

The Young People's Magazine

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Whom Should We Thank?

When one of our readers was in a restaurant recently, he noticed on his table a card provided by an organisation called StreetSmart. Their idea is to encourage customers to donate £1 to charity through their bill. "Good food, good wine and good company," said the card, "enrich our lives beyond measure. Most of us don't say grace these days because we don't know who to thank for the estimable pleasures of the table. StreetSmart lets us do a graceful thing. A simple thing. A kind thing."

There is no doubt that it is a good idea to give to charity. The Bible encourages us to give to the poor, for instance, and there are many organisations that do a lot of good which we may support by our giving. On the other hand, some charities promote what is sinful. So, while it is right to give to charity, we should know what our money is being used for and we should be careful to channel it wisely.

It is very sad if people do not know who to thank for their food. There should be no doubt about the matter; we only need to look around us and see, in the wonder and beauty of creation, clear evidence for the existence of the Creator. It is our fallen nature, blinded by sin, that makes it impossible for people to recognise immediately that there is a God. And unless God, in His kindness, will make us spiritually alive, we will never *want* to recognise God or His goodness; instead we will want to stay away from God and ignore Him. More than anything else, the theory of evolution, with which we are bombarded from almost every direction, helps sinners to forget God. This is an age when most people just assume that everything, from microbes to mankind and from the smallest meteorite to the biggest star, has come into existence by chance; we are told that it all just happened. But no; nothing just happened.

From all eternity God was. In other words, God had no beginning; He has always existed. And He has not left us to recognise from the world around us the evidence for believing that He exists. He has spoken to us directly – in the Bible. There He reveals Himself as our Creator, and as the Creator of everything that exists.

But the Bible also tells us that our Creator is continually providing what we need. In His providence He gives us what we need to eat and drink, and many other things also. He tells us that “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth” (Psalm 104:14). Very often, the food He provides for us is not only nourishing but also very tasty – He gives us the “pleasures of the table” in StreetSmart’s phrase. In spite of sin – in spite of mankind’s rebellion against his Creator – He still allows us to have pleasure in the ordinary activities of life, such as eating and drinking. People experience difficulty, trouble and sorrow in this sinful world. Yet, in God’s kindness, it is not all difficulty, trouble and sorrow; there is happiness also. But we should take care not to seek our happiness away from God.

When God has provided us with food, it is appropriate for us to thank Him. That is why we say grace before we begin our meals. We have the Saviour’s example, when He fed the five thousand, and again the four thousand. He took the few loaves and fish and, before He increased the food so enormously and gave it to the disciples, He said grace. What He did is described both as giving thanks for the food and as blessing it. So when we say grace, we are to thank God for giving us the food, and to ask Him to bless it to us, so that it would do good to our bodies.

But some people who accept that they should say grace before their meals cannot see why they should say grace again afterwards. But if we have enjoyed what we have eaten, we should surely feel thankful and we should want to express that thankfulness to the One who provided us with the food. To say grace after food is to respect the principle that lies behind what Moses said to the children of Israel: “When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 8:10).

StreetSmart mention food and drink and company. And what a blessing good friends can be! Yet friends can be dangerous. They can have a bad influence on us; they can lead us into temptation. We should choose our friends carefully. And, especially because we cannot see into anyone’s heart, we should ask God to direct us in choosing our friends. We may not realise at first what kind of person someone is whose friendship we are beginning to appreciate. But God knows and He can direct us.

We can also sin in the way we use food and drink. The Bible speaks of the sin of gluttony, and it is clear that a number of health problems are the result of eating unwisely. And wine and other alcoholic drinks cause various problems. The obvious one is that people lose control of what they say and do, and so they behave irresponsibly. They commit sins – sometimes serious sins – which they would never commit if they were sober. In Proverbs we

read the warning: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise”.

But how many reasons we have for thankfulness! God has given us a beautiful world. As I write, most of the clouds have cleared to leave a lovely blue sky. The greyness of the morning has passed away, and the sea and the islands beyond are now so much more attractive, as they reflect the afternoon sunshine. Yes, man in his foolishness and greed has spoiled the creation, but there are very many places where we can see the beauty of our Creator’s work. And as we look at it, let us admire His power and wisdom and goodness.

