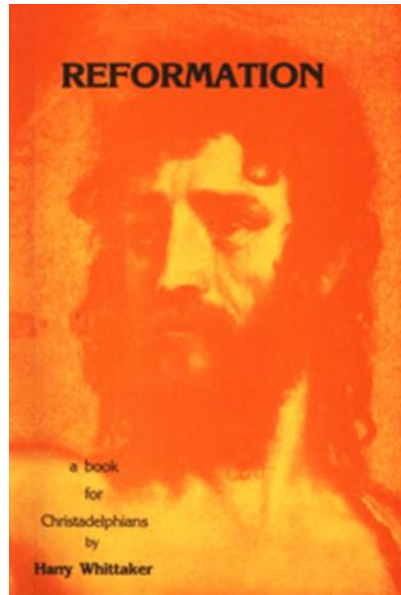


# REFORMATION

a book

for

Christadelphians



by

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Published by:  
Biblia  
130 Hednesford Road Cannock  
Staffordshire U.K.  
1st Impression 1985

Printed by  
North West Print Limited  
Danefield Road, Sale, Cheshire

[[@page:iv]]

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*Front cover:* John the Baptist (artist unknown).

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## FOREWORD

THERE are reasons not to be gainsaid for believing that the Christadelphian Body (not the Christadelphian Faith!) is in need of Reformation.

We could do with a prophet in the spirit and power of John the Baptist, but there is no sign of any such.

We have need of a resurgence of idealism and re-dedication. That will certainly come, but only when it is too late. The parable of the ten virgins makes that plain enough.

This book will not be popular. Its author is prepared for that. But one who goes in for plain speaking on important issues can hardly expect applause or approval. However, we have gone on long enough calling a spade an agricultural implement.

So whilst, inevitably, the hotch-potch collection printed here will make plenty of people cross, it is hoped that it may also do some good in the lives of others with responsive consciences.

There are certainly some better qualified than the writer to undertake a task of this serious nature. However, in the eight years since 1977, when I began to get on edge about it, there have been only signs of tinkering. Perhaps this is just another attempt at tinkering - with a heavier spanner and less know-how.

Considering that the Christadelphian Faith is nearer to Bible Truth than any other faith available, it is a pity that a call to Reformation in the living of that Faith should be necessary. God has given us the best thing in the world, and we are content to treat it as something ordinary.

Learning to cherish our spiritual inheritance and to live the life in Christ with zeal and idealism must become top priorities.

But how are such lessons to be inculcated? Inspired and inspiring teachers are in such short supply. And those with more ability and better judgement than I seem to lack the energy or the courage to speak out clearly.

[[@page:vii]]It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge in this undertaking the encouragement and criticism of my invalid wife. There is not a little of her practical wisdom woven into some of these chapters. But the roughnesses are my very own.

Special thanks also to Elsie Bramhill (bearer of a worthy name!) who typed and re-typed, and always with enthusiasm.

Parts of this book have appeared in one of our magazines, and feed-back seems to suggest that readers can stand this sort of thing in small doses at monthly intervals. So perhaps that is the best way to read what is now an expanded collection.

H.A.W.

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## **1. REFORMATION - REALLY NECESSARY**

ALL human institutions are born to roll downhill. Whether it be a village cricket club or a welfare society caring for the aged or a new political party, they all start with a flurry of idealism and high endeavour. Then, after a while - just how long depending on the initial "temperature" and the number of supporters and the material resources that have accrued - the momentum begins to slacken. This goes on by imperceptible degrees. The burden of activity comes to be borne more and more by fewer and fewer, until at last it is only a handful of

enthusiasts that keep the concern going, helped by the not-ever-so-effectual encouragement of a greater number of nominal sympathizers who are “leaners” rather than “lifters”.

And where individual repentance or enthusiasm is concerned, the pattern is usually not dissimilar. Maintaining a head of steam is not easy.

### **How churches decay**

Religious institutions are not appreciably different. Over the centuries the considerable diversity of churches came into being out of a series of crises in each of which it became evident to those more concerned that a desperate need had arisen to make a fresh start, a need to refurbish ideals or beliefs or methods, a need for reformation. In short, it's time for the car to go in for a service.

But once the reformation has taken place, usually in the face of opposition mild or bitter, it gradually acquires respectability. By and by a place in the sun is conceded by the rest; and, enjoying this improved status it makes sundry concessions in return. After a generation or two it is institutionalised. An increasing degree of formality and rigidity sets in, and then in spite of the efforts of the dedicated and valiant few the long slow depressing process of decay ensues, until at last – rigor mortis: “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.”

This kind of process, with sundry minor variations, has happened over and over again.

The Baptist church furnishes a good example. Back in the year 1942 *The Christadelphian* carried an impressive series of articles showing, by copious quotation from Baptist documents of the 17th century that in their beginnings the pioneers of that faith were almost identical in creed and outlook with the Christadelphians of the 19th century.

But in the course of the years, the Baptists have taken over not a few of the familiar doctrinal corruptions which have characterized the apostasy for long centuries, so that, for example, the present writer's father, reared in a fairly vigorous Baptist church, found it necessary to pull out because of the manifestly un-Biblical character of much of the teaching.

Today that process has gone even further. Now there are a fair number of Baptist churches which cheerfully deny their own name, no longer requiring baptism by immersion but accepting for membership or communion all who “love the Lord Jesus” (a specious phrase, this! for how can a man love Christ and yet ignore or deny some of the plainest things that he taught?)

The Christadelphian Faith has now been in existence for more than 130 years. Has the same kind of process been at work in its history as in the other churches?

The answer is No! - and Yes!

### **Our teaching**

It may surprise many readers of these words to read the present writer's conviction that the doctrinal decay in our Body over the years has been negligible, and this for two very simple reasons.

First, we have had a well-recognised Statement of Faith which, for all its imperfections of phrasing or emphasis, has kept to the forefront of our attention the main lines of Christadelphian conviction. That Statement nails our colours to the mast. And it is a fact that, essentially, Christadelphians of [[@page:3]]today stand for the same things that the (then nameless) Christadelphians of Dr. Thomas's early days stood for.

There is, however, need for some caution. Over the centuries the Church of Rome and the Church of England have both preserved in what is called the Apostles' Creed a splendid (if perhaps over-brief) statement of faith often recited in church services. But fossilisation has taken place. A big proportion of those who recite the words either do not understand what they say or definitely disbelieve some of their propositions. There is only one word to describe this.

It has to be admitted, with a sense of shame, that today we have a liberal left wing (happily, not too influential) which shows signs of a similar attitude, either decrying the importance of sound doctrine or throwing overboard certain specific principles. Again, there is only one word to describe his.

But, even making allowances for such erratic attitudes, it remains true that in the main the Christadelphian Faith still stands where it did.

### **Defenders of the Faith**

This staunchness to a true form of doctrine has come about also because we have never lacked watchdogs. These nuisance yapping terriers (as they appear to some) have justified their existence by keeping us doctrinally on our toes when without them we should probably have lapsed into indifference.

The trouble with these self-appointed Defenders of the Faith is that nearly always they have been wedded to an utterly wrong and Biblically obnoxious doctrine of fellowship, the logic of which has meant a sequence of disastrous fragmentations. And after any one of these flurries of spiritual excitement it takes us two or three generations to work the evil out of our system.

"The Truth is in danger" is still the constantly recurring battle cry of those whose sovereign remedy is to "split the kirk." But from the angle of doctrine these anxieties are exaggerated, for before "this generation" has passed (Matthew 24:34) the coming of [[@page:4]]the Lord will save us from that kind of disaster.

### **A greater danger**

From another angle, however, the outlook is hardly encouraging. We have fended off doctrinal loss with a well bolted and barred stable door, and are as yet hardly awake to the fact that the horse has been stolen via another exit. To use a different figure of speech, the engine and transmission of the Truth's chariot are still in tolerable going order, but underneath there is corrosion enough to warrant some head-shaking.

It is a corrosion of spirit, due to several causes. Sadly discouraged by the brute paganism of our time and the undeniable difficulty of making headway with gospel proclamation, we are not the witnesses for the Truth which we once were. To a perceptible extent Christadelphians

have lost both the knack for talking about the Faith that is in them and the inclination to do so. We keep on rooting around for substitutes for personal witness - exhibitions, films, answer-phones, the time-honoured leaflet distribution, and what not- but we mostly hold off from the one thing that can save us and our message in these days of unbelief, that is, talking about the Truth, being personally identified with it by our own individual witness. This is why the Year of Witness, for all its considerable expenditure of money and effort, was hardly the success it might have been. We try everything we can think of, except that which works best of all.

### **The spirit of the age**

But by far the biggest reason for the lowering of our spiritual temperature is the corroding influence of the affluent society. Because we can't beat 'em, we've joined 'em. The car, the telly, the Mediterranean holiday, the plush comfortable living of a generation which dotes on nice clothes and wining and dining - all this general softness and self-indulgence, this crass materialism - has bit by bit so invaded our way of life that often it is hard to tell us apart from the dedicated materialists among whom we live.

[[@page:5]]In all kinds of ways the worldly outlook takes charge of us and imperceptibly turns us into a people losing sight of their Christian idealism.

There is lavish expenditure - by both sexes - on all kinds of worldly enthusiasms: cosmetics and hair-do's, the latest in clothes, pride in a home which with its expensive carpeting and chromium kitchen is perhaps smarter than it should be; there is acceptance of a happy time-wasting slavery to the car and the garden, over-indulgence in week-end trips and the country cottage (or maybe the caravan), quiet luxurious addiction to the glossies and to the nastiness of the modern novel, conversation of a mostly empty or trivial character rising with an effort to an exchange of items of ecclesial gossip.

Of course nobody indulges in all of these hedonistic relaxations, which by the world's judgement are every one of them perfectly respectable. But there are, alas, plenty of us who go in for plenty of them - and have consciences so slumberous as not to see anything amiss. At the other end of the scale the word "austerity" simply does not find a place in the Christadelphian vocabulary. And if we speak of a Puritan we do so not in admiration or a spirit of emulation but with scornful disparagement, following the world in giving that admirable word its current fashionable opprobrious flavour.

### **In the world and of it**

This is the cause of so much of our decay - that we have let the world impose its outlook and its standards of judgement on us; and this is happening more and more because the Word of God with its complete relevance to life today, as well as to the generation of Peter and Paul, is either being squeezed out or else is being kept in a water-tight compartment.

Is there need for Reformation? Every brother and sister in Christ knows that there is. And the place to begin is not in one's own ecclesia nor even in one's own family but in one's own soul. Nor will that suffice. In a sudden burst of honesty or contrition or enthusiasm it is relatively easy to begin. But it is continuance that really makes Reformation.

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## 2. “FORSAKE NOT”

THE meetings, Bible reading, and prayer - these three items may be regarded as the basics of Christadelphian life, the warp and woof of our existence. Consider here the first of these.

Our community is readily divisible into two categories – those who go to the meeting on every possible occasion, and those who don't. Two generations back, the former represented the Christadelphian norm. Today they are a slowly-shrinking hard core. Without them the entire community would have folded up long ago. No society can flourish without its reasonable proportion of dedicated supporters.

### **How dedicated?**

Today, the larger fraction of ecclesial membership falls into the part-time category. It is, of course, understood that not a few find it difficult to join regularly in ecclesial worship and devotion; there are such hindrances as serious sickness in the house, the care of children, bad working hours, discouragement from those at home unsympathetic to the faith, and so on. What is written here is not relevant to any such.

But there are, very differently, those who are seen on Sunday mornings sometimes, and on no other occasions. It may surely be permissible to express a fair degree of surprise that there are any brethren with full opportunity to make regular attendance who are content to share the Breaking of Bread service just now and then.

### **Thanksgiving**

For, consider, this most important service of all is essentially a thanksgiving. A name which the early church had for it - Eucharist - means just that. So a casual attitude towards it, with attendance going in fits and starts, in effect declares: “I am [[@page:7]]thankful to God for the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done for me, but not much! There are other things (e.g. a Sunday morning in bed) which I regard as being every bit as important.”

Put down in black and white, this looks horrible. But is there really anything unfair about it as a diagnosis?

### **Sins forgiven**

Again, would there be such an easygoing attitude to the Table of the Lord if there were clear realisation as to just what this meeting of devotion means? Consider the familiar words:

“My blood of the New Covenant *for the remission of sins*” (Matthew 26:28). Here is the identical phrase which is used about our baptism into Christ.

These two holy rites are designed to supplement one another. Baptism washes away every sin committed up to that moment. But - such is human frailty and human thinking – after a while spotless robes of righteousness begin to lose their immaculate whiteness. However, the disciple who lives by faith in Christ takes delight in the knowledge that with the Memorial Service comes ‘remission (forgiveness) of sins.’ There the blemished robe of righteousness resumes its pristine freshness.

Yet faced with such a reassuring truth as this, there are some who continue relatively indifferent to the most important thing in life, and who don't mind openly asserting by a pointed non-enthusiasm that this is how they feel!

Others are altogether dependable in their attendance at the Breaking of Bread service, but have neither intention nor conscience regarding any other ecclesial meetings. This is better. But such can hardly be said to be dedicated to the highest idealism. Why is it that they are content to miss every Bible Class and Fraternal Gathering? Not through lack of opportunity. Allowance has already been made for such in an earlier paragraph. Then why?

### **Reasons? - Excuses!**

'During the week, at the end of the day I'm tired out.' Of course! But, then, not all of those who do attend are as fresh as a daisy! If indeed at Bible Class time you are feeling jaded, what a splendid opportunity to acquire merit!

That mid-week meeting teaches me nothing. The standard is poor I'm bored.' You may be right. But there are others who think the same, and yet never miss. Who have the better standards?

'If I attend, I shall get chivvied into speaking.' Not necessarily! But there could be worse evils. Such an exercise may do both you and others a power of good. Paul says it will.

'I can spend the evening more profitably at home.' That may well be. But is there not a flavour of selfishness in such an attitude? There are not a few who keep their minds bolted and barred against just such a thought, because Scripture says:

'We are members one of another.'

'There's a TV programme I don't want to miss.' Here is honesty. But how odd that it should always happen on one particular night in the week!

Every one of the foregoing collection of samples is an excuse. There is not a single reason among them!

### **Intention**

The blanket explanation covering them all is, of course, sheer lack of intention. If you intend to be at all those meetings you have been in the habit of defaulting from, you will be there. It's really as simple as that. A combination of sense of duty and purpose sets all these problems straight.

But, alas, the spirit of the age we live in encourages a man to shy away from anything he has a disinclination for. Hence the present lament about inadequate attendance.

