing some prospect of future material security. People easily get manipulated into indebtedness and dependency, or committing all their vital energies to chasing illusions, false promises and wishful images of themselves. Many fill up their lives with escapism to distract themselves from their deeper persistent problems or the anticipated inevitability of their own demise. Apart from solving little, this also prevents them building a more solid foundation for happiness. Others become caught up in the 'fast lane' and cannot get off the accelerating meaningless rush towards premature burnout. Despite its legal abolition, slavery is alive and well; it just keeps changing its form. Even so, it is just another of the major obstacles to happiness.

Much of the knowledge and wisdom of the older generation is ignored, partly because the personal experience on which it is based cannot be transplanted into other people. Children usually reject much of the advice of their elders as irrelevant, and insist on the right to seek their own experiences and make their own mistakes.

Many people go through life believing that they would be happy 'if only' a particular problem did not exist. Others assume that happiness will finally be theirs 'when' the next goal has been achieved, only to find that the satisfaction is brief and the feeling of emptiness comes back. They might despair or embark on a new theory that keeps them sedated until they reach the same point again. 'They drink this water, but the thirst soon returns' (*John 4:13*).

An on-going alienation, in which ignorance and human nature play their parts, reveals itself in our relationships with the environment and our fellow human beings, and ultimately, in the conflicts that exist within ourselves. Some we accept the biblical explanation of its origin and or may not, but our relative disharmony with the rest of the universe is a recognisable fact: ***Throughout recorded history, mankind has lived in chronic need of internal and external reconciliation, enlightenment, and a sound basis on which real hope can be built.***

The Good News

Christ came to give humanity the way to reconciliation at every level, and brought with him the promise of eternal life, namely the assurance of on-going, increasing, permanent happiness for every person who believes in him and practises what he taught. He offered neither a comfort zone nor a stressful burden, but a means of reorienting our lives to what is of lasting significance. The essential purpose of Christ's mission was to make it possible for all of us,

individually and together, to reach our highest potential and intended destiny. He came to bring hope to the most unhappy, rejected and imperfect of people who feel that life is short, miserable and meaningless, and teach them that troubles are temporary and life is eternal *if we let God in*. He came to 'quench our thirst' with an endless spring inside ourselves. By his life and its outcome he brought God close to people again, and people closer to God. He enabled the kind of happiness that can only come from real hope which stems from believing in something limitless.

The story of Jesus Christ is perhaps justifiably labelled as the greatest story ever told. It could be argued that no single person has ever had a greater and more enduring impact on humanity, and there are few parts of the world that are untouched by his influence. From the Christian perspective, the story of Jesus Christ is the most crucial chapter in the history of God's love for humanity. These bring us to the subject of 'God', but let us first consider the meaning of 'love'.

The Meaning of Love

The prominence of love in literature, human relationships and every major religion attests to the fact that its relevance to life and happiness cannot be ignored. As important as it is, the concept is nevertheless prone to multiple meanings and usages. In some contexts it has connotations of attraction, attachment and familiarity. In others it implies an intense romantic preoccupation. In parenting it conveys tenderness and care. In psychology it is treated as an emotion, while in philosophy or theology it is often considered an act of will. In some languages there are special words for what are considered to be different kinds of love or ways of loving. In the Scriptures its most usual meaning involves acting in the best interests of a person and striving for a harmonious relationship.

For consistency throughout this book, we shall define love as ***the pursuit of a person's happiness*** and we can qualify this by adding, 'intended, enlightened and responsible'. It is an attitude or orientation towards that person. This definition is also consistent with the most important and common Biblical usage. Without a genuine concern for the other person's happiness, the words "I love you" would be a misuse of the term in this context.

Love may have strong feelings associated with it, but in the Christian sense, it is more a *decision*. A loving orientation usually generates special behaviour such as patience, kindness and gentleness, and these are only a few of its visible attributes. Love can be endlessly deliberated and clarified, but as a concept, it is both extremely simple and infinitely profound. Its power is incalculable, and its place in Christianity is of utmost importance.

Chapter 2

PERCEPTIONS OF GOD

'Thou shalt not have strange gods before me.' (Exodus 20:3)

Central to Christianity, is a belief in the existence of God and His love for all His creatures, particularly human beings. Muslims, Jews and Christians call God by different names, and may use different terms to describe Him, but they all worship one and the same God. The crucial difference is that Christianity acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God who was sent to give us the way to eternal life.

Our Limited Knowledge

Mankind knows God only to the extent that he has chosen to reveal Himself; the rest is mostly theorising. We label God with superlatives such as 'perfect' and 'infinite' without having any clear understanding of what these terms may really mean in relation to Him.

In the Bible, God is revealed as

The creator and original cause of everything,
One with whom all things are possible,
The greatest genius in existence,
Both personal and impersonal; familiar and remote,
Present everywhere; Aware of everything,
Spirit; Truth; Goodness and Love,
Teacher and adviser; Parent and friend, Nurturer,
Just and merciful; Commanding respect,
Alpha and Omega - the beginning and the end

These represent only a fragment of the whole. In Islam they have over one hundred words or phrases for God, and further ideas can be found in other religions. ***It is possible that some combined description might be more complete and accurate than any one version by itself.***

The Word of God

Is the Bible the 'Word of God'? From the Christian perspective, the answer is both yes and no. Yes, in that it is the best record we have of the teachings of Christ, his immediate disciples and the inspired words of the earlier prophets. No, to the extent that it also contains a lot of ordinary human history. It is

definitely not the *complete* word of God, for what He could teach us would never fit into a single book of that size (*John 21:25*). Is it the accurate word of God? To a limited extent, for it is necessarily recorded in the relative crudeness of human language in the cultural context of time and place, otherwise we would never be able to understand it at all. Some parts are written in symbolic or metaphorical language, which can seldom be interpreted with complete certainty. The Bible also contains a number of apparent inconsistencies, but God cannot be the author of contradictions.

If we accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God, then it is reasonable to regard his teachings as the most accurate and authentic words of the Almighty. Next in credibility may be the epistles written by the Disciples of Christ, and their contemporary collaborators, as there is a reasonable indication that their teachings were drawn more or less directly from him and are almost entirely consistent with his message. The prophets of the Old Testament must also be taken seriously in that they were accepted by Christ and often quoted by him. However, their words tend to be much more obscure and often ambiguous. Where there appears to be disagreement, it is appropriate that the teachings of Christ be given preference.

The word of God does not end with the Bible. The writings of later scholars may also contain elements of Truth, particularly when they draw reasonable conclusions from the teachings of Christ. However, a clear distinction must be made between logical inferences from Scripture and 'theological theorising'.

What about the 'prophets' of other religions? From the Christian perspective the possibility cannot be excluded that some of their writings may also contain divine revelation. God can inspire whoever He wishes, and the reader may be surprised to learn that the much quoted teaching of Christ, 'Do unto others as you would have them do to you,' similar teachings were said by Confucius several hundred years earlier.

The Nature of God, Apparent Alternatives and On-going Debates

Much philosophical discussion has taken place over whether God is personal or impersonal, unity or trinity, familiar or remote, male or female, concerned with details or only with the overall picture, and whether He lives within human beings or outside them. ***It seems that we often use the word 'or' when we should be using 'and'.***

Male or Female

In His interaction with human beings, the nature of God appears to have shown characteristics of both genders - and often neither.

Unity or Trinity

Practising Muslims and Orthodox Jews, who believe in God as a single person, find the Christian teaching of three persons in one God strange and contradictory. However, the evidence of the Scriptures supports the concept of God as both unity and trinity. Consider the following extracts from the gospels:

- 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (*John 1:1-14*) The Word referred to here, is Jesus Christ.
- 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' (*Matt. 28:19*).
- 'Who has seen me has seen the Father' (*John 14:9*)..... 'The Father and I are one' (*John 10:30*).
- 'No slander is beyond forgiveness for men; but whoever slanders the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven' (*Matt. 12:31*). If only the Father is God then why should it be more serious to slander the Holy Spirit?

Despite the evident paradox, we must refrain from jumping to conclusions. The concept of 'one' is not always as simple as it seems [even in mathematics!] and the word 'person' is only the closest humanly comprehensible description of the nature of God expressed in the comparatively primitive approximations of our language.

Knowledge of the Future

Another controversial question is whether God can know the future, and if He does, how can freedom exist? Here too we confront an apparent inconsistency. However, before we reject either as impossible, perhaps we should consider that despite our 'advanced' scientific age, we still have little understanding of the nature of time itself. Without this, such debates are destined to remain inconclusive.

Does God Change?

In the most fundamental sense it seems unlikely. A number of things, such as the principles of logic and mathematics, are probably part of His nature, and we can reasonably expect such things to be eternal. He cannot decay or die or cease to exist for much the same reasons. He cannot change in the sense of being 'wrong' and later 'right', nor can He create things that are inconsistent in themselves. However, we are told that all things are possible with God, which suggests that He is free to express Himself in an infinite variety of ways. Since not all of these are simultaneously consistent, some might regard this as an ability to change. By way of analogy, we can walk slowly or quickly but we cannot do both at the same time. We have to change from one to the other.

God's Work: Creation, Evolution and Design

From the scientific point of view, the origin of the universe and its natural laws remains a mystery. We have theories to explain their existence, but the actual event of their coming into being is not directly observable. We really don't even know the fundamental nature of matter! With the evidence available to us at this time, it is impossible to confirm the biblical event of *creation* or to rule it out by deductive methods. [In this sense, we take 'creation' to mean bringing something into existence out of nothing.]

For similar reasons, there has been much debate about the origin and development of living things. The commonly accepted explanation is a process of *evolution*. This essentially means 'the spontaneous development of life from basic resources to complex organisms, under favourable conditions, according to natural laws and initiated by natural forces'. In contrast, the biblical version of the origin of plant and animal life indicates an act of *design*. It teaches that every species was formed intentionally by an intelligent being, from the natural resources of the earth, 'to bear off-springs according to its own kind'. However, the Bible also makes allowances for natural change as well as creation and design. For example, if God made one pair of human beings from which all others descended, then the different races must surely be the outcome of a natural process.

While abundant evidence is available to indicate a gradual process of adaptation within almost every species of living organism, a strong link between the different species has yet to be found. For example, the theory that man and the ape have a common physical ancestor has never been supported with substantial scientific evidence. In general, it seems what is presently known about the history of life on earth, is better explained by design and natural forces working together than by either on its own. Once again the emphasis is on 'and' rather than 'or'.

Fundamentally, there is nothing wrong with the evolutionist argument that life came about and developed because all the necessary conditions coincided. However, it does not refute the possibility that an intelligent being designed and initiated the process, intentionally provided the necessary conditions, or intervened at different stages. The only serious conflict between the 'divine action' explanation and the theory of evolution occurs where the latter seeks to ascribe the origin of the universe and the development of life to pure chance. The use of the term 'chance' in science, is often no more than an attempt to elevate what is really an admission of ignorance to the dignity of a legitimate theory.

Other components of the theory of evolution, such as 'adaptation' and 'the survival of the fittest', seem completely plausible, and are observed not only in plant and animal species but in many things made by human beings. Within almost every type of human artefact we find variety, and modifications or adaptations are incorporated to suit different purposes. Those designs best

suited to the prevailing conditions tend to last longer and are more likely to remain in production, while others may become 'extinct'. Many designs also show progressive development from the simple to the more complex, as is evident in the history of tools, vehicles and computers.

While the analogy between nature and human artefacts is not perfect, for no man-made object can (yet!) reproduce itself or be classified as 'living', it serves to illustrate that most phenomena which are used to support the 'evolution' argument are entirely compatible with the process of design. In contrast, those who reject the possibility of intentional design in nature, have yet to explain the exact process whereby even the lowest type of living organism came into existence. The simplest of these is still more complex and ingenious than the most intricate of human inventions.

God and Science

Divine causality is no longer an acceptable form of explanation in most 'respected' academic circles. Perhaps this is partly a reaction against those unobtrusive mental images of a God who manually runs everything in the universe. Such views originated from the attempts of human beings to account for what they could not understand at the time, and are clearly too crude and inadequate to coexist with the accelerating pace of discovery. Unfortunately, when they are formulated into dogma, they also become a hindrance to an even greater admiration for God's work which might come through a deeper study of nature. At the other extreme, they set up a conflict between science and faith which is conducive to rejecting God altogether.

Similar dangers exist when some of the Biblical stories are given simplistic interpretations. For example, according to the Scriptures, God made the universe in six days. Those who accept this literally and those who dismiss it as ridiculous equally overlook the biblical quotation: 'For the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day' (*II Peter 3:8; Psalm 89:4*).

It is partly true that with the progress of scientific understanding there has been an ever decreasing need to attribute phenomena to 'God' as a direct causal agent. However, one must be very careful in jumping to atheistic conclusions. It is equally true that with the relentless progress of automation and robotics in industry we no longer need to attribute the manufacture of many items to human labour. Does that eliminate humanity from the picture altogether? Are we not still the beginning and the end of the production process? It is interesting that God refers to himself as 'Alpha and Omega' in the Scriptures (*Rev. 1:8*).

It may also be significant that Christ, as far as we know, generally avoided discussing the laws of nature in any technical way. He did not give people models of reality which may have suited their level of understanding at the time, but which would later become embarrassingly obsolete.

Uncertainty

Science has been very dedicated to the discovery and understanding of laws which reveal the predictability of natural events. Mathematical formulas can describe the motion of the planets and foretell the position of the moon decades ahead with great precision. Such laws seem to work reasonably well on a large enough scale, but physicists have discovered that at the quantum level (extremely small) the behaviour of a particle is not totally predictable. To many scholars, this fundamental uncertainty undermines the concept of a God who created a perfect system.

Uncertainty, however, may be an essential feature of God's intentions. If it is part of our mission to explore the possibilities on our own initiative, then it can be argued that some degree of freedom may be essential both in us and in the material world. If *everything* were predetermined by rigid natural laws and predictable down to the finest detail, then how would it be possible for us to influence anything? On the other hand, freedom can never be absolute either, for then nothing could be built and there would be no universe at all. If freedom and predictability are both necessary, the question is how could the two be harmonised?

Imagine a person who is free to move about on a small ship. When he goes to one side, the ship leans over a little until all the forces are in balance again. The laws of hydrostatics ensure that the ship as a whole remains stable despite the random movements of the passengers. Likewise, the universe itself may have compensating mechanisms that maintain overall equilibrium on the larger scale, while allowing considerable freedom and flexibility in many matters of detail.

The uncertainty that comes with freedom does not imply any imperfection. It is not that God *cannot* control everything, but He probably *chooses not to*. Some degree of uncertainty may be very necessary, for otherwise we could never voluntarily participate in *making* the future.

The First Commandment

When we were advised in the Scriptures not to make craven images of God, the warning may equally have been intended to include mental images in the form of rigid ideas. As with a parent or friend we can have an intimate personal relationship, but we must always remain aware of how little we really know about them. This is especially true with God. We need to recognise that the full reality about God is vastly beyond the accumulated collective human knowledge and imagination. He does not fit neatly into any man-made concept. The way he described Himself to Moses can best be summed up in the words, **'I am who am'** [I am the one who is.] (*Exodus 3:14*) Perhaps that is the strongest conviction we can have about Him.

God and the Individual

As individuals, each of us is only one person of several billion on a small planet, somewhere in a vast universe where there are more galaxies than the number of people on the earth. If there is a God, would He concern Himself with something so apparently insignificant?

First, a person who has reservations regarding such a possibility may need to resist any inclination to imagine God as if He had our own human limitations. Decades ago, we already had powerful computers that could 'simultaneously' interact with hundreds of users giving each one the impression that he always had the computer's full attention. If this was possible with a mere human invention, then why should it be so incredible that God could interact with every individual as if he were uniquely special?

Nevertheless, the question, 'Are we individually important to God?' is a valid one. The evidence of the Scriptures is unambiguously 'yes'. A small part of this will come through in later chapters; however, the reader is once again invited to study the Scriptures which contain abundant indications of His love for us. When we speak of God's love, we refer to His limitless concern for our individual and collective happiness in the deepest, broadest and most far-sighted sense.

The Kingdom of God and Concepts of Paradise

Unfortunately, most images of 'heaven' depicted in religious art tend to offend our natural desire for more developed levels of happiness. They may portray an idyllic refuge of tranquillity and abundance for those whose lives have been dominated by starvation and war but they are hardly inviting for anyone who has experienced the satisfaction of accomplishment. They evoke an anticipation of the kind of paradise where development has ceased and nobody ever did anything new or exciting. Rather than stimulating the curiosity, they are often more conducive to *disinterest* in religion, and almost certainly misrepresent eternal life.

Despite the abundance of material written on the subject, we are still very unclear as to the nature of paradise. We do not know how many dimensions there are in the universe or what they might contain. Some reports from people who have had near death experiences suggest that they were greatly disappointed in having to return to the life we have here, finding this a mere shadow of a far greater reality. They say that it is like trying to communicate colour to a person who knows only black and white.