In the Bible we are told not only that “in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”, but also that He is preserving each one of us in life. And surely we should be thankful that He is keeping us alive! When we consider that we are sinners – that we have offended the holy God by our sins – we should be very thankful that He has not punished us as we deserve. We deserve eternal punishment for every sin we have committed, because each sin is directed against a perfectly holy God. But in His infinite kindness, God sent His Son into the world to die for sinners – which is a reason for very great thankfulness; indeed Paul felt he had to go to the limits of language to find appropriate words in which to respond to this wonderful event. What he said was: “Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift”. That should be our attitude too.

We have a great privilege. We have the Bible in our own language and we are able to read it. For English speakers, that has been true for hundreds of years. And during that time there have been preachers who have proclaimed the truths of the Bible clearly. Most of us, even today, have the opportunity of hearing such preachers, and that is something else for which we should be very thankful. It provides us with the opportunity of finding food for our souls. It would be tragic if, after God has always provided for the needs of our bodies, we should come to the end of our lives without ever having felt spiritual hunger.

We need spiritual food, whether we feel hungry for it or not. And God has provided spiritual food. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). We must come to Him by faith as He is revealed to us in the Word of God, and especially in the preaching of that Word. Then the needs of our souls will be satisfied for ever, and we will spend eternity expressing our thanks to God for providing for us all that we needed – particularly in supplying what our souls required, including forgiveness and holiness. No one in heaven will need to be told who it is they should thank for that.

A Good Soldier of Jesus Christ

The people of the parish of Troqueer were very ignorant when John Blackader came among them as their minister in 1653 at the age of 37. Some in this district of south-west Scotland were living in open sin and, although almost 100 years had passed since the Reformation, many still held to Roman Catholic superstitions.

Blackader had a difficult work ahead of him but he approached it energetically. Besides two services every Sabbath, he also preached to his congregation on Tuesdays. And twice a year he went round catechising the people. He asked pointed questions, for instance: Did they remember secret prayer? Did they kneel together at the throne of their Father and their King each morning and evening? Was the Sabbath a delight? Did the parents teach their children from the Bible? And the people learned much from Blackader's teaching. Gilbert Burnet, who later became a bishop in England and had no great sympathy with such men as Blackader, acknowledged how well they taught their people. These ministers, he said, brought their congregations to such a degree of knowledge that they understood matters of religion better than any others. And one would trust that many souls were born again under such a ministry as this.

But Blackader's work in Troqueer came to a sudden and cruel end. Charles II had come to the throne in 1660. He did not like Presbyterian church government any more than his father Charles I did. His government demanded that all ministers be ordained by bishops, and those who had not already been ordained in this way were ordered to report to the bishops by 1 November 1662. One of the Archbishops rashly declared that fewer than 10 of the ministers in his area would refuse. In fact, almost 400 ministers, mostly in the south of Scotland, refused; they knew that, before God, they were already truly ordained. They preferred to give up their manses and salaries and to keep a good conscience.

Among them was John Blackader. On his last Sabbath in Troqueer many were in tears in the church. And during the following week, he spent long days going about from house to house in his parish; he prayed in each home and committed to God everyone in the family. On the Saturday he rode off to Glencairn about ten miles away, leaving his wife and children to follow. It was a wise move because that very day soldiers came in search of him.

In the early winter of 1666, the Blackader home had another visit from soldiers. Happily Blackader himself was safely away in Edinburgh at the time. One of the children told how the dragoons came to the house about 2 am demanding that those inside open the door. Then they broke up the

stools and chairs with their swords and made a fire with them. They “stabbed through beds and bedclothes” in their attempt to find Blackader himself. They then threw his books down from the cupboard onto the floor and, said the 10-year-old boy, they “caused poor me hold the candle till they had examined them”. After they had put into a creel all the books they found objectionable, they headed for the hen shed and killed every fowl they found. Perhaps it was then the boy managed to get away. He ran for half a mile and lay down on the top step of the village cross and fell fast asleep. Between 5 and 6 o’clock an old woman came out of her house and noticed the boy. He told her who he was and what had happened. “O poor thing,” she said to him, “come in and lie down in my warm bed.” He had almost no clothes on, so he was very glad to get in out of the cold.

