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## **“What Are They Among so Many?”**

There was no food for the great crowd of 5000 – except that Andrew could point to a lad who had “five barley loaves and two small fishes”. We need not be surprised that he added the question: “But what are they among so many?” – especially as these loaves would not have been at all large. The provision was extremely limited; was there enough even to give the tiniest crumb to each individual in that vast multitude of people?

Yet Andrew’s question left out of account Christ’s divine power, so often manifested already in a whole variety of situations. We might very readily express surprise at the disciple’s unbelief. Had his Master not very often done wonderful works altogether beyond what mere mortals were capable of doing? Was it not equally within His power to feed the multitude in a miraculous way on this occasion?

But we might feel rather more restrained in our comments if we were conscious of our own unbelief as we consider the Church’s position today. How limited her resources are in the face of all the opposition everywhere “against the Lord, and against His Anointed”! When the Church makes so little impact on the world around, how can we expect the multitudes to pay attention to its message? The Church is weak; in our time it is very weak indeed. There are few who preach a pure gospel and believe in the full authority and reliability of Scripture; how can they influence the world to accept God’s authority, give up their sin and worldliness and turn to Christ? There is absolutely no possibility that this generation will be turned from their idols to serve the living God – apart from divine power. But we forget that, although the world is strong, Christ is infinitely stronger. Although Satan is the “strong man armed” who does all in his power to keep sinners in his kingdom, Christ is the “stronger than he”, who is well able to rescue sinners and bring them into the kingdom of grace. All power has been given to Him in heaven and in earth, and no creature, however strong, can possibly resist this King in working out His purposes.

To provide food for 5000 people was humanly impossible in the circumstances, but it was perfectly possible for the divine Saviour. He was able to

provide so completely for them that the disciples were able to fill 12 baskets with what was left over. To turn the multitudes of this generation and make them willing to walk in the narrow way which leads to everlasting life is totally impossible, if we look no further than human power. Paul might plant and Apollos water, but they could bring about no spiritual good by their own unaided efforts – however scriptural their preaching might be and however eloquently their words might be delivered. It is said of the Saviour Himself that “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not”; He came to those who professed to worship the true God, but they would not believe in Him. It is still the same. Christ comes, in the preaching of the gospel, to those who profess to worship the true God, and large numbers of them refuse to believe in Him; in their hearts they reject the Saviour appointed by the Most High.

Why will sinners not come to Christ? Because they do not wish to do so; because they have corrupt hearts. They have sinful rebellious wills; they are completely unwilling to submit to the Lord and His Christ. So, whether we look at the Church in its weakness facing a hostile world and making no impact on it, or at a particular preacher addressing individual hearers, the fundamental problem is the same: the unwillingness of each sinner to submit to the Lord and His Christ. We must bear in mind the unwelcome truth: “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be”. Here is an absolute impossibility – that the human heart will ever submit, apart from divine power, to the authority of God. The natural heart is completely unwilling to forsake sin and seek holiness.

Neither the powerful reasoning of Paul nor the impressive eloquence of Apollos will move a single heart in the direction of true, spiritual religion, unless the Holy Spirit will apply the truth proclaimed. The natural heart is too corrupt, too much in subjection to the prince of this world, to become subject to the law of God. No matter how convincing the arguments presented in preaching or in personal conversation, the human heart will never submit. Sinners may be told of the evil of sin and its consequences, particularly a lost eternity; they may be told of the greatness of the mercy of God in providing a salvation which is perfectly suited to their needs; they may be told of the shortness of time and the urgency of submitting to the claims of God. But if no more than human power is at work, nothing will be achieved; the human will is too strong for even the most persuasive presentation of law and gospel.

This is particularly so because “the god of this world” is blinding “the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them”. Satan presents

ideas and motives to the mind of the unsaved sinner which are perceived as more attractive and more relevant than the things of God. Such is the continual deceitful activity of the evil one.

In the face of such opposition, one might not be surprised if people look at the resources available to the Church and ask, “What are they among so many?” In themselves the preachers of the gospel are weak and, particularly if we confine our attention to those who proclaim sound doctrine, they are few. Yet it must never be forgotten that “it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe”. As surely as that was so in the apostolic age, preaching is *the* means it pleases God to use for the salvation of sinners in every age, including the twenty-first century. When it pleases God to save a sinner, He does not leave the preacher to his own resources. The Holy Spirit is then present to apply the truth, to remove the opposition, making the hitherto-rebellious sinner willing to submit to the authority of the Lord and His Christ. It is by divine power – yet always in the use of means – that sinners are made willing to forsake sin, to believe in Christ and to follow Him throughout the rest of their lives here below, for “the things which are impossible with men are possible with God”.

It was by this divine power that Lydia’s heart was opened so “that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul” and put her trust in the Saviour. It was the same divine power that accompanied the words of Paul and Silas so that the jailor in Philippi was willing to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. And it was by the same divine power that 3000 souls were made willing on the day of Pentecost to receive the message of Peter with gladness and to believe in the Redeemer he proclaimed. On the morning of that day, people might have been inclined to point to the disciples and ask, “What are they among so many?” But before the day was over, with a multitude of sinners savingly influenced by the truth, that question would have been completely forgotten.

As we look around the world today, and see the forces of atheism, secularism, heresy and false religion ranged against the Church, let us not despair. The Holy Spirit has not ceased His work; sinners are still being converted. And the same power which is effective in transforming individuals will yet be effective in bringing sinners in their multitudes to a genuine trust in the Saviour. Fundamentally the means will be the same: the Word of God applied by the omnipotent power of the Spirit. Undoubtedly, other factors ought to be considered – including, particularly, the prayers of the people of God. But let us not allow unbelief to obscure the fact that, when it is God’s will to rescue multitudes of sinners still going on in rebellion against God, no power in earth or hell can prevent it.

## New Creatures in Christ<sup>1</sup>

A Sermon by *Alexander O Laird*

2 Cor 5:17a. *If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.*

All the works of God are well fitted to excite the admiration of His intelligent creatures. Nature is daily unfolding wonders which the wisdom of our fathers never discovered. The book of providence has its mysteries too, which we should study for our profit though we cannot fully understand them. And the kingdom of grace – in its government, subjects and laws – is perhaps more mysterious than any. There is a simple grandeur in Moses' account of the Creation, so that we cannot fail to perceive the hand of God there. When man erects a dwelling place for himself on earth, we see the bustle of preparation and the noisy labour of workmen; but when God frames this vast universe, He only speaks the word and it is done. He says, "Let there be light", and it shines forth at His bidding.

Yet in grace, His method of working is more wonderful still. If *we* wish to cultivate the mind, it is a work of labour and of time. It may fail after all; and those in whose mental and moral improvement we feel the greatest anxiety may, notwithstanding all our pains, be fools in understanding and the victims of fearful depravity and sin. But under *God's* teaching, the mind is enlightened, the affections become spiritual, and the sinner, once as unresponsive as a stone to the things of God, becomes a living child, feeling, loving and growing. He was once no better than a piece of mixed clay taken out of the pit, but has been formed by the Potter into a useful vessel, and quickened by the breath of the Almighty to become an intelligent and living worshipper. If the angels sang together and shouted for joy when they saw the work of creation, no wonder there is joy in heaven over the *new* creation when a sinner repents – being created in Christ Jesus unto good works.

Man was the glory of the first creation, the noblest of the works of God. This world was built for his dwelling, and he lived upon the earth the image of his Maker. But in the second creation, there is a work more marvellous still, if possible, and certainly more full of majesty, mercy and grace. The Divine Spirit makes an unclean, guilty sinner into a partaker of His holiness, changes the vessel of wrath into a vessel of mercy, and the child of the devil into an heir of heaven. If it was a miracle of divine power when Jordan was driven back, what a miracle, both of mercy and power, when the affections flow in a new channel contrary to nature! So, if we are asked, What turns the stream of sentiments, feelings and affections in a regenerate soul? What causes

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted, with some abridgement, from *The Free Church Pulpit*, vol 2. Laird (1808-1891) was at this time minister in Abbotshall, Fife; he was later translated to Dundee.

prejudices to remove, the corruptions of the flesh to be driven back and the whole man to become new? It is at the presence of the God of Jacob and by the gracious power of His Spirit. But are all our guilty race the subjects of this wonderful change? Alas, it is far otherwise. No one can partake of it without a living Christianity and a vital union to Christ, and no one can be in Christ without being the workmanship of God a second time. In other words, if any man be in Christ, he must of necessity be a “new creature”. And if any man be a new creature, or the subject of a new birth, he must be in Christ. Let us inquire:

**1. What is it to be “in Christ”?** It is evident that this means a great deal more than an outward profession of Christianity. Not all who name the name of Christ are in Him in the sense in which the Apostle uses that expression. Else all who are admitted into the visible Church would be “new creatures”, entirely changed from what they previously were – which we all know is not the case. The expression is intended to denote, not an external relation, but a union that is far more close and spiritual. It means such a union by a living faith as enables the believer to derive virtue from Christ, and to receive grace out of His fulness, as the members derive virtue from the head and the branches from the tree. It means also that those who are partakers of it have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in their hearts and influencing their affections, feelings and conduct. It is therefore not a nominal or imaginary privilege.