Whatever heaven is like, the Scriptures suggest that God has been very actively working (*Gen. 1:1-31, John 5:17*), so the concept of it being a state of idleness is unlikely to be valid. If God and His possibilities are infinite, there

should always be something new for us to discover and pursue. As with knowing God, we must remain open-minded about what that future might hold.

* * * * *

The Scriptures are, without doubt, the most valuable source of information we have about God; however, a very relevant question remains unanswered: ***‘Can the existence of God or the authenticity of the Scriptures be proven at all?’*** It is to this problem that we now turn our attention.

Chapter 3

THE PROBLEM OF PROOF

'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

(Luke 16:31)

Evidence and Proof

There is no such thing as proof in the absolute or universal sense. There is only evidence. This is recognised in nearly every legal system, where verdicts are based on the concept of 'beyond reasonable doubt'. If totally irrefutable proof were demanded, no-one would ever be found guilty of crime. Rigorous proof may be possible in the environment of formal logic and mathematics, but not in the real world of science, law, society or even personal experience.

Objectively speaking, evidence may vary in strength and reliability, be material or argumentative, and come direct from personal experience or the words of another person. However, by its very nature, it is always open to question. In our present state of relative human ignorance, all of our observations and experiences will always support a variety of explanations and conclusions.

Persuasion

Evidence and proof are concepts built around our desires to persuade people to believe something to be true. However, what is sufficient to persuade one person, is not necessarily enough for another. Proof is a very personal thing.

For example, consider the following difficulties:

- A large number of people may see a given event and nearly all will believe that it actually happened. Despite this, others may claim that it could have been mass hallucination, or offer some other plausible explanation.
- People differ in their sensitivities; one may perceive the presence of something and another may not. What is perceived may be fact or illusion.
- One may try to communicate a personal experience, but there is no way that the experience itself can be transferred directly from one person to another.
- One person may have a more highly developed intellect that can accept or refute a refined argument while another may not even understand it.

- The most irrefutably logical argument may fail to convince, if its assumptions are unacceptable to the listener.
- People who have an aversion to an idea will demand much stronger evidence to persuade them against their inclinations. Indeed, attractions, aversions and vested interests can be so strong that evidence which is sufficient to convince nearly every other 'reasonable' person, may still leave their contrary beliefs unshaken.
- For some people, no evidence is acceptable unless it is scientific. Yet scientists have learnt to draw their conclusions, not with bold certainty, but with some degree of probability. Every theory is held only tentatively, and there is a long list of once 'proven' scientific statements which have now been discredited.

Agnosticism and Atheism

If proving anything conclusively is generally impossible, then no matter how strong one's own convictions might be another person who holds an agnostic view must be respected for his honesty and genuine doubts. Atheism, on the other hand, conveys a degree of strong negative conviction. In its most extreme form, atheism of the kind that dismisses the possibility of a personal God altogether has severe problems of its own. Unless we arrogantly assert that the human species has achieved the ultimate pinnacle of conscious existence, we must remain open to the possibility of other beings somewhere in the universe that may have attained a higher level than us. If that can be, then why not God?

The Crisis of Faith

Often people find themselves no longer believing in the religion they once accepted and even fervently practised during their formative years. While many simply 'drift away', a *crisis of faith* is a more traumatic loss of one's conviction where there remains a conscious need to believe in *something*, but serious doubt has fallen on what they once assumed to be true. It may have become a casualty of the scientific part of our intellect which tends to ensure that we hold convictions only until they are brought into question by new evidence or the emergence of an apparently more plausible theory. Perhaps this is the way the mind must function to promote development. Faith cannot operate *contrary* to good reasoning, and it would be obtuse to declare that we will always believe something even if there were seemingly conclusive evidence against it.

The crisis of faith could be the inevitable outcome of emotional dependence on a rigid simplistic unexamined system of beliefs that becomes untenable, or clinging to feelings of certainty that are not justified. On the other hand, it may be the result of taking our own doubts too seriously and jumping to premature

conclusions in the opposite direction. We should never make final judgements about intangible ideas for new evidence can always emerge requiring us to modify those we hold or even revive discarded ones.

There can also be unique personal reasons for a crisis of faith. Regardless of what the truth may be as an independent reality, each individual's ability to tune into it remains an essential link in its recognition and belief. This ability is influenced by sensitivity that may change rather like our varying capacities to draw pleasure from events in our environment. Sometimes faith finds itself in a void like a radio losing the signal from a station. The problem may be more with the receiver than with the signal. Extreme scepticism and cynicism may have developed through patterns of personal experience, or the tendency to question and analyse may have overtaken our ability to re-unify.

We need to accept that whatever the truth may be in any issue, there might not be adequate tangible evidence to support it, or it could be surrounded by conflicting information. It is rather like a partner declaring their love for us: Even when they are perfectly sincere, there can be many reasons why we might remain uncertain. That is where faith becomes complementary: Having found the evidence inconclusive, we take the risk and trust the sources we are inclined towards. Real faith is neither blind nor automatic. While it may be supported by intuition, it is essentially a conscious decision to set aside our remaining doubts and behave as if something is true. In any case, faith should never be confused with the *feelings* of certainty, conviction or comfortable acceptance.

Possibilities

We cannot expect the truth to jump out at us and overwhelm us. It does not actively compete or shout above the noise of its surroundings. We need to search for it and have the humility to be open to the possibilities. In matters of importance it is wise to examine critically whatever we observe, but very foolish to think that *lack* of convincing evidence ever disproves anything. Understanding this is important, for faith, meaning and hope can never penetrate beyond the closed mind. In any case, history has shown that most assumed limits were destined to be proven wrong.

Proof and Belief

The existence of God or the authenticity of the Scriptures is things no person can prove to any other. All that any person, including the author, can convey is that with his own attractions and aversions, perceptiveness, experience and abilities, the evidence he has encountered is strong enough to persuade him to take that additional step towards personal conviction.

If faith has a real meaning here, then it is the bridge between the evidence, which can never be totally and absolutely conclusive, and the state of believing it. Faith and evidence are complementary, and all areas of present human knowledge are a combination of both. In our awareness of God, there is a higher component of faith. When it comes to understanding natural processes, observation is more dominant, but even here, the most basic theories used to explain them are also not 'known', only believed.

Faith gives us the confidence to act despite our imperfect knowledge. Whether we recognise it or not, there is a component of faith in every decision we make and every action we take. If we were to require absolute certainty and complete understanding in every relevant detail, we would never act at all.

We will consider some further practical applications of faith in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

FEAR AND FAITH

'Do not be afraid, only believe.' (Mark 5:36)

'Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; Sufficient for each day, is its own trouble.' (Matt. 6:34)

Evil in Perspective

Those who have tasted extremes of experience can have no doubt as to the existence of heaven and hell; rather than places, they are states of being. To associate evil with painful experiences or unwelcome conditions is a useful guide as to the kinds of things we should avoid inflicting on others and, in general, on ourselves. However, the subject of evil is not so simple, for we are also taught that accepting temporary, and sometimes life-long, suffering may lead us to even greater happiness later or in eternity. So although evil and the unwelcome are closely related, it is clear that not everything that is undesirable or painful in the short term is necessarily evil. Evil must be seen with a long term view. By way of a simple analogy, parting with a valued possession or having to undertake medical treatment might never be pleasant at the time, but it can be regarded as regrettable only if it leaves the person worse off in the long term; otherwise it could be described as a worthwhile investment.

Perhaps the most accurate definition of evil might be 'anything which is a hindrance to greater happiness, particularly of the permanent or eternal kind'. This, however, forces us to recognise our severely inadequate understanding of evil and our need for some farsighted source of guidance. It is likely that our perception of evil differs significantly from God's view because of our limited ability to extend our perspective beyond the foreseeable future. Traditionally, the existence of evil has been attributed to 'Satan'; however the subject of angels, saints and demons and their influence on humanity is beyond the scope of this book. For the purposes of this chapter, we may conveniently confine our discussion to the relatively short term, human perception of evil that is more tangible to us.

The Existence of Evil

How can God, who is revealed as goodness and love, permit evil to exist at all? A detailed discussion of this problem which has puzzled philosophers for centuries would be too extensive. Ultimately, we do not know enough about God to offer a satisfactory explanation; however, it is possible to make some interesting observations:

- Good and evil, as we know them, are not like pure black and white; there are degrees of good and evil. Sometimes it is very difficult to draw a clear dividing line to separate them. Often they appear to be mixed in an interdependent way, and practical decision-making frequently involves ambivalence and compromise.
- Pain is unwelcome because people are sensitive. It may not be good to experience pain, but the *ability* to feel it appears to be essential to survival.
- We cannot learn to 'do good' freely if no possibilities but good ones exist; nor can we learn to control ourselves and our environments, which is necessary for freedom, without problem situations to master.
- Good and evil, like order and disorder, are *personal perceptions* influenced by our values, aims and sensitivities, rather than objective characteristics of the material circumstances. Situations tend to be interpreted according to individual preferences, and what is order for one person is often seen as disorder by another.
- No personal state, event or circumstances can be defined as good or evil without regard to the fitness and adaptation of the individual - one may suffer and another may thrive. The most well founded generalisations about what is bad for people, are likely to have their exceptions and what appears to be a tragic condition to an onlooker, is not always seen that way by the victim. Even more significant is that some people have accomplished great things precisely *because* of their 'handicaps'. In those instances, they often regarded their own conditions as assets, not liabilities.
- Much confusion arises when we try to make absolutes out of concepts that are, by their nature, relative. So it is with good and evil. Even when we label God as the greatest good, what we really mean is that a close and harmonious relationship with Him is the ultimate good experience *for us*. Were it not so, the term 'good' would be meaningless.

Nevertheless, whatever reasoning we use to explain the existence of things we regard as evil, the possibility of becoming a victim still remains very real and all we can do is to seek ways to handle that possibility.

Fear and Avoidance

Fear has its roots in each individual's own perception of evil, which is linked to his values, sensitivities, experience and imagination, and his wariness of the unknown. It expresses itself in a variety of forms, ranging from a prudent respect for things that are able to do harm, to severe anxiety which can cripple the ability to think rationally. It is a powerful force that can improve our safety or

destroy our well-being depending on what we let it do to us. In general, fear makes us naturally inclined to act so as to avoid unpleasant experiences:

External Avoiding Action

When unwelcome experiences are destructive, the strategy of disciplined avoidance is sound, and forms part of the key to survival and personal growth. For example, a fear of getting burnt will make us cautious in the use of fire. Sometimes, however, the action taken to avoid what is expected to be unpleasant also forms a barrier to other good experiences and a higher level of development. A crippling fear of motion sickness may prevent our experiencing the joys of travel. Nearly all the great scriptures and many other sources abound with useful advice in these areas.

Internal Avoiding Action

An alternative approach to handling fear is to seek ways of reducing our sensitivity. This area cannot be covered adequately here, but a few warnings may be appropriate. Firstly, self-induced numbness is a two-edged sword for it cuts off good and bad experiences without distinction. Secondly, insensitivity is just as conducive to alienation as over-sensitivity, and psychological barriers, like physical ones, offer protection only at the cost of relative isolation. Thirdly, while desensitisation may protect us from the pain of certain feelings, it can leave us open to destructive forces which we might otherwise have been motivated to avoid. Consider what could happen if we lost the ability to feel pain. Unless there is convincing evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that all sensitivities, whether physical or emotional, play a part in preserving our well-being. Fears can be confronted and sensitivities may decline or disappear as we adapt and learn to handle situations, but it is unwise to tamper with sensitivities directly without understanding their origin and role.

The avoidance of evil, motivated by fear, is of natural importance to all sensitive beings. We were given the ability to fear for very good reasons. Severe difficulties begin to arise, however, when fear becomes a habitual response to every threat. No matter how many things we try to control, run away from or desensitise ourselves to, there will always be another threat to confront us and we find ourselves living in perpetual anxiety.

In the context of happiness, life must be about more than escaping. It must be based on the positive pursuit of good, which is the essence of love. The most powerful inhibitor of love is fear. When it is allowed to dominate us, it cripples both love and life at the same time. Fear is a vital servant but a lethal master. The key to overcoming and controlling it is *faith*, which takes the form of belief, trust and confidence, even in the face of evil. Thus the habit of fear must be replaced by the habit of faith. This confidence enables us to find the courage to act with love despite the risks, and in so doing, make a meaningful contribution to happiness. On what can we base this faith? Let us digress a little to the subject of adversities.

Adversities

People who suffer unexpectedly, often ask themselves, 'What have I done to deserve this?' and, 'Why me?' Wherever we might seek the answers, it is important to avoid unproductively blaming anyone, harbouring anger at the 'unfairness of life', or worst of all, adopting yet another crippling fear to inhibit our freedom.

If we look to the past for explanations, we can usually find some plausible, and possibly accurate, combination of causality and coincidence that may have led to the situation. This line of reasoning has merits in terms of trying to understand natural connections, and thereby expand our knowledge and wisdom. However, the accidental components are often harder to reconcile, particularly for a person who expects natural justice. To make sense of adversities, we need to consider that the real reasons why anything is **allowed** to happen to us, may lie more in the future than in the past. Christ assured us that, 'Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father first having given His consent. As for you, even the hairs on your head have been counted. So fear not, for you are worth more than many sparrows' (*Matt. 10:29-31*). This strongly suggests that nothing ever happens to a person without it being sanctioned by the Almighty, and then only if it is potentially conducive to their long term good. Were it not so, His love for us would be inconsistent and unreliable.

The Path of Faith and Courage

If we believe in God's extensive support and protection, we can approach adversities and threats with courage. We can *choose* to treat them as opportunities rather than disasters. When facing important decisions, we can more readily accept unwelcome experiences as an investment, and will not allow fear and sensitivity to cripple our decisiveness. It is with persistence in this way of thinking that the habit of faith becomes established and comes to our aid when it is needed.

It is in our darkest hours when we are frightened, uncertain and alone, that we depend most on our confidence in God's love.

As we emerge, we often find that much of our anxiety was needless. In the end we may feel proud of having overcome our fear, and draw deep satisfaction from achievements that otherwise might not have been possible. Always, the person who acts with faith and courage, tempered with wisdom, gains or learns something, and in the extreme situation he finds that he has taken a crucial step in his development that changes his life completely.

Concern for the Future

Much of our discussion is equally applicable to the inclination to worry about the future. In advising us not to be anxious about tomorrow (*Matt. 6:34*), Christ does not imply that we should never make plans, take precautions or insure ourselves against unaffordable mishaps that have a reasonable chance of occurring. Some interest in the future is both beneficial and responsible. The message is to avoid premature *anxiety* about imagined possibilities that almost never occur the way we anticipate, if they happen to us at all. The best way to minimise the likelihood of future problems is always to take proper care of today.

Death

What is life and the meaning of death? We observe that people are born and people die, so human life becomes defined as what there is in between. People who believe only in the common denominator of shared human experience represented by observable evidence, may be drawn to the conclusion that death is the end, after which the body decays and the person ceases to exist.

The scientific approach to investigation has played an unbelievably important role in the material progress of humanity. It has had a strongly unifying effect on learning as a socially cooperative phenomenon, largely due to its rigour and emphasis on verifiable observation. Nevertheless, its ability to reveal reality is limited by the human senses aided by existing technology and reasoning. Is it valid to conclude that there is nothing in the universe except what these tools can discover? If we were all blind, would it mean that there is no such thing as light? What if a few people could see but the majority could not? Would it be reasonable to dismiss the anecdotal evidence because it is not verifiable by everyone? Just one sense more or less could make a very big difference to our perception of reality, and it is clearly imperative that we remain open minded regarding the possibilities. In a similar way, we must avoid letting our concept of 'being alive' become locked into the tangible evidence of our limited senses. Even from the most scientific viewpoint, the observable death of the body does not imply that the real person we knew has ceased to exist.

Except in our faith, hope and imagination, we are prisoners of the present. Often we cannot verify a future possibility simply because of what and where we are at the time. Has an embryo ever seen a chick to confirm that there is life beyond the shell? Would seeing it prove its own destiny? This is not an argument for the continuity of life but for the open mind.

On Easter Sunday each year, Christians celebrate the resurrection of Christ. That event and the miracles he performed in raising others from the dead were his evidence to us of the existence of on-going eternal life; on this hinges the faith of all Christians (*1 Cor 15:14*). This is also supported by the increasing

number of recorded 'near death experiences' where all known body and brain functions ceased and the people were later revived. The accounts of their experiences during the intervening period provide further evidence that life does not end when all visible signs of it have disappeared. The majority of those who have had these experiences completely lost their fear of death as a result. Naturally, there are always alternative explanations for the same experiences and our earlier discussion on the problem of proof applies equally here. However, for those who are willing to accept the evidence and follow Christ to the best of their abilities, the death of their physical bodies need not be anticipated with fear and finality, but welcomed as a transition to something much better. The length of this present life ceases to be a crucial issue and is replaced by the paramount importance of how well we live and the kind of person we are becoming.

