

NT

A pattern for life in God's House

The purifier of sins
Milestones
Gossip

Upside down values: persecuted

Issue 4 2012

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From the Editors' desk

Falling short

Another Olympics has come and gone. The staging of the event seems to have defied the typical cynicism of the British public and the medal count of the host nation was far higher than had been envisaged. Of the thousands of competitors, many exceeded their own expectations and those of others – but many fell short of the mark for a variety of reasons.

We would not normally think of putting the apostle Paul into the category of falling short, but reading his letters to the Corinthians leaves

no doubt that this was the assessment of him by many of the congregation in the Church. His credentials had been doubted, his motives had been questioned and his apparent inability to match the power and authority of his written word with spoken rhetoric had been made painfully clear to him. Leonard Ross takes up this subject in the last article of the series on conflict at Corinth. Like any athlete, Paul had to decide how he was going to respond in a pressure situation and his example is certainly instructive for all leaders who find the course they have to run on is more of a steeplechase than a sprint track!

Of course, in thinking about falling short there is a sense in which we all do – we fall short of God's very high standards constantly. Don Williamson reminds us in the conclusion of our keynote Hebrews series that we have the Lord Jesus, who never has and never will fall short, as the purifier of our sins. He has sat down at God's right hand – which signifies a successful and completed work. How thankful we should be about that! The related article in this issue, by Brian Fullarton, speaks of a runner in the book of Hebrews whose destination was not the Olympic finishing line, but the very presence of God so that, having first entered into it Himself, He opened up the way for us to follow.

In our current affairs section, Peter Hickling points out another falling short in the ability of science. As he says, despite claims to the contrary by some, science 'can only codify what happens; it cannot explain why it happens.' To find the answers to the big "why"s of life we must turn to, and rely on, the all-sufficient Word of God. It is that same Word that can cause us to challenge ourselves as to whether we have fallen short in some aspect of our discipleship. Richard Hutchinson speaks personally of such an occurrence in the final piece in our Beatitudes series, in relation to the experiencing of persecution.

I'll leave you to explore these articles and the others in this issue. We trust and pray that you enjoy this final edition of 2012 and that we have not fallen short of your expectations!

Martin



Unsought

Gilbert Grierson, Knocknacloy, N.Ireland

A couple of years ago I happened to be passing along a road and over the wall was a field that had a stream running through it, with quite a steep bank down to the water from the level field. In the field were a neighbour's sheep with their lambs. One lamb had wandered away down the bank to the water's edge and seemed to be having difficulty getting back up. It was making a lot of noise. I didn't think too much about it as I walked on. Surely the lamb would eventually find a way up to rejoin its mother, or the farmer would spot the distressed lamb as he was checking his flock. A few days later I passed that way again and, being reminded of the lamb, I stopped and looked over the wall. The dead body of the lamb lay in the cold water. Rescue had never come.

In her autobiography,¹ Patricia St John, the author of so many books that have thrilled, challenged and taught children (and adults) over the years, and who writes from her own life experiences and missionary work in North Africa, includes a chapter about the Mission Hospital at Tangier in Morocco. She writes of the extreme difficulties of bringing the message of the gospel to the people of that Muslim land and of the work of the hospital in opening hearts through the provision of free medical help to the needy at a time when no other help was available.

She writes of the day that a poor Moorish child was brought into the hospital in the arms of her father from a distant tribal village. Nothing could be done for her, and she was taken out of the hospital by her father to an animals' hut (a *fundak*) to die in his arms – the only one she knows who loves her. This is her poem:-

FATIMA

'I will die in my father's arms' she said,
'Amid scenes and faces I know,
Where donkeys stamp in the Fundak yard
Where straw is scanty and the cobbles are hard,
And the vermined squatters cook on the shard,
'Tis there that I long to go.'

'Not among faces foreign and kind
Would I plunge to the straits of death,
But under heavens starry and free
In the well-known haunts of poverty,
Held to the heart that yearns for me
Would I yield up my rattling breath.'

And through broken speech shall the Questing Love
Surge to her last alarms,
That scorns no channel to heal and bless,
Unperceived, through man's gentleness;
She shall rest in her final helplessness
In the Everlasting Arms.



Loving, unloved; seeking, unsought;
Knowing, the while unknown;
Denied all access, pursuing His quest,
The tide steals in on her long unrest:
Through the peace of a father's ragged breast
He shall gather and bear His own.

So writes Patricia St John of this little lost lamb. Fatima finally dies in the arms of her poverty-stricken earthly father who loved her, but unseen, behind and underneath are the 'everlasting arms' of the Good Shepherd, for, *he will gather the lambs in his arms.*²

It is strange how the Spirit of God can take a single word out of a poem, give it a different emphasis, and bring home a deep challenge to the heart of the reader. That's how it was for me. '**Unsought**' was the word. As a missionary, Patricia St John carried the message of the good news of a shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep to a people whose hearts were as stony as their land. Jesus loved, but few loved Him in return. He came, seeking those who were lost, but few were seeking Him. He was unsought, but He never stopped loving and seeking. And then the sadness came to my heart, along with the challenge: what of the lambs and sheep who are on the point of perishing today; men, women, boys and girls like the lamb in the neighbour's field that no-one cared enough about to save? Who will go to them and tell them of a loving Saviour? Is there no one willing to leave the 'ninety-nine' and go and look for the one who is lost? Another lover of souls, and especially the souls of little lost lambs, wrote,

'O for a passionate passion for souls,
O for a pity that yearns!
O for a love that loves unto death,
O for a fire that burns!'³

References: (1) Patricia St John tells her own Story OM Publishing 1993. (2) Is. 40:11 ESV (3) Amy Carmichael, founder of the Dohnavur Fellowship in S. India which provided a home for little children, especially girls saved from a life of deified sin in the Hindu Temples

Christ the Forerunner

The substance of the true tabernacle

Brian Fullarton, Bathgate, Scotland

... behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever ... (Heb. 6:19-20)

To understand the meaning of the word *forerunner* in Hebrews 6:20, we have to bear in mind that the Lord Jesus always in His earthly life had the thought of a future day before Him, following His perfect sacrifice and preparation for His unique high priestly activity, when an expectant and eager people (the 'us' of verse 20) would be in readiness to do service to God in spiritual worship, having firmly laid hold of 'the hope' set before them (v.18). This surely has to do with the collective approach of a people to God in His sanctuary, dependent, as was Israel in the past, on the pre-entrance of their high priest into the most holy place (also called *the Holiest of All*¹) in the earthly sanctuary, but with two major differences:

- (1) Israel's priestly representative alone made his way into the most holy part of the tabernacle without any later accompaniment by the people on whose behalf he was acting;² moreover, he was only there for a very limited time.
- (2) The purpose of Aaron's entrance and service, as high priest, on one specific day of the year in Israel's calendar, was to make atonement with the blood of the sin offering, first for himself and then for God's people, whom he was representing.