Though a mysterious and spiritual union, it is yet a real and living one and productive of the most lasting and substantial benefits. Other unions are formed only to be dissolved. We may, in our folly, have vowed a perpetual friendship to the companions of youth, while melancholy experience has told us that the closest earthly ties have all to be broken. But the union spoken of in the text is one of the closest intimacy and of the most enduring love. It is the union of a poor, guilty, perishing creature to one who can save to the uttermost – to a divine Saviour, whose wrath indeed is worse than death, but whose favour is better than life. A union with a fellow mortal may sometimes be for better, sometimes for worse – sometimes an occasion of joy, sometimes a source of sorrow. It might be no advantage to be intimately connected with a person of ruined fortune or blasted reputation; it would avail us nothing to have our fortunes bound up with those of a man perishing in the deep.

Yet if you be “in Christ”, joined to the Lord by one spirit so that all your concerns become His, and His interests and yours inseparably bound up together, you cannot bring Him down to your level, but He will lift you up to His kingdom and throne for ever. *Once* a child, you are always a member of the family. *Once* engrafted into Christ, you are a branch that never withers. It is true that you may, notwithstanding this privilege, participate in many of

the trials of this changing world. The most fondly cherished of your earthly hopes may wither and die. You may live to see the closest connections dissolved and the tenderest ties torn asunder. You may even have to weep in secret over a love inconstant and unsteady, like the ebbing and flowing of the tide – inasmuch as your heart may, in your seasons of sweetest communion, be filled with love and joy like a harbour full of water, and at other times empty and dry. Still, *once* “in Christ”, you are wedded to Him for ever. In joyous or adverse times, in seasons of tranquillity and trouble, in the days of active life or in the dark river of death, you will be so joined to your living Head in heaven that He cannot dwell in glory and leave you behind.

What a sweet and precious privilege is this, and how few by experience understand what it means! Many rest satisfied with an external relationship, while the affections of their soul are never called into exercise. But what is there in this to afford either profit or joy? Where would be the advantage of a union between two upon earth who, without any union of hearts, were tied together for life? So where is the gain of a nominal relation to Christ if there is no union of the soul to the Lord by one spirit? This may have a withering and deadening influence, tending to lull the conscience asleep, but cannot be expected to bring abiding peace or progressive holiness. Where, however, there is a saving union to Christ, a believer may be said to be “in Him”. There is, if I may so speak, a union of hearts. The Lord lays open His very heart to embrace in the arms of a warm and generous love all who, by faith, give themselves to be His. And they lay open their heart to Him, for how should they not have room in it for the Lord whom they have loved and chosen? If these things are true, I cannot conceive a more important inquiry for us this day than this: Have we any reason to conclude that *we* are in Christ. Happily the text furnishes a clue by which we may at least try to ascertain the fact. It gives us a description of those who are “in Christ”, and tells us, in very plain language, that “if any man be in Christ he is a new creature”.

**2. What is it to be a new creature?** By this expression we are not to suppose that any visible change takes place in a man’s external appearance when he is engrafted into Christ and made the subject of regenerating grace. There is nothing outwardly peculiar about such a man; yet he is different from what he was, and from the unthinking world around him. The Bible is different from any other book which the world contains. Look at it on the shelf of a library, and this difference may not be seen in its outward appearance. But spread the book open before you and see the treasure it contains. Then you may say of it as David said of Goliath’s sword: “There is none like it”. It has wrought wonderful changes in the world; it has broken many a hard heart

and healed many a broken one. It is a store where many a hungry soul goes for food and which is relished more than honey dropping from the comb. It contains more wisdom and knowledge than all the other books that were ever printed, and it has done more to make men happy on earth and joyful in eternity. Therefore, though it is just like other books in outward appearance, in reality there is not one in the least like it.

Now, so it is with those who are “in Christ” and, consequently, “new creatures”. In outward appearance they are just like other men. Do not, however, view them externally, as you would a Bible on the shelf among other books, but examine them a little more closely. Converse with them of their joys and hopes and hear what they can tell, not of their own doings, but of what the Lord has done for them and in them. See how they delight in the Word, in its precepts as well as its promises, what a relish they have for closet communion with God, what a horror they feel at sin and what an anxiety to have it subdued! Then you will perceive that their views, as well as their affections, are so completely changed that they are not only different from what they once were, and from the ungodly around them, but really “new creatures”.

You have heard of Naaman, a great man in Syria, who was a leper, and therefore suffering from a most loathsome disease which all his wealth and influence could not cure. But what a change came over him when he had washed seven times in Jordan and “his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean”! So when one is made a partaker of the change referred to in the text, instead of all the faculties of his soul being corrupted and spoiled by the leprosy of sin, a child’s heart is given him and he too is made clean. A man may indeed be driven by the force of public opinion, or by considerations of worldly expediency, from some sinful practices in which he formerly indulged, so that we may hear men speaking of him as a reformed character. Yet, though he may have undergone a visible change in many respects, he may after all not be a new man. Saul among the prophets, though another man from what he once was, was not a new man. Jehu, with all his apparent zeal for the Lord of hosts, was not in reality what he seemed to be. Herod, who heard John gladly, beheaded him at last. And Felix, who was deeply affected by the preaching of Paul, was a stranger to the power of converting grace.

The work, therefore, here referred to is not merely what brushes away such outward blemishes as are offensive to human eyes; it probes the deepest and most secret wounds of the heart and gives a new spring to all its affections, feelings and desires. Let us illustrate the change by an example: See two men very unlike one another in sentiment and character – indeed, as

diverse as any two individuals can possibly be. The one is not content with cherishing enmity in his heart to the cross of Christ, but unsheathes the sword of persecution in the hope of putting down, by the hand of power, that cause which excited so much jealousy in the world; he bathes the sword in blood and causes the dungeon to echo with the sighs and groans even of delicate females. The other, a man of a tender heart, is very jealous of the honour of Christ and is willing to die for His sake, weeping much over human infirmity and sin, and praying night and day that sinners might be saved.

The first of these was Saul, the persecutor, before it “pleased God to reveal His Son in” him. The second was, in one sense, the same person – His bodily appearance unaltered, and yet most evidently “a new man”, not merely different in some respects from what he formerly was, but entirely changed so as to become a “new creature”. Saul the persecutor and Paul the ambassador of Christ were really as dissimilar as if they had been two separate persons, born and educated thousands of miles from one another. And you cannot select two characters in the widely-scattered family of man who, in their ideas and feelings, are more unlike than Saul as a moral but natural man, and Saul as a “new creature” enlightened by the Spirit.

But let it not be supposed that the case is at all different now. A sinner in his natural state and a believer in Christ are both much the same as in the days of Paul. I shall suppose there is some man in this house who was once a child of wrath even as others but is now planted in the likeness of the Saviour’s death. I cannot doubt but such a man has undergone a change, perhaps not so marked and visible as Paul’s, but yet as real and complete. Such a man was once, it may be, not immoral, but yet without God in the world – a creature forgetful of his Creator, living only for time, and having no love to Jesus warming his heart. His soul did not earnestly cry for the milk of the Word. He had no communion with the Lord in prayer. He never felt the attractive power of the cross, and was influenced only by earthly considerations, and in a small way checked by a natural conscience.

But how stands the matter with him now? He is the same kind and affectionate friend, the same loving father, the same dutiful child, as he was before – nay, he is far more dutiful in every relation as a husband, a father, a brother, or a child, for he is now influenced by infinitely higher and stronger motives. He once worshipped formally, but now does so intelligently and spiritually. He formerly prayed with the lip, if he prayed at all, but now his prayers are the aspirations of his heart. He was once as much a stranger to the peace of God, and to communion of soul with the Lord in heaven, as if these things were only the dream of enthusiasm. But now he knows that there is such a thing as intercourse between man and God. I have

supposed there may be such a man here. If there is, he is not only different in some respects from what he was, but really a “new man”, “created in Christ Jesus unto good works”.