Chapter 5

THE OLD AND THE NEW

'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

(Matt. 13:52)

Christ and the Scriptures

The Scriptures comprising the Bible span the time from the creation of the universe to around the first century AD from the Jewish and Christian points of view. The Old Testament, part of which formed the basis of the Jewish holy book the Torah, covers the period prior to the coming of Christ. The New Testament is the story of Jesus Christ and the earliest days of Christianity. As we do not assume that the reader is familiar with the Bible, a very brief summary may be helpful.

The legend is that human beings in their earliest days were misled, asserted their freedom and became alienated from their Creator. As a result they lost their ideal environment, and hardship, illness and death became an on-going part of their natural existence. God, however, loved mankind and promised to send a saviour to reconcile them with Himself. The Old Testament relates how God prepared a particular nation for the arrival of this 'Messiah'. However, Jesus Christ was not the kind of leader they expected. He did not come with great force and lead them to material success and political victory over their enemies. He did not overwhelm humanity with the omnipotent power of God, but invited every individual to the truth in the spirit of freedom. He taught love and gentleness, lived in humility and poverty and even died a shameful death by crucifixion at the instigation of the existing religious hierarchy who rejected him and saw him as a threat to their authority.

We will return to 'the redemption' in a later chapter. For the present, it is sufficient to say that if the legendary 'Adam' of the Old Testament, who represents the earliest of human beings, demonstrated that even under the most ideal conditions mankind will go astray (*Genesis 2:15-17, 3:17-19*), Jesus Christ proved that in the most unfavourable circumstances, he could still remain faithful to his purpose. He established a spiritual kingdom, not a material one, and defeated death, not by avoiding it but by passing through it and rising again.

Although he often challenged, surprised and astounded the 'establishment', Christ did not abolish what was written in the Old Testament, but came to fulfil the promises made by the prophets, and make it possible for mankind to enter the kingdom of God (*Matt. 5:17*). He encouraged higher standards,

emphasising that the spirit of the law takes priority over the letter of the law, that the greatest two commandments of loving God and our neighbours as ourselves override all other commandments and rules, and that no amount of meticulous attention to subtleties compensates for gross neglect of weightier matters such as justice. Christ put the law into its proper perspective - as the servant of mankind, not its inflexible master. This outlook is partly captured in his words, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (*Mark 2:27*). In contrast to what the scholars of the day generally believed, Christ made it clear that a person cannot save himself merely by meticulous observance of every fine detail of the law, but that salvation is a cooperative task between God and mankind.

Other important contrasts exist between the Old and the New Testaments:

- The people had long been taught that suffering was the result of their sins and those of their ancestors. However, instead of apportioning blame, Christ focussed his attention on the need to use the power we have to alleviate their condition. This was the basis on which our worthiness of the Kingdom of God would be assessed.
- Through the teachings of Christ, God also came to be seen as close, rather than distant and remote, and a much greater emphasis was placed on friendship than on blood relationships.

The explanation for the change of emphasis lies not in any essential disagreement, but in the stages of development through which humanity must pass on its way to individual and social maturity.

The Process of Development

In many ways, the history of civilisation parallels the spiritual and social development of the individual:

1. The individual person begins life undisciplined. If this were allowed to continue without any order for long, the growing chaos would result in destruction, or at best, a very low level of existence. Rules and structure enforced by his parents and other elders, make his life more predictable, and enormously improve his prospects of survival and his attainable level of well-being.
2. As he matures, he can be given more freedom to make his own decisions together with greater responsibility for himself. He does not obtain a licence to lawlessness, but the recognition that he is also capable of making rules and applying them where they are appropriate.

The story of God's guidance of humanity reflects a similar process:

1. It is unnecessary for us to argue the outcome of total social anarchy. Countless short-lived examples existed, even in recorded history, to show that it has no long term viability. Order and predictability are necessary to ensure survival and development. Law is not only the basis of order, but vital to fostering in the individual and the community an appreciation of orderliness. Without this sensitivity, freedom is dangerous and responsibility cannot be properly learnt and understood. The Old Testament is largely the history of God's guidance of the Jewish people through this phase of their spiritual and social development. Other civilisations also had their 'prophets', or people of wisdom, whose enlightenment is just as likely to have come from God, although its real source might not have been revealed to them.
2. Christ takes man through the final phase of his growth - the phase of freedom without disorder. Law is not abandoned, but made subject to the supremacy of justice, responsibility and love. God, as the Spirit of good, comes to live within those who are receptive, and for them there is a declining need for order to be imposed from outside.

The Christian Church

Many mistakenly think that Jesus Christ founded a new religion. He did not. What Christ did was to fulfil the one which God established in the Old Testament with Abraham and his descendants. They became the 'chosen people', that is, the people selected to be the starting point from which humanity would eventually be reconciled with Him. With the resurrection of Christ, this religion ceased to belong to one race of people alone, and within the growing Christian community all who wished to practise its way of life were made welcome. Christ did not intend his followers to see themselves as an elite and exclusive group of people superior to the rest of humanity, but as workers helping to draw all people to the word of God and eternal life.

In its earliest days, the spread of Christianity was marked by the formation of small communities that shared a common basic belief and hope, and above all were noted for their loving behaviour and mutual supportiveness, not only in times of difficulty but on a day to day basis. As Christianity became more firmly established, formalised and centralised, it became politically more powerful, but this also opened the way for increased local apathy and complacency to the point where a significant majority were really Christian in name only. Part of the explanation may be that when a system becomes more complex and power becomes more remote and impersonal, so does the perception of responsibility, and this inevitably has an impact on the character of the individual and his relationships. Nevertheless, there were always groups of people who kept the original spirit alive.

Since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Christianity has featured an increasing number of autonomous 'denominations'. While for many of them,

their theology is very basic and sometimes questionable, their local community spirit can be much closer to what Christ originally intended. By proportion the sense of belonging in the larger denominations tends to be much less consistent, but they too contain groups where faith and solidarity continue to be very strong. Perhaps God in His wisdom has allowed this variety to flourish for good reasons.

On-going Renewal

At various times in its long history, 'Christianity' slipped back into relying too much on tradition and law, which are easier to teach and enforce than love. The threat of damnation for those who disobeyed was used as an expedient means of social control in the cooperation between 'Church' and state, and there was often visible corruption within the ranks of the clergy, especially those who possessed political power. Other signs of decadence also emerged. Often the teachings of theologians seemed to take precedence over the Gospel, and several generations of people were never encouraged to read the Scriptures, which the clergy claimed to have the sole right to interpret. There were significant periods where '*Christians*' persecuted other religious groups and alternative denominations, and some abominable atrocities were committed in the name of God.

From time to time, 'Christianity' finds itself in dire need of renewal. That is not surprising, for even the Jewish people in the Old Testament often went morally astray and had to be guided back. No community or institution is immune from the effects of human weaknesses, and forces such as vested interests, inertia, rigidity, fear, ignorance and complacency are ever present alongside everything that is beneficial. Unless an institution continuously re-examines itself, it inevitably experiences internal decay and declining relevance. The Christian Church is no exception.

Although major reforms tend to take place at irregular intervals, the process of renewal is really continuous and endless. Within every living religion, there is a dynamic interaction between the old and the new; a conflict between those who see a need for change and those who resist it for equally persuasive reasons; an on-going process that inevitably results in some degree of internal disunity. This process has also been very evident in Islam, but it is perhaps even truer for Christianity because it must be guided by *love* and *good* which should take priority over tradition and law. Good often takes much longer to identify and enlightenment does not come on demand. However, through this process the Church continually re-emerges in the spirit in which it was intended by Christ.

Christianity and Other Religions

Throughout history, significant teachers and prophets have arisen in various parts of the world. They perceived reality from different perspectives and taught

what they had come to see as the ideal way of life. They either did not know, or chose to disregard, many of the beliefs and practices of the established religions, and gave their people laws which were often more severe or more liberal. Were the structures that were being enforced within Judaism or 'Christianity' at the time, in conflict with the needs of practical survival in those environments? Could it be that these societies needed a more appropriate order at their stages of development? Were spiritual leaders such as Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed also sent by God? Like the prophets of the Old Testament, it seems very likely that they were.

With the expanding contact and dialogue, Christians are discovering much to be learnt from those outside their own community that is spiritually enriching and in complete harmony with the Gospel of Jesus. Incorporating such things into their own lives does not make them disloyal to Christ, but the contrary. Christianity is not exclusive of anything which is in harmony with the word of God, and any person who lives with responsibility and love, whether he calls himself a Christian or not, may be regarded like a disciple of Christ. [Read *John 13:35*]

Chapter 6

MORALITY

'Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?'

(Matt. 12:3)

Christianity is not a religion of laws, rules and regulations, but love and the responsibility to do good and avoid evil.

Morality is fundamentally about decision making and choice. As such, it is inseparable from freedom and responsibility, power, the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, love, conscience, guilt and judgement.

Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom is the measure of power in our lives: the power to do, the power to avoid and the ability to choose how we use it. It is accompanied by an unavoidable moral responsibility. The power we have is determined by our personal abilities and the resources over which we have control. We are morally responsible for all the effects that can reasonably be connected with the way we use this power or fail to do so. At the same time, we can never be held morally accountable for anything that is beyond our ability to influence. The words of Christ, 'From him to whom much is given, much is expected' (*Luke 12:48*), carry both implications.

Responsibility is also defined or limited by other factors:

- The first is by mutual agreement. More than one person may have power in a situation, but each agrees to confine his use of it to a certain sphere so as to avoid conflict and waste of effort. For instance, when a crime is committed, we ought to call the police rather than try to punish the perpetrator ourselves. Numerous examples of this exist at all levels of society from the family to the state, many of which have become entrenched in tradition and law, and the concept of 'authority' is largely focused on the control and acceptable use of power.
- The second is by necessary choice. Because our power and resources are finite, it is impossible to accomplish everything that is potentially desirable. An extreme case is that of the lone surgeon in the midst of a natural disaster. He may be forced to choose which lives he will try to save.

- The third is like the second, but results from voluntary commitment. For example, parents must attend to the responsibilities they *accepted* as part of their marriage which requires them to provide the necessary care for their children. With limited resources, other expectations must be reduced. However, voluntary choice never completely removes our fundamental obligations in relation to people in general.

Responsibility is part of love. Above the expected basic level, it is essentially voluntary, and we have the right to choose for whom we care with the power we have.

Right and Wrong

The second major area related to morality is values. As Christ said, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (*Matt. 6:21*). Our values are determined by our perception of what is good for us, or what we think will make us happy. They are tied to what we believe in and hope for. Christ and other great religious leaders gave us their advice, but we retain the freedom to choose and must face the outcomes of our choices. The values that dominate our lives find their expression in the more tangible objectives we pursue.

Any action we take is, logically, right or wrong only in relation to a specific objective. For example, taking tranquillisers may be right for the purpose of calming ourselves, but is wrong in relation to any side effects we wish to avoid. A desperate person might steal in order to feed his starving family. His action may be seen as right for survival but wrong for social order. Any attempt to label behaviour as wrong in an absolute or 'moral' sense, presupposes that one objective takes priority over another, or that it is possible for anyone to dictate the values and objectives of another person. However, the notion that 'the end justifies the means' is equally false, because in this context, 'justifying' implies that we consider the means used to be completely right, regardless of any unwelcome side effects. It is based on the mistaken belief that the only outcome of importance is the one that is directly being sought.

No action is universally right *or* wrong, but both right *and* wrong for different purposes. When correctly interpreted, this is more conducive to a clear understanding of Christian morality than any legalistic or dogmatic formula. It demands a higher level of moral development, and encourages the kind of obedience which is intelligent, willing and constructive:

- For those whose foremost values are eternal life, universal harmony and a deep relationship with the Almighty, the rightness or wrongness of every action is assessed in relation to *these* objectives. This is what Christ taught and practised. Often he would heal the sick on the Sabbath, a day on which it was forbidden to work. However, he was more concerned about the good of the people and doing the will of his Father.

- For those whose values are of a different kind, it is reasonable to pursue those actions which help them achieve their own objectives, provided they are willing to accept the full consequences, including those they did not anticipate. Every way of living has its own potential for achievements, its own attainable level of happiness and its inevitable outcome in terms of joy and regret. Each person has the freedom to choose the pathway he wishes to follow **at his own risk**.

Christ, on careful examination, made very few rules but set many high standards, and put much emphasis on the connection between action and consequence. His teaching on morality was pragmatic and expedient in the extreme, but with an eternal view: He gave us the most essential criteria for important life decisions, namely, if anything becomes an obstacle to achieving eternal life, avoid it or remove it, and if it is effective in making progress towards the kingdom of God, then do it!

Morality and Law

Right and wrong are often seen simplistically in terms of compliance with rules. This is lazy, dogmatic, irresponsible, and most of all, ineffective. We will not achieve eternal life, or anything of great value, through inflexible, blindfolded obedience. From the moral perspective, no law is above its purpose. It is not to be obeyed simply 'because it is the law'.

- Some laws are unjust and do more harm than good.
- Some do not serve their original purpose in the circumstances.
- Some are impossible to implement, and
- Some are in conflict with one another.

Under such conditions, a person is not acting immorally by disregarding part of the law, but may even be morally obliged to do so. As many war crimes illustrate, a person who obeys a law that does evil is just as deserving of condemnation as the one who breaks a law that was made for the good of everyone. Either way, no person can escape moral responsibility. While the 'rule of law' is vastly preferable to anarchy or the unlimited arbitrary use of power, it is neither sufficient nor absolute in all cases.

Most governments would welcome people to equate legality and morality, for that makes the task of law enforcement considerably easier. However, it is patently obvious that the two are not identical, and concerned citizens are constantly fighting to change laws in order to make society better. There is much that is legal and very immoral, such as business practices that exploit the disadvantaged, and there are things that are illegal but not immoral, such as failing to comply with minor regulations that have no relevance to anyone's well-being. In the latter case, one may still have to face the consequences, but these will not come from God!

Sometimes there are insufficient means to comply with all the applicable laws, and occasionally requirements are even in conflict with one another. For this reason, any system of rules, including those which are of religious origin, must be seen in some order of importance. Here common sense and some basic legal awareness are very useful. Generally a person should try to obey the law wherever possible, except where he finds it morally imperative to do otherwise.

Good

It is naturally appropriate for the practising Christian to tie his concepts of right and wrong to good and evil. It could be said that an action was right if its outcome is good and wrong if it leads to evil. These associations are very useful, but they sometimes overlook the subtleties involved in more difficult and complex moral situations which can lead to genuine disagreements, particularly where good and evil are mixed and not easily measurable.

A basic definition of 'good' is 'whatever leads to happiness.' Although essentially valid, this requires considerable qualification to be morally useful. The concept of good is not a simple one. Like right and wrong, it has an element of relativity, but in a different way. Right and wrong are concerned with actions in relation to objectives, whereas good and evil are concerned with outcomes or situations in relation to those who are affected.

The concept of good always begs the questions, 'For whom?', 'In what way?' and 'For how long?' Anything I do can have an outcome that is good for me yet make another person unhappy; good for one part of my life, such as my career, yet detrimental to another part; good for the moment, but not in terms of the eventual consequences. Consider a person who lights a cigarette in a crowded room. The act of smoking probably relaxes him and makes him a little happier for the moment. To this extent, it is good for him now in a superficial way. The moral problem is that his smoking also affects him at a deeper level in the long-term, and risks injuring the health of those around him. In contrast, eating an orange is unlikely to have such far-reaching consequences, and a more limited view is quite adequate. Whenever the issue of 'good' is considered, it is essential that we take a perspective that is at least as far reaching as the foreseeable consequences of our actions.

Clearly, no human being is sufficiently knowledgeable and farsighted to guarantee that all of his actions will be **good in every important respect**. Nevertheless, **that is the ideal to which we are directed to aspire**. Once again, our condition of ignorance and human weakness places severe limitations on us, and we have an on-going need for more enlightened advice.

Good intentions are the essential starting point, but by themselves they do not guarantee that the outcomes will be good. Without adequate knowledge and responsibility, they are lame, unreliable and potentially self-defeating. We are

all familiar with 'do-gooders' who meddle in the affairs of others without invitation, unequipped to repair the damage they do through their ignorance of the relevant circumstances. The process of doing good *starts* with intentions and awareness, follows through with actions and must be *confirmed* by the results. Love requires careful attention throughout the whole process, and is an on-going learning experience that is often in need of guidance.

Perfection

For most people, perfection has connotations of boring saintliness and impossible aspirations. However, Christ made an interesting reference to the perfection of God. 'He makes His sun rise on the evil *and* on the good, and sends rain on the just *and* on the unjust', (*Matt 5:45-48*). The message conveyed is that God treats people well, not because of who *they* are, but because of who *He* is. He is focused on His universal values and objectives. He is not diverted by people's offensive behaviour and does not act on the basis of irrelevant criteria. The teachings of Christ that surround this observation suggest that perfection is not a matter of unattainable extremes, but consistently appropriate orientation. The standards are high, but the principles are practical and ultimately much more effective than our short-sighted ways.

If we define personal perfection as 'being good enough to enter the Kingdom of God', then we can never achieve it without His support. That is hardly surprising, for despite our quest for independence, nobody has ever made significant progress in *any* area totally alone and unassisted. What God wants, is for us to cooperate with Him by adopting His ideals and working *towards* them. Some pursuit of ideals is essential to a meaningful life, and healthy societies have always encouraged people to strive for excellence.