Yet the brother whose sense of duty (not the highest motive!) leads him to participate in all that the ecclesia is doing is no loser by it. For, unless the tone of an ecclesia is pathetically low, when a meeting concludes there is usually plenty of time spent in noisy idle chatter (as it might appear); but this is one of the finest ways in which fellowship is expressed. And this is

specially true if that chatter happens to include further [[@page:9]]discussion of the speaker's topic at that meeting.

This fellowship is a really valuable thing, as the full-timers know better than any. Does the brother who dips the lights in order to send people home when they prefer to go on talking realise what a criminal he is?

### **Sundays only**

It is hardly necessary to make separate mention of those who participate loyally in both Sunday services, but who somehow consider it neither duty nor privilege to be present at any other meeting. There is a strange unrecognised inconsistency about such a pattern of life. In principle, what has been written already applies here also, if in less degree.

If the ecclesia was designed by Almighty God to be a family, is it not evident that the more time the family spends together the better? The early church thought so: "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house ..."

There is something to be said for having in the ecclesia one or two unofficial vigilantes. Some people have a flair for imparting to the undutiful a nudge in the right direction. But not many have. The ham-fisted, and those who trample round in hob-nailed boots, are invited to doubt their personal qualifications for such a role (as does the present writer). But the tactful ecclesial watchdog is worth more than his weight in dog biscuits.

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## **3. OUR UNCHRISTIAN GIVING**

In the Law which he was guided to give to Israel, Moses laid it down explicitly that the faithful Israelite should pay to the sanctuary of the Lord a tithe of the increase of his crops and of his flocks and herds. Indeed, some would expound the details of Mosaic precept as requiring two-tenths of this increase, or maybe in certain years three-tenths.

There is no need to argue that issue here. The main point for the present is that the Law did not suggest guide-lines as to what out of his piety a man might give to the sanctuary of the Lord or to the Levite in his gates; it stated *explicitly* what God required from him. Yet here there was necessarily involved an important element of faith. The Israelite was his own inspector of taxes. So far as one can tell, the Law said nothing about priestly or Levitical inspection of harvests or farmyard stock. God trusted each Israelite to make his own fair assessment. A man to whom God was a reality would know that "Thou God seest me", and in his giving he would act accordingly. This was faith.

There are not a few religions, such as Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists, who have taken over from the Law of Moses the idea of tithing, making it into a *rule* to be rigidly adhered to. This is what would be expected in those who essentially believe in justification by works.

### **Did Jesus really mean that?**

But today, for the true Israel of God who follow a religion which has *no* rules or regulations (Col. 2:16, 17), such an institution is abhorrent. Yet, clearly, there should be a spiritual

counterpart to the simple rigid rule laid down for ancient Israel. And there is! Its terms are positively frightening:

[[@page:11]] “Give to every man that asketh thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

“Love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great.”

“Give, and it shall be given unto you.”

“Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not.”

“All that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, as every man had need.”

These are not exactly popular Scriptures in the Christadelphian world. Without the springboard provided by such other Scriptures as John 3:16; Matthew 20:28; 1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 8:9; 9:15, what hope of ever turning this idealism into reality? In generation after generation we have proved ourselves more resolute and more adept at explaining away than at fulfilment. There were men in the time of our Lord Jesus who were good at this, and they hardly ranked among his finest disciples.

### **First fruits**

Israel had another commandment about giving to the Lord. It required that at harvest time, as another acknowledgement that

“All good gifts around us  
Are sent from heaven above,”

the man of true piety should bring to the sanctuary of the Lord a basketful of fine fruit (Deut. 26:2).

If such a commandment were taken seriously by the nation, a result of it would be that at the appropriate season of the year the court of the sanctuary would be chock-a-block with these tokens of harvest thanksgiving.

Instead: “Amos, what seest thou? And I said, a basket of summer fruit” (i.e. *one* basket, where there should have been hundreds at least). This was what the nation’s religion had come to. No wonder, then, that “the end is come upon my people of Israel.”

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### **The New Israel**

Today the New Israel are surely in better shape spiritually. But are they as good as they might be? Today those who are justified by faith God leaves to themselves, to let their faith operate in the application of gospel precepts more exacting than the Law of Moses.

But there is good reason to believe that that faith does not, in many instances, operate very efficiently in this era of the affluent society. Brethren who are called upon to move about the ecclesias in the ministry of the Word hear announcements of “last Sunday’s collection,” and can hardly fail to be struck by two things: the varying degrees of generosity and self-denial, and the fact that if Christadelphian contributions to the Lord’s cause approximate at all to the tithe standard of ancient Israel, then a very large proportion of our brethren and sisters are classic examples of sweated labour!

### **Ecclesial accountancy**

One is aware, of course, that only a portion of Christadelphian charity goes into the collection bag. There is no lack of other activity of this kind in which, here also, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

But allowing for that fact, even to the extent of assuming that the collection bag total needs to be multiplied by three, would that revised total come anywhere near representing one tenth of the ecclesia’s income (either gross or nett)?

If readers of these words will do a little mental arithmetic with the figures provided Sunday by Sunday, and then glance round the fairly well-dressed assembly and the equally well-dressed car park, they will shamefacedly have to agree that the Mosaic tithe is proving too idealistic a standard for a big proportion of us.

### **Personal accountancy**

Yet here is a remarkable thing, truly, that modern disciples find the standards of Moses’ law too exacting for them, whilst Mormons and suchlike shoulder such a duty cheerfully.

[[@page:13]]Remarkable, too, that whenever our Lord Jesus picked up a Mosaic precept for comment he invariably turned it into a principle quite impossible in its challenging idealism (see, for example, Matthew 5). The examples quoted on page 10 make it shatteringly obvious that he intended the same with the duty of Christian giving. Instead of following him in this, we have apparently achieved retrogression from even the standard which Moses would lay down for us.

What is responsible for present deficiencies in this undeniable duty? With many it is probably sheer lack of awareness of the inadequacy of one’s rather haphazard standards and methods of giving. Probably all of us would be all the better for a systematic check-up in this field. Pencil and paper in this activity will help a lot. Attempting it, many will undoubtedly be in for a shock.

Such personal and very private accounting will no doubt take into the reckoning not only one’s average Sunday contributions but also what is given to the funds of ALS, CBM, H & H, BF, and so on. Some might even like to include the cost of a campaign, though questionably, for that is usually an enjoyable and beneficial holiday, for the younger folk, at any rate. Speaking brethren rarely have their travelling expenses adequately covered. Private help given to the poor and aged might well be taken into account also.

But when all has been reckoned up, or roughly estimated, in most calculations there will be an appreciable something lacking from Moses' modest 10%.

### **Sin of omission?**

All who find themselves under self-censure as a result of this piece of arithmetic homework should be all the more ready to use a means of improving their own contributions of cash to the Lord's work, the more so since it is utterly painless - that is, the deed of covenant.

All who pay income tax, and that means nearly everybody, are positively encouraged by a benevolent grandfatherly government to have some of their tax returned to them simply [[@page:14]]for the asking. It involves only a promise to give the repayment to some recognized good cause. In practice all that is needful is the signing of a simple form promising to pay so much a year. Thus by the stroke of a pen one's donations to this fund or that are automatically increased by about 50%. Is it not downright bad stewardship with the resources God has given us if we fail to make use of such a facility?

This particular method of encouraging support to some of our good causes is already familiar to many. But one strange omission, very widespread, is in the failure to use deeds of covenant in connection with the ordinary ecclesial collections. Very elastic arrangements are possible regarding these. Suppose, for example, you contract to give £50 a year to the Sunday collection, that means that the ecclesia also receives another £25 back from the government. You may, of course, actually contribute £60 or £70 in the course of the year. Then that extra £25 will be in no way affected. If on the other hand your total for the year falls short by (say) £10, the ecclesial treasurer is empowered to make good that deficiency out of contributions from others or out of what extra you may give in the following year.

It is all very simple. A tax-paying member of the ecclesia who can manage only 20p per Sunday has it in his power to add another £5 per year to his ecclesial fund by simply signing a form. There are some ecclesias which are receiving an annual cheque from Her Majesty's tax collector of over £1000. Again the question has to be asked: With a kind open-handed government making such generous offers, is it good stewardship of the resources God makes available to us if we neglect such opportunities to improve the efficiency of the work we do for Him?

"Occupy till I come," said the nobleman. On his return he was best pleased with those who had been most purposeful and forward in achievement.

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## **4. PERSONAL PRAYER**

Here is an aspect of the spiritual life where your average Christadelphian has a lot to learn.

"Since prayer is such an intimate and personal matter, how can you possibly know that?" is the rejoinder which is bound to spring to the lips of many.

To this justifiable query there is a two-fold answer. Personal conversations reveal that there is an almost universal dissatisfaction regarding one's own prayers. Also, the utter inadequacy of so many prayers offered in public reveals only too clearly that many brethren who are called

upon to pray on behalf of others don't know how to pray. So their own personal prayers must surely be in the same category.

It is a fact past all argument that many prayers offered at ecclesial meetings are repetitious, wordy, uninspiring, unhelpful, packed with clichés - in fact, not prayers at all, but only dull public addresses to the Almighty. It is no difficult matter to sort out the brethren who know how to pray from those who don't, and they are a small minority. From this it is possible to generalise fairly safely regarding the community as a whole. If there is one field more than another in which there is need for a Christadelphian reformation it is here.

Obviously one needs to start with one's own private prayers. A drastic improvement in these can hardly fail to bring with it corresponding benefits in all ecclesial services.

### **A good routine**

First, it is important that there be a good wholesome prayer routine in one's daily programme. It may be argued that routine is deadening, the very enemy of spiritual alertness. This *may* be true, but it need not be if the danger is counterbalanced by self-awareness and self-examination from time to time.

[[@page:16]]But to pray just when you happen to feel like it is to deliver yourself to the devil, for, human nature being what it is, you will more often find yourself out of love with the practice of prayer than in love with it. And you will indeed be a most exceptional person if there are not times when there is a sustained disinclination from intimate talking to the God who made you. In any case, it is precisely at such times, when you are feeling most unprayerful, that you most need to pray. Just as it is absolutely necessary to make yourself go to the Breaking of Bread service at a time when you feel all out of tune with it, so also with your prayers. This principle must be received as a dogma. If it is, it can often be a life-saver.

### **How often?**

Some people say their own prayers once a day (those who don't manage even that, regularly, are in a bad way; there is a bright red light flashing!). This once-a-day habit should be regarded as an unsatisfactory irreducible minimum. Is the Father in heaven only so important that five minutes out of 1440 may be reckoned as His fair share? And remember, it is for your benefit, too, as much as for His glory. Are your spiritual needs as minuscule as that?

One has the impression that most of us pray twice a day, morning and evening. There are some evangelical churches who lay it upon their members to be like Daniel and to pray on their knees three times in a day, giving thanks to God. Centuries before Daniel this was the practice of David also:

“Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice” (Psalm 55:17). So the regular pattern of prayer at the beginning and at the end of the day should be a source of idealistic discontent and not of complacency.

Saying one's prayers lying in bed, for comfort's sake, is not at all a good thing. In the morning it needs the activity of getting up and dressing to bring a needful degree of mental alertness. And at night, especially if the electric blanket has been switched on, prayers said in bed are not likely to be very urgent in character, but more likely incomplete because sleep

supervenes. [[@page:17]]At the best of times with many of us prayer is a difficult or even unnatural exercise, so there is not much point in increasing the handicaps.

### **Sleepless nights**

In this matter of the mechanics of prayer the sick have no choice but to say their prayers in bed. Their prayer times can be, and should be, both more lengthy and more numerous. But also for the reasonably healthy rest of us there is a time when prayers said whilst lying snug in bed may be regarded as not only valid but admirable - that is, during sleepless hours in the dead of night. Rather than the usual recourse to a bottle of tablets it is better to appropriate such times for extra prayers on behalf of all the people whom we know to be in need of them - and that means nearly all the people we know! And if, as usually happens, sleep takes over in the middle of such an exercise, it may be assumed fairly confidently that there is little headshaking in heaven because of it.

### **Improvisation**

Another admirable habit is to improvise short prayers at all sorts of odd moments in the course of the day - prayers for the ecclesia's sick folk can be said whilst washing dishes or dusting; there can be a brief intense thanksgiving for the cheering influence of a bright shaft of sunlight or for the sight of a blackbird on the lawn or for the fitness to run easily up a flight of stairs; or maybe petition for wisdom in answering a particularly difficult letter. The possibilities of this kind are endless, yet one suspects that in the lives of most they go almost completely neglected.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

What form should our personal prayers take? Our Lord's own pattern prayer ought not to be neglected, especially since it goes so shamefully ignored at our formal meetings. But let it be said slowly, ever so slowly, perhaps even with each phrase and petition repeated with concentration of mind on the meaning. Just saying a familiar form of words can [[@page:18]]easily degenerate into a spiritual soporific or even an insult to high heaven.

### **Formal and commonplace, or personal and real?**

There should, of course, be every effort (should it need effort?) to relate one's prayers to current needs and situations. And for that reason, all need to learn improvisation in prayer. Even apart from the Lord's Prayer, it is the easiest thing in the world to slip into regular repetition of favourite phrases and commonplace petitions. Witness how often this happens in formal prayer in the ecclesia, and thus be warned about the same danger in your private devotions.

The prayers *you* say to our Father in heaven cannot be of too intimate a character. After all, His knowledge of every one of us is as detailed and intimate as it is possible to imagine (read again Psalm 139). So by all means let at least some part of your prayer be in the nature of confidences spoken in the ear of the best Friend of all.

Indeed, it can be a wonderfully good thing to talk over on one's knees any practical problem which currently presents itself. Thinking things out before God is a splendid exercise and not

at all an affront to His majesty. Decisions reached in this environment and by this means invariably stand up well to the light of day next morning.

### **The wandering mind**

What is to be said about that wretched problem of mind wandering in prayer? Amongst those who are given to taking their spiritual life seriously this is a universal headache. Many of our communal prayers in the ecclesia are almost an incitement to this bad habit. But what is the answer to the miserable self-reproach which suddenly says: “You have been saying words, words, words; but your mind has been miles away, and most unworthily”?

To this there is no easy answer. It helps, of course, to be constantly aware of the danger. But is there a cure?

Answer: No! not whilst this unruly human nature of ours exercises its restless powers.

[[@page:19]]But two things have been known to alleviate the problem. One is to say prayers half aloud, for then the mental effort of framing praise and petition in formal sentences rather than in idea can provide a most helpful mental discipline.