In the case of the Lord Jesus, His entry fully opened the way for His people to follow directly into the very presence of God – the Majesty in the heavens – where He is seated at His Father's right hand.³ He is there constantly in His Father's presence. When we come in worship, that's where we are; exactly where He is.⁴

Then again, He is not in the true tabernacle above to make atonement for our sins; He did that gloriously on the basis of His sacrifice at Calvary. His service is important in leading His people in praise and worship, at which time in that heavenly place He still speaks worthily of the Father to our hearts as we are engaged in meditation and adoration, and joyfully proclaims His Father's glories and attributes in song with perfect pitch and tone.⁵

The Tabernacle: the way of approach to God

When we consider the layout of the Mosaic tabernacle, that magnificent structure of the dwelling place of Almighty God on earth, and in particular the location within it where He would directly communicate with His servant Moses, we can understand the long period of time Moses willingly spent in the mountain in Sinai. He was

'with God' forty days and nights, learning everything that had to be learned – "*According to all that I show you...*"⁶ It is unsurprising that such detail is so minutely recorded, for there are so many lessons to be taught from the significance of every item of furniture mentioned. Their existence, focus and purpose is to give us a fuller and greater understanding of the excellencies of the Son of God. Above all, the inner chamber of God's holy presence was to be the place of the highest privilege and fellowship that could be experienced by an earthly mortal.⁷ However, skilfully woven and brilliantly coloured curtains, standing wooden boards with horizontally fixed bars, in addition to the dividing veil between the holy place and the most holy place,⁸ ensured that the way of approach was no mere ramble. Each step of the journey in coming to God had to be carefully considered; after all, this was the Lord's own master-plan.

The ritual necessary in coming before God is emphasised in the preparation of the holy garments that had to be worn by the high priest. These garments reflected God's glory and the beautiful service which His chosen representative could undertake.⁹ Elaborate touches of jewellery adorned the head and body of the high priest in his daily priestly ministry to God for His nation.¹⁰ Close attention had to be paid to the demanding minutiae of the sacrificial system, all of which pointed forward to that one supreme self-sacrifice of the Son.¹¹ We can readily imagine on that great Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*,¹² the whole camp of Israel would be at a standstill. No person was allowed to go near the tent of meeting. They couldn't see where exactly Aaron was, never mind what he was doing, after he made his way into the first compartment, the Holy Place. Then, after changing into his simple linen garments, he went on through the intervening veil into the holiest of all, all the while serving in silence. No such repetitions are needed today in this age of divine grace.

The all-important passage of Hebrews 10:19-23

Many Christians today are missing out on the great truth unfolded in the narrative above. The setting for this climax of earthly, but sanctified human activity in divine/heavenly service has to do with the responsibility of brothers and sisters¹³ in the house of God, in and over which the Lord Jesus is a great priest.¹⁴ Corporate divine service assumes our coming and being together in churches of God,¹⁵ carrying out the word and will of God, all part of what is described as *the confession of our hope*;¹⁶ that is our assurance and conviction that we are where God wants us to be in testimony for Him, and defending and propagating what He has revealed to us concerning the faith.¹⁷ Unlike the nation of Israel, we

ourselves fully enter in to the presence of God in worship, through the veil, that is spoken of as the blood-stained offering of Jesus' body – His flesh – in sacrificial death for us.¹⁸ It is all there for us to grasp and enjoy such a wonderful blood-bought privilege, week by week, for the rest of our earthly lives.

What now?

How sad it would be, if He is there in God's presence – as He most certainly is – waiting for us to come to worship on the first day of the week,¹⁹ and we are not there because of our possible deliberate physical absence. The voice of the worshipper rings out clearly and appealingly:

Praise is awaiting You, O God, in Zion ...²⁰

Oh come let us sing to the Lord!

Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation.

Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving;

Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms ...

Oh come, let us worship and bow down:

Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For He is our God,

and we are the people of His pasture,

and the sheep of His hand.²¹

We come to the Remembrance to celebrate the Lord's death, eat the Lord's supper, and be at the Lord's table²² – what a wonderful opportunity is ours!

Bible quotations from NKJV unless otherwise stated.

References: (1) Heb. 9:3 (2) Ex. 30:10; Heb. 9:7 (3) Heb. 8:1; 9:24 (4) Heb. 10:19-22 (5) Heb. 2:12 (6) Ex. 25:9 (7) Ex. 25:22 (8) Ex. 26:1,15,26,33 (9) Ex. 28:2 (10) Ex. 28:6-43 (11) Ex. 29 (12) Lev. 16 (13) Heb. 10:19 - although the masculine *adelphos* is used the word also has a wider meaning of those who share in a common heritage or origin (14) Heb. 10:21 RV (15) Heb. 10:25; 1 Cor. 11:16-18,20,22; 14:23 (16) Heb. 10:23 (17) Jude 3; 1 Tim. 1:19b; 3:9; 2 Tim. 3:8; 4:7 (18) Heb. 10:20 (19) Acts 20:7 (20) Ps. 65:1a (21) Ps. 95:1-2,6-7 (22) 1 Cor. 11:20,26; 10:21

Christ

The purifier of sins who has sat down on high

Don Williamson, Littleton, USA



The writers of this series have been presenting the wonders of our exalted Christ. He is the eternal Son of God, the one appointed heir of all things, the one through whom the worlds are made! The verse we have been looking at in Hebrews 1:3 reveals: *He is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of God's nature.* Can we ever understand or truly appreciate the scriptural statement that says, *He upholds all things by the word of His power?* Our Saviour is the exalted one; none can compare with Him, and it is in this context that we are to consider the fact that He is the purifier of sins.

Purification of the flesh

In order to appreciate what our Lord Jesus has done for us it might be good to see what was required by God in Old Testament times for dealing with this issue of sin.

We actually find one of the best explanations in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews: *For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.¹* Sin has been the separator from the beginning of time. God's provision for dealing with it in order for man to continue to have a relationship with Him was the offering of sacrifices (from a pure heart), resulting in *the purification of the flesh.* This was to be at

a cost to the one who had sinned and of course, it was the ultimate cost to the sacrifice that was offered in place of the sinner.