Many people associate perfection with satisfying *everything* on a wish list. A woman might imagine the perfect man as having money, good looks, honesty, charm and a lot of other characteristics all combined in the same person. Unfortunately, such a list can be entirely arbitrary, and may contain several desires that are incompatible. The laws of nature cannot support inconsistencies or contradictions, and clearly many of our notions of perfection are merely figments of human imagination that have nothing to do with God's standards.

It is also a mistake to confuse perfection with *perfectionism*. The latter is more of a neurosis than a virtue. It is an attempt to satisfy a multitude of self-imposed requirements in every unimportant detail, rather than to optimise the whole with the means available. Perfectionism tends to be counter-productive, often causing more vital needs to be neglected. It is said that Christ lived the perfect human life, but he was certainly not a perfectionist. He kept all the commandments and generally respected civil authority, but he did not observe every trivial custom. Christ's perfection lay in his total dedication to his mission.

If we think of perfection on the scale of *right* or *good*, then the principles of relativity must also apply here. Being 'perfect' is essentially meaningless unless we specify the objectives and the criteria. It seems that even God makes choices and optimises *for a purpose*. There are perfect birds in the air and perfect fishes in the water, but neither is perfectly suited to live in the *other* environment. The pursuit of true perfection starts with knowing or choosing our primary *objective* and having an awareness of the present *realities* including our abilities, resources and limitations. We need to think in terms of *effectiveness* with consistent proper standards in all necessary areas, and operate with an enlightened order of priorities.

The Priorities of Love

The central importance of love in Christianity has already been highlighted in the first chapter. One may also regard it as the *active* ingredient in morality. Love is meaningless without freedom, and this presents the individual with decisions as to where his efforts should be focused most fruitfully and how his love should be put into practice.

The order of the greatest two Commandments makes it clear that the Christian must love God first, and then his neighbour as himself. Rather than diminishing his ability to care for himself or his fellow human beings, this order of importance generally increases his power in both areas. There are many parallels in ordinary life where placing certain values ahead of one's immediate objectives actually increases one's power to achieve those objectives, as well as adding to everyone's benefit in the longer term: An engineer must first abide by the principles of good engineering, otherwise he will rapidly cease to serve his client. For the same reason, a teacher must first know his subject, and a lawyer might have neither clients nor income if his licence is suspended for malpractice. A doctor who does not give priority to good medical practices will probably contribute more to sickness than to health. A member of an orchestra who wants to create beautiful music must first master his instrument and be obedient to the requirements of harmony. The list of analogies is endless. In almost all professional fields, a higher loyalty to the sound practice of one's vocation actually increases one's ability to serve himself and other people. So it is with loving God above all else.

Responsibility and Love of Our Neighbours

The concept of neighbour is considered more deeply in the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:29-37*), where Christ indicated that being a true neighbour involves awareness and empathy. The reality is that we cannot be 'neighbour' in every respect to all the people we encounter. We must first be conscious of their needs before we can love any of them effectively. The parable implies that we ought to *become* 'neighbour', that is, develop compassion and take an

interest in others particularly where it is obviously appropriate or we are invited to do so. We should extend our 'selves' to include them and love them as part of us. In areas where we recognise a need but we do not have the essential knowledge, skill or resources, we should make available what we can afford to those who are in a better position to help.

Being neighbour is a matter of degree. As people become closer and knowledge deepens, love becomes even more essential, responsibility increases and so do the potential rewards. Closeness places a person in a privileged position where any of his words, actions and omissions, as well as his accepting or judgemental attitudes, could have a greater impact on the well-being of the other person. Whilst all human beings have much in common, marriage and family are more intimate relationships, and friendship is the closest and deepest form of being neighbour. It was for good reasons that Christ said, 'Greater love has no man than that he lays down his life for his friends' (*John 15:13*).

We must remember that apart from those whose care is entrusted to us, we are not responsible for other people, but for our own actions and the consequences we can reasonably anticipate. Therefore, ***in loving them, we must respect their freedom to make their own decisions and determine what is in their own best interests.*** Thus, if a person in need asks for financial help, it is generally for him to decide what he does with it. However, where there is good reason to believe that the person will only do more harm, as is likely when we give money to an alcoholic or compulsive gambler, then we are at least partly responsible for the outcome.

Conscience

Having discussed the issues of power, freedom and responsibility, right and wrong, law as distinct from good, and the role of love, ultimately morality is about decision making. An effective moral decision is based on *conscience* which is *unified knowledge* that comes about through a process of continuous learning and on-the-spot investigation. In other words, it must be developed and continually informed. Of course, the decision should feel right at the time, but that is not enough. Conscience is not that feeling. Some of the more important aspects are:

- An understanding of important moral principles;
- A well-formed basic order of priorities;
- An appreciation of the whole circumstances;
- Openness to those who have relevant expertise;
- An awareness of the applicable rules; and
- Knowledge of oneself in terms of abilities, resources and limitations.

Conscience is the internal guide that makes effective moral action possible.

Evil and Judgement

'For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed.' (John 3:20)

Some people aspire to no ideals at all, and pursue what they see is in their own foreseeable interests, above and at the expense of everyone else. They regard it as acceptable for them to kill, steal, lie, corrupt and pervert when it serves their objectives. Others try to justify their evil doing with excuses such as:

- If I don't, somebody else will.
- No-one will know.
- It's fair game.
- Others did it to me.
- Their ancestors hurt mine.
- They are wealthier than me.
- Everyone does it.
- Business is business.
- Religion has no place in politics.
- I was only following orders.
- It is legal.
- I did it for my family.
- The majority will be better off.

Immorality, or 'committing sin', does not consist of transgressing rules, but of acting in a way that is conducive to unhappiness. It is not the breaking of the law but the doing of evil. As we pointed out earlier, a person can knowingly cause a lot of harm without contravening civil laws or breaking any of the Ten Commandments.

Committing sin encourages disunity between a person and the one whom he offends. Seen from the victim's point of view, sooner or later we learn which people are good for us, and in what relationships. Given enough time, we usually come to recognise those whose actions do us harm or injustice. Although we ought to bring it to their attention and give them unlimited opportunity to change, while they persist with that behaviour we are inclined to want some form of **separation and distance**. The essence of 'judgement', whenever the word is used negatively, is the desire to increase the 'distance' between ourselves and whatever offends us. This usually implies the rejection (or at least the lessening) of a certain relationship, and in extreme cases it could necessitate total separation. For example, a person whose criminal behaviour makes him unfit for normal interaction, is usually removed from society and imprisoned. A child thrown out of home by his parents, a member of a religious sect shunned by his community and a company that is 'blacklisted' are all, in a similar way, being 'judged'. In practical terms,

'judgement' is without impact unless it diminishes or changes our interaction in some way.

The relationships we welcome are those which we perceive from promise or experience to be good for us, namely consistent with our values and objectives. Others we tend to reject. Seen in an eternal context, the same principles apply in our relationships with the Almighty. What is good for Him will be accepted, and what is evil for Him will be separated from Him and kept at an appropriate 'distance'. *God does not judge people according to the rules they have technically kept or broken, but the good and evil for which they are responsible.*

In the Gospel, the word 'judge' sometimes refers to labelling or drawing conclusions about a *person* instead of a particular action or relationship. It was possibly also in this context that Christ warned us when he said, 'Judge not, and you shall not be judged,' (*Matt. 7:1*). For example, it is reasonable to refuse to dine with a person because we find his eating habits disgusting, but that is entirely different from avoiding him altogether because we regard him as a 'pig'. In the first instance, we judge the specific relationship or behaviour, which we have a right to do for our own well-being, whereas in the other, we are evaluating the person himself. Because of our limited knowledge, the latter can never be justified.

It is also worth pointing out here, that the rules of conduct which were handed down to us are to be seen as a source of guidance for our own benefit, and were not given to us for the purpose of passing this kind of personal judgement on others whose actions do not affect us. Civil laws must, of course, be enforced in the interests of preserving order; however, the unlawful behaviour of another does not call for us to dissociate ourselves from the person but only from his actions. In this respect, Christ, who was often criticised for associating with sinners, set an outstanding example.

Justice, Compensation, Mercy and Forgiveness

Whenever people fail in their responsibilities to us, they do us an injustice for which we are entitled to demand adequate redress. The situation will also usually result in some practical form of 'distancing' between us and the other person, at least until we are satisfied. However, he may find it difficult or impossible to make full restoration. **Mercy** is restraint in our demands for justice, and a readiness to forgive without insisting on full compensation. Indeed, we might even be content with nothing more than a sign of regret and an assurance that the offender will try to behave better in the future. Very often Christ would only say to a person, 'Your sins are forgiven', or 'Go and sin no more' (*John 8:11*).

If judgement (of the negative kind) entails changing a relationship so as to increase one's 'distance', then forgiveness does the opposite. **Forgiveness** is an expression of faith and hope that unity can replace division, what is

damaged can be repaired, people can change, and that balance can be restored without demanding unnecessary or unaffordable compensation. Such confidence is vital if one is to maintain an environment in which learning and development can coexist with the present realities of human weakness. To put forgiveness into perspective, it is essential to distinguish between the personal relationship and the appropriate degree of trust in a specific area. This may be illustrated with an example: Suppose that a friend borrows one of your possessions and damages it by misuse. If you see that he is regretful, but cannot afford to have the item repaired, then you might not insist that he does so and still hold no bad feelings towards him. You have forgiven him personally and will continue to treat him as a friend, but you might be reluctant to entrust him with such things again until he demonstrates the capacity to use them responsibly. On the other hand, if he totally disregards the damage he has done, that attitude is very likely to sour the relationship and some personal distancing may result. Assuming that 'separation' was based on a well-founded perception that the person had a tendency to act in a way that is harmful to our interests, forgiveness should depend on equally reasonable criteria. To forgive others to the extent of fully restoring trust without requiring that they show at least a willingness to try to change their behaviour, would be inconsistent even with the ideals of Christianity. Christ did make it clear, however, that because God's generosity in forgiving us is boundless, there ought to be no limit to the number of times we are willing to forgive other people.

Guilt and Reconciliation

Feelings of guilt have a useful and appropriate role in human life where a person behaves contrary to his informed conscience, or neglects to inform it as adequately as the circumstances warrant or permit.

Unfortunately, whenever guilt feelings are dominated by things such as

- The breaking of rules,
- Un-clarified values,
- Failure to meet other peoples' expectations,
- Uncertainty and fear of the possible consequences,
- Association with matters over which we had no real control, or
- Misfortunes which might have been avoided if some other decision had been made,

then these feelings are more conducive to psychological problems than to a good Christian life.

It must also be emphasised that while we are expected to work towards ensuring a just system *for everyone in the present*, guilt for other people's mistakes and crimes is not transferable. The concept of 'collective guilt' is a fallacy where it attempts to assign responsibility to those who had no real power in the situation.

To the committed Christian, the avoidance of guilt lies in acting on his conscience with the best information and resources available to him at the time. While this does not absolve him of the responsibility to rectify adverse consequences, it ensures that his decisions were entirely moral and he need never reproach himself.

When there is a genuine reason to feel guilt, he should seek to be reconciled with the person against whom the transgression took place, whether it is God, another human being or himself. He must do whatever he can to repair the damage done and then put the matter behind him, making a fresh start with the added knowledge and wisdom gained from the experience. As well as being forgiven by others, he must also learn to forgive himself.

The Morality of Risk

Very few decisions are made in an environment of complete certainty, and risk-taking is not inherently immoral even when it is unnecessary. In fact, the failure to take appropriate risks can sometimes be immoral in itself. All acts of faith and trust are done in the face of some perceived uncertainty and even the most responsible loving actions can occasionally result in unfavourable outcomes. Risk-taking is an essential part of learning, development, exploration and discovery, and a vital part of life.

The moral side of voluntary exposure to risk is subject to the same principles of love and responsibility through to conscience. A few more specific guidelines may be useful:

- We have no right to expose other people, or what belongs to them, to unnecessary involuntary risks, particularly when we are not able to repair an adverse outcome.
- Risks must be rational; in other words the expected gains must outweigh the possible losses. One must consider both value and likelihood at the same time.
- It is generally unwise to seriously endanger deeper values to gain what is more superficial, to imperil more permanent interests for things that are more temporary, or jeopardise something that has broader benefits for more restricted advantages. From the Christian perspective, the ultimate in foolishness is to risk losing the kingdom of God and eternal life for anything else!
- Any risk-taking activity such as gambling is improper when it is compulsive and out of control.
- It is generally not immoral to risk anything we can afford to lose or what can be economically repaired or replaced, provided it is rightfully ours.
- If we are faced with a choice between a progressively worsening situations on the one hand and a courageous risky move on the other, then the latter may be more reasonable and morally sound.

When facing uncertainty, a person will never be condemned for a choice that has an unfortunate outcome, but only for approaching the decision in an irresponsible way or failing to take a *necessary and appropriate risk*.

Decisions involving even serious risks may be comparatively simple when the picture is understood; but at times we are confronted with situations that are not well defined, the options are unclear and the possible consequences and their likelihood unknown. These are the 'grey areas' where we do not know *how* to decide, and even the best available information and criteria are not discerning enough. We have no idea what Christ would do if he were in our position, and we cannot even err on the safer side, for we have no clue as to which side that is! Ideally our level of moral development should always be high enough to handle the kinds of decisions we face in our normal roles, and we have an obligation to work towards that; but if we are not ready and a decision *must* be made, then all we can do is pray for the right instinct and take a courageous chance.

Chapter 7

VIRTUES AND VICES

'Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls'

(Matt. 11:29)

Virtues and vices are aspects of human behaviour that form part of a person's character. A virtue is conducive to personal growth and long term happiness. A vice does the opposite. Much of the teachings of Christ, the earlier prophets and the founders of the other great religions, were devoted to communicating with people on these subjects. Although virtues are not uniquely Christian, they are nonetheless important to the practice of Christianity. It is not intended to discuss them here in detail as they are dealt with extensively in the Bible, the Koran, the Buddhist writings and other similar works. I propose simply to make a few comments on some of the important ones.

The Meanings of Virtues

- **Prudence** may be defined as due caution and preparedness. Although it is often associated with proverbs such as, 'look before you leap', it is a broader concept that includes the principles of safety, preventive maintenance and timely action. It also implies constant vigilance, alertness and being prepared for both dangers and opportunities. Christ often emphasised the need to avoid becoming complacent because we do not know when we could be called upon. *(Matt.24:43-25:13)*
- **Justice** is the consistent application of the same standards to all people, including ourselves, without discriminating on the basis of irrelevant personal characteristics. It includes a sense of responsibility to repair damage or make adequate compensation where appropriate. Within the framework of love, justice, like responsibility, is part of the minimum standard. Without a sense of justice in people, it is impossible to have a just system, which is essential to lasting peaceful coexistence. Revenge should never be confused with the pursuit of justice as it is based on feelings such as pride rather than a love for all people involved. Instead of wasting one's life indulging an obsession with 'getting even', it is more fruitful to believe that, in the eternal context, we can never be permanently harmed by anything others do to us, but only by what we do to others and ourselves. There is an old Chinese proverb: 'Who sets out in revenge, should dig two graves before he goes.'

- To be **poor in spirit** is to be detached from material possessions and the values of the world. We need to *use* material things and not be controlled by them. It is very difficult to grow internally when the things we treasure most are temporary and insecure.
- **Fortitude** is stamina or the ability to withstand hardship and persecution. In difficult circumstances it can be essential to physical, mental and emotional survival.
- **Persistence** is the most important key to success in achievement. At times we may need an unlimited willingness to tolerate repeated frustration, and 'giving up' has long been recognised as the guaranteed pathway to failure.
- The ancient Greeks had a saying, 'Everything in **moderation**, even moderation!' Any complex system or organism requires a balance to be maintained within certain limits, with occasional stretching to extend its possibilities. The human being is no exception.
- **Mercy** is restraint in enforcing justice for ourselves. Those who are seen to act mercifully are more likely to receive mercy themselves, and those who receive it, or observe it, may show their appreciation.
- **Humility** is the ability to see oneself in perspective and accept the truth about oneself. A modest portrayal of ourselves is also very useful in helping to manage the expectations of people around us. The opposite is pride, one form of which is oversensitivity to one's self-image where the associated anxiety can become a severe handicap to freedom of action.
- **Generosity** is the opposite of acquisitiveness, possessiveness, envy and misplaced jealousy. It reveals a greater sense of internal security generates extended harmony and benefits others in the process. Jealousy is the fear of losing something one value, while envy is the desire to possess what belongs to someone else.
- **Cleanliness of heart** is the opposite of any obsession with superficial pleasures and values or operating with hidden agendas. In the past, many 'Christian' teachers confined their interpretation of this virtue to sexual behaviour, often placing so much emphasis on it that their negative puritanical attitudes led to severe psychological problems among their followers. The opposite vice, lust, is not to be confused with normal sexual attraction, but involves the tendency to see human beings as objects to be acquired, possessed or used for pleasure without respect for their personal dignity as individuals.
- **Gentleness** is the ability to treat things well. Christ taught that, 'Happy are the gentle, for they shall inherit the land' (*Matt. 5:5*). If we interpret land to mean 'resources' then it is reasonable that those who are gentle should be given control, for then our resources will not be ruthlessly exploited and

destroyed as they often are. A gentle person generally does not use force or harsh measures unless it is necessary.