I shall suppose, further, there is some female in this assembly who, by the Spirit’s grace, has been made a partaker of the change I have referred to. She was once a stranger to the experience of Mary, who chose the good part and sat at the feet of Jesus. She felt that the world had many attractions, for its treacherous pleasures cheated her heart into forgetfulness of God. If the mother of a family, the cares of her household hindered her from caring for the things of the Lord. The children who were given her became entwined in her affections and beguiled away the time that should have been spent with God. In a word, the love of Jesus had not won her heart and become superior to other loves. She might have been, as we express it, amiable, graceful and accomplished – but, at the same time, she was graceless and without God. There is no spirituality or meetness for heaven in such a character, and nothing like a new-born child of God in a heart which is open to other loves but shut against the warm and generous love of Christ.

If such was once her condition, what is she now? She is a learner at the feet of Jesus. The attractions of the world have, in a great measure, lost their charms, or have been swallowed up by the attractions of the cross. She values the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. Her children have become greater objects of anxiety and care than ever, for she views them as a charge given to train up for eternity. But they do not, as before, engross the time that should be spent with God. Nay, they give her many an errand to the throne of grace and, if she has reason to believe that any of them have been led by her to Jesus, she will rejoice far more over them as their spiritual mother than ever she did as their natural parent. Surely then the change which has taken place is decided and real – not a partial amendment, but a new spiritual creation – verifying the statement in the text that, if any are in Christ, they are new creatures.

Enough has perhaps been said to show that the change here referred to, whether brought about suddenly or in a more gradual manner, is a divine and entire change, which renders the subject of it a “new creature”. If he was reckless and reprobate before – having a profane mind, a disorderly walk, being a despiser of ordinances – then the change will be more marked and striking. But if not immoral in his conduct, yet in reference to his heart the change will be no less decided and real, even though there will not be the same alteration in his outward walk. Before, he may have professed a regard for Christ and His cause, but his heart was not softened by His grace or constrained by His love. He may have observed his stated prayers, but

they were cold and formal. He may have attended public ordinances, but they were not Bethels of communion with God.

How different is the same man in regard to his spiritual state and experience when Christ is revealed in him as “the hope of glory”! His hard heart becomes soft and tender. The desires of his soul, and not the formal requests of the lip, are uttered at the throne of grace. He longs for a closer walk with God; his affections flow in a new channel; and his heart and treasure are in heaven, where they never were before. Is he not, then, a “new man”? Do *you* know anything by experience about a change like this? Are your desires no longer after the world but after grace? Do you rejoice in the testimonies of God more than in riches? Do your cares cause you to cry out, “What must I do to be saved?” instead of going out to earthly vanities? Do you fear sinning against God more than meeting a cross? If so, the day of your death will be better than the day of your birth. But if not, you can only be poor and miserable outcasts, for if you are not new creatures, you cannot be “in Christ”.

**3. Why is this change necessary?** One would think the text shows this clearly enough when we are assured that we cannot be “in Christ” without it – we can have no interest in His death, or participate in the blessings of His kingdom. How can a sinner full of impurity dwell with a holy God in a holy place? He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and the very heavens are not clean in His sight. Consequently He can never admit into His glorious presence in heaven a guilty, depraved sinner, unless he be first rendered in some measure like Himself. Nor could the natural man participate in the joy of the redeemed. As a deaf man surrounded with the most exquisite melodies, or a blind man with the most beautiful productions of art spread out before him, so would the natural man be in paradise. Besides, without the change here referred to, all our religion – however sound in doctrine and apparently zealous – must be utterly vain. How zealous was Jehu! Yet all was rejected because his heart was not right with God. What a fine, blameless character did Paul appear to have! Yet, being unconverted, all was but loss.

Job likens the hopes of the unconverted to the web of the spider. It weaves its web with great industry and skill, only to be swept away. So the sinner cherishes a hope that must inevitably perish. He is told that there is no condemnation to them that are “in Christ Jesus”, but he will not seek refuge in this hiding place. The god of this world has blinded his eyes, and he does not see the matter in its true light. Satan calls and he is ready, but the Lord calls and he sleeps on still. He is assured that the broad way on which he walks ends in destruction, but he is so perverse that he will go on it still. There is no hope of being saved or entering into life but by a new birth. By

your natural birth you came into the world, but you can enter into the world of grace only by a spiritual birth. “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

**Application:** (1) You who are strangers to a life of faith and to the power of converting grace have reason, surely, to consider your position solemnly. Are you willing to lose for ever the privileges and blessings of the kingdom of God? Remember that the work we have been describing is pre-eminently the *work of God*. He who can raise, unto Abraham, living children out of stones and can breathe life into bones bleached and dry, can doubtless quicken *you*. Therefore what meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God that thou perish not. Meditate on the number and aggravations of your sins. Search the Word, which is the instrument He uses in converting the soul. Plead for the Spirit’s grace to quicken and save you. Your condition is sad and dangerous in the extreme, but there are many in a worse situation than even you. What would the lost give for your day of grace? Yet there is room. The Master’s house is not yet filled, and to you is the word of salvation sent. Will you not come? I leave you with the exhortation which Gad the seer addressed to David, “See what answer I shall return to him that sent me”.

(2) If any of you are “in Christ”, and so “new creatures”, see that you cherish with care your new-born life. Grace in the soul is a tender plant in an unkindly soil. As the delicate flower which is a native of a warmer climate is checked in its growth by a biting frosty wind, so the growth of grace is greatly retarded by the chilling influence of worldly society. It requires to be nourished by constant vigilance, meditation and prayer. It needs daily the showers that keep it alive. You may well question its existence in the soul if it does not grow. Is every kind of life not accompanied with growth and progress? Look at the fruit trees in an orchard when covered over with blossoms in spring, and you will never see them so beautiful as then. Yet what would be the worth of this fine show if these blossoms never ripened into fruit? See a little child whose innocent prattle engages your attention; you may be pleased with its knowledge and intelligence in proportion to its years. But how great would your disappointment be were you to come back some 10 or 12 years later and find it a babe still! Now there must be progress in spiritual life too. And be very jealous of everything which may have a tendency to injure or retard the growth of this heaven-born, valuable life.

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The riches of the Christian are the Word of God laid up in the sacred treasury of the mind: the wisdom derived from that Word – store of divine grace, the least drop of which is more precious than all the gold of the whole world – and, in fine, the abundance of heavenly bliss that awaits them, of which they enjoy the firstfruits in the present state.

*Herman Witsius*

## The Providence of God<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Some Applications of the Doctrine

*Rev H M Cartwright*

The doctrines of the Bible are intended to be translated into experience and practice, and so we must come in conclusion to say a little about (4) *some applications of the doctrine which are to be made in our personal lives.*

(a) The fact of God's providence should move us to take notice of, and consider, what He does in His providence as well as what He says in His Word. "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the Lord" (Ps 107: 43). Flavel says that it is "most comfortable [comforting] to observe the ways of God in His providence: to compose ourselves to think of the conduct of providence through all the stages of life we have hitherto passed: to note the results of its profound wisdom, the effects of its tender care, the distinguishing fruits of its special bounty: to mark how providences have gone along step by step with the promises, and both with us".<sup>2</sup> It is useful to us and honouring to God to take note of God's dealings in providence. Former generations found much benefit in keeping, from a spiritual perspective, a diary of their lives.

(b) The consideration of God's providence should promote reverence and faith and comfort in those who know Him as their God. It gives us views of God's greatness, His "almighty power, unsearchable wisdom and infinite goodness".<sup>3</sup> "How great a pleasure is it to discern how the most wise God is providentially steering all to the port of His own praise and His people's happiness, while the whole world is busily employed in managing the sails and tugging at the oars with a quite opposite design and purpose; to see how they promote His design by opposing it and fulfil His will by resisting it, enlarge His Church by scattering it, and make their rest come the more sweet to their souls by making their condition so restless in the world."<sup>4</sup> It promotes "the confidence and gratitude and hope which arise from the belief that He superintends its minutest affairs".<sup>5</sup> It encourages us to heed Flavel's advice: "Leave all your particular concerns in the hands of Christ too, and know that the infinite wisdom and love which rules the world manages everything that relates to you. . . . When Melancthon was under some despondencies of

<sup>1</sup>This is the final part of a paper given at the 2004 Youth Conference.

<sup>2</sup>*Works*, vol 4, p 338.

<sup>3</sup>*The Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.

<sup>4</sup>Flavel, vol 4, p 340.

<sup>5</sup>John Dick, quoted by Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, p 67.

spirit about the estate of God's people in Germany, Luther chides him thus for it, 'Let Philip cease to rule the world'. It is none of our work to steer the course of providence or direct its motions but to submit quietly to Him that doth."<sup>6</sup> "The Lord hath been mindful of us: He will bless us" (Ps 115:12).