The power in the verse of Hebrews that we read is seen in the contrast of the sacrifices of the past to the one who is our once-for-all sacrifice. We get to consider the words, 'how much more'. There is no comparison between the one who is the purifier of sins and the possibly millions of animal sacrifices offered in the past. As I have already stated, there is none to compare with Him! This is what brings us to the point of wonder, that one of such exalted place should lower Himself to face the judgment and punishment due to us, so that we can serve God as those who have been cleansed.

Refined by fire

I'm sure we can all understand the fact that some things are refined or purified by fire. While water is the usual symbol of cleansing, fire can be too; John's comments about the Lord baptizing in fire may illustrate this;² and there is also the passage that commanded the Israelites to: *purify yourselves and your captives ... and all articles ... everything that can stand the fire, you shall pass through the fire ... And whatever cannot stand the fire, you shall pass through the water.*³ Although there are many metals that go through this process to reach their highest quality of purification, the best example might be gold. In order to secure the quality and high price of gold all foreign particles must be removed, and it is the application of fire that separates the pure gold from all the rest. Perhaps Peter had this cleansing in mind, when commenting on the practical outworking of the purification the Lord accomplishes.⁴ The Lord acknowledges this process in an illustrative point to the Church in Laodicea. *You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself ...*⁵ The saints in Laodicea had missed the mark, as they were neither hot nor cold toward God, but rather they were lukewarm. In fact, they were content to say that they were rich in this world's goods and therefore needed nothing. Yet the reality was they were spiritually poor and if they were to become truly rich they were to buy from Him spiritual riches refined by fire and white righteous garments of spiritual living. The riches of a man are what he is and does rather than what he has. The Lord knew all about the cost of the refining process and still He was willing to go through the pain and suffering of Calvary knowing that He would face the fierce judgment from a holy God and shed His blood so that you and I might have the purification of our sins.

Some of you may have heard of the forest fires in Colorado during this summer. We have had fires every year so in some ways it was not new, but this time the winds pushed the fire into a large city and the result was 365 homes being burnt to the ground. As I drove past the city that night on my way back to Littleton from Trinidad, I was awestruck with the sight of the fires on the side of

the hills and on the edge of the city as house after house exploded in flame. A few days later, with the fires out, photos showed the total devastation and destruction that was left behind. Empty driveways and concrete foundations were all that were remaining in an entire neighbourhood. It is a reminder of the purging power of fire. Our series aims to bring into our consciousness a fresh appreciation of Christ as the preeminent one without peer⁶ and, at the same time, rejoicing that we have a relationship with Him by grace.

Who has sat down on high

The statement in Hebrews takes us from Christ being the purifier of sins to being the one who has *sat down ... on high*. When we are contemplating the person and work of the Lord Jesus, we should always remember that our Saviour is the ultimate victor! Think for a moment about the other religions of this world. Mohammad was a prophet, but he is dead and buried; Buddhism encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices largely based on teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, who is commonly known as the Buddha, a man who has also died. And many of the cults like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses all follow men who have died. You and I serve a living Saviour, one who has conquered sin, death and Satan's power and is now at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven!⁷ The description we are considering is one of position and authority, and from the view of a completed work. This should thrill our hearts as we realise the place the Lord occupies in the heavens for us, knowing that He is there as our High Priest, a minister in the holy places on our behalf. What a transformational change from sacrifice to High Priest!

As we think in awe of our Lord and Saviour, it would be good to go back and focus for a moment on the saints in Laodicea. The Lord said He would 'spit them out of His mouth' for being lukewarm.⁸ It must have grieved the Lord's heart, knowing the place He had left to come for men, the place He took on our behalf and the place of His ascended power. But He says to them, "*Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent ... The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne.*"⁹ Wow! What a Saviour we have, one who by His grace has saved us from the eternal fire of judgement, purifies us for service before God, and seeks to share with us His glorious throne! Can we compare the riches of this world with Him? May we all seek to buy (for it will cost us time and convenience) of His gold, and to put on the garments of His holiness, for we are to be holy as He is holy.¹⁰ "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"¹¹

Bible quotations from ESV

References: (1) Heb. 9:13-14 (2) Luke 3:16; cf. Mark 10:38-39 (3) Num. 31:19-23 (4) 1 Pet. 1:3-9 (5) Rev. 3:17-18 (6) Col. 3:15-20 (7) Heb. 8:1 (8) Rev. 3:16 (9) Rev. 3:19-21 (10) 1 Pet. 1:16 (11) Rev. 3:22

Upside down values

Those who are persecuted

Richard Hutchinson, Cullybackey, N.Ireland

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*¹

The last of the Beatitudes is for those who are persecuted. It is not a subject that I have much personal experience of, and while I am tempted to insert a sincere “Praise the Lord” in there, I wonder whether that lack of persecution is not a comment on the stand I take for the faith. After all, the Scriptures make it very clear in the New Testament that suffering and persecution were to be expected in the Christian life. *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*, Paul told Timothy,² and Peter was just as matter-of-fact in his first epistle: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*³

So if I find myself in the position of a comfortable Christian, should I rejoice, or should I be asking myself whether my life is not Godly enough to warrant the persecution which is an inevitable consequence for Paul? Should I be surprised at the *lack* of fiery trials, since that seemed the stranger thing to Peter; concerned that I am not sharing in Christ’s sufferings to the degree I should be?

The New Testament writers prepared the saints for difficulties as the natural course of things and in doing so they were following on from the teaching of the Lord Jesus. Not only was the Lord alluding to the suffering to be endured on His account in the Beatitudes, but He was repeatedly explicit in flagging up the reality of following Him. In John 15:11, after a glorious description of the close relationship with God available through Him as the true vine, which Jesus said He was describing “*that My joy may be in you and your joy may be full*”, He outlines clearly that aligning ourselves with God and abiding in Him would mean separating ourselves from the world, which the world would hate us for, just as it hated the

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Mat. 5:10



Lord Jesus: *“If they persecuted Me they will also persecute you”*⁴

The very qualification Jesus gives for anyone willing to follow after Him is: *“Let him deny himself and take up his cross daily ...”*⁵ He wasn’t hiding the fact that following after Him would bring sacrifice and suffering along with it.