After this incident, Blackader began to preach in the open air. From his base in Edinburgh, he travelled through most of Scotland, apart from the Highlands, proclaiming the gospel. But he often said that he would be content to go a thousand miles on foot to be able to speak in Gaelic. In September 1668, when visiting Newmilns in Ayrshire, he was invited to preach in Dunlop parish. He set off on horseback and, after nine miles of very bad road, reached his destination very tired. Instead of getting off to bed as he had hoped, he found that people had already gathered for a service. Worship began at 11 pm; Blackader preached for an hour and a half and then baptised 42 children.

After a period of nearly four months’ illness, we hear of him preaching to a congregation of 1200 near Paisley, and speaking to a large crowd by a burn on a moor near Livingston, on the words: “The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost”. One Sabbath in the summer of 1670 found Blackader on the Hill of Beath, near Dunfermline, with John Dickson, another Covenanter minister. They had crossed the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh the previous evening and had time for only a few hours’ sleep at Inverkeithing. They had to be on their way early, as the first service was to begin at 8 am. First Dickson expounded a passage of Scripture and then Blackader preached from a verse which speaks of Christ’s sure and final triumph: “He must reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet”.

From 11 o’clock, when that service ended, there was a break until the afternoon. After Blackader had begun his second sermon, an officer rode up, dismounted from his horse and went to stand among the people on the left of the preacher, whose subject was the glorious purpose of the gospel: “to invite and make welcome all sorts of sinners without exception”. Perhaps the officer was expecting the minister to encourage his Covenanting hearers to rebel against the government, but of course there was nothing of that kind

in his sermon. After listening for some time, the officer returned to his horse but, as he was putting his foot in the stirrup, some of the people tried to stop him. Blackader could see that there was the danger of a disturbance, so he directed some wise, calming words to them. And he said to the officer: "Let me see, sir, who will offer to wrong you. They shall as soon wrong myself, for we came here to do violence to no man, but to proclaim the gospel of peace. If you be pleased to stay, you shall be as welcome as any; but if you will not, you are free to go." The officer rode away and the services continued until late in the day.

On his return journey to Edinburgh, Blackader reached Queensferry but found it impossible to persuade anyone to row him over the Firth of Forth. So the already-weary minister had to ride all the way round by Stirling, which was the first point where he could cross the River Forth by bridge. In the early hours of the Monday morning, seven hours after leaving the Hill of Beath, Blackader reached his Edinburgh home.

Blackader himself told about a Communion Sabbath held in a lonely spot at East Nisbet in the Borders. These were dangerous times for those who wanted to worship God according to His will. But on that beautiful morning, Blackader wrote, "we entered on the administration of the holy ordinance, committing it and ourselves to the invisible protection of the Lord of Hosts, in whose name we were met together". The tables were arranged on the grass beside the water; some of the people were sitting near them and many more on the surrounding slopes, which were "crowded from top to bottom".

They had no wish for the favour of earthly kings. Blackader commented: "There was a spiritual and divine Majesty shining on the work. Amidst the lonely mountains we remembered the words of our Lord, that true worship was not confined to Jerusalem or Samaria – that the beauty of holiness consisted not in material temples. . . . Few such days were seen in the desolate Church of Scotland, and few will ever witness the like. There was a rich effusion of the Spirit shed abroad in many; their souls breathed in a diviner element and burned upwards as with the fire of a pure and holy devotion." It was obvious that God was helping the ministers to speak to the consciences of the people; some who were there felt that the preachers acted more like ambassadors from the court of heaven than like mere men. About 3200 people went to the Lord's table that day and it was specially impressive to hear the huge congregation joining in the singing as darkness fell.

For about 15 years Blackader took every possible opportunity to preach the gospel, although he was leaving himself open to arrest by doing so. But early one April morning in 1681 he was seized in his own house in Edinburgh, and his work was at an end. He was to spend the last four years of his life in

the cold, lonely prison on the Bass Rock, out in the Firth of Forth. As his son Robert wrote after his death, he was “a good soldier and servant of Jesus Christ”. And Robert appropriately applied to his father the statements made about Moses in Hebrews 11: he “esteemed his Master’s reproaches greater riches than all the treasures and pleasures of this Egyptian world”.

Ambition

1. Out of Reach

W G T Shedd

This is the first section of a sermon by a well-known American preacher; it has been edited. His text is: “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not” (Jeremiah 45:6).