(c) The fact of divine providence is an incentive and not a disincentive to prayer and the use of other means. We might wonder what place there is for prayer in a world where God brings to pass all that He has purposed. But we are commanded to pray, and it is a fact that God's providence includes the means as well as the ends, as we see in the case of Elijah and his prayers for drought and rain (Jas 5:16-18). The fact of divine providence promotes rather than discourages the diligent use of means. Calvin draws attention to Proverbs 16:9: "A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps", and he comments that "the eternal decrees of God by no means prevent us from proceeding, under His will, to provide for ourselves and arrange all our affairs. . . . For He who has fixed the boundaries of our life has at the same time entrusted us with the care of it, provided us with the means of preserving it, forewarned us of the dangers to which we are exposed, and supplied cautions and remedies, that we may not be overwhelmed unawares. . . . The Lord has furnished men with the arts of deliberation and caution that they may employ them in subservience to His providence in the preservation of their life; while, on the contrary, by neglect and sloth, they bring upon themselves the evils which He has annexed to them."<sup>7</sup>

(d) What place does God's providence have in guiding us through life and helping us to know His will for us in specific situations and particularly when we have to make important decisions? We know that it is easy to misinterpret providence. Jacob did that when he said to his sons after they came back from their trip to Egypt for corn: "Me ye have bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me" (Gen 42:36). Providence seemed to open a way for Jonah when he tried to get away from the duty which the Lord laid upon him to go to Nineveh to preach: "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jon 1:3). Can we discover the will of God for us from His providence, when good men have so misinterpreted and abused it? We may briefly mention three guiding principles.

(1) We must recognise that it is in God's providence we find ourselves in

<sup>6</sup>Vol 4, p 219.

<sup>7</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol 1, Beveridge ed, p 179.

our present situation – providence reaching back to before we were born and including all the factors which have contributed to our present situation. We ought to examine in the light of God’s Word the course which has brought us where we are. What can we learn from it for our encouragement or rebuke or direction? Are we where we are through faith, prayer and obedience or through self-will? The answer should help determine what providence says regarding the way forward.

(2) We should seek to have a right attitude to God and His will. When Paul found himself “in a strait betwixt two”, what prepared him for the resolution of his predicament was his love to Christ. This made the glory of the Saviour, and the interests of His cause, predominant in his thinking and so made him truly ready to respond positively to the slightest hint of what the Lord’s will was for him (Phil 1:23,24) – even when it was not his first choice, had he been consulting only his own interests.

(3) We ought to remember, and act on, the principle that the rule of our action is not what providence *appears* to be saying but what God has revealed in His Word. As Flavel says, “the great and necessary duties of religion are revealed to us in the Word, with great perspicuity and evidence; about these there can be no hesitation; but things of a lower nature and lesser concern are left more obscure”. And he says elsewhere: “You can learn the voice and errand of the rod only from the Word (Ps 94:12). The Word interprets the works of God. Providences in themselves are not a perfect guide. They often puzzle and entangle our thoughts; but bring them to the Word, and your duty will be quickly manifested (as Ps 73:16,17).”<sup>8</sup>

Flavel himself gives as good advice, in the matter of the guidance to be sought from providence, as we have found anywhere. Among other things, he says: “If you search the Scriptures with an . . . unbiased spirit, in a doubtful case, pray for counsel and direction from the Lord, attend to the dictates of conscience. When you have done all, and shall find the providences of God falling out agreeably to the dictates of your own conscience and the best light you can find in the Word, you may, in such cases, make use of it as an encouragement to you in the way of your duty: but the most signal demonstrations of providence are not to be excepted against a Scripture rule: no smiles or successes of providence may, in this case, encourage us to proceed; and on the other hand, no frowns or discouragements of providence should dishearten us in the way of our duty, how many soever we should encounter therein. Holy Job could not find the meaning of God in His works, yet would he not ‘go back from the commandment of His lips’ (Job 23:9 . . . Ps 119:83,87). . . .

<sup>8</sup>Vol 4, pp 468, 419.

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“Paul, by the direction of the Spirit, was engaged to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22). After a clear revelation of the mind of God to him in that matter, how many difficult and discouraging providences befell him in his way! . . . (Acts 21:4 . . . 21:10-13). . . . Well then, providence, in concurrence with the Word, may give some encouragement to us in our way; but no testimony of providence is to be accepted against the Word. If Scripture and conscience tell you such a way is sinful, you may not venture upon it how many opportunities and encouragements soever providence may suffer to offer themselves to you, for they are only permitted for your trial, not your encouragement. Take this therefore for a sure rule: That no providence can legitimate or justify any moral evil.”<sup>9</sup> As an English minister said at the end of the eighteenth century: “When two lawful things are before us, providence often decides for the humble learner”.<sup>10</sup>

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## Obituary

**Rev A B Ndebele**

All who came into contact with the late Aaron Ndebele as fellow-travellers on the highway that leads to Zion and who spent some time in his company will remember him as a Christian and a gospel minister of no ordinary stature. So well endowed was he intellectually that he would undoubtedly have become eminent in any secular profession that he might have chosen to enter, but by divine grace he chose to serve the Lord Christ as a humble minister of the gospel. All the gifts bestowed on him were laid at the feet of that Master whom he served so well and so faithfully until his period of service came to an end and he was summoned into His presence to receive the reward of the inheritance.

He had the inestimable privilege of being born into a Christian home. It might have been humble and primitive by Western standards, but the Lord was honoured within its pale, and that gave it a status which no amount of earthly riches or grandeur could bestow. His father, Philemon Ndebele, the earthly head of this African kraal, sought by precept and by example to bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. He was, on the human level, much indebted to that faithful minister of Christ, Rev J B Radasi, who

<sup>9</sup>Vol 4, pp 469.

<sup>10</sup>J Goode, in John H Pratt (ed), *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders*, p 76.

made it one of his principal aims to make his people literate and thus able to read the Bible in their own homes. As a result the Holy Spirit enlightened Philemon's mind in the knowledge of the One of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write. Later in life, after years of blameless profession, he was elected to office and over many more years he faithfully served the Church as an elder at Zenka. His son, Aaron Bamhlomele Ndebele, the subject of this obituary, was born on 25 August 1925.

After completing the teacher-training course he had embarked on, and while still in his early twenties, he was persuaded to take up a teaching post at Zenka Primary School. It was there at Zenka that he was to come under the saving power of the gospel and it was there, presumably, that he was to profess Christ publicly for the first time. Details are scanty, but it would appear that he was much influenced by the prayers of the old, revered elder, John Mpofo. It is also thought that the young teacher benefited much from the preaching and teaching of Rev James Fraser, who was minister at Zenka from 1948 until 1953. It is evident from the Report submitted to the 1953 Synod meeting that Mr Fraser was very attached to him, and the account he gives of what appears to have been the genuine conversion of an old heathen called Mapala is of great interest and not least because Aaron Ndebele was involved. Mapala had never attended church and, until shortly before his death, had never called upon his Maker to have mercy upon him.

This account (reprinted in Rev A McPherson's *James Fraser*) is too long to include here in full, but as it sheds light on Aaron Ndebele's early life, it is of interest to insert some of it. Strange to relate (although later on in life he did not give much place to dreams) Aaron dreamt that this old man Mapala was dying and "in great distress of soul because he did not know the way of salvation". A visit by Philemon Ndebele, on his way to take a service at Mabayi confirmed this and the outcome was that Mr Fraser and Aaron on a hot summer day visited the kraal and held a service inside the hut, where they found Mapala, scantily clad, crouching over a fire in the middle of the floor. Such was Mr Fraser's confidence in his young companion that he asked him to take the main part of the service.

Mr Fraser wrote: "Aaron chose as his text the Saviour's question to the impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda, 'Wilt thou be made whole?' . . . He went on to apply his text, first to his audience in general and then to Mapala, particularly and personally. 'Mapala, Jesus Christ asks you this question today, Wilt thou be made whole?' At first the old heathen scarcely seemed conscious of our presence, let alone the fact that a most solemn question was being addressed to him. His sunken eyes were fixed on the floor. Then, while the question was being repeated again and again, Mapala's withered frame

became suddenly tense, his dull eyes brightened up and, turning towards the preacher, he cried, 'Yes, I want to be made whole. Oh, I do want to believe and to appear before the Father's face in peace.' The remainder of the sermon was addressed to Mapala alone, and the rapt attention which he gave the preacher was in itself a marvel to everybody present, as was also the clear strong voice in which he again cried out, 'Oh, I do want to believe'.