The promise of the Lord for those who suffer for His sake is that *“theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* and *“your reward is great in heaven”*. Persecution is called a *fiery trial* by Peter, and it is the purpose of any test or trial to prove the value of something. The testing of our faith in persecution reaps its rewards. *We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.*⁶ That hope is the hope of glory; the joy of knowing that this world is only a temporary dwelling for us, and *So we do not lose heart ... For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*⁷

With such a rich blessing comes the challenge: – When the apostles were arrested and beaten for their preaching we read they went *rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name.*⁸ If persecution comes to those who live Godly lives and if I have not been afflicted, what is missing from my life to be counted worthy of sharing in the sufferings of my Lord and Saviour? If we are found worthy to endure trials, the challenge then is to *Count it all joy;*⁹ to *joyfully accept*¹⁰ whatever shape affliction takes and to be content with¹¹ the hardships of following the one who endured the cross for us for the joy set before Him. He has set before us a joy that should encourage us through whatever this passing world can throw at us.

Bible quotations from the ESV

References: (1) Mat. 5:10-12 (2) 2 Tim. 3:12 (3) 1 Pet. 4:12-13 (4) John 15:20 (5) Luke 9:23 (6) Rom. 5:3-4 (7) 2 Cor. 4:16-18 (8) Acts 5:41 (9) Jas. 1:2 (10) Heb. 10:34 (11) 2 Cor. 12:10

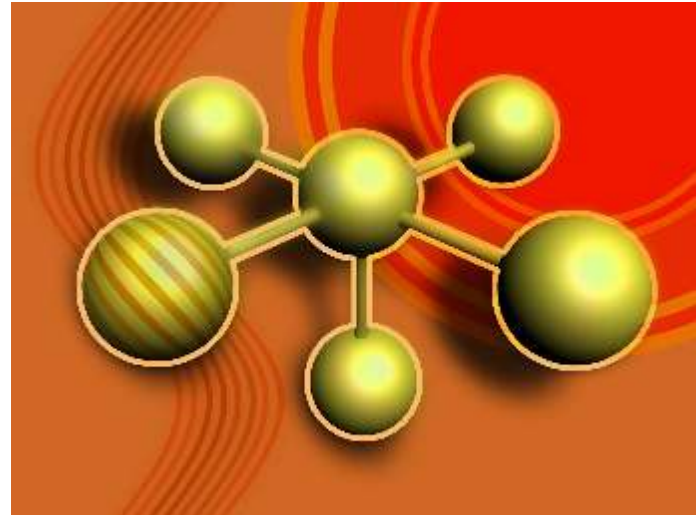
The Higgs boson – the God particle?

Peter Hickling, Cromer, England

There was great excitement among the usually staid ranks of particle physicists on July 4th 2012 when it was announced at CERN, the European Council for Nuclear Research, in Geneva that an elementary particle called the Higgs boson had been detected. It had been proposed as part of the Standard Model of particle physics, and it had been the target of a long search using the Large Hadron Collider. Why the excitement? Because it seemed to justify the Standard Model, and bring closer a unified scientific understanding of the universe. Yet it is not even certain that the particle detected is a Higgs boson, and the scientist making the announcement was suitably cautious.

What is the point of writing about this here? Hardly any readers will be particle physicists (neither is the writer), and the existence or otherwise of the particle will not make any difference even to technological workers. The reason is that in 1993 Nobel Physics prizewinner Leon Lederman published a popular science book on particle physics, *The God Particle: If the Universe is the Answer, What is the Question?* Lederman really implied no more than that the finding of this particle would help to establish a final understanding of the structure of matter, but the term is sensational and overstates the importance of the discovery. However, the words were seized upon by people who knew little of the subject and used it as though science had now found that there was no need for a God.

This is absurd. Science studies the things that are; its method is to record what happens, to formulate a theory which connects those events, then to test the theory against other observations. It may be substantiated for the time being, or found wrong or incomplete. No scientific theory can be regarded as unchallengeable. As an example, Aristotle reasoned that for a body to be in motion it must have a force acting on it: Newton overturned this in 1687, publishing his three laws of motion, which now schoolchildren learn. These in turn have been superseded by special relativity, although this makes no difference in ordinary earthly things. The point



that must be grasped is that science can only codify what happens; it cannot explain **why** it happens.

Even the most complete system of physics cannot give the reasons for things. For instance, my wife might say, “Why are all those papers on the dining room table?” and I might answer, rather obtusely, “Because the table is flat, and strong enough to carry the load.” Although that answer is true, it isn’t what she wanted to know: why I had left them there. Reasons, in this sense of the word, cannot come from the movement of elementary particles, which are essentially irrational, but they come from thoughts and actions. There can only be reason if there is an original Reason outside the individual human mind; this Reason is God.¹

Thus the name the ‘God particle’ for the Higgs boson does much more harm than good; it misleads those who bow down before the present-day god of science and gives them an excuse to avoid thought. Of course, if a complete theory of matter were arrived at it would not be at all destructive of faith in God and Christ. Lederman himself (a Jew) suggested that a fuller understanding would enable people to understand ‘how beautiful is the universe God has made’.

Reference: (1) Col.1:16-17; Heb. 11:3; John 1:1



The Advocate

Stephen McCabe, Belfast, N.Ireland

We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1 John 2:1)

An advocate speaks on behalf of, or represents, another. Paul's letter to Philemon is such a beautiful picture of advocacy. Paul's pleading there is on behalf of the servant, Onesimus, to Philemon, his master. It is surely like our Lord and Master who pleads for us, His servants, when we, in our own strength, fall so easily into sin.

... my child ...¹

Paul refers to Onesimus as his child. You may remember how Joseph brought Ephraim and Manasseh before Jacob.² It's a faint echo of the Lord bringing the fruit of His work before His Father. Jacob says, *"I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also"*.³ Jesus, as advocate, presents us to His Father, the triumph of Calvary won, the horror of Calvary behind Him. Not only has the Father seen the face of the Son again, but He has seen those He has brought with Him – His offspring. When He speaks to the Father on our behalf, it is in the context of our being intimately associated with Him because we are His.

... my very heart ...⁴

Paul says that he is sending Onesimus, his very heart. The advocacy of Paul here, and more importantly, the advocacy of the Lord Jesus, is not a cold, detached thing. The word 'advocate' easily brings an image of courtroom drama to our minds with its legal association in our language. It is easy to picture a lawyer representing a client, where the lawyer leaves work to go home and leaves the case and its concerns in the office, forgets the client until he returns. But when the Lord Jesus speaks for us before the Father, remember that we are His very heart.

... was useless, but now useful ...⁵

Onesimus means 'useful', so Paul is starting his appeal to Philemon with a bit of a pun. But the point is serious – Onesimus could be useful to Philemon! Isn't it wonderful to think that we can be useful to the Father? Once we were useless, but now the Lord Jesus as advocate can recommend us before the Father. How useful are we actually being? It's very easy, as part of a church, to just drift along under the radar. If too many people in an assembly start doing that then the church loses direction. It would be awful to contemplate a church of God – a group of people called together to serve God in His house – becoming unprofitable to God. Let's not allow that to

happen in our churches! We were once useless to God, but now we can be useful to Him through what Jesus has done – let's make sure we are.