There is also the excellent device of having a prayer list. This means praying with eyes open and with concentration on the written sheet - that is, unless such a list is consulted first as an immediate and specific reminder of what there is special need to mention.

Such methods as these vary a good deal in the degree of their usefulness. In the flock of the Good Shepherd some sheep are more wayward, more silly, than others. We are not all alike. What is an admirable aid or practice for one disciple of the Lord may be next to useless for another.

But for all, without exception, if there is to be real worthwhile prayer, there must be first a firm *intention* that it shall be so. If we really *want* to pray, we shall.

### **Help in time of need**

Finally, all should take comfort from the fact that no matter how inadequate one's prayers may be - spasmodic, wool-gathering, deficient in content and paltry in character-the Lord Jesus is an utterly adequate High Priest willing, nay, eager, to make good with his own perfect ministration all that the prayers of his brethren undoubtedly lack. This is comfort indeed. The incense, which is the prayers of saints and which may not be compounded according to the very finest divine prescription, is transformed by him into a most sweet-smelling offering before the Lord. But he can only achieve this if there is incense of some kind, the best the offerer is capable of.

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## **5. BIBLE READING**

IT has come to something when Christadelphians have to be urged to pull their socks up and do more Bible reading. But this is the situation, and it may as well be faced frankly and honestly.

Time was when “the daily readings” were done as a matter of course - by all. Those days are passed. It is now needful to reinstate the wholesome habits of earlier days.

Is it possible that there is some truth behind the excuse that life is a lot busier than it was and that therefore time for regular Bible reading is not so easily come by? Some would urge this in extenuation of their neglect, but very rarely does such a plea ring true. How can it? This generation has far more leisure time than any of its forefathers.

### **No intention?**

So if Bible reading is not given its proper place, it can only be because of lack of self-discipline in the use of one’s time. If the Word of God does not get the priority it deserves, this must be through lack of intention that this spiritual activity shall have its due opportunity to exercise its influence in one’s daily life. If the will is there to have Holy Scripture making its considerable contribution to a well-rounded faith and good Christian living, then daily reading will find its place without difficulty.

And, conversely, if Bible reading is neglected, it can *only* be because no need is felt for it and because there is no love for it. This fact may as well be faced honestly: If your attention to God’s word is spasmodic, fragmentary, unsystematic, then by that fact you proclaim your cool indifference to the best thing God offers, for the Word and The Word made flesh are one; you cannot have either without the other.

[[@page:21]]The Bible does two things for us - it instructs, and it influences. All Christadelphians have already had experience of Bible instruction. But he is a poor fool of a Christadelphian who considers that he has already gained all that he needs in that respect. The attitude which implicitly declares: “The Scriptures have already told me all that is really important,” sets this Book of God at an astonishingly low level. A man needs more than one lifetime of devoted study and contemplation before he can get within sight of such a conclusion.

Many slackers in this field would find their casual attitude cured forthwith if only they could convince themselves that there is still far more to be learned from the Word than they have succeeded in discovering as yet.

### **A mistaken emphasis**

Here, incidentally, is where certain among us blunder badly (though with the best of intentions). They dogmatically urge you to “read the ‘pioneers’ and keep on reading them.” Almost invariably behind this attitude is the tacit assumption that the worthies of an earlier time succeeded in discovering everything of real value that is to be discovered in Holy Scripture. A sorry proposition, truly, which those fine men - every one of them learners to the end of their days - would have had precious little esteem for.

By all means read all that they have to offer, but let it never be forgotten that that course should be only a small part of a good apprenticeship. It has been said before, and deserves to be said again, that one who stands on another’s shoulders should be able to see further than he.

## **Slow progress**

Bible reading certainly leaves its mark on the reader. But how very imperceptibly! Not in a week, perhaps in a year, more likely in a decade, certainly in a lifetime. Yet - strange paradox! - the one who thus reads systematically, persistently, hungrily, will be the very last person to notice any transforming influence. But others will see it and, maybe, marvel, perhaps even envy.

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## **Unconscious influence**

Very often it is not the jolting impact of blunt Bible aphorism or precept which makes the change - though indeed there are but few Bible readers who do not have this experience; they are the spiritually thick-skinned. Rather, it is the fact that when reading the Word of God you are spending long hours with the world's finest literature and in the company of the finest characters who ever lived.

It is an experience everybody has had - by simply being in the company of saintly people, you have been made to feel a much better person that you normally are. They have this effect of bringing the best out of you.

Alas, it works the other way as well. There are some individuals who seem to have quite a flair for bringing out the very worst that is in you. Although not meaning to, they efficiently transform you into a very devil.

So also in your fraternizing with the elect whom the Bible makes you familiar with. They either make you like them or make you want to be like them - which amounts to the same thing. Yet, strangely enough, even when the Book takes you into the innermost soul of pietistic Pharisees or crude bullying Rabshakeh or rough tough Joab or devious covetous Balaam, it somehow succeeds in immunizing you from *their* influence. And thus you gain on the roundabouts without losing on the swings.

In theory everyone concedes the truth of what this chapter has said so far. But in practice, no! Otherwise it would not be needful to lament here that the Bible is losing its place in Christadelphian life.

## **Good Bible talk**

If it be asked: "How can you possibly know that?" The answer is: "Two pointers - the deplorable lack of good Bible conversation amongst us; and, the utterly inadequate Biblical content of much of our public speaking."

How rarely, at the close of a meeting, is there animated discussion centring on what has been heard! Plenty of talk [[@page:23]] about health or jobs or holidays or the latest marriage or the latest baby. Can this mean anything else but a relative indifference to the Book on which our faith is built?

And there is an increasing tendency to let fluency, showmanship and the gimmickry of public speaking disguise a sorry lack of Biblical backbone. True, addresses heard today are in the main much more listenworthy than they were, say, two Generations back. But that is to be

expected, for in those harder struggling times most of our speakers were entirely self-taught. Today's educational facilities should make relatively easy not only effective techniques but also the acquisition of good Bible understanding. Today we often get the former, but not so often the latter!

So Back-to-the-Bible it must be. The daily reading according to the Bible Companion may not provide the very best regimen of this kind, but nevertheless the system is undoubtedly a splendid one. The familiarity which it fosters with the text of Holy Scripture is superb and has been many a time envied by people of other communities.

## **Resolution**

For all who will take a cool honest look at themselves and detect a certain slovenliness or laziness in this matter of regular Bible reading, here is a straitjacket to be voluntarily taken on for the good of one's soul, a discipline to be accepted and never shrugged off. All young Christadelphians should do themselves the good turn of making an unbudgeable resolution that for the foreseeable future they will adhere rigidly to this pattern. There is a minority so eager to spend time poring over and thinking hard about the Word that they would rather find time for it than for food. Such hardly need the discipline of a regular system. Yet even for them the fellowship of reading the same scriptures on the same day as all their brethren is a spiritual dividend worth having.

## **When and how?**

When is Bible reading best done? The answer here [[@page:24]]necessarily has to vary with circumstances and temperament But for most, early morning is undoubtedly the best time. A few - families, mainly - read at meal-times. Very many leave Bible reading to the hour of relaxation at the end of the day immediately before settling down to sleep. Almost any other time is better than this. At such an hour mental alertness and insight are hardly at their keenest; and with not a few the lure of lighter reading is specially strong just then.

So Bible reading in bed should be taboo. Even reading with an over-comfortable sprawl in a cosy arm-chair can hardly be recommended. The most rewarding method of all is to read with one's feet under a study table, with concordance handy and with a pencil or pen poised ready for use. For it should be an unflagging rule that every impressive new idea or hitherto unsuspected link-up of passages must become a permanent capture by being made note of somewhere, in a notebook or a Bible margin.

You can afford to snap your fingers at those who denigrate such habits as channelling your thinking for all time whenever you come back to that annotated Scripture. The habit of assiduous note-making has far more to recommend it than to decry it.

By all means make lavish use of alternative versions to impart freshness to a Scripture in danger of losing its appeal through over-familiarity. But never forget the importance of checking some new rendering which sounds specially attractive. There is no modern version which has not taken too many liberties with the text. A reading is not necessarily correct just because it says what you would like it to say! But with this caution, the versions can indeed be very helpful.

The main thing is, however, that you read - regularly, alertly, and a lot. Frame your habits thus, and then you will also read thankfully.

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## 6. OPERATION LOST SHEEP

Jesus told a parable about a sheep that was lost. There is an unmistakable element of urgency about this little story. The ninety and nine are left to take care of themselves - in the wilderness, too! It is the one that is lost that is all-important.

Once again, here is Jesus flying right in the face of normal human judgement. If that sheep is lost, isn't it because it is wayward? The rest of the flock hang together, and thus they are safe and also full-fed. Why does this odd one have to be so odd, so silly?

### Good Shepherd

These considerations notwithstanding, the Good Shepherd gives top priority to an immediate rescue operation. He is not content merely to go to the top of a near-by hill in order to scan the countryside. He doesn't sound his pipes, and then shrug his shoulders if there is no response from a long way off. He "goes after that which is lost, *until* he find it." Here is resolution and persistence, a spirit that is unwilling to admit defeat.

This same intensity of purpose and unflagging zeal in what is, after all, a matter of personal self-interest, shows just as clearly in the next parable.

### Anxious housewife

Unlike the sheep which is lost away from the flock, the greatly-valued piece of silver is lost *in the house!* If, as seems likely, it was part of a necklace or other personal ornament, it was probably taken for granted. Through year after year it was worn along with the rest. But as soon as it is lost, having rolled away into an obscure crack or cranny or into a gloomy comer behind some item of furniture, its importance overshadows all [[@page:26]]other domestic concerns. "Doth she not light a candle, and sweep the house (raising such a dust in the process), and seek diligently *until* she find it?"

Again, there is a determination not to be said nay. That coin must be found! So the operation is not perfunctory. She seeks diligently.

### True to life?

How true to life these two parables are - in one essential respect, at any rate! Together they convey a solemn warning that it is possible for one of Christ's brethren to be lost not only by very obviously and perhaps perversely going away from the flock but also by the obscurity of his presence in the house.

These parables are not true to life, however, in the element which they have strongly in common - that, in both instances, as soon as there is awareness of the loss, there is almost frantic urgency about recovery.

The sorry fact has to be faced that in most ecclesias when a wayward brother breaks off his association with the rest, there is either a short flurry of anxious activity on his behalf, followed by a sad shrugging of the shoulders in a spirit of resignation, or else, that device of the devil, a letter of resignation is received and accepted, and the chapter sadly considered closed. Very rarely indeed is there an undiscouraged resolution to continue every effort, *until* ... The chapter is to be considered closed only when it comes to a happy ending. There must be few ecclesias indeed which are not at fault in this respect.

### **Two worthless sons**

In yet another parable which by its dramatic power overshadows even the other two, the Lord puts the twin problems side by side. There is a young rip of a son who is lost away from home, and wanting to have nothing more to do with the stodginess of the life he has been used to. And there is the ever-so-respectable son who stays at home, and continues to go through the motions of a life of service, yet all the while nursing in his soul a proud and bitter spirit. Like that coin, he is [[@page:27]]in the house, but lost just as much as his brother.

The attitude of the father to both is the same. For that waster who has gone off to paint the big city red he is ceaselessly on the look-out; and when a worn ragged figure is one day spied in the distance, the old man runs, runs, to greet him; he hears only the prodigal's confession but stifles with his own breathless gladness the suggestion that his son should cease to be a member of the family.

And when the other preens himself on his own splendid virtues and in high dudgeon sulks outside, coining caustic phrases about that worthless fellow, his father does not administer the lambasting he so richly deserves, but instead sinks his own dignity in a superb plea for reconciliation.

Regardless of his own comfort or personal feelings, the father of these two disreputable offspring deems no effort out of place that the family might belong to each other again. In his eyes nothing else is more important.

### **The dutiful ecclesia**

Then how essential that from time to time *every* ecclesia amount an Operation Lost Sheep. It is, alas, true that with little effort most ecclesias could compile a depressing card-index of names and addresses of lapsed members - and could also usefully include in it those who, though never belonging to the ecclesia, have had close contact with it as potential converts or as members of Sunday School or Youth Circle.

Once in a while these should be visited by those best qualified to talk to them. Sending a letter, or making a phone call, instead of seeking personal contact, is the recourse of a lazy man or of a coward or perhaps of one who is outwardly dutiful but unconcerned in spirit.

And if, as inevitably happens from time to time, there should come a startling crisis in the Middle East sharp enough to set all Truth-instructed people thinking about the Second Coming, that is the time to arrange a special meeting and to put out warm invitations to all on the aforesaid card-index.

But all such recommendations as these, like the parables [[@page:28]]themselves, fall on deaf ears if there is no real concern for the family, no *intention* to do what our duty to do. The *will* to bestir oneself in this good work is all important.

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## 7. FIRST BASE

THE Christadelphian body came into existence primarily as a protest against the utterly false, un-Biblical teachings which the churches had imparted with dogmatic confidence for centuries. That protest, that distinction in basic teaching, constitutes the *only* justification for the separate existence of Christadelphians. It may be questioned whether perhaps *all* the characteristic beliefs of our community are important enough to warrant the emphasis we have been known to put on them. After all, there are differing degrees of importance regarding our various doctrines. It is, for instance, vastly more important to believe that our Lord experienced a bodily resurrection to eternal life than it is to be perfectly clear in one's mind whether it happened on the third day or after three days and nights.<sup>1</sup> It is more important to understand what the Covenant Name of God involves than it is to know how one should spell or pronounce it.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from details of this sort, our inheritance of a corpus of clear Biblically-established doctrines is a thing to be mighty thankful for.

### Modern trends

But alas, in these days it is becoming increasingly evident that there are some among us who are not as thankful as they should be. In fact, it may be taken as incontrovertible that today there is nothing like the emphasis on sound doctrine, indeed on doctrine sound or unsound, that there used to be.

This fact becomes shinningly clear when consideration is [[@page:30]]given to samples of current Sunday evening addresses, Whereas our forefathers discoursed vigorously and lengthily about "The Thief on the Cross" and "That old Serpent the Devil" and "Trinity or Unity?" and topics of a similar doctrinal character, today we find ourselves listening to homilies of a kind which might well be heard at the Methodist Church down the road.

This is just one of the ways in which the lines of demarcation between ourselves and a rather invertebrate orthodoxy are becoming blurred. As already hinted, some brethren think this trend not at all a bad idea. They want our gospel to be more concerned with Christ and an appeal to the heart.

### The spirit of the age

Of course in this they are right. It is a valid criticism of the old-time Christadelphian preaching that Christ and one's personal reaction to *him* received but little stress. In this respect our fathers were to a big extent children of their times. But the same is *just as* true of

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<sup>1</sup> The Statement of Faith very clearly and correctly says the first of these!