Man’s constant question is; Who will show me any good? It does not matter whether he is rich or poor, we find him always and everywhere reaching out after something. It is an error to suppose that ambition is confined to the leaders of the world. The most remote village has people whose minds and hearts beat in the same kind of way that urged on the French emperor Napoleon through the hundreds of battles he fought until he was defeated at Waterloo. To the human eye, there is indeed a great difference between the ambitions of a Julius Caesar and the ambitions of a local politician, but to the eye of God there is no difference at all. In His sight, the ambition and hopes of an earthly king or an earthly conqueror have as little significance as the struggles of a local politician to gain a position in his village, or the toils of a millionaire to add a few more thousands to his treasures.

If we could look from eternity at human life, we would see that the usual distinction which we make between the great and the small things of earth is not a real one. We would also see that all human ambition – whether it is that of a king or a peasant – is the same useless attempt of a creature to pass over a line which the decree of the infinite and eternal God has made it impossible for him to pass. “Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie; to be laid in the balance, they are altogether vanity” (Psalm 62:9).

In the text, the prophet Jeremiah recognizes how prone man is to be ambitious, and he warns against it: “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not.” To put such a question implies that this is the common weakness of man and his sin. It is as if Jeremiah had said: “Are you one of the common mass of mankind, and is your eye dazzled with visions of glory or pleasure? Are you reaching out after an unlimited amount of earthly

good? Are you seeking the praise of men and not the praise of God? Worldly enjoyment and not heavenly blessedness? Stop this struggle to find solid good in what is created." Let us therefore consider some of the reasons for not longing after the "great things" of earth and time, some of the things which would persuade us against worldly ambition.

The first reason for not seeking the great things of earth and time is that *you cannot reach them*. We do not deny that the energy and perseverance of an ambitious man may accomplish great results, but we are confident that he will never attain what he desires. For his desires are continually running ahead of what he attains, so that, the more he gets, the more he wants. He never acquires the "great thing" which he is seeking, in such a way as to sit down quietly and enjoy contentment of heart. Alexander was a famous King of Greece who lived more than 300 years before the birth of Christ; we are told that, when he had conquered all that was then known of the world, he wept in disappointment because there were no more worlds for him to overrun.

A young man begins life longing for wealth. This is the "great thing" which he seeks. This is the height of his ambition. We will suppose that he limits the sum which he seeks to \$100 000. After some years of toil, he obtains it. But this sum is no longer a "great thing" for him. Now that it is actually in his hands, it looks small, very small. The limit is enlarged, and he longs to be a millionaire. The "great thing" which he now seeks is \$1 000 000. This too he obtains, but with the same result. The "great thing" shrivels up again, now that it he actually has it, and he once more enlarges his limit, only to meet the same disappointment, unless death interrupts him with the stern words: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee, and then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?"

In this way, it is clear that he who is seeking great things here upon earth will never obtain them. He is chasing his horizon. He is trying to jump off his own shadow. As fast as he moves forwards, the horizon moves away from him; the farther he leaps, the farther his shadow falls. His estimate of what is a "great thing" continually changes. Though he has accumulated wealth, or obtained earthly power and fame, yet he is no nearer the desire of his heart – no nearer to a satisfying good – than he was at the beginning of his career. Indeed, it is the testimony of many a man that the first few gains at the beginning of life came nearer to filling the desires of the mind, and were accompanied with more actual contentment, than the thousands and millions of dollars that came afterwards.

As a man "thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). The value of all earthly good depends entirely on how we feel about it. Eternal things have a fixed worth, while temporal things do not. So whatever appeared great and

desirable to us yesterday, appears small and undesirable today. Like the chameleon, it changes its colour as we bend over it and cast light or shade upon it. He who loves God and truth, loves an object that is the same yesterday, today and for ever. But he who loves wealth or pleasure or fame, loves an object that is continually shifting and varying. God is always great and always good, and the heart that has made Him its supreme portion never finds Him falling short of what it expects. But those who love the things of this world will experience a series of disappointments. As fast as they attain one thing, it proves to be different from what they expected and gives way to something else. This in its turn they chase after and, when they reach it, they fling it away in disgust.

So we find that no really great thing can be secured within the sphere of this world because there is no really great thing in it. Many things seem great while the struggle for them is going on, but not a single thing in the wide realm of creation is absolutely great. God alone is great. Nothing but the infinite and adorable excellence of God is large enough for the desires of a being like man, who will exist for ever. Well then may Jeremiah say to every ambitious man, whether his desires reach out after wealth, pleasure or power: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not."