- **Diligence** is the willingness to work, that is, to do meaningful and purposeful activity. As such, it is the crucial link between our resources and our prosperity, material or otherwise, and appears to be essential not only for survival but for personal growth.
- **Patience** is more than the inclination to wait for the appropriate time to act most effectively. It is also the motivation to pay due attention to detail where necessary.
- **Faith, love** and **courage** have already been discussed, however it is worth adding that courage is not the absence of fear but the readiness to act with faith and love even when we are fearful.

The list is not exhaustive and the interpretations are not intended to be complete, nor are they necessarily the only reasonable ones. However, regardless of how precisely one chooses to define the concepts, their importance to long term well-being is firmly established. The old proverb: 'Sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny,' describes one of the most common pathways by which virtues and vices become ingrained in a person's way of thinking and acting. Beyond their direct impact on the life of the individual, it is interesting that from the social point of view, virtues are generally conducive to attraction, closeness and harmonious interaction between people, whereas vices tend to encourage friction, separation and distance.

Vices in Perspective

When situations arise that threaten some of our values, they can give rise to strong feelings such as **anger, hate, jealousy**, and other 'negative' emotions, most of which are rooted in fear. We were given the useful ability to feel them for very good reasons. While they are not immoral or evil in themselves, we are responsible for the way we respond to them. Anger is a very good example. A person who feels, shows or acts on anger in rare and serious situations where basic justice is at stake is not behaving immorally, nor is he under the control of a vice. Even Christ responded in this way when he drove the money changers out of the temple (*John 2:14-16*). Anger turns into a vice when it gets out of control or becomes a habitual reaction to threats, irritations and adversities. In extreme cases such people can be very difficult and dangerous to live with, and if they are 'stuck' in situations they find undesirable, the constant state of anger (or any other negative emotion) almost invariably undermines their health. When they realise how damaging and unproductive the tendency is, they may try to suppress it. They might remain outwardly calm but seethe inside, or bottle it up until they cannot contain it any longer and some minor incident results in a major outburst. Repression rarely works in the long term.

The key to overcoming these habits starts with examining our values. If we can reduce the number of things we regard as really important, there will be fewer perceived threats and less cause for excessively strong feelings. We then need to work on developing more skill in investigating, managing or avoiding undesirable situations, and responding in constructive ways. What is most imperative, however, is to cultivate the habit of faith in God's love, and confidence that things will turn out well in the long term *without* our over-reacting.

Other vices such as **greed, gluttony and lust** are associated with obsessive wants. The pattern, however, is the same in that there is generally an association with fear (of losing the opportunity?) and the formation of a pernicious habit that is out of control. Unfortunately, much of the political and economic system is driven by the prevalence of vices. Economists tell us that greed is good, creating employment and wealth. Lies and broken promises are expected as normal in the world of politics. In business, deception and exploitation are endemic and widely regarded as acceptable, and occupations such as prostitution and gambling are even labelled as 'industries'. The reality is that vices sometimes work rather well offering big advantages – in the short term!

Vice and Sin

The connection between vice and sin is an interesting one. If an artificial distinction can be made between a vice and a corresponding sin, then the vice is the inclination or the habit and the sin is the action. Our proneness to vices is not necessarily the result of having committed any sins ourselves. It is an outcome of what is often called 'original sin' namely our state of alienation, disharmony and disunity which are part of the inherited human condition. In this respect, we differ from one another only in our most prominent areas of weakness. Furthermore, acting under the influence of a vice involves 'committing sin' only to the extent that the person has reasonable control over what he does, and if the consequences of resisting are tolerable. These days, established vices tend to be seen as psychological problems rather than moral issues, although the behaviour that follows from them must still be taken seriously. The reality remains that there is a vicious circle between vice and sin as there is between any repeated action and habit. Thus it is hardly surprising that Christ warned, 'whoever commits sin is a slave to sin' (*John 8:34*).

Appropriate Application of Virtues

Life is complex and a considerable degree of 'automation' is necessary and desirable both in the physical world and in human behaviour. This is why we have reflexes and the ability to develop habits. In general, it is far safer if the habit is a virtue rather than a vice, like automatically using the brake in a

dangerous traffic situation instead of the accelerator. However we remain responsible and therefore it is best that we retain the ability to override even good habits and exercise control.

It would be very difficult to argue the value of a vice as we have defined it, but one is often unaware that virtues can sometimes become liabilities. People have an inclination to use their own particular talents to try to solve every problem that confronts them regardless of how appropriate those abilities may be in the situation. Virtues are prone to the same pattern, and two important things follow from this. Firstly, all virtues are important and no single one provides a universal formula. *Every* tool in the kit is there for a reason. Secondly, like all tools, ultimately *we* must control *them* and not let them control us. As with our talents, we must develop sufficient discernment to know where a particular virtue is counter-productive (*Eccl 3:1-8*). Christ was very gentle by nature, but he also knew when to use force.

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In the pursuit of lasting happiness, the area of virtues and vices is probably the one in which personal change is most necessary and difficult. The subject of directing our efforts and making changes will be addressed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

SACRIFICE AND SELF DENIAL

'For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost?'

(Luke 14:28)

The Meaning of Sacrifice

In ancient times, and even until comparatively recently in more primitive societies, sacrifice was generally associated with offerings killed and burnt on altars to appease the deities. These practices probably had considerable significance in the development of humanity while it awaited greater enlightenment. Although such rituals are no longer practiced in civilised communities, the basic concept of a sacrifice remains valid and useful: Something valued is given up to gain something else that is more important – a *price* is paid. This fundamental aspect has not changed.

The essence of Sacrifice is Investment. No rational person gives up anything, or willingly suffers an unpleasant experience without the hope of gaining even more according to his scale of values. The only way in which the practising Christian may differ from anyone else, is that his highest values are related to God, eternal life and the teachings of Christ. Nevertheless, there are a number of misconceptions about sacrifice in Christianity:

- The commonly held belief that sacrifice is genuine only when the person making it hopes to gain nothing in return is pseudo-religious nonsense. Christ promised great rewards to those who gave up everything to follow him.
- It is a mistake to think that God does not love Himself, even when He makes sacrifices for us. He values the reconciliation of human beings with Himself and the rest of the universe. He sent His Son to bridge the great void between humanity and Himself which no ordinary person could cross by his own abilities unaided. Christ, his life, work and suffering were the sacrifice, or investment, through which the possibility of a close relationship between mankind and God was re-established, and we shall return to this later in the chapter.

The greatest two commandments: To 'love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind', and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (*Luke 10:27; Deut 6:5; Levit19:18*), are also not devoid of self-interest, but are at the very core of its most enlightened form. They provide the most consequent, expedient and effective criteria for orienting ourselves in relation to the most important objective – lasting happiness.

1. We must love God first not only because it pleases Him, but because closeness to Him is the best thing we can ever achieve for ourselves. As Christ promised, we will be rewarded a hundred-fold even here, and we will have eternal life. Very often we must seek one goal before another becomes more easily attainable. Likewise, we must love God first with all our being so that we may be able to love ourselves and others most effectively. In the words of Christ, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and its justice, and all other things will be yours without asking' (*Matt. 6:33*).
2. We must love our neighbours as ourselves. We must give equal consideration to their happiness and to ours in whatever we do. In this way, the well-being of everyone is increased, which is consistent with God's love for each of us. This does not mean that we should never make sacrifices for others, but that when we do, it should be for our mutual benefit in the long term. In extreme situations we may even give up our lives for our friends, expecting to be rewarded only in eternity, but we would be foolish to do that for no better reason than their short term advantage. It is equally true that at times we must attend to our own welfare before that of others, not because we love them less, but so as not to diminish our ability to care for both. There must always be an appropriate balance.

Some groups advocate an extreme form of 'self-martyrdom', preaching a total disregard of their own welfare for the sake of others. They behave as if it were possible to aspire to higher standards than God has given them. A failure to love oneself is just as serious as failing to love one's neighbour. We have no licence to delegate back to God the things He has given us the ability to do for ourselves. There is a very real distinction between a sacrifice that is rational and self-neglect which is irresponsible.

Sacrifice of the practical and rational kind has always had an essential role in personal development and the elevation of human society. For that purpose, it retains an important place in Christian living, but not as a form of worship. God does not need our 'offerings' to appease Him or win His favours. Rather He wants us to love Him and one another, and show mercy to those who offend us. (*Hos 6:6, Matt.9:13, Mark 12:33*)

Self-denial

In Christianity as well as in other religions, people are traditionally taught to practice 'self-denial' during special periods by fasting and depriving themselves of some of the usual pleasures of life. This 'self-denial', is probably better described as self-discipline and self-restraint which is not inconsistent with loving oneself. In fact it has several short and long term personal benefits such as:

- Learning to appreciate things in small quantities;

- Reducing the saturation of the senses to provide room for new experiences, and make possible a more developed level of happiness;
- Reducing consumption to leave resources available for investment in personal growth;
- Helping to establish or increase self-control;
- Questioning the necessity of an entrenched habit;
- Strengthening endurance under deprivation;
- Helping to explore and establish alternative pathways to satisfaction;
- Allowing us to test ourselves safely under our own control;
- Training us to be able to make personal changes in ourselves when needed;
- Increasing our sensitivity and empathy with those who are deprived;
- Helping to deter actions arising out of feelings of desperation, and learning to wait for the wisdom to make a better decision;
- Providing exercise in detachment and an increase in freedom.

The list is by no means comprehensive, but it illustrates the fact that when seen in their proper contexts, sacrifice and self-denial are just as natural, necessary and beneficial to personal development and change, as any other form of investment in its own field.

Self-denial and Identity

Our personal identities and self-images are strongly influenced by what we consider to be the important elements of our lives. Most commonly they will be dominated by our occupations, roles and relationships, and are likely to include personal characteristics, experiences, achievements and anything else which we feel contributes to making us the individuals we are. They tend to be modified and reinforced by the way others respond to us. The particular aspects we emphasise depend largely on our values which may include status and prestige. Consequently, our perception and communication of these aspects is prone to being distorted by exaggeration and wishful thinking. Self-descriptions, which make up the identity, are like items of clothing: they can be functional and decorative, but they can also restrict our freedom, conceal the truth and mislead.

Perhaps the deepest form of self-denial is the willingness to become detached from one's cherished identity and think of oneself simply and only as a *person*. This enables us to see others in the same light, and in doing so, we remove the major source of unjust discrimination which lies in the labels, titles and descriptions we attach to ourselves and other people. Racial prejudices begin to disappear from our attitudes; ethnic origin, age, sex and religion become irrelevant in our basic treatment of others. Parents and children, employers and employees, leaders and followers, all develop a greater empathy and mutual respect; and those who were punished for law-breaking are given real hope of rehabilitation. Thus it has important implications in the context of the

commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves: The more modestly we define ourselves, the more inclusive of others that *self* can be.

Apart from the social benefits, this outlook can have an important impact on a person's own life, leading to a more enduring self-respect. Two thoughts from Christ are particularly significant: 'Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and who humbles himself shall be exalted' (*Matt. 23:12*), and 'He who is afraid for his life shall lose it; and who loses his life for my sake shall find it.' (*Matt. 10:39*). In the Gospel, the meaning of the term 'life' is not restricted to one's physical existence, but encompasses every element including what the person sees as his identity. If taken too seriously, our identity can be as much a form of confinement and vulnerability as a source of psychological comfort. It then becomes a cause of anxiety, and *when fear dominates any aspect of life, it tends to have a crippling effect on vitality and the ability to function in a loving way*. The ability to think of ourselves in more basic terms, frees us to become more sensitive, adventurous, and in tune with God and everything around us. Detachment from our packaged self-images also makes it easier to see and accept the truth about ourselves, which can then be used as the proper starting point for constructive change and growth with dignity. In general, it helps to remind ourselves occasionally that, ***'Who' I am, is never as important as the fact that I 'am'.***

Personal Change

Anyone who has tried to change anything about them usually discovers rather quickly how difficult it is. The makeup of human life is extremely interdependent. When anything in it becomes established, other aspects tend to adjust and extra features are incorporated which become dependent on the new order. For example, when we install a telephone or purchase a vehicle we nearly always expand and adapt our lifestyles to take advantage of the possibilities the item has to offer. The new lifestyle becomes dependent on it. The more we build on it, the more difficult it becomes to part with it. This is true for everything we adopt into our lives including habits, virtues, vices, prejudices, people, material objects, models of reality, 'crutches', and (some say) even diseases!

We only feel the need for change when undesirable symptoms begin to appear or general unhappiness sets in. Usually our efforts focus initially on alleviating the symptoms, or if that fails, then working on the immediate causes. The classic example is the person who takes cough suppressants but is eventually told by his physician that he must give up smoking. After his first attempts it becomes clear how much of his life has become biologically and psychologically dependent on the habit.

It is pointless to attempt any change without a willingness to pay the price. The cost depends on the degree to which the change is connected with everything else in one's life. There is a saying that if you want to change anything about

yourself, you must be prepared to change *everything*. That might not always be necessary, but one need to recognise the possibility that the changes needed may be at a much more fundamental level than where the problem is being perceived. The process is a matter of work, namely searching for a method that is appropriate to the kind of change needed, and then putting it into practice. However, to start, a person needs to have a tangible vision of what he hopes to gain, and the 'price' he is willing to pay in real terms. It is unavoidable that some investment, that is sacrifice and self-denial, will have to be made.

The Redemption

In the first chapter, we referred to the evident need for reconciliation between humanity and the rest of the universe. According to the Scriptures, the problem started when we originally became alienated from God. Perhaps the biblical story of Adam and Eve may be a little simplistic, but the essence of it is that the first human beings naively sold themselves and all their descendants into the slavery of evil. Their only hope was that God promised He would eventually buy them back.

We may have needed rescuing, but why should God want to do so? Apart from the assurance that He loves us, there is also an issue of justice:

- Is it reasonable to condemn a person forever because of decisions he made in a state of weakness and immaturity? Surely, forgiveness is a necessary part of guided development that involves freedom and learning?
- Is it right to abandon his descendants to a fate they did not bring on themselves? It would seem reasonable that a just God would not let one person suffer permanently for the mistakes of another.
- Would it be fair for God to pass judgement on humanity without the willingness to experience being fully human 'from beginning to end through the full range of extremes'?

In the person of Jesus Christ, God put Himself into our position. It is likely that the reasons why Christ had to *suffer and die* to save humanity cannot be fully understood at this time, but the Scriptures indicate that it was a major part of his mission to give up his life 'as a ransom for many' (*Matt. 20:28*). He alone had enough resources to take upon himself the burden of our reconciliation, and clear our hopeless 'indebtedness'. By his sacrifice, Christ paid for all of humanity's past, present and future misdeeds. ***He did not save us regardless of what we might individually persist in doing, but he bought us the genuine freedom to decide which way we want to go. Within our present lifetimes we must choose.***

The Challenge of Christ

Although Christ paid the ultimate price, the role of sacrifice is of practical importance in the life of every human being. Any mature person recognises

that great things are rarely achieved the 'easy way', but often mean giving up something we want very much now for an objective that is far more valuable in the long term.

Following Christ entails sacrifice and self-denial in this context, but what kind of cost is involved? The reader may be puzzled by some of his teachings such as: 'Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you; bless them that curse you; pray for them that persecute you'. 'If a person strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek also'. 'If he wants to take your coat, give him your cloak as well' 'Give to those who ask and lend without hoping for return' (*Matt. 5:38-44, Luke 6:27-30*). Many regard such principles as absurd, ridiculous, weak and impractical. However, in suspending our pride, our natural rights and our convenience, becoming detached from material wealth, and stepping out of our narrow, superficial, short-sighted perspective, we invest in something far greater, deeper, more permanent and much more satisfying. We are not left worse off, but acquire a vastly elevated potential for happiness and also make the world a better place in the process.

Apparently even more controversial are teachings such as 'If your right eye offends you, pluck it out, for it is better to enter life with one eye than to be thrown fully sighted into hell' (*Matt. 18:9*). Naturally, Christ was not advocating self-mutilation as an impulsive course of action, but the need to keep focused on our ultimate objective and is willing to make *any* sacrifice for it if necessary as a last resort. It is like amputating a limb when there is no other way to save the life.

With 'sacrifice' and 'self-denial' as with all decisions, there is a component of faith, but ultimately the issue is one of rational expediency in relation to more important values that are usually deeper, broader or more permanent. In the universal and eternal context the principles are the same. Material possessions, most personal relationships and even our physical existence in its present form are very limited and transient. While they should be treated well, their purpose is useful service and wise investment, not preservation as an end in itself.

The Gift of Grace

While individual 'sacrifice' and 'self-denial' are essential to personal progress, they are not sufficient, for it is also true that no person ever achieved anything totally unaided. These realities apply equally to the attainment of eternal life.