<sup>2</sup> The Statement of Faith uses "Jehovah" and has no mention of "Yahweh"! But there may be in existence some versions where a little tinkering has taken place.

the present generation. We live in a time when the only acceptable dogma is that dogma is anathema, when the most palatable philosophy is: “By all means follow the religion that *suits* you,” not the religion that is right. And accordingly topics for Sunday evening addresses have taken on a different emphasis, as these extracts from a current ecclesial ‘plan’ illustrate:

Christ died for us all  
God is calling to you  
Can prayer help you?  
The amazing grace of God  
Living waters  
Freedom in Christ.

Interspersed with these come a few which have the Second Coming or the truth of the Bible as their theme. But the importance of sound doctrine seems to be giving way to something not unlike the modern evangelistic approach -Christ in your heart, your own personal Saviour, the Lord of [[@page:31]]your life. Not that this is wrong - of course not - provided it is handled discreetly.

### **First century emphasis**

But ought not the fact to be faced that this was not the approach of the apostles in the course of their preaching? The rather sickly style of modern conversionism is in sharp contrast with their aim and method. Is it not true that in the Book of Acts apostolic witness constantly repeated these ideas?:

Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God.  
All things concerning him were written beforehand in the Holy Scriptures.  
He rose from the dead.  
A heavenly high priest, he now shares the glory of God.  
He is the promised Messiah, and will one day return to rule the world.  
He is God’s appointed judge of mankind.  
Therefore repent, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance.

The apostles seem to have reserved the “devotional” emphasis for later, in epistles written to nurture the Christ-life among the new ecclesias, and even there an intense emotional stress comes only occasionally.

### **Personal familiarity**

There is another aspect of this decline of interest in “first principles” which arouses misgivings. Not only the Sunday evening speaker but also, even more, the rank-and-file Christadelphian is losing his ability to be a competent witness for the Faith. Here are inter-related factors - less interest in doctrinal principles means declining ability to talk about them and therefore less inclination to attempt to do so. And, conversely, less personal witness means that the Sword of the Spirit becomes rusty and blunt.

This unhappy phenomenon shows itself in all kinds of ways. A brother, long years in the Truth, and nearly all that time holding ecclesial responsibilities of one kind or another, proved quite unable to conduct a trial interview for baptism without [[@page:32]]falling back on one of our standard publications for the job, Another brother who has built up for himself a wide

reputation for tackling “deep” Bible subjects came to grief sadly one nigh when asked to deal with a ‘first principle’ theme that was a-b-c for members of an earlier generation. A middle-aged sister was heard to remark: “There are plenty of the questions asked me before my baptism which I couldn’t attempt to answer today.” A sorry admission! Hardly a thing to be proud of.

So there is perhaps something to be said for including in our Christadelphian Reformation a re-discovery of the basic doctrinal instruction which was once a normal part of Christadelphian equipment. The glory has not departed yet, but is as vividly bright as it was?

Then what about an occasional chapter out of “Christendom Astray”?

[[@page:33]]

## 8. AUSTERITY

THERE’S desperate need for a reformation here’ said John the Baptist. ‘And when I say reformation’, he added, ‘I don’t mean words about it. I mean something *done*.’

Of course John the Baptist didn’t say that, but that was the gist of his call to repentance. That is the kind of language he would have used - will use - to our generation.

He came to the people of Judaea as austere a figure as those Pharisees were sleek and self-satisfied. Camels’ hair and a leathern girdle? Today he would wear denims and an old anorak. He subsisted on locusts and wild honey. Today, apple fallings or coffee-and-a-bun.

This was the way he set the tone for his campaign. And can there be any doubt at all that in this generation he would send out the same ringing call? Can there be any doubt that right now the New Israel needs such a call?

### Puritan?

In cool withering language eighteenth-century William Law exposed the falsity of religious life in his own time. Apart from the dated phraseology everything he wrote is just as apt, or more so, for a big segment of the modern Christadelphian ecclesia:

“If you will here stop and ask yourselves, why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you, that it is neither through ignorance or inability, but purely because you never thoroughly *intended* it... When you fully *intend* to be like them in their ordinary common life, when you *intend* to please God in all your actions, you will find it as [[@page:34]]possible, as to be strictly exact in the service of the church (here, read ‘ecclesia’). And when you have this *intention* to please God in all your actions, as the happiest and best thing in the world, you will find in you as great an aversion to everything that is vain and impertinent (i.e. trivial) in common life, whether of business or pleasure, as you now have to anything that is profane. You will be as fearful of living in any foolish way, either of spending your time or your fortune, as you are now fearful of neglecting public worship (i.e. in the ecclesia). Now, who that wants (i.e. lacks) this general sincere *intention*, can be reckoned a Christian.” (From “A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life”).

No apology is made for the length of this quotation. We all stand in need of blunt words like these.

### **High ideals still-born**

Is there a single reader who on the day of his baptism was not full of all kinds of good intentions, fine ideals, high resolutions? But they were all stultified from the first minute by the environment into which he stepped on emerging from the baptismal waters. The turning of those aspirations into practical living was inevitably guided by the standards of piety and Christian service normal to the ecclesia which gave birth to this new child in Christ. And - the fact may as well be faced - at no time in the last 120 years have those standards been what they should have been. Especially is it beyond gainsaying that, since the affluent society came in, standards of self-denial and self-dedication have been mediocrity itself. And this for the very simple reason, constantly harped on by William Law, that there has been no substantial *intention* to be self-denying and dedicated.

Yet the Lord himself plainly and bluntly said: “Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, *cannot* be my disciple” (Luke 14:27).

### **Too comfortable**

Look round the ecclesia of which you are a member (and [[@page:35]]don't forget to include yourself in the inspection), and then ask yourself how many undeniable examples of cross-bearing there are. Note here that the Lord Jesus did not equate this with patiently putting up with unavoidable affliction. He spoke of a man “taking up his own cross” (Matthew 10:38). The words imply a deliberate choice of an uncomfortable way of life. What percentage, would you say, is there of such in your ecclesia?

Then have the “called-out ones responded very completely to the call, or do they need calling out a good deal further? In modern times does the average Christadelphian ecclesia give the impression of being made up of earnest single-minded sanctified souls whose first, whose only, aspiration is a grateful approximation to the purity and self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ their Lord?

It is dogmatically asserted here that the kind of austerity John the Baptist called for and which the Lord Jesus personally exemplified and demanded in a hundred different ways is not matched by so much as five per cent of us.

### **Taking up the cross!**

Instead, this:

Lavish Christmas dinners and high self-indulgence in fine style pagan style by thousands of Christadelphians, not one of whom believes that their Lord was born on December 25.

A natural birthday is always a good excuse for a lively celebration, even though the only two birthday parties in the Bible were both used to perpetrate a murder! Today young Christadelphians throwing parties have had the air loud with sexy pop songs. Nor have these relatively harmless antics seen the worst to which our young dedicated “saints” have given themselves.

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof.” His people, therefore, will seek to give Him glory by using the gifts of His air earth in a way that will please Him. How many of our parties do that?

Again, look round a well-groomed ecclesia (there are plenty [[@page:36]]to choose from), and ask yourself why saints in Christ need to be so expensively turned out. Any appreciable difference from the church of worldlings in the next road?

Or, look at the car-park, and contemplate the quality there! and the high proportion of new or nearly new models.

Or, eavesdrop on conversations about Mediterranean cruises and exotic Caribbean holidays.

Or, drop in at a few modest homes, and marvel at the fine new lounge carpet, or the plush new suite (“we were fed up with the other - had it nearly five years!”), or the expensive kitchen gadgets - all these acquisitions dedicated to the service of “the Son of man who had not where to lay his head.”

Of course, all of these are examples in extremism. But they do happen! And, in a less degree, they are happening in the lives of *most*.

How many of your brethren or sisters do you know who would not be the better for some real acts of self-denial? Do we, as a community, need a drastic dose of austerity, or don’t! we? Surely it is time we stopped playing games with our religion, time we counteracted modern temptations with realistic re-dedication.

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## 9. “MAKING WISE THE SIMPLE”

It is a strange thing to have to say to those who pride themselves on being the People of the Book, but it needs to be said: In the Christadelphian body there is a desperate lack of good Bible study!

Here by “Bible study” is meant something more intensive and purposeful than Bible reading (which also is in shorter supply than it was). The daily Bible reading which covers from three to six chapters renews acquaintance with the general ideas of Holy Scripture and also, it is hoped, supplies new insights here and there, now and then. This needs also to be supplemented by a more careful and painstaking application to words, phrases, details, arguments, allusions.

This kind of approach to Scripture is something that is within the grasp of all who have the *intention* to learn more deeply what the Bible is about.

### Gifts lying idle

It is not only (though of course it is specially) for those who are natural students. Alas, even about them - the people with higher I.Q.’s - it needs to be said that far too many who at college or university have brought to concert pitch their ability to master geology or economics or biology or literature or history have failed lamentably, and to their shame, to

harness their proven powers to the vastly more important duty of developing a deeper insight into the Word of God.

How is such neglect to be explained? Is it due to the pressures of life or lack of self-confidence or laziness or downright indifference? Certainly all of these are covered by one phrase - lack of *intention*. To them the subject is just not important enough. If it were, there would be no lack of diligence. Every ecclesia has its capable brother who hardly [[@page:38]]ever thinks of settling down to a programme of good Bible study except when he has to prepare an address. How high an esteem for Scripture does such a practice betray?

### **No bent for it?**

But there are far more in the other group who excuse and solace themselves with the reassurance: “That kind of thing is all right for those with the bent. I’m not one of that sort. I wouldn’t have a clue how to start. “ A big number of sisters mistakenly put themselves in that category, besides the many brethren who quail before the undoubted brilliance of some of our greater luminaries and who allow themselves to be put off from realising the best that is in them. “It is plainly impossible for me to achieve the kind of results produced by Brother A, so why should I bother to try?” Is this excuse-making, or laziness or both?

Let it be remembered that the greater a man’s persona endowment, the greater also his responsibility. The apostle James calls it “heavier judgement” ([[3:1>> James 3:1]] RV). And the Lord himself insisted on the same principle: “To whom men commit much, of him they will ask the more” - hence “few stripes... many stripes”, whatever that means.

### **Husband-wife co-operation**

And here it needs to be added that the wife of many a brothel carries a heavy responsibility to encourage, incite, persuade, or goad her husband into applying himself to this best of all activities. Too many wives would rather see the spare bedroom re-decorated than rejoice in knowing that a deeper insight into the Sermon on the Mount is crystallizing out in the study or through the to-and-fro of man-and-wife discussion.

### **Learning to ask a question**

It may come as a surprise to those who write themselves off as incompetent in this field to know that even the most ill-equipped among us are capable of Bible study of the *best* sort. For this is not a matter of erudite commentaries and lots of [[@page:39]]Greek and Hebrew. Quite simply, it calls for the developing of the faculty, which we all have more or less, of *asking questions*.

One of the finest mathematicians in Britain, a man with an international reputation, once said to me: “The way to make advances in mathematics is to find problems that need answering. Once you realise you are faced with a problem that no one else has yet dreamed of tackling, then you are on the way to extending the boundaries of the subject.”

He didn’t know that he was, in effect, enunciating a wholesome principle for much rewarding Bible study. There is no block of three or four verses in the Bible which when read with care does not provoke questions. And often, though not always, the search for answer leads to wider understanding.

An hour or two before writing these observations I was busy reading and re-reading 1 John 2:12-14:

[[12.>> 1 John 2:12]] I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.

[[13.>> 1 John 2:13]] I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father.

[[14.>> 1 John 2:14]] I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.

And here are the queries which arose in my mind:

1. Why the repetition (v. [[13a>> 1 John 2:13]] = v. [[14a>> 1 John 2:14]])?
2. Why this order? Why not: "fathers... young men... children, "which is surely more natural?
3. Why do not these groups include "mothers... young women"?
4. "The wicked one." What wicked one?
5. Why the change of tense? "I write... I have written (strictly: I wrote)."
6. Why *three* clauses in the second address to young men?
7. Why should these particular reasons apply to these [[@page:40]]particular groups?

I repeat, anyone capable of careful attention can read any block of verses in the Bible and come up with a list of specific enquiries like these. And if satisfying answers do not follow as readily, then they are still there as so many useful talking points when in Christadelphian company. And then there is hope that the disease may prove infectious.

### **"Light" reading**

Again, as a particularly easy form of Bible study, ask someone to recommend a helpful commentary on some part of the Bible you are specially interested in, and each evening before you settle down to the telly or light reading of some kind, read the commentary on (say) three or four verses, having a pencil in your fingers to mark points of interest. Persevere to the end. Then go through it again, transferring to the margin of your own Bible every useful suggestion.

Another not very exacting method is to equip yourself with a Bible which has a good set of central-column references (in this respect the Interlinear Bible is in a class by itself). Having decided which book you are going to study, read a chapter carefully (or, maybe, only half a chapter). Then go through it again chasing up all the references supplied. Do this slowly and carefully, always asking yourself: "What is the connection?" When you strike one that is particularly useful, put a pencilled ring round that little letter © (or whatever it is), and underline in your references column the passage it steers you to thus: *p. Rev. 6:26*.

"Exploring the Bible" (HAW) mentions all sorts of other methods which can be tried out; e.g. painstakingly following up every important word or phrase with the help of a good concordance. This is one of the most rewarding methods, but also one of the most wearisome.

The main thing is that you attempt something in this neglected field. Nurture in yourself a lively curiosity regarding Holy Scripture. And, whatever method you try out, be sure to persevere. The golden rule is: Little and often.

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## 10. “BY THY WORDS THOU SHALT BE JUSTIFIED”

“Members one of another”, writes Paul. His words are never more true than when those in Christ are engaged in enjoyable conversation. And we help or hinder each other according to the quality of our talk.

It may be trivial chit-chat, lively repartee, acrid debate, gossip harmless or harmful, or, on the other hand, it may be earnest enquiry, hard thinking done aloud, or enthusiastic sharing of worthwhile ideas. Actions may speak louder than words, but it is doubtful whether they have more influence on the lives and characters of others.

### The good talker

The man who talks well and wisely is “a tree of life”, “a flowing brook”, “a fountain of life” (Proverbs 15:4; 18:4; 10:11). Lovely figures of speech, these, with profound truth in every one of them.

Tennyson put it this way:

“And what delights can equal those  
That stir the spirit’s inner deeps,  
When one that loves, and knows not, reaps  
A truth from one that loves and knows.”