... receive him as you would receive me ...⁶

What a beautiful thing for Paul to say. And he is asking a lot! Philemon knew Paul. He respected and loved him. Paul says, "For my sake, do the exact same for Onesimus." The Father loves the Son more completely than we can presently understand. The Lord Jesus speaks on our behalf to the Father – "Receive him, receive her, as you would receive me." Elsewhere Paul says that we are *accepted in the Beloved*.⁷ There is no more wonderful position to be in than that.

... whatever he owes, put that on my account – I will repay ...⁸

Onesimus is very likely to have stolen from Philemon, but Paul says that he will 'foot the bill'. The big difference in what the Lord Jesus does for us is that He has already paid. The old account was settled long ago. So whenever the accuser, Satan, stands before God to point the finger,⁹ there is one who speaks on my behalf – "That has been paid for, paid for by My own blood, My own life." Our advocate says, "Whatever he or she owes, that was put on My account. And it has been settled."

The great comfort of 1 John 2:1 is that if and when we do sin, and our potentially useful service for our Master is put at risk, we have one who speaks for us before God, so we have nothing to fear.

References: (1) Phile. 1:10 (2) Gen. 48:1,9 (3) Gen. 48:11 (4) Phile. 1:12 (5) Phile. 1:11 (6) Phile. 1:17 (7) Eph. 1:6 NKJV (8) Phile. 1:18-19 (9) Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10

Bible quotations from ESV unless otherwise stated



Ethical dilemmas

Euthanasia

Ben Jones, Toronto, Canada

What would our response be if we were asked to help someone to die? Euthanasia, meaning ‘good death’, is a result of the idea that there may come a time when death is preferable to continued life, with various arguments being put forward in favour or in defence of the act. However, for a Christian believer, scriptural guidance must be at the forefront of our consideration if ever we are in the situation, or if, more likely, the question is posed to us as a challenge. The intent here, of course, is not to give a definitive answer, because it is almost always possible to come up with ‘what if ...?’ scenarios that challenge ideas about euthanasia. Instead, it is worth considering the implications of our life of service for God whether clearly seen or beyond our immediate perspective.

The topic of euthanasia logically leads us to consider the question: what are we here on earth to do? To enjoy our life, in any degree, or to glorify God? Although these are not mutually exclusive options, when we truly appreciate the latter, then the former becomes irrelevant. To quote the apostle Paul, *More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.*¹ In Paul’s mind, he considered all other things, notwithstanding any pain or discomfort, as rubbish compared with knowing Christ. In Philippians 1:21, Paul states, *For to me, to live is Christ* – declaring that his continued life was valuable because it meant that he was able to serve his Master. For a believer in the Lord Jesus, death is preferable to life in many ways, because death will instantly deliver us into the presence of our Saviour – a much better place to be than here on earth! Nevertheless, the many commands in the New Testament for the way in which we should serve the Lord demand that we have a life of service ahead of us, however much we may want to be with Him.

Advocates of euthanasia often approach the matter from a desire to be compassionate: to relieve the suffering of those for whom there is no reasonable hope of recovery. In a medical situation, there may well be cases where intolerable pain or permanent disability lead to a patient, or family members – or doctors for that matter – considering euthanasia as a compassionate way of easing the pain and discomfort that a loved one is feeling. From the perspective of our loving heavenly Father, seeing one of His children in pain must be a heartbreaking thing, especially since He has power to heal or to ‘call home’. Indeed, when the Lord Jesus saw the pain and anguish of His friends over the death of Lazarus, He was moved to tears, even while knowing of Lazarus’s imminent resurrection.² Compassionate euthanasia may seem like



something a loving God would allow or even advocate, and yet the scriptural perspective that *to live is Christ* is something that cannot be ignored.

As followers of the Lord Jesus, it is our purpose, and should be our desire, to glorify Him in all we do and, by the work of the Spirit, the Lord can often be glorified by us without our knowledge. In 1 Kings 19:18, God reveals to a dejected and defeated Elijah that there were 7,000 people in Israel who remained faithful – an example and testament that God’s plans and God’s workings are often far beyond what we can see or imagine. Similarly, for someone dealing with incurable pain or disability it may be difficult to see how God can work in the situation to His glory, but we must be aware of how limited our own vision is.

Richard Bach, the author of *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*, states the guiding principle of a life of service quite succinctly: “Here is a test to find whether your mission on earth is finished. If you’re still alive, it isn’t!” God has already numbered the days of our lives³ and has allotted to us works of service⁴ – works that we may accomplish even when we feel at our lowest, through the magnificent working of the Spirit. While easier said than done, our life should be constantly focused on serving our Master.

Bearing in mind that God is the author of life, and has the sole right to determine the length of a human life,⁵ and that the Bible teaches the sanctity of human life,⁶ the Churches of God regard (active) euthanasia as an excommunicable offence; but the termination of ‘life support’ in ‘brain death’ cases is regarded as being subject to the exercise of personal conscience based on factual information by those concerned.

References: (1) Phil. 3:8 NASB (2) John 11:35 (3) Ps. 139:16 (4) Eph. 2:10 (5) Acts 17:25 (6) Ex. 20:13

Conflict at Corinth

Pastoral Conflict

Leonard Ross, Aberdeen, Scotland

‘Pastoral conflict’ – two words which do not sit comfortably together, especially in the context of a church of God. Those in the Church of God in Corinth are described as being *sanctified in Christ Jesus and called ... saints*.¹ By God’s grace they were enriched in knowledge, had the ability to communicate well, and were not lacking in gift; they eagerly anticipated the coming of the Lord; terms which should be descriptive of every church of God, then and now. What a pleasure it should be to ‘pastor’ such a group of disciples! Sadly, the reality was that the spiritual standing of the Corinthian church was not reflected in its daily life. Whilst Paul was with them,² they were comparatively safe, and might have been better able to resist returning to their former way of life, but now in his absence it seems the ‘flesh’ was asserting itself once more. News from Chloe’s household of divisions, quarrelling,³ gross and unchecked sinful practice, brings great distress to Paul who, with Apollos, was a spiritual father to them, and who had, with godly jealousy, presented the church to Christ as a *pure virgin*. His fear was that the minds of these his spiritual children were being *led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ*.⁴ Though they might have ten thousand tutors in Christ, all the instruction in the world without the caring affection of spiritual fathers to help apply it, would be unproductive in this young and immature church. Where were their elders and shepherds?