The Book of Ruth

71. Proper Marriage

Rev K M Watkins

Ruth 4:1,2. "Then went Boaz up to the gate, and sat him down there: and, behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spake came by; unto whom he said, Ho, such a one! turn aside, sit down here. And he turned aside, and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, Sit ye down here. And they sat down."

Boaz wanted to marry Ruth. That night he had promised to do so, if it were possible. Therefore, first thing in the morning, Boaz went "up to the gate" of the city of Bethlehem. Why did he go the gate? Because that was the place for him to arrange the marriage in a *proper* way.

In those days, all kinds of official business were conducted at the gate: legal cases, community affairs, and commercial contracts. If one's business was honourable and upright, then one took it to the gate to be officially and publicly recognised. If Boaz was going to marry Ruth, he wanted it done this way. He did not want it done in a corner, as though it was something to hide. Seeking Ruth's hand in marriage was nothing to be ashamed of. He was not afraid to declare openly and publicly that this was his aim. At the gate, he

collected together no fewer than 10 witnesses of what was going to happen (see verse 2), so that the whole city could know and accept the outcome.

Boaz shows us that marriage must be entered into publicly, in the presence of witnesses, by a formal, official wedding ceremony. Today our towns and cities do not have a gate like Bethlehem had. But there are still proper procedures which ought always to be followed. Marriage should be according to the laws of our country, and properly registered with the authorities. Lifelong, binding commitments must be made and recorded. What the Westminster Confession of Faith says about divorce applies equally to marriage itself: "a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed" (24:6).

What a contrast to today! Many start living together as if they were husband and wife, without proper marriage. This is rightly called "living in sin". The couple may say that they look on each other as husband and wife. They may say that they are committing themselves to each other for life, as in a real marriage. But that does not make their relationship lawful. They have ignored the proper and public way of official marriage, and whatever they think of it themselves, and whatever other people think of it, in the sight of God it is not marriage but sin!

The Lord Jesus Christ made His view of the matter very clear. By His attendance at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, He honoured not only the institution of marriage, but also the official ceremony – the wedding. Some parables show that a proper wedding is the only acceptable way of beginning marriage. Even the king's son could not be married without a wedding (see Matthew 22:1-14).

When the woman of Samaria denied that she had a husband, Jesus told her: "Thou hast well said, I have no husband: for thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband" (John 4:17,18). Five times she had been married. Each man was her husband for a time. Now she had another man, with whom she was living as if he were her husband. But, Christ made clear, that man did not count as her husband, because there had been no proper marriage. Just living with someone does not make you married.

Remember this! Many young people are throwing off the idea of formal marriage as old-fashioned. They look on it as just a piece of paper which cannot change the way they feel about each other. But it is not old-fashioned. It is much more than a piece of paper. It is scriptural. It is godly. It is Christian. It is required by God. Boaz understood this, and so must we.

If anyone could have been tempted to bypass the legal procedures of his community in marriage, it was Boaz. He wanted to marry Ruth very much.

And she wanted to marry him. Only one thing could prevent them getting married. There was a nearer kinsman who had the first right of marrying her (see 3:12,13).

Boaz could have done what many people do today: without any proper marriage procedure, he and Ruth could have just started living together. That way it would be too late for the nearer kinsman to do anything about it, and Boaz and Ruth would get what they wanted.

But did Boaz do that? Of course not! Remember how he conducted himself during the night when he found Ruth lying at his feet. He did nothing more than speak with her. Being a righteous man, Boaz was determined to seek marriage with Ruth in the right way. There was no alternative. He had to follow the proper procedure. He had to go to the gate and inform the nearer kinsman, even if it meant losing Ruth!

Boaz probably felt the journey to the gate very long. Every turning off the path offered an easier way. But he knew he must go on in the way of righteousness. When he saw the nearer kinsman go by, was this the beginning of the end? It probably took great effort to call the man: "Ho such a one! turn aside, sit down here." Did Boaz almost wish that the man would not hear, or that he would refuse to come? But the man did hear, and he did sit down: "And he turned aside, and sat down".

He did this for one reason, and one reason only. It was *right*. In wanting to marry Ruth, Boaz wanted a good thing. But he was a man of principle, and he knew that everything had to be done properly and openly, in the eyes of all his community and, more importantly, in the eyes of God. Wicked people say, "Let us do evil, that good may come" (Romans 3:8). Boaz could not think like that. If he obtained Ruth through sin, he knew that the Lord's blessing would not rest on their union. It is better to do right, and enjoy God's blessing – even if you do not get what you want – than to get what you want by doing wrong, and thus incurring God's wrath.