Tennyson was no great Bible man, but here how well he describes conversation between two Christadelphians of the right sort!

But they have to be of the right sort. Good conversation wilts among us nowadays! How often do two kindred spirits walk and talk, or even lounge in armchairs and exchange worthwhile ideas? The busy-ness of life (in the world’s most leisured generation) defeats us. Or is it that the media have drugged our [[@page:42]]capacity for conversation, mesmerising us with faces and pictures and words that are mostly mediocrity, so that we lose the knack for constructive thinking for the benefit of our fellows?

What is it that is “like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Proverbs 25:11)? The 19th century revisers made a guess “A word in due season”. King James’s men made a different guess: “A word fitly spoken”, but in the margin they had the humility to confess their mystification about the literal reading “A word spoken upon his wheels.”

Dare one suggest that there is here an allusion to the cherubim chariot of the Lord (Ezekiel 1:19, 20), the symbolic vehicle of the Spirit of Life?

If this is correct, the lovely picture in that Proverbs verse turns into shape and colour the uplifting influence of wholesome talk about the Word of God (consider Psalm 147:15; Jer. 23:21; 2 Thessalonians 3:1 RV, and many others).

## **Incomparable stimulus**

Everyone knows - in theory, at any rate - that in neither quality nor influence can any conversation aspire to the same level as well-informed discussion centred on the Scriptures. That Emmaus Bible Class (Luke 24) was a prototype. To its inspiring level all other Bible discussions should aspire: “Did not our heart (that is, our *mind*) burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the Scriptures?” Then, if there are such possibilities, why are the Lord’s bewildered disciples of the present day so un-eager for a like experience?

Let the reader of these words ask himself: “When did *I* last have an Emmaus experience?” And if that lapse of time has been shamefully long, then further questions follow: “Why so long? Have I been without the right appetite? Have I been in the wrong company? Is my preference for more trivial talk? Is it possible that I don’t *want* to talk about the Scriptures, because then I feel like a fish out of water?”

But, says the holy prophet, “they that feared the Lord spake [[@page:43]]often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard” - heard what? Aimless chatter about the weather and ailments and holidays and the car and the garden and clothes and grand-children, and sundry other like topics - was this what made their heart burn within them?

## **Idle words**

Yet did not the Lord Jesus say: “Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement” (Matthew 12:36)? There is no more unpopular passage in all the Bible, chiefly because there is none more misunderstood. A careful pondering of the context makes the conclusion easy and clear that Jesus meant every idle word spoken *about him*. It is by our words *about him* that we shall be justified, and by our *about him* that we shall be condemned. (“Studies in the Gospels”, p. 254).

“That’s better”, you say to yourself with a sigh of relief, “I can live with those verses if that’s what they really mean.”

But suppose you are not in the habit of talking about the Lord at all? Is that where a certain sinister word to the ecclesia at Laodicea comes in?

Also, the fact stands incontrovertibly true that you cannot hope to make conversation of any quality or value *about him* unless you have developed deeper insights into the gospels than you had when a kid in Sunday School.

And the Lord doesn’t want pious platitudes about himself -devout talk turned on in certain company because you fear it may be expected of you. If there isn’t avid eagerness or at least alert or well-informed interest, what’s the use? The vast diversity of truth written about Christ our Lord is to be loved with heart and soul for its own sake - and in what more efficient way shall this love grow than by talking about him?

## **A wholesome influence**

The same goes for all other parts of Scripture. The words of Moses also are to be “in your heart and in your soul... a sign upon your hand... frontlets between your eyes... and you

[[@page:44]]shall teach them your children” - how? by packing them off to Sunday School once a week? Well, at least that. But much more effectively by the simple godly habit of talking at home about the Scriptures as though you are interested in their every detail.

The father of two lively boys - 9 and 10 years old - unloaded to me his worries about the inevitable effect of this increasingly evil world in their lives. “What (he asked with evident concern) is the best way to counteract the influence of all this rottenness? What can be done to insulate their developing characters from the corruption and violence all round them?”

Thinking fast, I offered only one suggestion: “Let your boys grow up hearing the Bible talked about in the home, in a natural and unforced fashion, as just part of the family’s way of life. That will save them if anything will. “

I wasn’t consciously echoing Deuteronomy 11. It was only afterwards that I realised how I had been borrowing from Moses.

This, of course, is the way for us to “exhort one another daily” - not by prating at each other or laying the law down about this and that, but by helping to insinuate the salutary influence of God’s Word into one another’s thinking.

And why not the same also in our correspondence? The late Brother Will Watkins, of cherished memory, hardly ever wrote letter without weaving into it a comment on some Bib passage which was occupying his thoughts at the moment. After all, what he found fascinating, stirring, or uplifting could surely be counted on to have a like effect on his correspondent also!

Habits of this kind are of immense value negatively as well as positively. Out of the seven abominations which the Lord hates (in Proverbs 6:16-19), no less than three of them have to do with words and talk. The “grapevine”, more efficient in the Christadelphian world than anywhere else, hums with many an entertaining detail which, whilst not downright evil in character, would be better not said. The old Greek dramatist wasn’t acquainted with our modern slang, but he wrote a play about [[@page:45]]the “grapevine”, and called it “The Wasps”.

The good habit discussed here, centred on the Good Book, may be counted on to crowd out this human penchant for denigration and damage of others. Instead, by it life is toned up, made sweeter and more wholesome, to the glory of God.

But until the habit is formed and has taken over, there needs to be firm *intention*.

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## 11. DISSATISFIED?

In the narrative of Israel’s wilderness wanderings on how many separate occasions do the people come under censure for murmuring? The correct answer is fifteen. They murmured against the Lord, they murmured against Moses and against Aaron.

It is difficult to decide which is the worst thing about them during that period - their amazing lack of faith, or their highly developed faculty for grumbling. Doubtless these two evil qualities reinforced each other.

In more recent times many an exhortation for the New Israel has been framed on those caustic records in Exodus and Numbers. And so it will always be - because such admonitions are always necessary.

There may be good or bad reasons for a spirit of dissatisfaction. Discontent regarding some aspect of our doctrinal position or of the traditional formality which has now become the set pattern of ecclesial life; or maybe some uneasiness about the mediocre spiritual quality of our way of life, or of some other facet of the Christadelphian kaleidoscope mentioned in this book.

Consider just now the first of these.

### **Uneasy about doctrine**

Let the fact be faced that the basic reason for our existence as a separate community is a valid one. We have inherited a different and better theology than anything any of the churches can offer. When a dissatisfied brother writes his wretched "letter of resignation" and goes off to join some church or other, he invariably moves downhill theologically. In order to [[@page:47]]strain out some doctrinal gnat, he soon finds (if he takes his critical faculty with him) that he has to swallow several large unclean camels. One can only be profoundly sorry for those who finding what we call The Truth unsatisfying, take off for fresh spiritual fields and doctrinal pastures new.

The writer of these words has had fairly wide experience of this comparison of our Faith with that of others, and over the years the conviction has grown steadily that no one else has anything better to offer. To be sure, it is a bad thing for Christadelphians to go around saying cocksurely: "We've got *the* truth". But we are fully justified in asserting with fair confidence (and, I hope, gratitude): "What Christadelphians stand for is nearer to Bible Truth than anything else we have met."

And of course that is why we should **never** cease to evangelize. Aren't you doing a friend a good turn (to put it mildly) when you show him something better than what he already believes?

When doctrinal dissatisfaction rears its head, this is usually because the occasional restless individual has been doing his own Bible research (yes! by all means!) regarding the Devil or Demons or the Pre-existence of Christ or the Holy Spirit or some similar field where (let's face it!) there has been a tendency among us to paper over cracks and pretend that "there's really no difficulty."

It's as well to be honest here and admit that in such doctrinal regions we have not had *all* the problems neatly solved for us in advance by our venerated "pioneers." But there is a big difference between making such a concession and drastically scrapping as rubbish their main-line conclusions on such matters. Those main lines will still safely carry the bulk of our traffic. To change the figure, even the less tidy corners of our theology can be splendidly satisfying for starving church mice.

It is a pity that, times enough, those who have set out to resolve outstanding problems have made shipwreck through an ill-advised confusion between wood and trees. They have tended

to become obsessed with one or two aspects of their [[@page:48]]problem whilst at the same time losing sight of the main issue. It is this loss of sense of proportion which has, all too often brought shipwreck of faith.

Let it be said here, too, that intolerant or over-drastring handling of these tricky situations can make bad worse. Instead of being quietly urged to mark time for a while in a spirit of loyalty, to let the dust settle, doubters clamouring for answers have instead sometimes been rather peremptorily shunted into outer darkness and permanent disaster. Even a traitor like Judas was encouraged to be present and to continue at the Last Supper.

### **Idealism**

Another kind of grumbling alluded to earlier is one which all have a good deal of sympathy for at different times. It is the spirit of criticism, activated by the high idealism of the gospels, which looks at the typical Christadelphian way of life and sees it as far more ordinary, and far less idealistic, than it has any right to be.

Who can say that such a dissatisfaction is quite unjustified? We Christadelphians have the best thing in the world, yet, judging at least from outward appearance, we bring to it the same kind of half-hearted interest and undedicated zest that men would have for a course in embroidery or women for a do-it-yourself class in automobile repairs.

The fact has to be faced that as a community we are not much given to idealism. Within certain limits our spiritual life is pretty wholesome, but reaching for stars is not a ploy we are specially keen on. How are you to reach for a star and at the same time keep your feet on the ground? And this last we are doggedly resolved on doing. The faith which climbs over the gunwale to attempt walking on water to Christ is not deemed, admirable but quixotic and a liability.

So the critic who avers that we are too matter-of-fact, too much lacking in heavenly aspiration, is most of the time dead right. And for that very reason he may become disillusioned, especially if he happens to encounter a few examples of [[@page:49]]faith-in-action elsewhere. Faced with this kind of problem the idealist is in danger of misapplying “By their fruits ye shall know them,”<sup>3</sup> and then of going on to draw a bad conclusion which may take him off into a more effervescent but less-soundly based society. Instead, the right and proper reaction is to go ahead and put one’s ideals into practice *in one’s own life first*. Only such a practical measure endows one with the right to point a finger at others who haven’t as yet made that amount of progress. Yet, oddly enough, once you have tried walking on water (and have felt just the same as Peter), you lose all impulse to say to the rest: “Why don’t you...?” When you have despised yourself for your own timidity, you somehow feel less inclination to censure your chicken-hearted brother.

### **A bad symptom, and its cure**

The fact is, this grumbling-appendix disease afflicts only those who live in the world of theory, and who are better at looking at others than at themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Isn’t it true that the Lord was talking about false teachers and their disciples? Applied thus to brethren who flirt with modernism the test is mordant, for no modernist ever becomes a missionary!

One of the warning symptoms is when you find yourself talking about “the Christadelphians”, and using the pronouns “they” and “them”, instead of saying “we”. It is a tendency to look out for.

When Daniel felt in a frame of mind akin to that, he “set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes.” This is the right way to go about things. And he said it in the right way too: “O Lord... we have sinned, and have committed iniquity... neither have *we* hearkened unto thy servants the prophets... O Lord, to *us* belongeth confusion of face... *we* have rebelled, neither have *we* obeyed...” And so his prayer went on - an intensifying confession of sins which he himself was not at all guilty of but which crushed his spirit because they belonged to Israel and he too belonged to Israel.

[[@page:50]]All the fine men of God were like this, brought low by the inadequacies of the people they belonged to: Moses, Nehemiah, Paul, David, Jeremiah - the list is lengthy. The psalmist did not confess: “We have sinned like our fathers,” but “with our fathers.”

It is a worthy self-humiliation: “Lord, I have sinned with my ecclesia.”

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## 12. “EXALTED... ABASED”

IS there any Christian virtue more elusive than humility? The human capacity for self-deceit is so subtle and limitless that even if a man should begin to think that in some facet of his life’s activity he is at last learning to be humble, in the next minute he will find, if he takes a really careful look at himself, that he is congratulating himself on being so - beginning to be proud of his humility. This, so the writer of Ecclesiastes would certainly comment, is vanity and a great evil.

A humility which refuses to be humble is specially obnoxious when geared to one’s religion.

### **As good as any**

There are some aspects of our Christadelphian life which are surely justifiable grounds for a communal self-congratulation. We have, for example, developed a family spirit - yes, worldwide - which is surely second to none, an intimacy not just in one’s own ecclesia but reaching out to others, often over great distances. It is something to marvel at. A family spirit has grown up which leaves hardly anybody out in the cold, except perhaps a few who are walled in by shyness or who have a strange idiosyncratic preference for a desert-island existence. Neighbours marvel at the number and diversity of cheerful visitors who appear at the door of two ordinary, indeed rather unattractive, people. “How come that they have so many friends?”

That sort of experience makes a worthy testimonial concerning the Faith we share, and the spirit of it.

### **Alas, not so good:**

But, lest we as a community begin to feel too pleased with [[@page:52]]ourselves, there come in alongside this a few memories of a superb capacity for criticism. This happens simply because our family intimacy is such that we become familiar, perhaps too familiar, with not

only the best but also the worst that is in our fellows. And the spirit of tolerance which should grow out of an honest awareness of *one's own* incurable deficiencies is not always given a place in the pyramid of virtues as high up as it deserves.

### **A proud dogmatism**

But it is specially in the field of dogma and dogmatism where an over-weening pride or spirit of arrogance seems to flourish, no matter how well-watered it may be by reminders that “ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit.”

The implication there seems to be that self-congratulation in knowing The Truth of Christ is quite out of place. If it exists, there is need for application of a suitable weedkiller which has on the bottle: “Man at his best state is altogether vanity;” or perhaps the other herbicide which comes in a can labelled: “In everything give thanks.”

And how a sense of proportion helps! Has any Christadelphian got the right to preen himself that “we have the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth”?

Well, it all depends - as a certain famous broadcaster used to say - on what you mean by “the Truth.” Using that expression for a necessary summary of saving principles of belief, the first item in that triad is probably correct (though one is still left wondering why the familiar BASF gives no prominence to “justification by faith”).

But if by “the Truth” is meant not just saving Truth but the whole profound range of divine revelation included within the covers of a Bible, then in *that* sense no man living has a right to say that he has “the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth.” For in Holy Scripture there is more profundity than any man can hope ever to master in a lifetime. And indeed if in that sense some self-assured individual were to say that he had the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth he would be asking to be laughed at for his purblind ignorance. A man who claims to have mastered God's Book in effect claims to put himself on the mental level of its Author - and there is only one word for self-assertiveness of that quality.