‘Pastoring’ from a distance will never be easy or effective, especially if the flock has little confidence in its shepherd, and this sadly was something which greatly disturbed Paul. It seems that, to some, he was just not acceptable, and they questioned his apostleship and sought to undermine his God-given authority. In his second epistle to Corinth he is compelled to defend this and indulge in boasting to vindicate his character and ministry. His reluctance at doing this surely displays a humility befitting such a great pastor amongst the people



of God of that day. In the meantime, however, he sees the need of the personal touch, and so he tells them he is sending Timothy to remind them of his *ways in Christ, as I teach them .. in every church*.⁵ The choice would be theirs – would he come to them with a rod, or in that spirit of love and gentleness which pleads with them.⁶ To the man who daily felt such deep concern for all the churches, would Corinth become an even greater burden?⁷

The communication from Chloe along, possibly, with verbal reports from Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus⁸ seeks advice on a number of practical difficulties, and in this first epistle Paul deals with these. Of major concern, of course, are the divisions within the church, for a house divided against itself cannot stand.⁹ It seems unlikely that Apollos or Peter would have welcomed such followings and Paul certainly did not; he tells them in effect to ‘grow up’ and not behave like immature and worldly children – they are ‘God’s temple’ in whom the Spirit of God dwells.¹⁰ They should remember their calling¹¹ and *let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas ... you are Christ’s ...*¹² The leaders were simply *servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God*,¹³ *God’s fellow workers*¹⁴ answerable to the one whom Peter would one day describe as the Chief Shepherd.¹⁵

Whilst we may deprecate the problems in Corinth, without them we would not have these two great epistles. How much poorer we all would be without the gem of 1 Corinthians 13! But those who today have pastoral responsibility as elders in the churches of God, will one day be called to ‘give account’, as also will Paul. What will he say about Corinth? And what will those who watch out for our souls say? May we allow them to do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for us.¹⁶

Bible quotations from the ESV

References: (1) 1 Cor. 1:2 (2) Acts 18 (3) 1 Cor. 1:11 (4) 2 Cor. 11:2-3 (5) 1 Cor. 4:17 (6) 1 Cor. 4:21; 2 Cor. 10:1 (7) 2 Cor. 11:28 (8) 1 Cor. 16:17 (9) Mark 3:25 (10) 1 Cor. 3:16 (11) 1 Cor. 1:26 (12) 1 Cor. 3: 21-23 (13) 1 Cor. 4:1 (14) 1 Cor. 3:9 (15) 1 Pet. 5:4 (16) Heb. 13:17

Milestones

An interview with Suzannah Goldsack, Victoria, Canada

Each of our lives contains 'landmark' events in terms of God's dealings with us. It's biblically preceded that we should recall these, even as there were certain stones which were to 'become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever'.¹ Sue, tell us, what would you consider to be landmarks or 'memorial stones' in your life that you could share with us?

Memorial Stone 1: When my grandmother died, in the clear-out of her house, we found her mother's Bible, and in it, a photograph of me as a child, a baby on her lap. She had written: "This child is for the Lord."

Memorial Stone 2: When I was 15, my parents were having a difficult time in their marriage. My mother worked nights and my father worked days, just so they didn't have to see each other. My father suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome. When seventeen, fighting in WW2 with the Navy, he was one of a few survivors on a ship that went down. He would neither see a psychiatrist, nor could he deal with the mental illness. So our family became the battleground. On February 18, 1970, my father called my brother, my sister and me into the room of our home and hugged us.

The next day, my brother and I went to the garage. We opened the door, flipped on the lights, and found dad dead on the front seat of his car, having run a vacuum hose from the exhaust pipe into the car. Time stood still. Suicide is never about the victim, but about the survivors.

In 1972, I made the decision to come to the University of Victoria to finish my university degree. I was working in Nanaimo at the time, teaching swimming and lifeguarding at the Nanaimo public pool. On one of my rare weekends off, I came to Victoria looking for a place to live, so I went to the University housing office and received a list of people who had rooms to rent. On that list were Pat and Phil Williamson, who had a small room to rent in their basement. Their name just seemed to jump out at me. When I finally got to their house I saw Phil – the tallest man I'd ever seen – working on the side of their house. When I inquired about the room, in the usual Phil way he said: "Go, ask my wife." When I knocked, the door opened and there was Pat speaking on a telephone with a twelve-foot cord, holding Benjamin, who was then three months old, while she herself was drinking a cup of

coffee. She invited me into their house. My life has never been the same since. In August of 1974, I moved into their little room in the basement and stayed for four years. I needed a family and they had their prayer answered for someone to fill their room.

Memorial Stone 3: Part of my rental arrangement was to have my meals provided. Pat and Phil talked to me at mealtimes about the love of Christ. Not only did they give thanks for their food, but they regularly talked about the Lord and what he was doing in their lives. I was rough, hard and my language was awful. Pat had decided that if I didn't change she was going to ask me to leave ... then the Lord intervened.

The Church of God in Victoria was having a series of prophecy meetings with Jack Ferguson, Reg Darke, and Bob Armstrong. It was being held in a hall not far from the pool. Pat suggested that I come to a meeting. I walked into the hall with wet hair, dressed in sweatpants and sweatshirt only to see women in hats, all dressed up and men in suits and ties. As the meeting went on, Mr Ferguson came to Revelation 14:19-20, *the angel swung his sickle to the earth, and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood came up from the winepress, up to the horse's bridle, for a distance of 200 miles.* I was terrified. I felt at that very moment Armageddon was going to happen. As I was preparing to leave the hall, Mr Ferguson cornered me and asked me if I knew the Lord as my Saviour. I said, "No," ducked under his arm, jumped on my bike, and rode home – fast!

When I got home, I went right to my room and I stayed there. For the entire night I paced my room. I couldn't rest. At 6 am, I knelt beside my bed and said, "God, if you are real, I need



to know it.” His audible reply was: “I have been waiting, now is the day of salvation.” At that moment, it was as if the weight of sin – and all the desperation in my life – lifted from my shoulders.

In the morning when I went up for breakfast, Pat knew immediately that I’d had an encounter with the Lord. She said she now knew what the face of Moses must have been like when he came down from the mountain! The most telling difference, however, was the change in the words that came from my mouth. I certainly knew that a real transaction had taken place.