Boaz trusted the Lord to take care of the outcome. Yes, he wanted to marry Ruth. And he knew that if it was God's will, God would make it happen without him having to break any law or cheat any man. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace" (Psalm 37:37). Boaz behaved uprightly, and the Lord gave him the result of peace that he wanted so much: marriage with Ruth.

Boaz did his duty. So must we. God gave him what he desired. And God can give us what we desire too, if our desires are right, and pursued in a correct way. Do what Boaz did! "Delight thyself also in the Lord" and His ways, which are right and good; "and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psalm 37:4).

For Junior Readers

True Worship

I'm sure some of you have been on holiday to a big town or city, in this country or abroad. Perhaps you went exploring as a tourist. You would have used a map or guidebook to tell you which buildings or places of interest you should visit. Very likely some of these would be famous churches or cathedrals.

I wonder what you noticed first when you entered one of these historic churches? Its size, perhaps. Huge, high pillars, long aisles and a very high roof. All very impressive.

What else? Large decorations and pictures in the stained glass windows, were bound to draw your attention, and perhaps also the ceilings painted with religious scenes. Then perhaps you realised that it all seemed very cluttered: statues, crosses and candles all took up space. Perhaps then you looked for the pulpit – but there was no sign of it as you looked towards the front of the church. Eventually you noticed it to one side in front of a pillar, certainly not a place where it could be most easily seen.

How very different from our plain, simple places of worship! This is not just a matter of preference. It is a question of what is scriptural, and of why we attend church.

When you look round your church building, what most attracts your attention? The pulpit, isn't it? Why is this? Because the preaching of the Word of God is the centre of our worship. The Bible tells us, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" The Shorter Catechism also helps explain this, "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, *but especially the preaching of the Word*, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners". So, again, the importance of preaching God's Word is emphasised. You should be very thankful that you belong to a Church where the reading and explaining of the Word of God have such a central place.

So, if this is why we should attend church, why would you want statues, paintings, fancy windows and things like that? At best, all of them are distractions, are they not? They draw your attention away from the true worship of God.

Jesus told the woman from Samaria, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth". True worship must

come from the heart, not from looking at outward things or thinking about them, however attractive to the eye they may be.

As you know, the Second Commandment is, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath . . .”. So no one is to try to make any likeness of God, or of Jesus, in wood or stone or anything like that – or even in our minds. And no one is to worship any such image. Not only are these things distractions, they are also against the Bible. And that is why we should not have them in our churches.

The Bible tells us that “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”. You are privileged in having the Word of God faithfully set before you in a pure form of worship. Will you not pray that God would bless these means of grace to the salvation of your never-dying soul.

“In the Beginning”

1. The Scripture Doctrine of Creation

Rev David Campbell

This is the first part of a paper given at the 2003 Youth Conference on what the Bible teaches about creation.

The Bible gives God’s testimony about the salvation which has been provided for sinners. Written by holy men of God as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, it unfolds the mind of God sufficiently to give us the knowledge we require for salvation. The Scripture account of the creation of the world is an essential part of this revelation. Nothing in it happened by chance, for God executes His decrees in the works of creation, as the Shorter Catechism teaches: “The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass”.

The Catechism is concise in its statement that “God’s work of Creation is His making all things out of nothing by the word of His power in the space of six days, and all very good”. For a fuller presentation of the Scripture doctrine, however, we can turn to the fourth chapter of the Westminster Confession, where we read: “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good”. This is the doctrine of creation which we believe the Scriptures teach. We may look at five aspects which it brings together.

(1) God is the Creator of all things. There is significant emphasis in the opening words of the Bible: "In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth". Throughout the first chapter we repeatedly read: "And God said". Isaiah 45:18 speaks of "the Lord that created the heavens; God Himself that formed the earth and made it". In the New Testament, Paul presents the same clear truth to the idolaters in Athens when he speaks of "God that made the worlds and all things therein" (Acts 17:24).

God the Father is the Creator of all things, as we read, "There is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him" (1 Corinthians 8:6). The Son of God is the Creator also, for "all things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). The Holy Spirit also "moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2), and in Job we read that "by His Spirit He hath garnished the heavens" (Job 26:13).