"After the service, Aaron and I taught him the prayer of the publican, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'. With an effort he memorised the words, and from then until the day of his death, two weeks later, he kept repeating them during his conscious moments. . . . After his death I asked Aaron if he believed that Mapala had passed from death to life. 'I have a good hope that he was indeed saved,' was the reply. When asked on what he based his hope, Aaron answered that apart from what he had seen of Mapala before the end came, the testimony of the dead man's heathen wife and relations gave him good grounds for believing that he had been savingly changed." Apparently, Mapala's affections came to be centred on things above and not on his earthly possessions and, most impressive of all, when he could not communicate with, or recognise, those around him, he was still heard praying the prayer of the publican and petitions of a similar nature.

Much later on in life, Mr Ndebele was to indicate where his delight was placed at this early stage of his Christian life. In 1996, just after he had assisted at a communion at Nkayi, he wrote to a member of our mission staff: "I started going to communions at Nkayi 50 years ago. It was December 1945 when I first met Mr John Mpofu and his son Alexander. Alexander interpreted for Rev Dr R MacDonald; Rev John Tallach also preached, and Norman Miller was with them. . . . I thought Dr MacDonald was great at the action sermon: 'Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'. I had some refreshing memories at Nkayi. I tried on Sabbath morning to get the congregation and myself to meditate on: 'For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ'."

When Petros Mzamo, then the Headmaster of Zenka School and its boarding department, was accepted as a student in training for the ministry, it was Aaron Ndebele who was appointed to succeed him. While there, his uncompromising opposition to superstition and witchcraft was publicly manifested. We learn from his father's obituary that "what was wrong, or even suspect, in the culture of the Matabele people had no place given to it in his home. . . . Witch-doctors and their kind he would never consult, and he and his like-minded wife regarded these things as the 'unfruitful works of darkness'. Even flippant discussion of these things was frowned on." The son was to prove himself every bit as faithful as the father. The account given by

Aaron Ndebele of his encounter with the witch-doctor at Zenka is printed elsewhere in this issue and exemplifies the fearlessness and courage which identifies a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

In 1962 he was transferred to Ingwenya to fill the post of Headmaster of the Primary School and also, his preaching abilities being now recognised, to take services there in the absence of Rev A E W MacDonald, who was on leave in Scotland. The following year he was accepted as a student studying for the ministry and subsequently spent a year at the University in Salisbury (now Harare). In 1964 he began his theological studies at Ingwenya under the tutorship of Rev A E W MacDonald and then continued his studies in Scotland under Rev D MacLean for one session, returning to his native land in 1966. On June 2 he was ordained and inducted to the Ingwenya Mission charge.

His first report, presented to the 1967 Synod meeting, gives a very comprehensive account of his manifold labours. He did not spare himself, visiting, superintending schools and taking services at the various stations on the Ingwenya circuit – while ever conscious of the need of the blessing of God the Holy Spirit, without which his labours would be in vain. In that report he touchingly refers to the departure of Miss Jean Nicolson from Ingwenya after serving the Master there over the long period of 33 years. Acknowledging that this service was by divine grace, he wrote, “Among the living and those who have since fallen asleep, none has given the same service to education and more help to the Africans in Rhodesia”.

By 1968 he had established regular services in Bulawayo. This was primarily out of concern for the spiritual welfare of young people attached to the Church who, in seeking to continue their education or as a result of finding employment, were likely to settle in that city and raise families there. These services were held in between the morning and evening services at Ingwenya – first of all in a hall and later in a school classroom at Mpopoma. (In 1974 Rev Donald Ross arrived to be settled in Bulawayo and not long thereafter a very suitable, fine building was erected at Lobengula.)

Space forbids us giving anything more than a brief summary of his labours. In 1984 he was taking four weekly prayer meetings as well as three Sabbath services. “Our duty,” he wrote, “is to preach the gospel to every creature and to leave the changing of the natural heart with the Lord Himself.” Over the period of his ministry, he acted, at various times, as interim Moderator of the Bulawayo and Zenka Kirk Sessions when these charges were vacant and also established new outstations at Inyathi (near where Robert Moffat had come as the first missionary to the Matabele) in 1982, and at Insiza (where some Fingo families had settled) in 1987.

Mr Ndebele was the first Free Presbyterian minister to visit Kenya, sent by the Church on what might be called a reconnaissance visit, and it was on the basis of his report that the Church took the first steps towards establishing a mission there. He also visited Malawi on more than one occasion. He attended Synod meetings in Scotland from time to time over the years and, in 1988, he was accorded the honour of being appointed Moderator. As Rev Lachlan MacLeod, his successor in that office, was a member of the Southern Presbytery and thus involved in the Lord Mackay of Clashfern case, which came before the Synod in 1989, Mr Ndebele was back in the moderator's chair when the Synod deliberated on it. This was arguably the most important and critical case that had ever come before it. He rose to the occasion admirably, it has to be said, and presided over the Court in a most competent, dignified, firm and impartial manner. In regard to the issue which occasioned the departure of those men who formed what was to be called the Associated Presbyterian Churches, he was rock-firm on the side of the Church, as were, to a man, all the other African brethren. His last visit to Scotland was in 1995, when he attended the Synod meeting in Inverness. On this occasion he also visited Holland and Canada.

In the opinion of one who was his co-presbyter for a number of years Aaron Ndebele was "a born leader, a fine judge of character, able to take wise decisions in resolving problems. . . . He had no doubt as to the scriptural witness of the Church and in his preaching he constantly reminded our people of the witness of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland from its beginning and the necessity for its continuance."

Most of all, he had the good of his own congregation at heart. In 1977 he wrote: "The Secondary School pupils at Ingwenya are a great help in providing the congregation with their melodious voices in the singing of the Psalms of David. I often wish that the Lord would cause light to arise in their hearts and that they might be saved, every one of them. May He bless the seed sown, to His own glory." And in 1981: "When the schools are in session we have the opportunity of meeting boys and girls from all over Zimbabwe. The majority will be hearing the gospel for the first time in their lives and perhaps the only time. We can only pray that the Lord would bless the seed thus sown so that it would yield fruit, even after many years." Those who were closest to the situation tell us that he was much esteemed and respected by the pupils. This remained the case notwithstanding the fact that they were not unfamiliar with rebukes from the pulpit, administered in his own inimitable way. For instance, on spotting some of them asleep, he would stop in the middle of preaching and call upon them to wake up, reminding them that they had their dormitories to sleep in!

Outside the mission compound, the sight which he longed to see was that of young men having the courage (which some young women apparently had) to attend the church on Sabbath and weekday “and leave the beer gardens closed for want of drunkards”. His own fearlessness and courage in the face of danger were noteworthy. Over that troubled period of war and bloodshed which preceded the declaration of Zimbabwe as a sovereign state under that name, he much encouraged other fellow-labourers from the Word of God. We are told that he ventured, on the death of his father, into one of the most dangerous areas in order to be present at his funeral and to conduct the worship. While he was engaged in doing so, representatives of the men known as “freedom fighters” appeared as if from nowhere. They were heavily armed with weapons and bandoliers of ammunition wrapped around their bodies. Far from being intimidated, Aaron Ndebele took the opportunity of addressing them in regard to sin and salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. What effect this had on them we cannot tell, but they were certainly restrained from placing a finger on any of those present.

Along with Rev Petros Mzamo, Mr Ndebele was one who took a keen interest in providing sound religious literature for the use of the Church. In 1963 (before he was a minister) he was, with Mr Mzamo and the late Mr James Tallach, a member of a Committee formed to provide a complete book of Psalms in metre in the Ndebele language. We are informed that this psalter was printed by the Trinitarian Bible Society and that it was changed to the new Ndebele orthography in 1973. From the same source we learn that, after coming to Ingwenya, Mr Ndebele was able to trace a copy of the original Xhosa Psalm Book printed by Lovedale for the Rev J B Radasi in 1922 and that he had it reprinted for use in the Cameron congregation, who are Xhosa-speaking. In addition to this, Mr Ndebele, for many years, translated into Ndebele the daily verses in the Trinitarian Bible Society’s Golden Thoughts Calendar.

In September 1996, while standing by the roadside near the Inyathi church, Mr Ndebele was knocked down by a passing bus. Although his life was spared, he was never fully to recover his physical and mental strength again. The writer was present at the time and is not likely to forget the trauma of the situation. From the scene of the accident, he was taken, unconscious, with all speed to the nearest hospital, at Inyathi, and after what seemed to be an interminable period of time, an ambulance arrived to take him to Mpilo Hospital in Bulawayo. For some time his life lay in the balance, but gradually he recovered his strength.