### **A Pride of lions**

The contemporaries of Jesus were good at this sort of thing: “We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man.”

Wrong on both counts! If indeed they were true children of Abraham, the godliness of Abraham would show in their lives and especially in their attitude to Jesus. And never in bondage? How could they ignore Daniel 2 with its thrilling sequence of proud conquerors, especially iron Rome, who one after the other had broken in pieces and crushed tiny Israel? And were not these religious adversaries of Jesus, every man jack of them, in an incurable bondage to their own God-estranging lust for power and pride of place?

But the lesson these bad men present is not easily learned. Today not a few of those who manage a few weeks' holiday in Israel, congratulating themselves: “*We* are the seed of Abraham,” are often quite forgetful that “a man has (and is) nothing but what is given him from above.”

## **Our own disagreements**

Amongst ourselves this humility is often difficult to discern. When a difference of opinion arises - about Gog and Magog, about our oh-so-little-understood doctrine of the Holy Spirit, about who will be raised in the last day and who not - so often there are factors which have not been given due consideration, or details hidden from sight by ignorance or prejudice, so that there is simply no room for that “nothing but the Truth” mentality. In many a field of discussion there is need for the reminder: “I pray you, believe that ye may be mistaken.”

And if indeed the speaking of reproof for crass error is a duty not to be neglected, why, oh why, must it be done with [[@page:54]]heavy-handed sledge-hammer dogmatism? Why not instead the inimitable effectiveness of the Lord’s own method of asking a rapier-like question: “Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good or to do evil? to save life or to kill?” There have been times when even an angel of the Lord has been content to say: “The Lord rebuke thee,” knowing right well that sooner or later He will.

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## **13. AVAILETH HOW MUCH?**

IN 1975 cancer claimed as one of its victims one who could be ill-spared from the Ecclesia of Christ. Perhaps he was taken away because we did not deserve to have him, for he was a man of extraordinary faith, foresight and energy.

### **A Day of Prayer?**

One project which John Williamson would fain have seen adopted as a normal feature of Christadelphian life was a Day of Prayer, to be observed together throughout the brotherhood. The idea was that on one particular day all the ecclesias everywhere should be united as “the Lord’s remembrancers”, seeking with heart and soul God’s blessing on our preaching work or for forgiveness of our many shortcomings or for the speedy coming of our Lord from heaven or for those who have let go their hold on faith in Christ.

It was a measure of the serious need for reformation that such a suggestion as this met with a cool reception or with downright rebobation. Here was plain *proof* that Days of Prayer are precisely what we are in need of!

### **Over-cautious**

There seems to be amongst us an ingrained tendency to react to any well-intentioned proposition with the question: “If adopted, what *might* go wrong?” Such an attitude may be depended upon to damn any proposal, whatever its inherent virtues; for, human nature being what it is, there is no wholesome movement which it cannot corrupt. If Jesus and his apostles had had this attitude, they would never have begun their ministry, for Jesus, Paul, Peter, John all knew beforehand that in time the Truth would be swamped in a welter of [[@page:56]]apostasy. In our time ALS, CBM, H and H, CIL and a whole lot of other initials have all been damned as dangerous, the thin end of a big wedge labelled Apostasy.

Instead of seeking for flaws in something which is clearly not unbiblical, would it not be better to approach this, and any other proposition, with a different kind of question: “What *good* might such a movement as this achieve?”

## **Bible pattern**

That Days of Prayer are thoroughly Biblical is only too obvious. The Day of Atonement was Israel's great day of spiritual re-dedication. Then all the nation joined in prayer for forgiveness. Sins of omission and sins of commission were laid before God, and repented of. Shall it be said that the New Israel have no need of a similar united importunity? If it be argued: "We have our weekly Breaking of Bread service at which to seek renewal of forgiveness, then let it be remembered that Israel had their great feasts and also the perennial morning-and-evening sacrifice. But their Day of Atonement was as important as *all* of these. So it may surely be concluded that a special Day of Prayer involving us all, and closely associated with our Breaking of Bread service, would be not only an honour to the Lord our God, not only an intense spiritual stimulus to everyone, but also a harnessing of spiritual power which at present goes much neglected.

## **Prayer meetings**

Taking this idea a step further, it is pertinent to enquire why] prayer meetings feature so little in our ecclesial life. That they were an important element in the life of the early church can hardly be doubted. Here is one very eloquent verse about this: "Praying at *all* seasons with *all* prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with *all* perseverance and supplication for *all* saints" (Eph. 6:18). It is a ministry which should know no boundaries. Yet in our ecclesial life how very circumscribed and formal are the opportunities for such activity!

It is not difficult to put a finger on the reasons which lie behind [[@page:57]]current discouragements. Says one: "But that's what the churches do!" - as who should say: If they do it, it must be wrong!

What a devastating argument to use! Is it not true that most churches read the Bible at their services? And do not quite a few of them baptize precisely as we do? And do they not hold a Breaking of Bread service like ours (even if they do choose to all it by another name). Then why have voices not been raised against questionable (sic!) activities such as those? This is surely the appropriate moment to murmur something about the baby and the bath water.

One suspects that another reason for reluctance is the somewhat dour tradition which has come to dominate our services. Anything which might be deemed to be at all overtly emotional is considered suspect, and the prayer meeting might well be an ideal occasion for such. God forgive us, if we really are afraid of emotion (though indeed we would do well to react from the sloppy sentimentality which in actual fact is sometimes tolerated). How often is anyone seen in tears at one of our services? That consideration alone shows whether or not the pendulum might be allowed to swing. It is a sad and sorry fact that prayers offered at our services are very often stodgy and unprayerful. Then is it possible that the retreat from prayer meetings is dictated by fright or self-mistrust in the souls of those who do not know how to pray and know that they do not?

The only *regular* prayer meetings that should be held are those of the ecclesial elders. If these brethren take their duties really seriously, they will invariably assign an appreciable part of their time together for the offering of petitions on behalf of individual members of the flock who specially are in need of spiritual aid and divine blessing. Such an activity, entirely in harmony with New Testament example, can be far more profitable, far more effective in

maintaining the health of the body of Christ than the arrangement of the chairs for Bible Class or the re-surfacing of the car park or the cost of printing the address roll.

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### **Times of need**

All other prayer meetings should be *ad hoc*- to be arranged just when there is some special need. Daniel, faced with the challenge of a wrathful suspicious Nebuchadnezzar, went to his brethren and said: ‘See, this is an emergency. Only our God can help us out of it. Then let us ask him to come to our aid’ Daniel did not rely merely on his own prayers. He needed the prayers of the rest also. Nor did they each pray separately, as individuals, but together, as one heart and one soul.

When Peter was shut up in prison, the next on Herod’s hit-list, the brethren met specially to pray for his safety and his release - and then, when God promptly gave them what they asked, they flatly refused to believe it. Human nature has not changed. And some who read these words will just as emphatically declare: “Thou art mad!”

It is a good idea, when some emergency arises in the life of one of the brethren or in the experience of the ecclesia, not to wait on the formality of ecclesial discussion and resolution that perhaps the time is ripe for special prayers. Far better to have it as a standing instruction to the Rec. Bro. that, when he is approached by two or three of the ecclesia who feel urgent about it, he should forthwith take it on himself to arrange and announce a suitable prayer session.

These occasions, let it be emphasized, are for those who *want* them. The prayers of those who attend will be hard enough work without having to struggle against the stifling effect of a wet blanket. And if the ecclesia in general is not in favour, then let those who are meet in someone’s home and go ahead. Even if the ecclesia does not want to say “Yea, yea”, it must on no account say “Nay, nay”. It does not have the right to discipline private devotions.

### **Procedure**

And how proceed? Here are a few simple suggestions.

Meet in a home. In turn let each of those present take a couple of minutes to remind the rest of what they need to pray about, and by all means let him also direct attention to a [[@page:59]]suitable Bible passage. Then, without any intermission, the prayer. This process, repeated by three or four different brethren, with reference to various needs (for there will always be more than one problem), is all that is needed for a simple but effective session.

The energized fervent prayer of righteous men avails much -and with all kinds of valuable by-products. In the prayers it is important to avoid formality of phrasing as much as possible persons should be mentioned by name. Problems are to be spelled out simply and plainly, not because the Almighty needs this but because those sharing in the prayer will then concentrate their own attention and importunity so much more readily.

One other point - there is no special virtue about standing for the prayers (one suspects that this is a practice taken over from the Church of Scotland), so on these occasions it may be desirable, by common consent, to remain seated.

But none of the foregoing are to be regarded as rules. They are only suggestions. Experience will point to desirable readjustments.

Last point. It is impossible to make a wise judgement about devotional exercises of this sort without prior experience of them. By all means let trial be made of this cooperation in importunity before shrugging it off as a practice of little worth to either man or God.

[[@page:60]]

## **14. “READ, MARK, LEARN...”**

“READING maketh a full man,” wrote Lord Bacon in his famous essay. Very true! And diligent reading of the Bible maketh a man full of the best thought and instruction that he can absorb.

There was a time when for many Christadelphians Bible reading was almost their own literary diet. A few such still exist - and the blessing of God be on them! But most of us find time for other reading. Indeed, not a few find too much time for other reading which has in it nothing that is profitable or wholesome. So, first of all a word to such - the avid readers, those who, finding themselves with a few minutes of leisure, instinctively reach for a book.

### **A friend or a tyrant?**

This reading habit may be a wonderful blessing, or on the other hand it may be a thralldom and a curse. From time to time there is need for careful honest review of one’s reading habits, for these may very easily degenerate into time-wasting or a kind of drug addiction or even a mental equivalent of gin-drinker’s liver shrivelling the soul.

There are some readers who, once they are launched on a novel or a who-dun-it, are incapable of putting the thing aside until finished. Such people are to be pitied more than the cigarette smoker, for they are mortgaging a big useful portion of their lives at the Bank of Futility. Such reading is pure self-indulgence and a great waste. Worse than that, with the kind of immoral garbage which passes for literature nowadays, it may well become a voluntary slavery of the mind to evil thinking.

[[@page:61]]Young people especially need to be warned against the dangers. When I was in my early twenties, a friend (sic!) put a book into my hand: “You really must read this. Superb writing!” book I read it, and for a long time afterwards I wished most fervently that I hadn’t. It was as fine an example of first-rate handling of the English language as you could wish to find, but the story it told was evil, the kind of thing that could defile the mind of any young Christadelphian. Yet today books of precisely that sort are prescribed reading for teenagers at school.

### **“Pluck it out!”**

The Lord Jesus provided the answer to this problem in dramatic drastic words: “If thine eye cause thee to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for thee to enter into life having one eye than having two eyes to be cast into Gehenna fire.” Of course, there is no literality about this commandment, for what a man can read with two eyes he can also read with one. But

plucking out one's own eye could be a grim painful experience, besides leaving behind it a feeling of limitation and handicap. Never mind, says our Lord and Master, it's worth it!

So, negatively, there are plenty of readers of these words who would do well to make new reading rules for themselves -such as: Not more than one novel per month! Or, maybe, no more fiction this year!

Some readers may well consider whether similar self-imposed restrictions are not needful regarding other forms of reading. A few years ago it suddenly dawned on me that I was spending the best part of an hour a day reading my way through one of our best newspapers. So the experiment was tried of doing without. Now it is no longer an experiment but a way of life. Five or ten minutes of radio news bulletin adequately takes its place. There must be not a few of my brethren who accept a similar thralldom to much worse trash than *The Times* or *The Telegraph* without even being aware of the fact.

A comparable indulgence to which many would do well to [[@page:62]]say farewell is the Sunday newspaper, for assuredly it does little or nothing to encourage holiness on a holy day. Some of them proclaim and encourage a definite addiction to lasciviousness.

### **Relaxation**

“But” says someone in protest (a Protestant protesting in the wrong direction!), “the stress of life is such that there come times, especially at the end of a wearing day, when your mind craves for relaxation - times when you are just not equal to anything serious!”

Well, yes, that is true, though by no means as often as we would persuade ourselves. At such times a little self-psychoanalysis is not amiss, for full often there is a certain streak of self-pity doing its insidious work: “My dear fellow, you've had a hard hard day. You are tired out, body and brain. You really have deserved a little self-indulgence.” Even that may be true, though it rarely is. But must there be indulgence of the wrong self?

Enough on this tack! But the point needed to be made, and should have been made long ago, that in the field of reading contemporary corruption makes increased self-discipline a bounden duty and not just a spiritual supererogation.

### **Reading for profit**

More positively, there is room for reminder that nearly all of us would be the better for a bigger ration of good reading, definitely designed to further one's grasp of the Truth and to increase appreciation and understanding of Holy Scripture.

Some put their exhortation rather crudely this way: “Read the ‘pioneers’, the only books worth reading!” And in response to such urging many a well-intentioned reader has started in manfully on *Elpis Israel* or *Phanerosis*, only to come to grief (yes, grief!) before fifty pages have been mastered. The ratio of those who have finished *Eureka* to those who have started it must be a very small fraction indeed.

Yet there are very simple devices to save one from the [[@page:63]]weariness of spirit, which can come to regard such an assignment as drudgery. One is - and I have never ceased my thanks to a very fine old brother who put me on to this - to read two pages a day. Just two

pages, and then put the book down before concentration begins to flag. Agreed, there is a certain loss through discontinuity, but this is not as great as might be thought, and the gain of steady unremitting progress through a difficult but worthwhile book more than compensates.

Another sound idea is - never to read such volumes without pencil in one's fingers. Readiness to annotate makes for mental alertness, and notes in the margin facilitate the recapture of the outstanding ideas.

### **Our own classics**

In the field of Bible exposition the constant employment of that word "pioneers", usually restricted to two, three, or perhaps four writers, has done harm as well as good, by its implication that all "sub-apostolic" writers in our community are necessarily as inferior as the sub-apostolics of the second century inevitably and quite palpably were.

Certainly, *Christendom Astray* should be compulsory reading (at maybe three pages a day) for all Christadelphians. That book - 23 year old R. R. never wrote anything better! - may be a bit dated in its zealous tackling of doctrinal problems which are not so pressing today, but it is, without question, full from beginning to end of fine foundational material. There may be, here and there, expositions of obscure passages which do not commend themselves to modern judgement, but there is no getting away from it that this is incomparably our finest survey of basic truth.

There are plenty of other books in our steadily increasing Christadelphian catalogue which are worth anyone's attention - such works as Islip Collyer's "Guiding Light" (it was pure inspiration that made someone give me a copy on my 21st birthday), John Carter's "Parables" and "Oracles" (both of them packed with good stuff, yet somehow allowed in recent times to fall into obscurity), "Guided by the Star" (wise and gracious reading from the pen of a wise and [[@page:64]]gracious man C.A.L.). These are just a few samples that come to mind out of a fairly long list.