That creation is the work of the Trinity is suggested in the words of God near the beginning of Genesis: "Let *Us* make man". The eternal purpose of the three Persons of the Godhead was to create the world and man upon it. The Scripture teaching on the Trinity presents the Father as the One who originates, and working by and through the Son, who upholds and establishes all things. The "concluding, completing and perfecting acts" are ascribed to the Holy Spirit. God is the first cause of everything; all things owe their existence to Him; He is the designing hand of the universe. So "the earth belongs unto the Lord, and all that it contains," and He rules over everything.

(2) God created all things out of nothing by the word of His power. The direct testimony of Scripture is the foundation for our doctrine of creation – a testimony easily understood by all who read the Bible. It teaches us that "through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Hebrews 11:3). Or as one writer has paraphrased it: "The things which exist were made of things not existing". In Psalm 33 we read: "He spake and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast". There was no time between the command of God and the appearance of matter out of nothing; it happened at once. Creation was a supernatural act of God. Only God's power can bring something out of nothing.

Pantheists (*pan* is the Greek word meaning "all" and *theos* is the Greek word for "God") hold that God and the world are somehow the same thing, and that God is everywhere, in the sense that matter is God and God is matter. Thus God, in their view, is not separate from the creation, and so did not create the universe. But the Bible teaches throughout that the world, and all matter in the universe, is distinct from God and that He created it. Plato, a Greek philosopher, taught that matter is eternal, and so did the early

Church father Origen. The Bible teaches that only God is eternal, “who only hath immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16). Matter is not eternal; it had to have a beginning. So it must have had a cause, and the first cause is the Creator of all things. It is much more difficult to believe in the creation of matter by a “big bang” than creation by the personal God of the Bible.

For Younger Readers

A Wrong Turning

We were in London. It was Sabbath, and we were on our way to church by car. It was a long drive. We turned left and right lots and lots of times. We went through traffic lights and roundabouts and more traffic lights. And at last we went through a tunnel. So we were almost at the church. Then we made a mistake. We went straight on when we should have turned left.

We should have turned back as soon as it was safe to do so. But we didn't. We carried on. We hoped to get to the church by going round a longer way. And, in the end, we did. But there were more cars and buses on the road we took. And the traffic was moving more slowly. We had to stop and wait several times at traffic lights until they changed to green. So it took us much longer for that last part of the journey, which should have taken us only two or three minutes. And we were almost late when we arrived at the church.

Things could have been much worse. We could have got lost, or we might have been very late in arriving at church. But God took us safely there in time. I hope we were thankful to Him.

There is always a right way to take, but there may be many wrong roads. Every day you will see that in lots of ways. When your mother tells you to help her, the right thing to do is to say, Yes, what would you like me to do? But there are many wrong ways to take. You could say, No. And that would be very wrong. You could say, I will do it sometime. And that would be wrong too. Or perhaps you help her, but you make it clear that you do it without any love to her. Really you are quite angry. That is very wrong too. And you are sinning against God.

When you go wrong you should turn back as soon as you can. If you are angry, you should stop being angry. If you say, No, to your

mother, you should go to her as soon as you can and tell her you are sorry. And then, if it is not too late, you should start helping her.

Maybe a boy takes something that doesn't belong to him – a toy or some sweets or some money, perhaps. He has taken a wrong turning. He should go back as soon as he can; he should give back what he has stolen. Perhaps he hopes no one has noticed. But God has seen what he did. And perhaps others saw him too, and they speak to him about it. So the boy tells lies about what he has done. That is another sin. He has a chance to turn back, but he doesn't take it. And in the end it is far, far worse. How terrible if he goes on stealing and telling lies! All the time, it is becoming more and more difficult to turn back.

Remember, when you take a wrong turning like this, it is always best to turn back as soon as you can. Ask God to turn you back. Ask Him to make you want to turn back. And ask Him to forgive you all your sins for Jesus' sake. He is able to do so.

Looking Around Us

To Mars?

President Bush has announced plans to send people to Mars by 2020. No doubt it is possible, or almost possible, to do so with today's technology, but it would be fantastically expensive, perhaps £400 billion. Surely better uses could be found for this vast sum of money. How many people might be spared tremendous suffering if some of it were devoted to medical research! And, if there was a will to do so, how much might be done towards translating the Scriptures into new languages and spreading Bibles among people who cannot afford to buy a copy for themselves!