The help of God has always been available to human beings in more remote ways. However, only His indwelling presence can be life-giving in a lasting personal sense. The life, death and resurrection of Christ allowed this lost connection to be re-established so that God would again contribute directly to the character of those who welcome Him. This contribution is the 'gift of grace' that is frequently referred to by the writers of the New Testament.

As the obstacle of sin has two related aspects – the *state of sin* or alienation, and the act of *committing sin* or contributing to the alienation – grace helps to remove it in both ways. It creates the fitness to have God live within us, and gives us more strength and inclination to avoid evil and do ‘good’ despite the opposing forces. In a way it is like the case of a bankrupt person who is unable to manage his finances effectively. A benefactor might offer to clear all his debts restoring him to respectability, and also help him towards greater prosperity in an on-going way. However, he must trust the benefactor, and be prepared to work constructively with the assistance provided.

Faith is the ‘open door’ that invites the grace of God, and this can make the crucial difference if we are willing to cooperate. Although the gift of grace is free, entirely benevolent and cannot be earned, it is also an investment in the sense that the giver has reasonable hopes of mutual benefit. God would like us to ‘bear fruit’ in terms of doing good works, and reach our greatest potential as a credit to His creation. For us there is the promise of great rewards even here, as well as eternal life.

Chapter 9

PRAYER

'...they suppose they will be heard for their many words.' (Matt. 6:7)

'God is a spirit, and those who worship Him, must worship in spirit and in truth.' (John 4:24)

Prayer plays a vital role in our developing an intimate personal relationship with God. It does not consist of the art of stringing words together, but is more an attitude or a frame of mind in which verbal communication is only a part. When Christ was asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray, he gave them an example (Matt. 6:9), which we have come to know as 'The Lord's Prayer'. This prayer represents the desired orientation of our hearts and minds rather than a prescribed formula of words. Let us examine some of its meaning line by line:

"The Lord's Prayer"

Our Father,

We think of you in a familiar and personal way. You are close to us and equally your children.

Who art in heaven,

You represent our ideal of perfection and happiness.

Hallowed be Thy name.

We respect your reputation and admire your genius.

Thy kingdom come,

We share your values and seek the benefits of your order.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We want to think and live your way. We are working to put your ideals into practice here.

Give us this day our daily bread,

Give us the nourishment we really need.

And forgive us our trespasses

Don't hold our failings against us; let us keep trying.

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

We hold no resentment against others, and we let them make a fresh start also.

Lead us not into temptation,

Don't put us to a test for we recognise our weaknesses. Lead us away from opportunities that ought to be resisted.

But deliver us from evil.

We depend on your protection and care, and on your help in making the changes needed in us.

From this example, it is clear that the real purpose of prayer is to develop a meaningful relationship with God and to orient ourselves towards what we *ought* to be pursuing in the best interests of all, including ourselves. While Christ also encouraged us to ask God for what we want, we should accept His decisions. This is a matter of wisdom. God respects our freedom and values our individuality, and His love for us implies that what we want is also important to *Him*. However, we need to recognise that unlike us, He has a comprehensive view of the whole picture.

What prayer requires is total sincerity, that is, complete openness and honesty with us and with the Almighty, in thought, words and actions. Preferably, the words we use are entirely our own and can say anything we may wish to at the time. Ideally, talking with God should come easily, but first our lives must be connected to Him so that our words have mutual relevance. Like all good communication, it is largely dependent on the relationship being high enough in our order of priorities.

Listening To God

God communicates with us in several ways. He might bring us together with something or someone who can enlighten us, or He may speak to us more directly through our ideas and intuition. However, to 'hear' Him, we must become sensitive at the deepest levels of our being. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ taught us, 'Happy are the clean of heart, for they shall see God' (*Matt. 5:8*). We cannot receive messages in their clearest form when our sensitivity is dulled by abuse, and our receptors are cluttered with distractions and obstacles or tuned to competing interests. So it is with seeing and hearing God with our innermost selves. We must clean ourselves within, and place His values at the centre of our lives.

Meditation and Awareness Building Techniques

In the Christian tradition, meditation is regarded as very helpful to prayer. Meditation can be practised within almost any religion and by people who profess no religion at all. Its broader purpose is to promote personal and cosmic awareness, insight and healing; however, there can be no standard expectation, and the outcome depends largely on the person's reason for doing it. Most techniques of inducing the meditative state, involve focusing the attention with the aim of achieving equanimity, and within this state, new avenue to enlightenment can be explored.

In a way, anything that brings about greater self-knowledge is, at least indirectly, an aid to prayer. Thus one may include the more scientific approaches to self-discovery associated with psychology and related fields. At least initially, any technique should be practised under the guidance of one who has expertise in its use, for like tools of any kind, some of them can be harmful

and dangerous if inappropriately applied. The value of any given technique depends on whether it suits the individual, and none of them may be regarded as generally superior to any other, or indispensable to the practice of Christianity. It is also not possible to conclude that a person who has had a certain experience or used a given technique, is necessarily more 'in touch' with himself or with the Almighty than one who has not.

Closeness to God

It is true that God will never allow us into any parts of His realm unless it is mutually safe and beneficial. However, that is nothing unusual. We are not permitted to enter an operating theatre without complying with obvious levels of hygiene nor should we be allowed to work with dangerous equipment without evidence of competence. In fact before we became mature enough our access to many things was limited, but this did not isolate us from our parents' love, and it was most probably their sincere hope that someday they would be able to entrust us with more. God wants to be close to us, and prefers us to be on familiar terms with Him. Like an ideal parent or friend, He always wants to help us develop. If we offend Him, He is always ready to forgive.

God is everywhere, even within us if we want Him to be. In this respect He will always accept us the way we are at the time, as long as we want to make genuine progress. To be close, all we need is trust and complete honesty with ourselves and with Him (*Read Luke 18:10-14*).

Chapter 10

RITUAL AND REALITY

'Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven...' (John 20:23)

Christianity is not a religion of rituals and symbols, but a religion of reality.

There are, of course, rituals and symbols in Christianity, however they are not crucial. They form a flexible aesthetic framework or environment in which the real spiritual aids, called *Sacraments*, are made available to the recipients. By way of analogy, international agreements are often accompanied by much protocol, flag flying and celebrations, but the substance of real importance is the discussion and the resulting treaty itself.

It is not intended to discuss the spiritual aids in detail, but rather to distinguish them from the visible rituals and formalities that may accompany them and other events commonly associated with religion. These aids were instituted by Christ for the benefit of individual growth and well-being, and have remained basically unchanged.

The Sacraments

- ***Baptism*** is a spiritual renewal, or rebirth, that unites us with Christ. In accepting Christ into our lives, we welcome God to live and work freely within us, which He would not do against our will or without our invitation. The ceremony is an outward formality, and in some circumstances it is possible to be baptised without the ritual being performed.
- ***Confirmation***, or being sealed with the Holy Spirit, is an extension of Baptism, and brings God to live within that person in a way that is expected to enhance his wisdom, deepen his instinctive understanding and help to guide his conscience. It provides him with further spiritual resources that encourage the building of a more intimate relationship with God.
- The ***Anointing of the Sick*** is likewise intended to be effective rather than symbolic. Its purpose is to promote healing, especially at the spiritual level. However, it is not a substitute for the responsible use of ordinary remedies for physical ailments. Neither does it imply that one can expect miraculous cures to every disease especially when the problem might have been sent for our personal development.

- **Reconciliation** is the forgiving of our failures in responsibility and love. Christ often forgave people their sins and gave this power to his apostles and their successors. Their exercising it offers the sincere person a tangible guarantee of God's forgiveness, which is of great benefit to his peace of mind.
- In Christianity, **Marriage** is a sealed contract between a man and a woman who wish to establish a lifelong, exclusive sexual relationship, calling upon God for His support in meeting its obligations. The ceremony is symbolic and very flexible, but the contract in the presence of God is real. While the promise received from our partner can be a beautiful thing and plays an important role in the vitality of the relationship, our primary moral responsibility is to try to honour the commitment we make *ourselves*.
- The **Sharing of Bread and Wine** in memory of Christ is intended as an on-going source of spiritual nourishment. Based on the Gospel account of the Last Supper, Christians are taught that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (*Mark 14:22*). In this communion, Christ comes to live within us and we live in him. The practice also commemorates the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, through his death, for the reconciliation of humanity with God. As the Jewish people celebrate the Passover to mark their delivery from bondage in Egypt, Christians celebrate the Eucharist to mark the rescue of humanity from the slavery of sin and alienation from God.
- The **Ordination of Ministers** confers on them the power and authority to administer these aids. However, all baptised Christians have the power to baptise in emergencies, and in the case of Marriage the power lies in the couple with the priest or celebrant acting only as the chief witness.

All of these sacraments have an element of mystery and appear to be more profound than what our limited minds can grasp. Consequently, faith plays an important part in their acceptance. They are almost never accompanied by dramatically obvious changes in the recipient, but their effects are believed to occur in more subtle ways at the core of human character and depend on the person being sufficiently developed and properly prepared.

Symbols, Rituals and Ceremonies

Nearly all religions are rich in symbols, rituals and ceremonies which convey much about their history and way of life. They help to unify the community of believers, and encourage communal worship which is also important in Christianity. There is no suggestion that they are meaningless or that they have no beneficial effects, but in Christianity they are as distinct from the real spiritual aids as the visit to the physician is from the taking of the medicine. It

is a mistake to equate Christianity with its rituals, and equally unfruitful to become attached to them because of their emotional appeal, rather than to a firm belief in the teachings of Christ and the means he has provided for our spiritual growth and well-being. Furthermore, while symbols and religious artefacts can serve as useful reminders of important aspects of one's faith, and as such, should be treated with respect, in Christianity there is no room for superstition, and one must be wary of developing any psychologically dependent relationship with them and become anxious lest they are damaged or lost. Religious artefacts do not 'deliver us from evil'. Only God can do that.

The ceremonial and symbolic aspects of formal worship, unfortunately, can also have a serious negative side. It is not that any particular area is at fault, for the prayers are meaningful, the music is stirring, the church buildings tranquil and solemn, the artwork an act of devotion by dedicated craft-workers, and the ceremonies and protocol often fit for the presence of royalty. The principle may well be that nothing less than the best is suitable for the 'House of God'. The problem is that as this grows, it starts to overshadow the core message by its volume and prominence. In contrast, the early Christian community concentrated almost exclusively on their relationship with God and with one another, giving very little emphasis to the paraphernalia that eventually came to outwardly represent Christianity. It is worth bearing in mind that while Christ was a practising Jew who upheld the religious traditions of his people, the overwhelming emphasis of his life and teaching was on the way people live **outside** the formal places of worship.

In Christianity, there must be some minimum necessary 'formality' to properly carry out the important spiritual functions. A little more in a special setting may be meaningful and aesthetically desirable. Beyond that, however, it can become a distraction and a burden that is often conducive to wavering believers questioning the whole package. There is little doubt that the attempt to return to meaningful basics is one of the major contributing factors motivating many smaller groups to break away from the larger denominations. Unfortunately, all too often, many of the important spiritual functions are also abandoned in the process. In relation to rituals, symbols and formalities, the Christian once again faces the challenge of seeing and living beyond the superficial.

Going to Church

There was a time in some Christian denominations when it was regarded as a very serious sin to miss the Sunday church service. Regular participation in formal prayers and rituals was mandatory and together with donations to the circulating collection box, they were the visible signs of being a good Christian. Apparently, the 'mechanical Christian' could commit all his sins during the week, have them forgiven by a priest on Saturday evening, participate in the sacraments on Sunday feeling clean and get back into his dirty work again on Monday. Some really believed that, provided they died having received absolution, such technicalities guaranteed them entry into the Kingdom of

Heaven. This kind of abuse and hypocrisy clearly has no place in an honest relationship with God.

Of course, a good Christian *should* participate in regular formal worship. Frequent contact not only serves as a useful reminder of a one's faith and ultimate mission, but if the services are well conducted they may provide valuable input that helps to keep the motivation fresh and alive. It is almost common sense that active members of any interest group ought to attend relevant meetings and few professionals can afford to lose touch with their associations in a changing world. However, it is not a major offence to miss the church services occasionally any more than it is to suspend a regular arrangement with a friend once in a while. It becomes a real problem when we start to drift away.

Chapter 11

THE CLERGY

'But I am among you as one who serves.' (Luke 22:27)

The Role of the Clergy

The Christian clergy are regarded as the successors and delegates of the apostles who were chosen by Christ to formally spread his teaching. Thus, they are responsible for the preservation and furthering of the work he started. When they preach the Gospel or perform their spiritual duties, they speak and act on his behalf.

Their commission is to teach, serve and advise, but their authority to direct is limited by the fact that the Christian's ultimate responsibility is not to his priest or bishop, but to his *informed conscience* which must be guided by the Spirit of God. In informing his conscience, however, a person must listen and give due consideration to the clergy by virtue of their education in spiritual and moral matters.

Contrary to popular impressions, the clergy are not 'the Church', nor are they its rulers. Although their learning makes them the obvious choice to speak for the Christian community in religious matters, Christ made it very clear that his followers are all brothers and they have no master but himself (*Matt. 23:10-11*). The clergy are the servants of the Christian community, not their masters. It is therefore significant that whilst they may have a hierarchy amongst themselves so as to preserve order and effectiveness, as followers of Christ they do not rank higher than other Christians. The use of the term 'laity' for those who are not formally ordained is unfortunate, as it has connotations that there are two classes of Christians, the professionals and the amateurs. This is not the case. It is very possible for the un-ordained person to be more sensitive, informed and enlightened in the practical application of Christianity to particular situations, than many of the clergy, especially those unfamiliar with the circumstances.

Appropriate Expectations

Whilst every religion demands a high standard from its clergy, expecting them to 'practise what they preach', it would be a mistake for the Christian to leave the Church because many priests fail to live up to those ideals: The message is more important than the character of the messenger. A priest cannot water down what he preaches in order to justify his own failings any more than the medical practitioner can condone smoking because he himself is unable to quit.

Personal perfection is as difficult for a member of the clergy to attain as for anyone else. Once again, it is necessary to distinguish between the person and the role: The work being done has to be respected according to its importance, while the person doing it must be accepted as a human being. As individuals, the clergy are no less prone to human faults than other people or more worthy of the highest reward than any un-ordained person who dedicates his life to the service of God and his fellow human beings in his own way, according to his own calling and abilities.

The Problem of Serious Misconduct

While most people tend to be reasonably tolerant of ordinary human weaknesses in members of the clergy, it remains an unfortunate fact that major corruption and perversion also exist within their ranks. Although people recognise these possibilities in most occupations and strongly deplore them in positions of trust such as education, medicine and law enforcement, many are dismayed when they discover that not even the representatives of their spiritual ideals are consistently above such inclinations.

If there were a simple formula whereby those who are unworthy could be sifted out before they are ordained, it would go a long way towards solving a problem that has resulted in major disillusionment with formal religion. Media attention has served to highlight it more strongly in recent times, but the truth is that it has existed in almost every organised religion since the dawn of antiquity, and the prospects of eradicating it do not look promising. Even the original Disciples of Christ consisted of a wide range of people from stronger characters to cowards and traitors, and the clergy throughout history have been no less varied.

A person is not a true Christian because he belongs to an organisation run by people of supposedly exemplary character on whom he should try to model himself. What makes a Christian is his relationship with God and his own personal commitment to pursuing the ideals of Christ. The mission of the clergy is to help people towards these objectives. As in all occupations, some of the clergy will be outstanding and some will be a disgrace to their profession. However, any encounter with the latter is not a valid reason to dismiss the whole or abandon a worthwhile aim.

On-going Debates

Sensitive issues such as the *ordination of women* can only be resolved in time, and it is unfruitful to let them be obstacles to the immediate task of putting Christianity into practice in one's own life. Equally, questions regarding the *infallibility of Popes* are of more interest to the academic theologian than of importance to the salvation of the individual.

Celibacy has, likewise, been the subject of much debate. It clearly has practical advantages for priests in certain circumstances, but as a uniform requirement it may be questionable, particularly since the apostle, St. Peter, the 'rock' upon whom Christ built his Church, was married. It was not mandatory in the early days of Christianity. It could be argued that whenever the clergy are systematically excluded from a normally acceptable sphere of personal interaction, such as marriage and parenthood, it may curtail their ability as a professional group to empathise with those who have related problems. On the other hand, a marriage breakdown within the clergy can have more serious implications for the whole community of believers.

The appointment of homosexuals to significant positions in the clergy has threatened to cause serious division within some denominations. The issue is complex, but great care must be taken not to compromise basic principles. There is a considerable difference between appointing a person who has latent homosexual attractions, and one who openly flaunts it as a sexually active lifestyle which he considers morally acceptable. A clear distinction must also be made between condemning an individual for a personal inclination he cannot change, and approval of the behaviour that may follow from it.