By 1997 he was back in the pulpit and attending to his duties, although at times he was incapacitated. The writer assisted him at two communions in

the summer of 2000, at Bulawayo and Cameron, and although his mental and physical stamina appeared to be impaired, there was still fire in his preaching. This was evident on Sabbath afternoon in Bulawayo when he preached on the words: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” However, by the end of 2000, his health was again deteriorating and early the following year he retired from the Ingwenya charge and took up residence in Bulawayo. Rev John Goldby was present at the meeting held to mark his retirement and reported how Rev Petros Mzamo “addressed his old friend with great feeling”, and that “it was no surprise that Mr Ndebele was visibly moved, as the two ministers had been labouring together in the gospel for the past 50 years, first as Christian teachers and then as ministers”.

Physically strong and handsome in appearance, Aaron Ndebele stood out in a crowd. He had a most attractive personality and, being naturally of a happy, cheerful disposition, he was a most pleasurable companion, one in whose company time passed very quickly. By divine grace, he was, in our view, a Christian who bore the features of the Bunyan characters – Hopeful, Standfast and Valiant-for-Truth – merged together. He was highly respected in the Ingwenya and Zenka communities, not only as an upright man and minister of the gospel, but also as a skilful farmer whose well-tended fields stood out among those around. In this, as in other ways, he set an example before others. It was by rising with the sun that he was able to devote attention to these things. He loved his nation and his fellow men and earnestly prayed for the coming of better days when the gospel would have free course and would be glorified in the salvation of multitudes of the human race in Africa and beyond. His voice is now silent and that is our loss.

Over the course of his last few weeks in time, he suffered much weakness, but such suffering he endured uncomplainingly. The end came on 24 June 2004. His soul, now perfect in holiness, passed immediately into glory to join the company of “the spirits of just men made perfect”. Two days afterwards, on the Saturday of the Bulawayo communion, his body was laid to rest in the grave, to await a glorious resurrection. On that day, Mr Mzamo conducted worship and in closing drew attention to the departure of his friend and colleague, basing his remarks on words befitting the situation, words first written by Paul in prospect of his own dissolution: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith”.

To his like-minded widow, who, over the years, so dutifully attended to his needs, and to the four sons and two daughters and other relatives whom he left behind, we extend our sympathy. *(Rev) John MacLeod*

All your peace is to be found in believing God’s word about His Son.

*R M M’Cheyne*

## Encounter with a Witch-Doctor<sup>1</sup>

*Rev A B Ndebele*

It was about October or November 1952 that a popular witch-doctor went to stay in the home of a local chief at Nkayi in the Shangani reserve. The woman claimed to have been sent by some great spirit in the Matopo hills to make rain, heal the sick and kill the witches and wizards in Chief Chukuro's territory. Her arrival in the district was reported to the District Commissioner, who gave her permission to perform her work as an official herbalist who would treat some mild ailments among the population. In the witch-doctor's mind, as well as in the peoples', such a permit from the District Commissioner would cover her in her divinations, although the law of the land treated such actions as a crime punishable by law.

Men, women and children from all walks of life consulted Shoko, as she used to be addressed – by the term which meant a goddess. In December a headman from Zenka district, who also was an important right-hand man of the Chief, took the witch-doctor from Nkayi to Zenka so that the local people would make use of Shoko's services. Huge crowds of men, women and children went to see Shoko at her home about three miles from Zenka Mission and about half a mile away from my then home. Every day people of the Zenka community took provisions to the witch-doctor such as beer, goats, hens and oxen. There was so much food in the headman's home that the crowds who patronised the place were well fed.

Once, about the middle of January 1953, after I had attended a normal church service at Zenka, where the late Rev James Fraser preached, I was sitting in my house reading my Bible and meditating on what I had heard in church. The noise of the drums, which were being beaten at the party for Shoko, made it impossible for me to continue in my duty. The beating of the drums was accompanied by singing and dancing. The shrieks from the crowd of women, anything up to 500 strong, made the impressive festival a real challenge to Christianity. At that period of my life I had just undergone a change in my soul, which made me value the claims of God's Word and His law, including: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy". I believe the zeal for the law of God, which was being trampled at my door, made me go to the home where the noisy, godless party was.

On arriving in the home I went straight to the owner of the kraal and asked for his permission to see his great visitor, the Shoko. At first the man said, No, because the woman was very touchy and she would be offended

<sup>1</sup>This account has been transcribed from a tape-recorded account of this incident made by Mr Ndebele in the Stornoway manse about 20 years ago.

if I would criticise her. But I insisted that I was indeed trying to help Shoko by telling her a few things, and he then reluctantly agreed to let me see her. On turning my eyes away from the headman I almost bumped into the Shoko, who asked me, in English, "What do you want?" I told her that I wanted to speak to her. She replied, "Nonsense", and walked away into a hut reserved for her as her private residence. I followed her into the hut. She sat down on a mat with some women attendants.

I then began to deliver my message to her, which went along these lines: "Woman, this is the Lord's Day, the day in which God, who made heaven and earth, rested after He had created all things and creatures in heaven and earth and in the seas, and that includes you and me, poor sinners. God commanded that this day shall be used only in the worship of God and in the enjoying of Him for ever, but you have taken all these crowds of men and women from the worship of God to the worship of a poor creature like yourself. You tell people to address you as God when you are only man. You are therefore guilty of breaking the Sabbath, and the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me". Thou shalt not bow to any graven image or any likeness of anything on earth or in heaven above. You are a messenger of Satan. You are doing his work; you are therefore guilty in the sight of God. Unless you repent of your sin you will die and go to hell."

The woman replied that she also was a Christian, in the Methodist Church; at that time she had been sent by the great spirit in the Matopo hills to heal the sick and make rain for the people; that was not a bad thing to do. She continued to say that she prayed before she did any work in her practices. Also she said that the District Commissioner had given her permission to do her good work in the Nkayi district, and who was I to stop her from her work? In reply to her defence I said that it did not matter where she got the permission to practise her witchcraft, the point I was making was that there is a God in heaven who is greater than all the kings of the earth and who has His laws, that must be obeyed by all human beings. Permits from the Chief, the District Commissioner, Governor, King or Queen do not give licence to any man to break God's law.

The poor woman, who was human after all, broke down and wept. In conclusion I said, "Shoko, you are invited to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, to worship Him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords", and speaking to the whole crowd I continued, "You men, women and children of Zenka, stop worshipping this woman and calling her a goddess. Worship the Lord Jesus, who invites you all to His church to worship Him." The atmosphere in the whole home was very tense; women wept and men groaned. I left the place

and walked back to my home and continued my duties after the Sabbath services which, in short, were reading, prayer and meditation.

Two days later all the men and some women were assembled at the headman's home, and I was summoned to appear before the crowd to explain my Sabbath action. I went to the headman's home, where I found an angry crowd, among whom some men suggested that I should be beaten up by the Chief's order so as to take away my madness. I must say that at that stage I got really frightened. Some young men who appeared really strong said that they had been standing behind me and were ready to knock me down, to kick me, but they had just not got round to that kind of action. I was then called every name known among Africans in Zimbabwe to disgrace and really humiliate me. The man who led the proceedings said that by the law I was guilty of: (1) breaking into a man's home without permission and disturbing the peace in the home, in front of a multitude of spectators; (2) insulting the Chief and District Commissioner by defying their authority in permitting the woman to practise her craft; and (3) infringing the freedom of worship by enforcing my so-called Christian views on the Shoko when she also worshipped God in her own way.

In reply to the three charges I said that I was sorry if Mr Ncube, the local headman, felt that I was looking down upon him by my going to his home and speaking to his woman visitor. I stated that I thought he had permitted me to see Shoko. The second accusation, that I had defied the authority of the Chief and the District Commissioner, was a matter I was sorry about because the Word of God teaches us to honour our rulers. I thought they had misunderstood my point, which was: the law of God was of far greater importance than the laws of men. On the third count, that of interfering with Shoko's worship of the spirit of the ancestors and my accusing her of worshipping Satan – for that I could not apologise, as my statement was a true description of her work. Insults were then levelled at me, while the headman, who was crying with rage, was demanding an open challenge with me, with fists, in face of the spectators. I made it clear that if he would beat me, I would not retaliate.