In the summer of 1974 I went, for the first time, to Britain. There, I met Jack Ferguson and we had a long conversation, during which I learned that Jack had also been spoken to audibly by the Lord. On his way to Canada that year, he had prayed fervently while flying that there might be a soul saved. During the meeting, just as I walked in, he told me the Lord said to him: “There’s your soul, don’t let her get away.” Jack told me that he’d never cornered anyone before or since, but that he knew this was his opportunity. I will be forever grateful for the Lord bringing these people into my life to lead me to the Lord. The unique thing to me was that once I started reading the



Scriptures there was never a doubt as to where I would worship. I saw the hedged garden, and God’s house within, and I knew that was for me. In January of 1975 I was added to the Church of God in Victoria.

NT: It’s surely unusual how personal guidance was obtained in these instances. We understand that teaching which is for all of us to obey is contained solely in God’s Word carefully understood in its context. Did you have one more memorial stone for us, Sue?

Memorial Stone 4: When I was 31 years old I met a young man with whom I wanted to have a relationship. I prayed desperately to the Lord over a number of months, but seemed to get no answers. As Jeff and I continued to write, e-mail and meet, we were at a place where we would

have to decide whether to take our relationship to the next level. He was everything I wanted in a man: kind, gentle, strong, dependable, someone with whom I could have children. As I continued to pray to God, I felt no nearer to an answer. I pleaded with God to let me know what I should do. I could not imagine my life without children, a husband, a home and all the things that little girls dream of. After three months of trying to decide what I should do, the Lord gave me a verse: *For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts.*² He gave me this five different times through different people or readings. Jeff and I chatted over the period of a week, and I finally had the courage to tell him that I thought our relationship wasn’t going to go further. Although disappointed, he understood. I cried for days. So I have been called to singleness. Do I like it? Most of the time, I do.

NT: Thanks for sharing your story with us. It’s a good thing to give thanks to the Lord for his wonderful interventions in our lives, as the psalmist did. The recollection of what God has done in our lives, strengthens our trust in Him for whatever lies ahead.

References: (1) Josh. 4:7 (2) Is. 54:5

Bible quotations from NASB

Camp work

Richard Hutchinson, Cullybackey, N.Ireland

This summer marked my 25th year of being at camps in Northern Ireland and when I packed up this year after our Mixed Week, adding it all up I had completed my 50th camp.

Should the Lord spare me, I hope to add a good many more to that total – though I doubt I’ll reach my century – but this article is not a raising of one’s bat toward the pavilion; it is a reflection on what camp work is all about and why it is such a valuable avenue of our outreach activities in Churches of God.

A little history first, for which I’m indebted to J.J. Park’s account of *The Churches of God: Their Origin and Development in the 20th Century*.



It was Dr. Charles Luxmoore who ran our first camps from his own home in Halifax back in 1907 and 1908. Dr. Luxmoore's desire was for young people from different churches of God to study the Word together 'so that they would appreciate the value of fellowship and friendship in the things of God'. Since those early years there have been camps in the UK every year except when the Second World War interrupted things in 1940-41.

After the war-time hiatus, UK camps started up in earnest again, with girls included for the first time and, from 1946 onwards, UK camps were held in several districts rather than as one national affair. The late '40s also saw camps beginning in Canada, America and Australia.

So, from then until now, camp-work has grown into one of the cornerstones of our outreach work, and it is a thrilling and rewarding work to be involved in. The original intention of Dr. Luxmoore is still at the heart of why we are running camps for young disciples today, and of course, there is a strong Gospel mission at the heart of our work with younger boys and girls. For those who are involved with the young people of camps, and for those who support with prayer and their finances, camp is a precious work, more than worthy of the demands it lays upon us.

What is it that makes camp work so special? I think a large part of it is that camp presents a unique opportunity for us to build stronger relationships with the children we work with. Instead of seeing them for an hour or so once a week, at camp we spend every waking moment of a full week with them. You get to know the boys and girls as individuals. You build bridges with them and hopefully build trust, so that they begin to see you as someone genuinely interested in them and their welfare. When camp is over, those 'one hour, once a week' youth club sessions have value added by time invested with the children in camps.

Time at camp is time away from distractions and, in many cases, distressing situations. Some of the children have home lives we can scarcely imagine, and very worldly environments. Simply removing them from that milieu has a big impact in itself – I've often seen youngsters who cause real problems at youth club seem much more agreeable after a day or two at camp, which shows just how important background influences can be.

The camp environment is a unique opportunity to present a sustained programme of the Gospel, where the seed can be sown and then nurtured. It's not a quick 10-minute message and then off home until next week – it's hearing the Word of God a couple of times a day, singing songs about Jesus, giving thanks before every meal for Jesus,



holding conversations with workers about Jesus. The campers can ask questions and get answers, and there is time for them to think over the things they learn.

Over the years, the Holy Spirit has worked consistently, wonderfully and mightily in the hearts of young boys and girls through camp work, and the full reaping of that harvest we'll not truly know until we see faces we never thought to see in 'the glory' – in the age to come.

We have seen a renewed focus in the last 15-20 years on camps run for young Christians, which was Dr. Luxmoore's original intention. I'm certainly thankful that we began a Mixed Week here in Northern Ireland just as I turned 15 years of age. I benefited a great deal from both the times of study (which to me were a new experience at that time) and ministry. Where else might I have had the opportunity to spend that amount of time, at that age, engaged in getting to grips with God's Word?

I also formed many friendships with other young people from across the UK and further afield. The value of close friends who share your enthusiasm for the Lord's service has been proved to me countless times, and camp has furnished me with many who have encouraged and sustained me over the years. It is a very special thing to me to now be running camps and seeing young people form those same bonds of friendship; I can chart their spiritual development from year to year as they respond to the discussion groups and ministry sessions. I look at these young Christians and pray that I am looking at the future of the Fellowship of Churches of God and I count it a privilege to encourage their growth, even as I am encouraged by them growing.

Dr. Luxmoore would, I'm sure, be delighted to see exactly that end result he hoped for in 1907 now being borne out of camps all over the world in the Churches of God today. May God continue to glorify Himself in the salvation of young souls and the adding of young disciples to churches of God.



Women preachers?

Brian Johnston, Leigh, England

The Bible states¹ that women are not permitted to speak when the church gathers together as a church. It is not given to women to lead the church in any audible, authoritative way. This agrees with what we find in 1 Tim. 2:11-12 – *a woman must quietly receive instruction ... I do not allow a woman to teach*. Yet, quite evidently, many believers throughout the denominations today consider this not to be the case. Let's examine some reasons why some have come to this conclusion:

Claim 1: “This text (1 Cor. 14:34-35) is not authentic.” However, the text appears in all known manuscripts. It would be irresponsible to try to minimize the force of these verses by doubting that they are original when no manuscript that has come down to us supports the case for their omission.