Chapter 12

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

'When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you ...' (John 16:13)

Christianity was never intended to provide ready packaged, dogmatic sets of rules to cover every possible situation. Had Christ predicted distant future developments such as in-vitro fertilisation or the testing of nuclear weapons and moralised about them, the powers of the day would have found no need to crucify him; he would have been laughed out of Jerusalem! Yet these things are a reality today. God, in His wisdom, allowed us to make such discoveries as part of our on-going exploration of the universe, but we must always be guided by conscience in the light of responsibility and love.

It would be impossible to discuss every current moral issue, so only a few will be considered here.

Abortion

The most crucial question related to the premature termination of pregnancy by deliberate interference, is 'when does the life of a person commence?' Is it at conception, after birth, or somewhere in between? Theologians and scientists may theorise, but the truth is that nobody knows for sure. If the answer turns out to be 'at birth' then abortion is probably no more serious than any other form of self-abuse, and even justifiable under certain circumstances. However, if life in the personal sense really does begin when fertilisation takes place, then the number of murders committed through abortion makes the biggest mass killing in history a sideshow by comparison.

Most of those who have abortions or carry them out either do not care sufficiently about human life or they prefer to believe that it begins later. If the participants are honest about their uncertainty in this respect, they must recognise the possibility that they are killing a real person. Would a responsible and loving human being take such a risk in anything but the most extreme circumstances?

One on-going emotionally charged debate revolves around the situation of rape resulting in pregnancy. Added to this is the psychological trauma of carrying it through its full term as a constant reminder, followed by the responsibility of having to care for an unwanted child. This is a very serious matter. Even more serious is the question, 'Do we have the right to kill an innocent third party to remedy a gross injustice done by someone else?'

Birth Control

The central question in birth control is whether or not it is good to alter (some would say 'pervert') the function of the body so as to remove the natural connection between intended cause and effect. This dilemma is not confined to sex, but may be broadened to other pleasurable activities such as eating and drinking. Certain citizens of Ancient Rome had practices whereby they could continue eating indefinitely without digesting food!

It is pointless to argue that the only 'intended' purpose of sex is the procreation of the species, because that could have been accomplished without building pleasure into the activity, simply by providing human beings with an irresistible urge. Human sexual interaction clearly performs more than one function.

Whilst the general teaching of the Christian Church is against separating sex from procreation for valid reasons, it concedes that circumstances can exist where the practice of contraception may be the most responsible course of action. The decision is therefore left to the individual's informed conscience.

Euthanasia

It is very difficult to see any person, particularly a loved one, suffer. It is considered morally appropriate to take reasonable steps to ease suffering even if they tend to shorten the person's life as an eventual consequence. However, euthanasia, or 'mercy killing', is essentially different in that it *seeks to end life* in order to remove suffering. For a Christian, who considers God the final arbiter of the termination of human life, at least in natural circumstances, there is little room for debate. Nevertheless, there is a situation that is not entirely clear-cut. Is it moral to switch off the life support system of a human being who is kept 'alive' in what could be described as a near vegetable state?

There is a crucial difference between killing a person and allowing him to die naturally when we have taken all reasonable steps to keep him alive in a state of dignity. In cases where there is very little hope of restoring the person at least to consciousness, one must seriously consider what would be the most loving decision in a greater context. The relevant considerations extend beyond the individual who is on the life support system. Keeping such a person 'alive' is usually beyond the affordable resources of individual relatives, and even society as a whole may not be justified in bearing the burden if it means curtailing its capacity to help others in need.

Divorce

The control of modern marriage has almost completely been taken over by the state, and where religious ceremonies are used, they are seen by many as

having only symbolic or sentimental value. Despite the explicit teachings of Christ, almost all countries which have predominantly Christian populations now recognise divorce and allow remarriage.

The traditional view is that a *valid* Christian marriage is generally indissoluble due to the nature of the contract. The participants call upon God to witness their agreement and join them together in an exclusive sexual relationship until one of them dies, and accept the permanence of that relationship for better or worse as part of their destinies. In the words of Christ, “what God has joined together let no man put asunder” (*Mark 10:9*).

To initiate divorce for reasons other than desertion or adultery is not only a repudiation of the promises made when the marriage took place but an abandonment of one's confidence in the viability of such an agreement. If one has just despaired in the face of ‘worse’, is it logical and consistent to make the same promise again with a new partner? From another point of view, if a person proves by deserting their spouse or indulging in persistent sexual infidelity that they are unable to be loyal to a marriage *for better or worse*, then it is highly questionable whether they have the capacity to enter such contracts on those terms. In these cases it could be argued, at least morally, that there was no valid contract to dissolve. Either way, the suggestion is that in Christian marriage *valid* means *indissoluble*.

It is often contended that while the original promises may have been made with honest intentions at the time, it would be unfair to condemn a person to a life of misery when he no longer feels able to honour his commitment. However, in Christian morality, intentions are meaningless without responsibility. It cannot be denied that some marriages can be extremely difficult owing to the circumstances or the personalities. No divine law dictates that a couple must occupy the same residence or share the same bed regardless of the consequences, and there is definitely a place for partial or total *separation*. The right to life, personal safety and sanity take precedence over the obligations of marriage. However, the existence of serious difficulties in the relationship, finding they ‘no longer love each other’, or falling in love with someone else, do not morally release a person to start again with a new partner.

In fairness, it must be conceded that decisions to end a once committed relationship are rarely taken lightly, especially where children may be affected. When partners in a *valid* Christian marriage resolve to divorce, the morality of another ‘marriage’ under state law, is a matter of conscience for the parties involved, and it is not for outsiders to pass judgement on any particular case. Nevertheless, as long as the original partner survives, no contract with another person can become a valid *Christian* marriage.

Sexual Behaviour

The Christian's attitude to sex should be a natural and positive one that is free from unfounded inhibitions and superstitions. However, many of the long standing rules are based on sound reasoning and experience, and a person who ignores them does so at his own risk. The admonition against sexual intercourse outside marriage is not unique to the Old and New Testaments, and in view of the severe health risks, promiscuity is particularly irresponsible. Christian morality, however, demands a higher standard of sexual behaviour than one that is based solely on a fear of the possible physical consequences such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexual interaction takes place at many different levels of intimacy, and not all of these need be confined to marriage. However, as in human relationships of any kind, the closer and more trusting the interaction, the greater the potential benefit and also the deeper the vulnerability of the persons involved. Every level of intimacy, therefore, carries with it a level of responsibility that requires an appropriate commitment to the happiness of those who are affected. This responsibility extends to the impact of the relationship on the person as a whole. When sexual interaction of the most intimate kind takes place, it should be an extension of a genuinely loving relationship, never a casual encounter.

To better appreciate the moral side of sex from the viewpoint of happiness, it is necessary to recognise that sexuality is not detachable from the rest of the personality. Deliberate attempts to withdraw emotional involvement from sex, rather than 'liberating' a person, tends to become a hindrance to sexual fulfilment. The deepest experience of sex is impossible without the sensitive participation of the entire person. This, however, entails openness and vulnerability, and is clearly safer in an atmosphere of commitment. In any case, stable relationships have long been recognised as necessary for sound emotional development.

Two other areas are of common concern:

- Probably the worst that can be said for most solitary sexual practices is that they are usually associated with an immature level of development. The only severe psychological problems known to be connected with them, are the result of their 'sinfulness' having been over-emphasised by some of the clergy. Considering these practices have always been prevalent, particularly among adolescents, it is very surprising that these supposedly 'serious sins' are never mentioned at all in the Scriptures!
- To *be* a lesbian or a homosexual in terms of feelings is not a question of morality. It is not within the power of these people to prefer heterosexual relationships. To discriminate against members of these groups in areas where their sexual attractions are irrelevant, is a violation of Christian justice. However, practices such as sodomy in *any* sexual relationship, *are*

moral issues, and the warnings of the Scriptures against obviously unnatural behaviour are very clear (*Romans 1:26-27*).

Although the moral perspective and the level of tolerance in these areas have varied in Christianity over the centuries, the sexually active lifestyles often associated with them could never be regarded as morally equivalent to mature, responsible heterosexual relationships.

It is one thing to talk about sexual morality and quite another to realise that feelings and natural drives can be so strong as to override all reasoning. That, however, is not unique to sex, and humanity has wrestled with this problem throughout recorded history. The answer does not lie in the repression of sexual feelings or a denial of their value, but in learning to respect the natural forces at work, and having a deeply ingrained spirit of love and responsibility.

De-Facto and Other Relationships

De-facto relationships, trial marriages and casual sexual partnerships are generally regarded as unacceptable in Christianity. The principal reason is that they tend to imply a lack of permanent commitment and responsibility. However, it is essential to distinguish between formality and reality. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that some de-facto relationships are more committed or 'wedded in spirit', without the certificate, than many officially married couples who recognise divorce as an option if the relationship doesn't work out, or fail to love each other as they should. Ideally the formality and the reality should go together, but ultimately it is the reality that counts more, and it is inappropriate to pass judgement on individual cases simply because the protocol has not been fulfilled.

There is no basis for 'same sex marriages' in Christianity. However, aside from the subject of sexual behaviour, which has already been covered, there is no reason why any two people regardless of gender should not have a life-long committed loving relationship that never has to be formalised as a contract.

Politics and Social Justice

The particular form that government takes is not, in itself, an issue in Christianity. In theory, democracy ensures government by the people, but often it degenerates into rule by the loudest noise that threatens popular support. On the other hand, while there can be abundant personal freedom under benevolent dictatorship, absolute power that is not accountable is highly prone to corruption. No political system is without its advantages and disadvantages. The crucial issue, however, is not *who rules*, but *who benefits or suffers and in what ways*. What is of paramount importance is the well-being of the individual and society, and this calls for due emphasis on justice, freedom, long-term viability and prosperity that is not only of the material kind. By Christian

principles, the primary purpose of government is to be servant to all (*Mark 9:35*).

The responsibility of government may be illustrated with an example from the economic sphere: All too often, influential groups succeed in persuading authorities to further their vested interests, virtually giving them a licence to exploit the rest of the population with impunity. It is fundamental to the Christian concept of justice that the earth and its resources are for everyone to use and that no group has the right to monopolise them to the exclusion or exploitation of others. Governments have a duty to structure their economic systems so as to ensure that this is avoided, and that every person has an adequate opportunity to do sufficient work to enable him to support himself and his dependants in dignity. The neglect of such basic justice is a tested recipe for social unrest and an escalator of crime and other evils. Semi-automated charity in the form of minimal 'government hand-outs' is no substitute. Apart from the likely material hardship, the more insidious effect of being denied the opportunity to work is the damage to the person's self-respect, and the sense of frustration and alienation that comes from insufficient meaningful involvement with others through the mutually beneficial use of his talents. This is compounded by the feeling of powerlessness over his own life in being totally dependent on assistance at other people's discretion.

The need for justice, however, runs deeper than the setting up of fair legal and economic processes, for there is no system devised by man which other men cannot circumvent, frustrate and pervert. Although good systems are indispensable, the ultimate basis of social well-being will always remain the sense of justice that lives within the people themselves. Without individual moral awareness and initiative, the power of *any* form of government to ensure social justice is very limited. This is where education and religion play a vital part.

Should the Church get involved in politics? This question is impossible to answer in an unqualified way. There are good reasons to suggest that the clergy should not seek power or become politically active at the party level, for their role must remain consistent with Christ's mission in that his 'kingdom is not of this world' (*John 18:36*). Nevertheless, it is entirely appropriate that they speak out on matters such as morality, justice and human rights. At the same time, the Church is not just the clergy but the community of all believers. As part of society, practising members of all faiths have a duty to participate in its effective government, and presumably, the state is better run by people of developed conscience and moral convictions.

The Limits of Legislation

Christianity recognises the vital role that secular law plays in society at every level. The 'rule of law' is an essential safeguard against anarchy and the arbitrary use of power, whether by private individuals, organisations or public

authorities. Nevertheless there are substantial difficulties with law that cause concern from the Christian point of view.

Law is of little use unless it becomes an integral part of human behaviour, and people cannot absorb unlimited complexity. Rather than creating a deeper awareness of obligations, the growing volume either becomes a ponderous burden consuming an increasing proportion of time and other resources and a disincentive to involvement, or it creates a major compliance problem due to ignorance. Christ's comment that the Pharisees 'bind heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with a finger' (*Matt. 23:4*), is equally applicable to many civil authorities today. Law rapidly reaches a phase of diminishing benefits and considerable wisdom must be applied when attempting to regulate any area, for there is a big difference between accomplishing a specific objective with more regulation, and optimising the whole with the limited resources available. Excessive law is highly counter-productive and eventually cripples society. Equally, too much emphasis on the rule of law, as if it were an end in itself, tends to promote legalism where the 'spirit' of the law is overshadowed by the 'letter', and the fundamental supremacy of justice, responsibility and love is forgotten. Just as 'man does not live by bread alone' (*Deut. 8:3, Luke 4:4*), society does not function by legislation alone but by an optimum combination of factors that include educated awareness, good example and community support.

An on-going dilemma is whether a politician should vote in favour of a law that offends his religious convictions. If the law *forces* people to act immorally, then he cannot in conscience support it. However, if it merely *permits* certain immoral practices, there is no uniform answer. A Christian politician who votes in favour of legalising divorce, prostitution, attempted suicide or the worship of 'false gods' is not necessarily condoning these practices, but may see a need to tolerate them and allow people to make their own moral decisions where they (arguably) do not cause unmanageable disharmony within society. He is simply refraining from imposing civil penalties in addition to those that the person might be destined to face at the spiritual level. We must remember that the purpose of secular law is limited to the peaceful coexistence of society, and there are many immoral acts that do not essentially violate this such as over-indulgent practices that harm one's own health but nobody else's. In the interest of preserving the communal benefits of personal freedom, it is often necessary to (reluctantly) tolerate some degree of evil, and even God appears to do so at this time. Where good and evil are closely mixed, prematurely rooting out the evil is not always the best strategy (*Matt. 13:24-30*).

Responding to Evil and Injustice

When a person observes or experiences a gross injustice, it is natural and morally appropriate to take reasonable action to rectify it and attempt to reduce the likelihood of a recurrence. Civilised societies have evolved processes whereby these objectives can be pursued in orderly ways, but sometimes the

system fails due to its own inadequacies. A classic example is the situation where we know the identity of the person who committed a serious crime against our family, but we cannot prove it with sufficient evidence. Another case might be a corporation engaging in very detrimental practices that are not covered by law. Should one 'let them get away with it' possibly to continue doing harm? When may we 'take the matter into our own hands' with forceful unilateral action? Could we try some unconventional means whose broader consequences are still unknown?

There is no moral justification for human revenge in Christian thinking, however, the pursuit of the common good outside the existing legal framework has long been the subject of debate. There is no single answer to cover all scenarios, but a very important principle always applies: An orientation of love and responsibility demands that we expand our perspective beyond the original objective, to embrace the *full* consequences of our strategy. In the pursuit of justice, as in all areas of decision-making, it is vital to ensure that proposed solutions do not create even greater problems in the long term, at a deeper level or in a wider context. If they threaten to do so, then the appropriate action may be to bear with the injustice and have confidence that God will eventually rectify it in His own way.

Another question is whether perpetrators of evil and injustice should be exposed. Again the full consequences of any such decision must always be assessed before any action is taken. It is sufficient to suggest that the moral answer is not always 'yes'. This issue is illustrated by the situation of the unfaithful husband: Should his wife be told? The answer to this question depends on the relative good or harm that might result either way, but the real moral issue is that he should ***stop doing it***. What about the truth? We must remember that concepts such as 'the right to know' do not override all other considerations. How much of the truth one reveals in any given instance must be governed by the basic principles of 'love your neighbour as yourself' and 'do unto others as you would have them do to you.' Of course we should avoid telling direct lies, but we have no moral license to hurt people with truth unless it is necessary. If the perpetrator of evil voluntarily changes his behaviour, that may be a far greater achievement than the doubtful deterrent effect of public humiliation.

Historical Injustices and Reconciliation

Throughout the ages, the strong have traditionally exploited the weak, majorities have persecuted minorities, indigenous peoples and established communities have suffered at the hands of invaders, and children have inherited the consequences of decisions made by their forebears. Innumerable conflicts from family feuds that continued for generations to wars that lasted for decades, had their roots in the un-forgiven injustices committed by those who could no longer be brought to account. Resentment festers wherever there is

perceived unfairness and no less so when people have reason to attribute their existing disadvantages to the ancestors of a more privileged group.

The individual cases are varied and often very complex, but if this unproductive cycle is to end, a number of principles need to be implemented.

- Firstly, one's group identity, whether it is based on race, religion, nationality or any other criterion must never be made more important than the other person's humanity.
- Secondly, the pursuit of justice must be motivated by a desire to make a better society for *all* parties rather than obtaining satisfaction for the one with the grievance.
- Thirdly, the focus must be on the unjust situations that are in the *present* rather than the past, and the endeavour to rectify existing injustices must not generate new ones.
- Finally, parties with historical grievances should have confidence that in the eternal context all past injustices will be rectified and there is no need for the present generation to *avenge* them (*Deut 32:35*).