It has to be admitted, however, that most Christadelphian reading is fairly hard work, calling for the "two pages a day" regimen. Our writers have so concentrated on sound ideas that they have neglected the second great commandment for their ilk: "Whatsoever thou writest thou shalt frame to be read with *interest*." Our speakers and writers alike seem to find dullness a virtue - a sharp contrast with Holy Scripture where it is not possible to find six dull books in all the sixty-six. Whom have we had besides three or four familiar names with the ability to carry the reader with them?

### **A sense of judgement**

Whilst undoubtedly there is need in these days to urge renewed acquaintance with our Christadelphian standard works, there is surely no need to issue a reminder that we are not J.W.'s swallowing hook, line, and sinker every pronouncement that issues forth in book or magazine from Brooklyn, New York. The power of individual judgement is a precious right of every true disciple of Christ. And, outside the safeguarding boundaries of our First Principles, which all have given ready assent to in their baptism, there is ample room for divergence of opinion; e.g. in the field of prophecy, or the interpretation of Bible types and some Bible characters. So you are not called upon to accept *every* opinion or interpretation which you come across just because they present themselves with the authority of print (e.g.

this chapter!). Even your Christadelphian mentors, big and small, need to be weighed and assessed. None of them is without error, but neither is any of them always right. The infallibility and authority of Holy Scripture does not belong to our time.

This warning is much more needed whenever you dip into the writings of non-Christadelphian authors. It is easy to be on one's guard against the howlers in dogma confidently perpetrated by Victorian commentators. It is not so easy to insulate one's thinking from the pretentious glibness and slack handling of Scripture text which so often characterises the modern evangelical. The blind and the deaf can pick out the speaking brethren who fall for this kind of thing.

The modernist critical school should be left severely alone. These men, who pretend to an honesty they do not have, are enemies of the Bible. Claiming to be its friends, they assume a sublime superiority over men who wrote "Thus saith the Lord", and in that spirit they coolly set about putting them straight. To be sure, they have scholarship, lots of it. But their basic assumptions about Holy Scripture, and even about the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, are wrong. So it cannot be said too strongly to the rising generation: Let them alone! For, if you follow a blind leader, you will by and by find his blindness infectious.

[[@page:66]]

## 15. A-B-C

"PURE religion before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

Few simple straightforward Bible passages have been more misunderstood than this. The words are commonly read as meaning that doing good to one's fellows in such practical ways as these is the very *essence* of true Christianity. In this sense the words are often quoted by those who rate practical benevolence high and who set faith and sound doctrine low in their list of priorities.

A proper understanding of the word "religion" (*thrēskeia*) helps to a more accurate appreciation of the apostle's exhortation. It describes not the pith and marrow of godliness but the outward forms of religious practice; not the flesh and juice of the fruit but the outer skin: "worship as expressed in ritual acts" (Souter), "religion in its external aspect" (Hatch). In other words, James is emphasizing that one who finds little room in his life for the care of orphans and widows and for guarding against worldly contamination has not yet learned his spiritual ABC. These are exercises in godliness of a most elementary and obvious character.

Behold, then, how in the average Christadelphian ecclesia this principle of Christian living has been stood on its head!

### **The young and the old**

It is tacitly assumed that those best qualified for such activity as visiting the sick and afflicted and downhearted are the middle-aged and the elderly. By common consent the "visiting brethren" deputed by the ecclesia to take care of such responsibilities [[@page:67]] are those who normally can be assumed to be One recalls an ecclesia (it was years ago now) in which a young brother of 18 or 19 took upon himself to visit systematically the aged and lonely. He would drop in for a short while, chat about health or the garden or last Sunday's meeting, read

a chapter of Scripture and talk about that as well as he knew, would perhaps do some simple job that needed attention, and then away before his presence became a burden. He was learning his ABC, and finding pleasure in it.

But the sharpest memory attached to this reminiscence is that by degrees the ecclesia got to know about this and *marvelled* at it - that one so young should choose to take on himself such a duty which none of his age-group had even got round to thinking about!

And so it would have been amongst the young folk in many another ecclesia. There is a great gaping hole here in our Christadelphian way of life. We have tacitly allowed to grow up a tradition that young inexperienced brethren and sisters are not fit and proper persons for activities of this kind. Instead we have helped to nurture a generation of good-time youngsters who would be horrified to have the word “selfish” applied to them, but who are certainly going all out to qualify for the alternative label: “Self-centred.”

Happily such strictures as these are not universally true. One recalls with pleasure a splendid example of a different sort.

An aged sister lived alone in rather humble surroundings. One Friday evening a young brother drove up, and took her off to spend a comfortable restful weekend in one of the finest homes in the ecclesia. As soon as she was off the premises, a squad of the ecclesia’s young people descended on her home, and proceeded during the rest of Friday and Saturday to transform the place. Carpets were shaken and cleaned. Floors were scrubbed. Cupboards were emptied, re-lined, and made tidy. A rather shabby room was papered and painted. Furniture was spruced up. The garden was tidied. In fact, every job of that kind that could be done in the time was done. And then on [[@page:68]]Sunday evening, the rather dazed but appreciative occupant was returned to her home to enjoy with gratitude all that had been done in her absence.

One wonders how many ecclesias there are where such a blitz might similarly take place.

Indeed, such activity might well go further. Suppose a local welfare officer were to be approached by one of our youth group leaders: “I have here a team of x youngsters - teens and early twenties - who are willing to lend a hand with any welfare work needing to be done.” It is difficult to believe that such an offer would be received with anything but open arms.

Of course, it is possible, if one is so inclined, to envisage sundry disadvantages or snags about an activity of this kind, but hardly such as would veto it altogether. There is such a thing as being over-cautious about a new venture. Not infrequently, alas, we have proved ourselves more adept at saying “No” than at saying “Why not?”

### **A duty for all**

The emphasis here so far on visiting and helping being done by the young folk is not intended to put their elders out of business. God forbid that such should ever be! Ideally, the expression of fellowship by visiting and kindly acts should never be regarded as the prerogative of any age group.

It is even arguable that the appointment (in most ecclesias) of official visiting brethren and sisters has done more harm than good. True, in one respect such an arrangement has meant

efficiency in the supply of prompt aid and comfort where such have been necessary. But on the other hand this system has *very* often encouraged the rest of the ecclesia to assume that the provision of help and fellowship for those who might need or appreciate them is none of their business. Those specially deputed will take care of such responsibilities.

This is not a state of affairs to be contemplated with any tranquility of spirit. Ideally the well-being of the sick, aged and lonely should be shared by all. We have gained on the swings, but in the process have we lost on the roundabouts?

[[@page:69]]Would that in every ecclesia and every age group there were more examples of this sort: I was chatting with a brother whom I had known for nearly fifty years, and it cropped up (very casually) in the conversation that for many years he had never let a week go by without visiting someone who would be all the better for a visit! And all that time I had never had any inkling that this was a normal part of his way of life!

Suppose that ten per cent of all his brethren and sisters had followed such a pattern of quiet unselfish dedication. Then what a vast amount of additional good would have been done to the glory of God, what a deepening of fellowship right through the Household of Faith, what a strengthening of the bonds of the gospel.

But he - my exemplar - did this in his quiet unselfconscious way because he had the *intention* to do it. Just that!

[[@page:70]]

## 16. SHEEPDOG

IT is, or should be, almost a platitude in Christadelphian circles that “we are members one of another.” People go to church - if they do! - and, service ended, they get up from their seats and go home, with hardly a word spoken to anyone. Those who read this are accustomed to something very different - warm handshakes (plenty of them), and a big proportion of the congregation still be seen, fifteen minutes after the concluding prayer, standing around talking hard and perhaps having to talk loud because there is so much of it.

This is good. But it is only the elementary expression of a mutual brotherly concern that could well go a good deal further:

“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. 2:4).

“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification” (Rom. 15:1, 2).

### Flair

Timothy was not without his failings, but among his fine qualifications as a fellow-worker with Paul in the gospel was this: “I have no man like minded, who will naturally care for your state” (Phil. 2:20). Paul had a splendid team of helpers, but in this one respect Timothy surpassed all the rest. What a vast amount of unchronicled good this young man must have

accomplished through the diffused influence of a ready personal concern and a natural charming friendliness. He had a flair, and he used it. Paul saw to that.

Constantly the apostle rubbed in this practical lesson, that a true and worthy disciple of the Lord will go through life ever on [[@page:71]]the alert to give a helping hand - practically, spiritually - to a brother who could do with it.

“Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth” (1 Cor. 10:24).

Here when Paul says “wealth”, he means neither dollars nor sterling. And in everything the aim and intention is to be not just certain breezy mateyness, but “edification”.

In an ecclesia of good tone the Arranging Brethren will never relax from alertness and concern regarding the individual members of the flock entrusted to their care, for this side of their responsibility is vastly more urgent than new paint on the hall door or the catering for the next fraternal gathering. These other things are trivialities, yet they tend to get more than their share of attention simply because they are more straightforward and do not involve awkward personal situations.

There are, alas, some ecclesias where the hall drapes and the amplification system are faithfully dealt with, and then the elected brethren go home feeling that they have fulfilled their responsibilities.

Then all the more reason why others who have no ecclesial office or title of any sort should take upon themselves to be unofficial ecclesial watchdogs. Two or three kindred souls of this kind, appointing themselves as an informal vigilance committee and going into action without appearing to do anything, can within a year or two work wonders in the spiritual life of the body of Christ.

Let it be underlined again. This is not a matter of complaining to the Rec. Bro. about shortage of hooks in the cloakroom or asking none-too-good-tempered questions about the draught in the back left-hand corner of the hall.

### **“Members one of another”**

Rather, it has to do with alertness to note that self-conscious brother X is lonely in the midst of the ecclesial hubbub when everybody is talking to everybody except him.

It means taking note of the fact that a certain family has quietly broken off its attendance at Bible Class. What sort of [[@page:72]]tactful reminder or encouragement is called for, and who is it who is best qualified to go about such a delicate task?

Does Brother Y know just how much his lusty but somewhat unmusical singing reduces the pleasure and value of the service for some of his fellows? The ecclesial elders could never do anything about a problem of that sort. But a brave kindly ever-so-tactful sister might, without doing damage persuade him to be rather less vigorous or even to be contemplatively silent!

And there is that sensitive young student, an eager boy, who got hurt when being put in his place rather brusquely the other day by Brother Z (“forty years in the Truth, my lad!”). A friendly chat about his studies, or (better still) about his Bible studies, or about his activities in

the Youth Circle - some deliberate effort on these lines, helped on by an encouraging smile, can be balm of Gilead doing its healing work all unperceived.

There is no end to the possibilities for good to be wrought by careful kindly well-intentioned individuals who go about their self-appointed tasks in the right spirit. But always the watchword must be "For Edification", not "For Self-assertion".

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## **17. FOUR SHUT BOOKS**

THE very essence of our Faith is knowing the Lord Jesus Christ. None would wish to argue that it behoves all true believers to learn as much about him as it is possible to know. This is a truism.

How odd, then, that our early Christadelphian tradition should have had such a different emphasis. It is easy to see why this was so. In the nineteenth century, Methodists and Salvation Army did their best to turn faith in Christ into something verging on sentimentality, and the early brethren reacted from this strongly. Also, they found that basic truths which orthodoxy has neglected or perverted were often more readily expounded from Genesis or the prophets or the epistles. Also, their fervour regarding the Second Coming and the Kingdom took them enthusiastically into deep researches in the complexities of latter-day prophecy.

So the Gospels and much of the life and teaching of our Lord got neglected. Zechariah and Daniel and Revelation were a tremendous challenge, and became staple diet. It somehow wasn't recognized that the Sermon on the Mount and the discourses in John's gospel present just as big a challenge - in a different kind of way.

### **Helps presently available**

It is true that R.R., realising that things were a bit out of balance, wrote "Nazareth Revisited", but that attempt at a life of Christ was hardly his most successful achievement. He was far too busy a man for a task of that sort.

More recently, attempts have been made to make good our lack. Brother Melva Purkis's study is beautiful and sympathetic, [[@page:74]]but lacks detail. L.G.S. bequeathed two splendid books - on Mark's Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount - but these are not exactly easy reading, and some would say the same about J.C. on John's Gospel and the latest effort on Mark by A.D.N. and no one knows better than the present writer how much has been left undone in "Studies in the Gospels."

### **Perspective**

Here then is a plea that, worldwide, Christadelphians get down to a really serious dedicated detailed study of the Five Gospels (for the O.T. - Psalms especially - can add enormously to our insight into the person and teaching of our Lord). Without any possibility of demur, such a study is vastly more needful and will prove to be more profitable than the same amount of time spent on principles and details of the Law of Moses or the intricate reasoning of the Epistle to the Romans or the baffling symbolism of the Apocalypse (this is written, out of strong conviction, by one who has spent a good deal more time than most of his readers on all of these splendid topics).

The Gospels are all right for kids in Sunday School, are they? It is high time that that tacit assumption be let go. Thank God, the Gospels are wonderfully good fare for youngsters. But they are also the most profound and most compressed narratives ever written - and they were written in the first instance for mature adults. There is here another reason why we should all of us be busy as beavers studying the Gospels - such a study is immensely rewarding, no matter what may be the qualifications (or lack of same) in the student, whether these include familiarity with the text or linguistic ability or powers of analysis or acquisition of learned accessories. At any level, the study of the Gospels is a better spiritual investment of time and effort than anything else that can be suggested.

How many hundreds of hours are needed to cover, with appropriate concentration and investigation, the three large volumes of Eureka? Put that amount of time into poring over the text of the Gospels, and the result will certainly be more abiding interest, more continuing zest, more real insight into the [[@page:75]]purpose of God, more familiarity with the text of the whole volume of Holy Scripture, and more intimacy with Christ our Lord than the other study could possibly yield.

## **Methods**

Then how go about it? There are various methods available. You can study one Gospel at a time. You can study themes -miracles, parables, discourses, O.T. connections, characters -but probably the most rewarding is to take all four gospels together, with the help of a good harmony. By this method it is possible to gain great enlightenment through weaving together two, three, or four narratives. And there is also the gain of historical perspective and development which so often goes sadly neglected.

It is important always to read and ponder, asking a question about every facet of these winsome records. Many of your questions will go unanswered, perhaps for years, but even that experience can do you good.