The exploration of the world has been fuelled by human curiosity, the desire to see what no one has seen before. But space exploration is largely fuelled by the hope of finding evidence that might support the theory of evolution. So, when a space probe discovers evidence of ice on Mars, there is a flurry of excitement. Without water there could be no life on the planet. But it is a very different matter to suggest that, because water has been found, there must have been life on the planet. In fact, it proves nothing.

To find out about how the solar system was formed, we only have to read the Bible, which begins: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". And the cost of a Bible is very much less than £400 billion.

Real Cleansing

The picture shows a man diving into a hole, in the shape of a cross, cut in the ice covering Lake Shartash, 900 miles east of Moscow. He was one of thousands belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church who plunged into icy rivers and lakes across the country on that particular day in January. They believed that they would be cleansed by jumping into water blessed by a Russian Orthodox priest.

These priests would do far better to teach their followers what the Bible actually says. There God tells us what will make us pure. It is not an outward washing of the body that will do our souls any good. Some people think that the water used in baptism brings about the new birth. But that is not so. It is only something spiritual that can make a spiritual change in a soul.

Others may see very easily that outward ceremonies cannot remove sin, but they may try to make themselves holier by their own efforts, in the hope of pleasing God. But He makes it perfectly plain in the Bible that no kind of human effort will cleanse us from our sins. He warns: "Though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before Me" (Jeremiah 2:22). Nitre is another substance used, besides soap, for cleaning. But, however much nitre or soap might be used, there were some stains which could not be removed, no matter how much effort was put into the washing. So, no matter how much effort we might make, we cannot wash away our sins. Sin has too great a hold of us. No matter how hard we try to keep God's law, we will never keep it perfectly, and perfection is the only thing God can accept. Our best deeds are never good enough.

But we do not need to give up hope. We read in the Bible about "a fountain opened . . . for sin and for uncleanness" (Zechariah 13:1). This is real cleansing. It really does take away sin; nothing else ever will.

When was it opened? We should think back to when the Roman soldiers pierced Christ's side after He died. Then there flowed out blood and water. This points us to Christ opening a fountain for sinners everywhere which can really take away sin. It takes away sin in the sense of *guilt*. Those who believe in Christ have all their guilt washed away; they are pardoned; they will never be punished for any of their sins – because Christ died for them.

And this fountain takes away sin in the sense of *uncleanness*. For Christ's sake, the Holy Spirit purifies the hearts and lives of sinners. What they could not do themselves, He does for them. There is no need to plunge into icy rivers or lakes. There is no possibility of making ourselves holy by our own efforts. We must realise that Christ has done all that is necessary for the salvation of sinners. He calls us to come to Him and be cleansed in the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. May we do so urgently!

Youth Conference 2004

Arrangements

Venue: Scottish Agricultural College, Craibstone Estate, Bucksburn, Aberdeen.

Dates: Tuesday, April 6, at 1 pm, to Thursday, April 8, at 1 pm.

Chairman: Rev D A Ross.

Lower Age Limit: 16 years old or fourth year secondary.

Applications: To Rev D A Ross, F P Manse, Laide, Ross-shire, IV22 2NB, *as soon as possible* (the closing date is March 31). See the February issue for an application form. The fee will be £36 for applicants in full-time employment and £18 for others. Cheques are payable to the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

Programme

Tuesday, April 6

2.30 pm

The Role of Women in Society

Some Biblical Principles

by Rev N M Ross

7.00 pm

Eastern Europe

Free Presbyterian Mission and Religious Background

by Rev David Campbell

Wednesday, April 7

9.30 am

The Providence of God

The Doctrine and How It Applies to Our Lives

by Rev H M Cartwright

1.30 pm

Sites of Religious Interest Around Aberdeen

A Historical Tour

conducted by Rev D W B Somerset

7.30 pm

“A Church Unique in Christendom”

Some Free Presbyterian Church Principles

by Rev Roderick MacLeod

Thursday, April 8

9.30 am

A Barnabas and Boanerges

James Kidd of Aberdeen, 1761-1834

by Rev D W B Somerset

Further information will be sent to each applicant about a week before the conference. If you have any queries, do not hesitate to phone Mr Ross (Tel: 01445 731340). But please do *not* delay sending in your application.