Guilt is neither hereditary nor contagious and any attempt to make it so is a gross violation of truth. It is far more conducive to reconciliation to openly forgive the culpable ancestors than to seek apologies from the descendants for events that were beyond their control. At the same time, the beneficiaries of past injustice also have a moral obligation to use their relative advantages to improve conditions and opportunities for those who inherited misfortune.

Globalisation

Whether globalisation is beneficial or not depends on how it is defined, what is being globalised and how the objective is pursued. The concept of globalisation is not new, but the world scene has changed in terms of the awesome power that humanity now controls. The global view is therefore becoming increasingly important especially where decisions affect the greater physical, social and economic environment. The principles of Christianity suggest that our awareness and love must grow with the extent of our influence.

There are several perspectives. The idealistic image of globalisation as universal connectedness has merits, and in some areas such as communication and information availability, considerable benefits are being achieved for an increasing part of the world's population. The economic interpretation of the concept envisages the free movement of business interests, and here some of the 'advantages' become more questionable especially when they entail diminished control over life at the local level. The advantages that come with greater interdependence are often gained only at the cost of increased local imbalance and vulnerability.

The political perspective might suggest the eventual establishment of a World Government, or at least a consistent overall system of guiding principles. Throughout history, many have sought the globalisation of their ideologies or influence through a variety of means including writing, negotiation, invasion, missionary propagation, subversion, intimidation and terror. Jesus Christ sought the spreading of the Kingdom of God through teaching, example and invitation. When he commanded his disciples to teach all nations, he intended that there should be a globalisation of hope and reconciliation with God and with one another so that someday all of humanity would live in harmony as one. At this stage, globalisation is largely dominated by greed and powerful commercial interests. We still await the globalisation of responsibility, compassion, environmental care and the freedom of people to live and work where they choose.

International Conflict

Peace cannot be equated with the absence of war or the unconditional willingness of the disadvantaged to accept the way things are. It requires positive progress towards justice to manage the underlying enmity. This is true at all levels from the personal to the international. World peace will never be achieved while nations pursue their own interests to the detriment of their neighbours. Neither can lasting peace be based on fear. Whilst you may succeed in coercing others into reluctant submission with your power to do harm or make life unpleasant for them, you can only attract them and elicit their active cooperation by being good to them. It requires us to recognise that the principle of 'love your enemies' (*Matt. 5:44*) is far more effective in converting enemies to friends and generating peace than the concept of 'an eye for an eye' or the inclination towards disproportionate retaliation.

Should nations disarm? Christ did not say '*trust your enemies,*' and total disarmament is unlikely to be conducive to effective diplomacy and mutual respect between cultures of differing values, especially before a sound basis for friendship is established. However, while the key to peace does not lie in the surrender of power which may be needed to discourage active aggression or contempt, the intimidating presence of power does not resolve the underlying conflict. The attention must be focused on the causes of hostility, and once there is substantial progress towards a satisfactory resolution, both sides may be naturally motivated to reduce their wasteful weapons expenditure.

It cannot be denied that international diplomacy requires considerable skill, but we must remember that ultimately we are dealing with human nature. Some unilateral initiative in good-will without conditions attached is very effective and too often neglected. A complementary step is open communication towards a public understanding of one another's perception of the truth. In contrast, nearly all wars have been based on a substantial component of lies, manipulation, hidden agendas and the relentless pursuit of vested interests by all sides, while they were sold to their own people under a banner of

honourable motives. Lasting peace depends more on truth, justice and good-will than on clever strategy.

The Terrorism Problem

Fanatical terrorists often regard themselves as legitimately at war with an enemy culture where all people are seen as responsible, if not directly, then by their indifference or tacit approval. However, such arguments are fallacious, for they grossly over-estimate the knowledge and power of most ordinary citizens. Deliberate indiscriminate violence also stands in sharp contrast to God's way of thinking, where He was willing to spare an extremely corrupt society if destroying it entailed harming even a small minority of just people (*Gen 19:23-32*). Terrorism is indisputably contrary to the teachings of Christ and can never be justified from a Christian perspective.

What is controversial about terrorism is the explanation for its existence and the appropriate response. Isolated acts can occur in any society, for there will always be people who are willing to go to any extent to pursue their unaddressed grievances, frustrations and other agendas. Organised fanatical terrorism, however, only thrives in an environment where there is extensive support. Combinations of internal poverty, perceived injustice, external threats and general outsider apathy to basic human needs provide an ideal fertile ground for endemic hatred to flourish, and when we add a suitable belief system that condones violence in the name of a holy cause, it is hardly surprising to find a ready supply of terrorists whose 'mission' overrides the value of all human life including their own.

Many naive responses have been attempted, such as insisting that militant groups disarm and unconditionally renounce terrorism before any negotiation can take place. Vast resources have been used in trying to defeat invisible enemies by deploying massive military power, and this has almost never been successful regardless of which side of an ideology border one represents. There are the advocates of covert operations of questionable legality which occasionally backfire. Finally some sink to the level of attempting to control the guilty by threatening the innocent close to them and try to terrorise terrorism out of existence. In the meantime we move ever closer to crippling our own societies with even more restrictions that do little to prepare us for the next surprise attack. We fail because we try to fight this evil mostly with force and fear. We fail because of our exclusive views of ourselves and our human responsibilities, and because of our apathy to the suffering of those with whom we do not identify. We fail because we do not hear the message of Christ.

Regardless of the ideology that drives terrorists or condones their activities, the inescapable fact remains that happy individuals in a prosperous society do not volunteer for suicidal martyrdom, and people surrounded by active good-will have no reason to go to war with their neighbours. The truth that terrorism is

evil, does not mean that it is a one-sided issue. To conquer it, we also need to look into ourselves. Christianity condones neither terrorism nor apathy.

The Only True Religion

It is natural that every religion should claim to be the 'one true path', and of course, Christianity does the same. In fact, each denomination within the major religions repeats the assertion for itself that they have the truth, and everyone else is mistaken. This presents a dilemma: On the one hand, if a person does not believe his philosophy is better, then why is he preaching it? On the other hand, regardless of which one is destined to be verified, it seems the majority of humanity comprising the 'non-believers' could be condemned!

A person who expects a decisive contest ending in conclusive proof will have to wait. At this stage, we are *all* forced to live by faith, and ultimately the matter of who will be 'saved' is for God to decide, not us. However, regardless of whether we are correct or otherwise, no belief system makes us personally superior to any other human being. The individual who holds an erroneous idea is just as precious to God and must be treated accordingly.

Freedom of Religion

The extent to which freedom of religion is viable depends on what is included under the banner of 'religion' and the way freedom is defined. Unless technology advances to the point of being able to read private thoughts at a distance, religion in the sense of *belief systems* will always be free regardless of legislation. On the other hand, religion as *behaviour* can never be completely unrestricted for then even terrorism and ritual human sacrifices could be regarded as lawful! 'Freedom of religion' may be a catchy political slogan but largely an impractical myth. Within every society, incompatible behaviour must inevitably be curtailed regardless of whether its origin is religious or otherwise. While most religious practices pose no real threat to society and much of the evident intolerance is baseless, some behaviour may be manifestly offensive to other groups. This presents a few dilemmas and challenges for both the individual and the democratic state.

Most major religions, including Christianity, entail more than private belief or worship. They encompass a total way of life. A person who practises *any* religion with integrity does not separate his involvement in business or politics from his higher convictions. They necessarily influence his values and everything he does, and not even local secular law will take precedence over them. Whether this is good or bad depends on what the beliefs prescribe. Either way, if practising his religion poses a threat to those who have more power, it is inevitable that he will become victim of some form of 'persecution' in subtle or obvious ways, whether lawfully or not. Christ warned his own followers to expect this. *In reality, freedom of religion always exists for any*

person who is prepared to pay the price of living by what he believes in. It is somehow significant that in the history of almost every religion, their finest hours were usually when the external conditions were least favourable.

While religious intolerance is seen as undemocratic, the reality is that freedom of religion can itself lead to social friction, and pressures build up in the opposite direction. Recently, some countries have moved to ban the public display of religious symbols such as the veil, the scull-cap and the cross in an attempt to promote equality and reduce division. However, the real threats to social harmony do not come from symbols but from ways of thinking and acting. The damage is done by indoctrination that encourages contempt for non-believers, unjust discrimination in public matters such as business dealings, and incompatible standards of public behaviour that are religiously prescribed or licensed. This is the level at which the problem needs to be addressed. Failing some agreeable resolution, separation inevitably takes place by one means or another such as imprisonment, ghetto formation, apartheid or national division. Otherwise the antagonism runs its natural course.

Where there is no essential conflict between religious and secular ideals, it is entirely appropriate that all people (including clergy) who commit crimes should be treated alike, and not be allowed to evade public scrutiny. Serious difficulties, however, can arise when secular and religious laws are in conflict. Attempts to place secular law above religious law do not work with *any* religion that has a large number of practising followers, and even if authorities are willing to resort to persecution, the exercise is likely to fail. One must always remember that the primary agent of order in society is not the law enforcement system but voluntary compliance which is based on many things *including religion*.

The Environment

Whilst it is reasonable to assume that the human species cannot continue to expand indefinitely without serious consequences, and limits may already have been reached in certain areas, it is a mistake to reduce the problems of the environment to one of population. Globally, there are more immediate problems which the control of population will not, in itself, prevent or solve. The indications are that a minority will destroy the life supporting ability of the earth by greed, mismanagement, short-term expediency and lack of cooperation, long before we perish because of too many people wanting to satisfy their basic needs.

For example, western economic systems are geared towards large-scale production, expanding markets and unlimited wants. They are dependent on mass consumption for their 'prosperity'. This brings with it the clutter, pollution, resource depletion, extinction of species and general environmental degradation which are the inevitable by-products of avarice and materialism taken to extremes. They are the natural result of the kind of 'progress' that

maximises the 'having' rather than the joys of the 'doing'. In contrast, it is actually remarkable how few personal possessions are really necessary for comfort and fulfilment!

Earlier in this book, we noted that one of the essential ingredients of happiness was a sense of oneness, unity or harmony. That is equally vital in the relationship we have with the rest of nature to which our physical existence and well-being are tied. This interaction ought to be positive, constructive and developing in a way that does credit to the capacity of the human intellect to explore the rich possibilities nature has to offer. Instead, what we see is an ever increasing state of destructive alienation.

According to the first chapter of the Bible, mankind was given dominion over the animals and all the resources of the earth. As with the rest of the Old Testament, Christ did not abolish this principle but fulfilled it. He made it clear by his teaching and his example that those who rule must do so for the benefit of all. Dominion does not give them the right to ruthlessly exploit and to destroy, but to develop and use for the good of the whole. So it must be in our relationship with the environment. We do not own nature, but have a stewardship over it for which we will have to give account.

At the same time, there is no room in Christianity for extremism of the kind that considers human beings expendable for the preservation of the rest of the natural world. That is neither the sole nor the ultimate purpose of human existence. A viable solution to environmental problems cannot be found by exchanging them for intolerable evils of a different kind. Methods which attempt to deny people the expression of their natural drives to procreate, invent, develop and build, serve only to undermine voluntary cooperation at the individual level, without which no lasting solution is possible. They are also inconsistent with Christian ideals.

What are necessary is a general change of attitude away from a destructive obsession with our short-term wants, and a restructuring of our economic systems so that individual survival and well-being can be assured without the need to impoverish the future of everyone. An education in the relevant problems is needed at every level of decision making from personal to state, and awareness that all of us are also responsible for the kind of world we leave to future inhabitants.

Chapter 13

POSITIVE ACTION

'Follow me.' (John 1:43)

'Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, is like one who built a house, and dug deep and laid its foundations on rock; who hears and does not, is like one who built his house without a foundation; and when the river beat against it, it fell immediately' (Luke 6:49).

One of the first things children learn when they begin to move about unaided is the meaning of the word "no". Setting boundaries in terms of what people ought not to do, is perhaps necessary for social order, but it is unfortunate that for many of us our moral and spiritual development never evolves beyond this level.

God clearly did not create people just to occupy a space and 'survive'. A reader of the Parable of the Talents (*Matt. 25:14-30*) will recognise that we are expected to use our abilities and our freedom, which God respects and values, to make a useful contribution. Thus, Christian life is essentially about actively doing good. Within certain limits we may do as we wish, but the operative word is "do". We are expected to use our abilities and resources, according to our temperament, to explore the possibilities of the universe; and keep our creative pursuits such as learning, organising and building, raising family and 'improving the standard of living' in balance with proper maintenance, rest and relaxation. We ought to avoid lifestyles that consist of nothing but self-indulgence, consuming and retirement.

Productive works, and indeed the pursuit of happiness itself, invariably involve some degree of cooperation. This is impossible without the necessary obedience to one another. For mature and enlightened people obedience tends to be voluntary in an atmosphere of negotiation and mutual respect, and recognition that our instinct for freedom retains a vital role.

To be truly productive and fruitful, we must learn to obey God, which does not consist of meticulously following a detailed set of instructions, but of learning to think His way. For this, a Christian needs to become familiar with the teachings of Christ as recorded in the Scriptures. He should try to understand and follow them, and teach others to do likewise. Jesus Christ gave a new commandment to his disciples: 'Love one another as I have loved you' (*John 13:34*). He set an example by the way he thought and lived, and invited us to learn from him how to make our lives worthwhile and build a close relationship with God and with

one another. We must learn to extend our limited 'selves' to look deeper, be more inclusive of others and take a long term perspective. The decisive issue in any challenging situation should be, 'How would Christ handle it if he had *our* strengths and limitations?'

We are directed to feed the hungry and thirsty, clothe the naked, give shelter to those who need it, and visit the sick and the imprisoned, (*Matt. 25:34-46*), which apply not only in the physical sense but in the intellectual, emotional and spiritual areas as well. Where we cannot do these directly, we should give whatever support we can to others who are able to. We may be motivated by feelings of compassion or indignation at the injustices of the world, but it is only what we do about them in relation to our capacity that ultimately counts (*Mark 12:43-44*). Acts of compassion, exercises in self-discipline and mourning should never be done for publicity (*Matt. 6:1-4*), nor should distinctions be made on the basis of 'deserving' or ability to repay (*Matt. 5:45-47*).

Aside from these acts, our work is generally meant to be done openly (*Matt. 5:16*). Externally, our good works can help to make the world a better place. While some will dedicate their lives to 'high profile' objectives such as changing the 'system' if they have the appropriate combination of abilities and resources, each person must use his own talents to contribute in the best way he can. The prestige of an occupation should never be confused with its value. However, good works have an even more important outcome, and that is their influence on individual people. While a perfect system would be a tremendous achievement, Christ's kingdom is not of this world (*John 18:36*). We might even create paradise on earth, but if we do not succeed in making people better in character, then it is ultimately wasted effort. Good works not only improve the quality of life, but strengthen the character of the person who does them and set an example for others to follow.

While nobody can do enough unaided to ensure his own salvation, we are expected to cooperate with the Almighty by using all the knowledge, wisdom and resources we have been given, to take one small step at a time towards improving ourselves as people. More than anything else, it means that whenever we fail, as everyone often does, we must always try again and never accept defeat in the active pursuit of good.

A productive and fulfilling life requires learning and persistence, but generally we are intended to enjoy the process. God's love for us means that our happiness is important to Him. Our task in this life is not to 'exist' in perpetual anxiety and fear of death, but to make it our business to *live* the best way we can and let God live and work within us. This way, not only do most evils take care of themselves, but we accomplish far more good and generate much more happiness in and around us. That is ultimately what love is about.

CONCLUSION

We began this book with a discussion on the pursuit of happiness and defined love in those terms. In the end, happiness remains the only really meaningful measure of success or failure, and everything else is just a means towards that fundamental aim. For the pursuit to be effective, we cannot restrict ourselves to a short-sighted, exclusive, superficial perspective. With very good reasons, it must be centred on God and embrace others. Nevertheless, happiness still remains the final criterion. True success does not lie in our visible achievements as compared with those of other people, or in accumulating the values of the world. *We are 'successful' whenever we become happier than we were, in the deepest sense, and others are happier because of us.*

If we love God and follow Christ it is not because we don't love ourselves, but because we do. In the final analysis, Christianity incorporates the art of loving ourselves as an integral part of its way of life. It includes the responsibility of being good to ourselves now and the prudence of investing in our future. Where it differs from most other sources of guidance, is that without disregarding our present needs it takes ***a universally inclusive and eternal view.***

I hesitate to call this a conclusion, or indeed to write a conclusion at all. In a way, it is like ending a journey when one has just departed from home. Another reason is that I find it impossible to summarise the teachings of Christ in a few words; everything he said is important. For the reader who may be largely unfamiliar with his recorded life and message, I hope that this will be no more than a beginning.

Perhaps the most significant thing about Christ is not even the immeasurable wisdom of his teachings but who he was and is. The Gospel accounts speak of him as the Son of God and the saviour of all human beings. In his words -

'Whoever lives and believes in me will never die' (*John 11:25*).

'I am the way, the truth and the life' (*John 14:6*).

'I am the light of the world' (*John 9:5*).

* * * * *

'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

(John 8:31)