Judgement having been postponed a few times, in about March of that year the final decision was reached, in which I was told that the law required me to pay the woman whose craft I had seriously disturbed by my accusation, by giving her an ox. I told the Sub-Chief, before whom the case had been brought, that I could not do that on principle. The Sub-Chief claimed that he was being kind to me and therefore he was reducing the fine from an ox to a heifer, to a goat, and then to a hen as the last chance granted to me before the witch-doctor would pronounce her curses upon me and my family. I was

given some days to think about it. In the interval some of my relatives came to me suggesting that they were prepared to give Shoko their beast instead, in order to avoid the imminent doom that was sure to befall me according to the witch-doctor's threats. I told them that they would help me far better by leaving me alone. I must say that at that time I found my father to be a real strength to me when some of our people were criticising me for not behaving like the Apostle Paul, who became all things to all men. They were saying I should have gone to the home and taken worship – that is, reading, singing, prayer and then an address in which I could have brought in the evils of witchcraft. They insisted that my method was too militant.

I must say that these criticisms quite disturbed me at the time, but the Word of God, which I hoped I was defending, gave me light – in that passage when the Lord Jesus found the Jews in the temple selling and buying and He overturned the tables and took a whip and drove men and beasts out saying, “My house is the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves”. Although there was pressure from the devil, my own heart and men, I refused to pay the witch-doctor with a beast or money, but told the Chief's assistant in the district that I was prepared to challenge the witch-doctor in the strength of the Lord God, and that he should therefore tell her to go and pronounce all her curses against me.

In April of the same year Shoko, the great witch doctor, was taken by ambulance to Nkayi District Hospital ill with pneumonia. The large sum of money she had gathered from the people in the district as fees for treatment given for various diseases was reputed to be some thousands of pounds. It would be understandable that she was able to make so much money within so short a time, about three or four months, if we consider that she claimed that she could raise the dead from their graves, give medicines to make people rich and medicines to make people immune from the witches' curses or enchantments. Many heathens, and even some good people, were tempted to consult Shoko, who was thought to be expert in charms and witchcraft. After medical treatment for pneumonia, Shoko seemed to have a complete breakdown of her health; she was in and out of Nkayi hospital until finally she died in the middle of June 1953. I must say I got a shock and could not understand the ruling of providence at that moment, but surely His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are past finding out.

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Long life is only a real blessing when men grow in grace as they grow in days and years. Eternity is a word that will break the hearts of sinners in that place where mercy never enters.

We cannot be said to find much pleasure in the worship of God if we grudge to give Him one day in the week.

*A. S. Paterson*

## Eastern Europe Mission

*Rev D A Ross*

It had been our intention to have Mr Igor Zadoroshney ordained to the eldership during a visit in November last year to the Odessa Congregation, Ukraine; he had already been elected by the congregation to that office. However, due to sudden illness, Rev Neil Ross was unable to accompany Rev Donald Ross and Mr Edward Ross to Odessa, and we were unable to have the ordination because we did not have the quorum necessary to form the Kirk Session in Odessa. It is hoped, however, that members of the Kirk Session will, God willing, be in a position to visit Odessa Congregation in April and May of this year in order to proceed with the ordination. On that occasion it is intended also to have a communion season, the services of which begin on the Thursday and finish on the Monday just as in other congregations of the Free Presbyterian Church.

On every visit to the Odessa Congregation, there is a great volume of work to do; it was so on this last visit also. We are thankful to record that considerable progress was made in finalising ownership of the site for the building of a new charity centre, including facilities connected with the work of the gospel in Odessa.

Since then, Rev Neil Ross has provided an outline plan for a building, which is now with an architect in Odessa who will complete the plan and oversee erection of the building. The building will be on three floor levels; Bibles and other literature will be stored in the basement; the ground floor will be used for a meeting place, an office and garages; at top floor level there will be living quarters. The plan has yet to come before the Dominion and Overseas Committee for approval.

Our lawyer Mr Popov has the difficult task of negotiating with government departments in connection with building regulations and services. If all goes according to plan, these negotiations will be completed by the end of May, and thereafter in God's providence we hope to be in a position to proceed with building. We have already paid about £10 000 to purchase the site. The architect has estimated the cost of the completed building to be between £32 000 and £35 000. Architects' and lawyers' fees will bring the figure up to about £40 000, but we do not yet have fixed prices. This is a lot of money, and we are dependant on the Most High to provide for us as in the past. To that end God directs us to give of our substance to the work of the gospel and we hope and pray that friends will be moved to do so on this occasion as in the past.

Such property would be a means of establishing our presence in Odessa

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and would provide a permanent place from which we could distribute the Word of God and other literature throughout the Ukraine and other countries. Not least, it would be a meeting place to which we could invite people for the public worship of the Most High. In the Ukraine it is much more acceptable to invite people to public worship in a building set apart for that purpose than in a private home. It is also more acceptable in the eyes of government officials.

Editing of books translated into Russian has been delayed for various reasons, but we do hope that some headway will be made shortly. While there are other books we would like to translate, we believe that it is necessary to get Robert Shaw's *Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* and Rev Donald Macfarlane's *Sermons* to the printers first. We have, however, translated some small articles, and *The Mother's Catechism* has been translated into Ukrainian. Some of these have now been printed and others are ready for printing. *The Mother's Catechism* has already been issued in Russian.

We continue to look to the Most High to bless this small work for the advancement of His truth in Eastern Europe. Many different churches from outside are seeking to establish a presence in these formerly-Communist countries. While we are glad that the Word of God is sent out by many different churches, not many of them sound forth the truth in its entirety – as it is so well systematised in the Westminster Confession of Faith. This we seek to do by the grace of God and ask for your continued support for the various aspects of this work. “The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those that published it” (Ps 68:11).

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## Notes and Comments

### Prince Charles' Proposed Marriage

It has been announced that the Prince of Wales is to marry Camilla Parker Bowles on April 8. “After 30 years,” said the front-page headline in *The Times*, “Charles puts his affair in order.” Would that it were as simple as this!

One would expect that members of the royal family would set an example to the rest of society in their marriages, but clearly Prince Charles has not done so. His relationship with Mrs Parker Bowles led to a great deal of tension in the Prince's marriage to Princess Diana, and in 1994 he admitted on national television that he had committed adultery. Mrs Parker Bowles is now divorced but her former husband is still alive. Obviously Prince Charles is now free to marry as his wife is dead, but his fiancée

is not free to do so, and so the proposed marriage will not be scriptural.

This is an age when the Seventh Commandment is widely disregarded – when, in particular, it is common for a man and a woman to live together as if they were husband and wife, although they are not married to each other. It is especially sad that, when Clarence House was renovated, Mrs Parker Bowles became the Prince’s “live-in partner”. There has been a recognition in royal circles that public opinion needed to be prepared gradually for this marriage. But public acceptance does not make any difference to how God views the matter, and that is what is crucial.

If he becomes king, Charles will be the supreme governor of the Church of England. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs in any case; nothing should be allowed to obscure the fact that Christ is the Head of the Church. But it would be even more unsatisfactory for the supreme governor to be someone whose morals are so markedly inconsistent with the standards of the Bible, which the Church professes to accept. The Archbishop of Canterbury has stated that he is pleased that the marriage is to take place and will lead the service of prayer and dedication which is to follow the civil marriage ceremony. It would seem that it is not yet acceptable for the marriage to be performed by the Church of England; yet how inconsistent to be indicating – by this service of prayer and dedication – that they recognise the validity of this union!

We do not claim that Charles is the first heir to the British throne to follow an immoral lifestyle; that would be far from the truth. Yet surely we may expect those in positions of influence to live upright lives. Sadly, we have to face the fact that too often this is not so, but it does not interfere with our obligation to obey the exhortation that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; *for kings, and for all that are in authority*” (1 Tim 2:1).

### **John Knox, Misogynist?**

Frequently when John Knox is mentioned in the press it is with some accompanying epithet which is intended to be less than complimentary. Referring to current moves to rewrite history with more emphasis on the contribution of women, Ian Johnston (*The Scotsman*, 19 January 2005) begins an article by saying: “John Knox would not be amused. His ‘monstrous regiment of women’ is again on the march. The fiery preacher who founded the Church of Scotland can count himself as one of the country’s many heroes to have won acclaim both at home and abroad. But Knox’s misogynistic [woman-hating] attitude appears to have been shared for many years after his death by those compiling the annals of history.” After mentioning “the real

Lady Macbeth . . . and the Jacobite heroine Lady Anne Mackintosh”, he says that “Lynn Abrams, professor of gender history at Glasgow University and convener of the SWHN (Scottish Women’s History Network) hopes acknowledging such figures will help a new generation of women finally throw off the chains of Scotland’s ‘macho’ culture, which was fuelled by Knox’s infamous book, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* and the influence of the once highly patriarchal Kirk”.