Claim 2: “The text is not as clear-cut as it appears to be.” There have been attempts to play down the force of the statement, even though *they are not allowed to speak* takes the form of an absolute rule.

Some, while agreeing that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is both authentic and absolute in character, limit its application to the evaluation of prophecies only. They do this by seeing this as part of a continuing instruction from the preceding verses. Paul's point here, they tell us, is that the women may not participate in the oral weighing up of such prophecies as he has been dealing with in the immediate context. But does it not seem inconsistent for those who claim that Paul permits women to audibly prophesy in a church gathering to also say that he forbids them the seemingly lesser task of weighing up the prophecies?

The clearer point is that these women were in learning mode,² and not undertaking any critical or editorial function with regard to freshly-delivered prophecies. For Paul is at pains to ensure that the restriction which he is making does not mean that the women cannot learn. This implies that it was a learning activity in which they were engaged, not the activity of publicly weighing up prophecies.

Paul's summing up actually begins at verse 26 when he proceeds to give practical guidelines for the ordering of both the gifts of tongues and prophesying when the early New Testament churches assembled together. Various in-church speaking roles are then listed in terms of exclusively masculine pronouns until Paul begins to address the womenfolk in verse 34, and then it is in order to explicitly confirm that they are indeed not permitted to speak.

Claim 3: But then, what of 1 Cor. 11:5? In what sense is the woman there praying or prophesying? The only possible reconciliation with the praying and prophesying women of 11:5 is to understand these women as being part of the overall church company which was engaged in



praying and prophesying, but which they specifically were not permitted to lead audibly.³ After all, we today would not hesitate to similarly describe women present at the Breaking of the Bread as collectively worshipping (although silent), being equally part of the holy priesthood.

Claim 4: “This text only applies at that time to Corinth.” This argues that the reasons behind Paul's demand for silence are local, probably cultural. The suggestion that some of these women were noisy (or uneducated) cannot be taken seriously, for we must surely ask why, in that case, does Paul ban **all** women from talking – and were there no noisy men? Since Paul's rule operates ‘in all the churches’ (vv.33b-34), it would be necessary to assume that all first-century Christian women were noisy which is obviously nonsensical.

Some think Paul was advocating a practice unique to Corinth, which means we can legitimately ignore it. Nothing could be further from the truth, Corinth was being asked to come into line with what all the other New Testament churches were already doing. *Has [the word of God] come to you only?*⁴ Paul asks if they are not troubled by the fact that all the other churches have put the same instruction into a quite different ecclesiastical practice.

A further argument against this being a statement that speaks to that local culture only is the observation that they are not allowed to speak *as the law says*. By this, Paul is probably referring to the creation order in Genesis 2:20b-24, for it is to there that Paul explicitly turns on two other occasions when he discusses female roles in a way which agrees with what we find here.⁵ The verse in Genesis does not mention silence, but it does indicate that man was made first and woman was made for man, and a pattern has been laid down regarding the roles which the two play.

Bible quotations from NASB

References: (1) 1 Cor. 14:34 (2) 1 Cor. 14:35 (3) It is a fact that the Spirit gave prophecy to women to speak, even publicly (Acts 21:9; Luke 2:36-38), but not when the church was called together. The 1 Corinthians 14 portion which begins at v.26 gives an in-church context that is emphasized for sisters in v.33-35. (4) 1 Cor. 14:36b (5) 1 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Tim. 2:13

Gossip

Edwin Neely, Brantford, Canada

The Old English word was *godsibb*, a friendly term describing relatives and close friends, and eventually describing the chatter of women gathered to assist in childbirth. The word was first used as a verb by Shakespeare, but its present meaning is quite different, involving the idle and often meaningfully hurtful slanted anecdote that flies on wings of quicksilver and leaves destruction in its path. Solomon described the action as *going down into the inmost body*¹ and he didn't mean with any good results. Paul condemns the actions of such as engage in this hurtful practice: ... *idle ... gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not.*² A few in his day were guilty of it; I wonder what he would say if he lived in our time!

Marshall McLuhan described modern gadgets as having become extensions of the human body – the typewriter of the fingers, the bicycle of the legs, the telephone of the ears, and so on. Were he alive today he might expand that thought exponentially. Today, modern gadgetry means we don't even have to wander about from house to house spreading rumours; we can accelerate the practice with the extension of thumb action. We are accountable for the words of our mouths;³ we are no less accountable for the action of our thumbs and fingers! James warns us well: *If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body ... And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity ... it defiles ...*⁴ Of course the tongue defiles in many ways, but we need remember that one of them is gossip, whether oral or electronically transmitted!

Among dedicated believers gossip at times disguises itself in the camouflage of “matters for prayer”, human interest for supposedly good intent, but nonetheless hurtful in its broadcast.

It begins with statements like, “I'm very concerned about ... (you fill in the name).” There are times to speak, but there are times when we need to learn to be silent. One wise man taught his son, “Never overlook the opportunity to keep your mouth shut!” Even prayer meetings should not be used as platforms for gossip. Some things need be prayed about, certainly, but on one's knees, alone with the One who knows all things already.⁵



God's law through Moses to Israel was: “*You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people ... I am the LORD.*”⁶ To this Solomon adds, *A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter,*⁷ and adds in Proverbs 26 that though a talebearer's words are like tasty trifles they cause strife. To the Thessalonian saints Paul exhorts that those who walk in a disorderly manner as busybodies should learn to work in quietness.⁸

As well as spreading gossip there is the possibility of feeding on it. Modern media have made celebrity gossip popular and acceptable in our society. No matter what dirt is cast up in the lives of sports stars, celebrities or politicians it becomes a delightful titbit for public consumption on a world-wide scale. Nothing seems taboo; all is open and laid bare – and it defiles! The Christian believer needs no part of it. Gossip is social sewage; it rots the spirit! The Holy Spirit advises us rather to think on things which are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, things of virtue and praiseworthy.⁹ The Lord Jesus knew all things, He knew what was in man, but He didn't talk about it, nor did He advise the spread of that kind of news. He should be our example in word as well as action. He did not gossip; can we who are His afford or even want to do so?

Bible quotations from NKJV

References: (1) Prov. 18:8; 26:22 (2) 1 Tim. 5:13 (3) Mat. 12:36 (4) Jas. 3:2,6 (5) Mat. 6:6 (6) Lev. 19:16 (7) Prov. 11:13 (8) 2 Thes. 3:11-12 (9) Phil. 4:8