A subsequent letter in the same newspaper from Dr Rosalind Marshall claims that Knox “was not a misogynist. He had a very happy family life and his women parishioners not only flocked to hear him preach but found him a patient and sympathetic counsellor in all their troubles”. Dr Marshall points out that “Knox had been forced to leave England, where he was a preacher, when Mary I succeeded to the throne and began persecuting Protestants”. The Roman Catholic Regent, Mary of Guise, was ruling in Scotland. “Convinced that these two queens would bring ruination to their countries”, Knox produced his *First Blast*. Dr Marshall notes that the words in the title of this book “do not refer to an army of women on the march. They mean ‘the unnatural rule of women’, which is something rather different.”

Roderick Graham, in *John Knox – Democrat* (Robert Hale, 2001), in keeping with his honest endeavour to present Knox in accordance with verifiable facts, asserts that *The First Blast* “has unfairly gained notoriety as a misogynist tract, whereas in fact it is highly political, questioning the absolute right of monarchs, especially female monarchs, and particularly Mary Tudor, and advocating a power struggle against sinful rule even to the point of death”. Elsewhere in the book he asserts that “a quick survey of contemporary Scotsmen’s opinion of John Knox would give us a picture of a ranting, vain, dogmatic misogynist. All four accusations are totally untrue. . . . The accusation of misogyny is based on one (usually unread) tract alone in which he condemns Mary Tudor for replacing the established religion and giving equal power to her husband, a Spaniard. Personally he was thoughtful and understanding in his relationships with women, writing many letters of comfort to them. He married twice and fathered five children, and although we know little of these relationships, they were admired by colleagues. Moreover, he displays great sympathy and remorse for having given his first wife, instead of the calm routine of a peaceful ministry, a life that was often fraught with danger.”

Apart from Knox’s own personal Christian relationship with women, it should be remembered that he was at the forefront of that Reformation movement in Scotland which brought biblical principles to bear on society, deliver-

ing both men and women from the oppression of the Middle Ages and laying the foundation for the progress made in following centuries in every area of national life. We read that MSPs and others are planning a rehabilitation of Macbeth, in an attempt to make him into a national hero and an attraction for tourists. It would be better for them if they swallowed their ignorant prejudices and set themselves to discover the truth about a figure of the stature of Knox, who not only was a faithful minister of Christ in his own day but, as Roderick Graham puts it, gave “modern Scotland three great foundation stones. They were the Church of Scotland, the acceptance of an obligation to care for the poor and infirm, and the Scottish system of education.”

Our MSPs, journalists, clergy, educators and others who regard themselves as leaders of public opinion should be given Thomas M’Crie’s *Life of John Knox* and his *Life of Andrew Melville*, with all the notes attached to the original editions, as compulsory reading in the hope that they might begin to realise how they are breaking down the foundations and squandering our goodly heritage. “A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees. But now they break down the carved work thereof at once with axes and hammers” (Ps 74:5,6). HMC

### **Inciting Religious Hatred**

It is well-known that the Westminster Government is promoting a “Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill” which includes the creation of a new offence of “incitement to religious hatred”. Neither “religion” nor “hatred” are defined. Would it, for example, be regarded as incitement to religious hatred to say, with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (chapter 25), that “there is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God”? Such a law could be wide open to abuse and eventually become a means of silencing criticism or even claims to exclusive truthfulness and righteousness on the part of biblical doctrine and morality. While it would not apply in Scotland, one can be sure from the track-record of the First Minister and his Executive on such matters as “hate crimes” and “sectarianism” that the Scottish Parliament will not be behind in securing something similar.

Geoffrey Robertson QC, a human-rights lawyer, says of this aspect of the proposed law that “this clumsy drafting has produced a very serious offence – seven years’ imprisonment is also the maximum sentence for arms smuggling – which can be committed by harsh but truthful attacks on the most unprepossessing people, merely if they belong to a group ‘defined by

reference to religious beliefs' and are likely to take offence, for reasons that may be paranoid or vicious" (*The Scotsman*, 26 January 2005). He claims that "the proposed offence has nothing to do with combating terrorism or crime: it is an entirely unnecessary restriction on a freedom to criticise religion that is more necessary than ever". There are already laws which make it a criminal offence to incite a crime against anyone, which take account of religiously-aggravated crimes and which protect citizens against assault. As *The Christian Institute* say in their helpful paper on this subject: "The best way forward is to rigorously enforce existing laws, not to create a new offence".

Various organisations have drawn attention to prosecutions of Christians under a similar law in Australia. A leading Australian Muslim who favoured the introduction of this law has put on record his changed opinion, that such laws undermine the religious freedoms they set out to protect and makes the point that those who believe that their religion articulates what is true and unique must "passionately argue against, or warn against, the beliefs of another" – "yet this is exactly what this law serves to outlaw and curtail" (from a *Christian Watch* memo). Even under present laws persons, at the instigation of those who were offended, have been harassed and prosecuted in England for criticising unbiblical practices.

The right to freedom of speech and to criticise religion and religious practices and persons (whether or not they are orthodox Christians) is not to be equated with the right to blaspheme the one living and true God and His Son Jesus Christ our Lord and so incidentally to offend those who conscientiously adhere to the Christian religion of our nation. It is obvious that, alongside moves towards restricting the right to criticise persons on account of religion, there is an increasing reluctance to implement or conform to the law against blasphemy – as is illustrated in reports of the BBC's resistance to pressures to withdraw an allegedly-blasphemous television production and the St Andrew's students' persistence in presenting an allegedly-blasphemous play.

Instead of simply bemoaning these sad developments we should support such organisations as endeavour in a sober and biblical way to resist the tide of ungodliness, make our views known to parliamentarians and others who have responsibilities in these areas, and be instant at the throne of grace. Like Jehoshaphat going into battle in the wilderness of Tekoa against the Ammonites and Moabites we have reason to pray: "O our God, wilt Thou not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee" (2 Chr 20:12). HMC

## Church Information

### Zimbabwe Mission Centenary

A celebration of 100 years of missionary activity will be held, DV, on 9 September 2005. The Zimbabwe Presbytery has made it plain that any who have a mind to be present and are able to make the necessary arrangements are welcome to attend.

### Kenya Mission Administrator

There is an urgent need to make a new appointment to the post of Administrator at our Mission at Sengera, Kenya, as we expect the post to become vacant in the near future. The situation is serious as we expect not to have an administrator there beyond the middle of this year. For further information please contact Rev J R Tallach, F P Manse, Raasay, Kyle, IV40 8PB.

(Rev) *J R Tallach*, Clerk to the Jewish and Foreign Mission Committee

### Meetings of Presbytery

**Zimbabwe:** At Bulawayo, on Tuesday, March 8, at 11 am.

**Western:** At Laide, on Tuesday, March 8, at 6 pm.

**Outer Isles:** At Stornoway, on Tuesday, March 15, at 1 pm.

### Synod Agenda and Committee Reports

Clerks of Presbyteries, conveners and clerks of committees, and all interested parties should note that all items of business intended to be placed on the Synod agenda must be in the hands of the Clerk of Synod by April 5.

Conveners and clerks of all standing committees of Synod should note that all committee reports must also be in the hands of the Clerk of Synod by April 5, for printing. These reports should contain information about the work of the committees during the year. Recommendations and proposals should be sent as separate items for the Synod agenda. (Rev) *John MacLeod*, Clerk of Synod

## Acknowledgement of Donations

**The General Treasurer** acknowledges with sincere thanks the following donations:

*Bookroom Fund:* D Bakker, £10 per KJH.

*College & Library Fund:* Anon, USA, "Where most needed", \$720.75; Anon, USA, "Where most needed", \$110; A Friend, Newcastle, Is 41:10,13, £40.

*Eastern Europe Fund:* Rev G Taverne, £31.74.

*Jewish & Foreign Missions Fund:* Anon, Switzerland, SFr 20 000; A Young Person, USA, for Kenya Mission, \$3.50; A Friend, for the work in Israel, £500 per Rev JLG; Anon, for John Tallach Secondary School, Zimbabwe, £500.

*Legacy Reserve Fund:* The estate of the late Mr Ian MacDonald, Glasgow (additional), £134.68 per Messrs Frederick & Co, Solicitors.

**Congregational Treasurers** acknowledge with sincere thanks the following donations:

**Edinburgh:** *Congregational Funds:* Anon, for new church blinds, £60.

**Raasay:** *Congregational Funds:* PB, Inverarish, "In loving memory of my dear husband", £200. *Jewish & Foreign Missions Fund:* A Friend, for Zimbabwe Mission, £25 per Rev JRT. *Sustentation Fund:* A Friend, £25 per Rev JRT.

**Staffin:** *Door Collection:* Anon, for New Year's Day collection, £5; CM, Staffin House, £50. *Sustentation Fund:* Anon, £35.