For instance, has it ever occurred to you to ask these questions?:

- a. Was the man healed at Bethesda a “good guy” or a “bad guy”?
- b. Why does the eloquent symbol of the fisher, so prominent in the Gospels, disappear from the rest of the NT.?
- c. Why did Jesus use different methods of healing - a word, a touch, going to a bedside, healing from a distance, or by some freak method such as John 9, Mark 5 and [[7>> Mark 7]] and [[8>> Mark 8]]?
- d. If the miracles in John are signs, what is the healing of the nobleman’s son a sign of?
- e. Is Matthew 17:21 genuine? And if so, what is the point of it? f. Explain the penny in the parable.
- f. How many explanations can you assemble for John 14:23?
- g. Which is the correct one?

Such lists are endless, and a great education.

[[@page:76]]  
**Imagination -**

- is a dirty word in some Christadelphian circles. But when studying the Gospels, forget that, and in your mind reconstruct as fully as you can the baptism of Jesus, Peter's walking on the water, the healing of the woman in the crowd and of the bent woman in the synagogue, the two cleansings of the temple (so different!), the great row with the Pharisees. And even though later on, you may find that your internal TV has supplied you with some wrong details (as **all** man-made stories about Jesus invariably do), you will nevertheless want to get down on your knees and thank God that He has endowed you with these powers.

If there is to be a Christadelphian reformation, then by all means let a revived study of the Gospels be part of it. We can do without explorations into God-manifestation, though indeed we ought not, but this other we cannot - must not - do without.

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## 18. INFECTION

ON that occasion when I first found myself involved in a discussion about the need for reformation in the Christadelphian Ecclesia, one of the first things I heard said was: "But look what a lot of fine, faithful, utterly dependable brethren and sisters there are! **They** don't need to be urged in that direction. They live Reformation all their days. "

That is a comment easy to understand and easy to sympathize with. Yet, in fact, it is not true, and if given undue emphasis is capable of doing a vast amount of harm by lulling a fair number into complacency when in reality there is hardly one who is not in need of reformation in some way or other. The best among us suffer from having an idealism that has lost its edge, or else from having one or two blind spots which others **could** tell us about tactfully, yet they cowardly don't.

### Exceptions?

No! The first step towards reformation must be a recognition of the universal need for it. There are no exceptions, it is a call which **all** must take seriously.

That said, the fact remains that whereas every ecclesia has its devoted characters dedicated to sterling service in the Lord's work, utterly dependable from year's end to year's end, there are also others - plenty of them - whose religion is at best half-hearted. And between the two groups there are not a few others who go in fits and starts, sometimes qualifying for one category and sometimes for the other.

The first type attend all, or nearly all, the meetings, and therefore they hear all those stirring practical exhortations [[@page:78]]designed to stir the sluggish out of their torpor. But they are the people who are not torpid. They are conscientious, often very worried about their own inadequacies, even though they have far fewer than some of the others. These are the people who read the Scriptures with care and regularity. They go pretty often to Fraternal Gatherings and benefit from the fellowship there. They do their bit in a special effort and, better still, on a campaign. And all the time they wish they could screw their own standards of Christian living and dutiful service a bit higher.

Yet, whenever there is special appeal or exhortation that the girding of loins be more whole-hearted and resolute, these are the hearers or readers who are made miserable by such reminders of their own inadequacy. The others who most of all need such spiritual jolts do not

get them. They do not hear because they are not in the congregation to listen. They do not read because either they are not readers or else they are given to reading the wrong stuff.

### **The Baptist**

This, then, is a mighty serious problem - how to get the message over to those who are not there at the receiving end.

John the Baptist had his own kind of solution. He held open-air meetings, not in the marketplace or the shopping precinct, not in the temple area or the park, but in the wilderness! And people of all classes went to him there - not just the earnest souls, given to worrying about the mediocre quality of their godliness, but also the other sort: the selfish well-off, the publicans, soldiers (probably recruited into Barabbas's growing gang of rebels), harlots, and even learned Pharisees and Sadducees. These were the people who really needed to hear a call to repentance, and they came and they heard.

### **How did John do it?**

The answer is: He had two secret weapons which we don't have. One, power from heaven, a burning inspiration such as no modern Christadelphian has ever known. Two, a personality [[@page:79]]which by comparison makes the most dynamic of us a water colour painted with milk.

Agreed, then, we have no John the Baptist. Then, what alternative?

### **Hezekiah's intense sincerity**

Hezekiah, newly come to the throne, the heir to as bad a situation as any man could expect to inherit, saw clearly that reformation was the only answer. "So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah." They "passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh even unto Zebulun."

That circular letter of Hezekiah's was a stirring piece of work. Surely all the tribes would respond to the wisdom and sincerity which inspired it. But no! "Divers of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem." But others "laughed them (the messengers) to scorn, and mocked them." So what the good king hoped would be a nationwide reformation actually made its impact on only a faithful remnant.

Today, after the manner of Hezekiah, similar missives have gone out and still go out to every family in the New Israel, reminding of the special spiritual perils of our time and of the grievous sin of indifference. It must be all or nothing. "He that is not with me (when in his baptism he has proclaimed his intention of yielding staunch loyalty) is against me."

Will there be the same extreme of negative response as in Hezekiah's day? Thank God, no! There will be no mockery, no laughing to scorn.

But there may well be plenty of indifference or self-excuse (the same sin painted a different colour). Many will still go completely untouched simply because they do not even bother to read. The printed appeal to every family is a device of diminishing profitability. Human nature sees to that. Then what?

## Sharing the good intention

Those who do take such an appeal seriously need also to go [[@page:80]]a step further and take it seriously to others who, they suspect might, if left to themselves, remain casually indifferent. I am my brother's keeper. Therefore I have a duty to seek his well-being in any way open to me.

Clearly, any effort made to reinforce the good work of others has to be done in the right spirit and by the right methods. Talking down to people gets nowhere. A hectoring tone or the assumption that one has a right to "lecture" will assuredly be counter-productive. Instead, "let us (you and me together) go up to the mountain of the Lord."

A sister happened to be near the literature table when a teenager stood casting his eye idly over the titles. She reached for one particular item and put it into his hand. "Read this," she said, "it's just what **you** are needing." He took it, read it, and a week later asked for baptism.

That kind of personal reinforcement of reformation appeal can make all the difference in the world.

There is room for a lot of really profitable private conversation on this theme. Earnest **intention** to somehow get out of the rut will be found to be catching if it becomes an element of one's unselfconscious talk to others who could do with a dose of the same disease.

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## 19. "UNTO THE WELL-BELOVED GAIUS"

IT is a strange phenomenon. This is pre-eminently the age of leisure, and yet always we lack time for some of the best things in life. In the end of the last century, my father as an 11-year old half-timer in a Lancashire cotton mill put in more hours a week than many a full-time worker of this generation. Yet in spite of today's increase in leisure - and holidays - most of us have no time (and in any case, little inclination) for writing letters. The post office, bullied by powerful trade unions, has added its discouragements in the shape of exorbitant charges and wretched delivery service. And of course it is so much less trouble to pick up a telephone and talk such exhilarating platitudes as: "How are you? We're fine. Is it raining at your end?"

It can hardly be denied that a gracious element of fellowship has gone out of life. Yet, since we Christadelphians subsist on and for fellowship, something should be done to maintain, or re-capture, the best features of that old way of life. It can mean so much more to us than to other people.

### The old folks

There are two age groups who should take this activity specially seriously. The retirees or senior citizens or whatever current jargon calls them are specially well-placed to exercise a wholesome cheering influence by their writing of one letter per day, or per week, according to personal flair and circumstances. Many such people have the time, and also the ability and experience to put together a worthwhile readworthy letter without undue effort (though it has also to be recognized that there are plenty for whom the writing of a good letter is as big a

[[@page:82]]task as the compiling of an encyclopaedia would be to others; this chapter is not written for such!).

“Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” As age lengthens and years shorten, personal contact with old and valued friends - by letter if not in person - becomes more precious. Also, retirees, when writing to friends of the younger generation, have so much wisdom and experience of life to pass on, that it would be a shame to neglect such a means of exercising good personal influence.

I have known just one or two such correspondents who have made it a practice to include in every letter written to a brother or sister in Christ some brief but stimulating observation on a Bible passage of outstanding interest; an illuminating cross-reference, or a useful Bible comment gleaned from recent reading. Would that this habit were widespread among Christadelphians!

### **Young people away from home**

The other age group referred to are the young people who by job, college, or marriage are taken away from the home that reared them. These in their twenties or late teens have a special duty to keep in regular touch with the folks at home. The keeping of the commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother”, which Scripture nowhere abrogates for those who are over sixteen, should find its best expression, for those who are away from home, in an unfailingly regular letter home *once a week*. The occasional phone call, for which Dad is invariably expected to pay, is a barely adequate alternative - unless you first make a careful list of all the interesting comments and enquiries and items of news that you deem worth mentioning.

This laziness of the rising generation and casual indifference to those who nurtured them is something to marvel at, and also to deplore. Presumably it is the self-centredness or maybe thoughtlessness, of youth, often not easily outgrown, which is responsible for the readiness to divorce oneself from home.

“But life is busy. I’m so short of time. And anyhow there’s never anything of real interest to say. Whatever could I tell [[@page:83]]them that could possibly make a readable letter once a week?” This is the gist of the usual self-excuse. Which just shows how blind the most percipient of our bright young things can be! Why isn’t it obvious to them that *everything* in their life, no matter how unimportant, is of absorbing interest to parents? This is a fact. Therefore letters home should be made up of chatty items of detail, lots of detail, however scrappy or trivial they may seem.

A weekly letter of this sort, scribbled off in half an hour or less is not much to ask from those who have been cared for and nurtured for years without ever a word of thanks thought of or expected.

### **No answers!**

It is not inappropriate here to mention the fine example of one brother who, after he was married and his mother left a widow, living within fairly easy reach, never let a day go by without a few minutes’ visit or, if he was away from home, a daily postcard close-written.

There are those who feel quite hurt and indignant if an answer to a letter is not received. This is a species of small-mindedness to beware of. To be sure, it is (usually) a pleasurable thing to receive letters, provided they are not from the income tax office, but it is a poor sort of friendship which feels hurt if a letter evokes no response.

All sorts of reasons may exist, not the least being the fact that for some people sitting down to write a letter, even to a close friend, can be as unwelcome a chore as washing dishes. So if you suspect that the one to whom you write falls into that category, it is a kindly gesture to conclude with: "Don't bother to reply; I expect you are busy" - or something of that sort.

Letters to sick folk are among one's highest duties. They are also among the most difficult, for on the one hand there is the danger of being over-sympathetic, in a sugary sort of way; and on the other hand it is possible to convey such an impression of your own busy healthy life as to do the suffering recipient more harm than good. Unless the patient is in very low condition, [[@page:84]] probably the best plan is to send as readable a mixture as possible of comments on recent Bible reading and details of interest concerning the ecclesia and mutual friends.

### **The angry letter**

There are certain letters which it is best not to write, ever. In one of his essays Dean Inge laid it down as an irrefragable rule: "Never write an angry letter!" There is much practical wisdom in this. If you must give expression to your violent indignation, then it is only fair to allow the one you are lambasting the opportunity of self-extenuation or immediate apology or equally vigorous riposte. In any case the chances are that six months later the memory of your outburst will bring the red of regret and perhaps of shame to your cheeks.

"As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man." And this stands true when instead of person to person the medium of communication is a letter - but only provided the water is smooth as glass. If, on the other hand, the surface is ruffled, what a weird and undesirable distortion is presented!

So, by all means write your angry letter, but then put it away for a few days. When you bring it out again and re-read, you will not need that famous dean of St. Paul's to tell you to tear it up.

And the same goes for indignant letters to the editor. If you happen to be disgusted and live at Tunbridge Wells, don't count on the editor to save you from your own indiscretion. Yet, in general, it is fairly true that readers of journals write readily enough to express vigorous disagreement, but only rarely in appreciation. The emphasis needs to be more the other way round.

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## **20. BLIND SPOTS**

"LORD what fools these mortals be!" It is hardly a Bible notation - but it might well be, for nowhere do the Scriptures express anything but contempt for human wisdom and human judgement, as well as (of course) human behaviour. After writing a long catalogue of the fruits of human cleverness, Isaiah throws the whole lot into the garbage bin with the words: "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of".

David was even more withering: “Man at his *best* state is *altogether* vanity.” It would be difficult to be more damaging than that.

It may have been a typical bit of Mark Twain fun when he wrote something to this effect: “Whatever else, if you tell me that he is a human being, you need tell me nothing more; that is all I need to know. He can’t be any worse!” But behind that wisecrack there is an awful lot of truth.

The Book of Proverbs has more variegated epigrams than any book on earth in the searing things it has to say about human folly.

So it should be a plain and easy lesson for the man of God to learn that he needs to be constantly suspicious of the validity of human judgements. The world is far more often wrong than right.

Yet just because the world is too much with us, in all kinds of ways it succeeds in imposing its “wisdom” on us. Through forgetting how warped human nature is, we may all too easily allow ourselves to be brain-washed into accepting worldly attitudes or evaluations.

Here are three examples which surely deserve to be re-considered.

[[@page:86]]

### **Retirement**

By general consent western society has come to the conclusion that when a man is getting on in years he is entitled to make the rest of his life a quiet self-indulgent holiday. At first they said: “When you get to 70,” Now the figure is set at 65; and already, not uncommonly at 60. “Soul, thou hast much goods (and a pension) laid up for many years. Take thine ease Eat, drink, and be merry.”

So all the old routine is let go. And in its place, there is a bungalow by the seaside or a cottage in the country. (America and Canada have their own equivalents of these). Now, instead of “the rat race”, as it was contemptuously referred to, there is the intensely useful and satisfying life of taking the dog for a walk, disbudding the chrysanthemums, and re-decorating the spare bedroom.

Yet God’s law for old age could hardly have been more clearly expressed than this: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread *till thou return unto the ground...*” In other words, a man is to work till he drops.

To be sure, he is not called upon to go on working at the same job. Failing physical powers or flagging mental alertness will almost certainly preclude that. But clearly the divine law implies a continuing life of *usefulness* as long as such is in any way possible.

To what extent, it may well be asked, is this divine law for our ageing society being taken seriously?

### **The last Will and Testament of -**

Without any special design, the second example also concerns old age.

When they die, most people have money, goods, and chattels, which, whether they wish or no, they are unable to take with them. So a man makes his will: "The Last Will and Testament of Billy Muggins". And in 19 cases out of 20 the good Christadelphian leaves all, or nearly all, that he has gotten to his kith and kin - his children usually. If those children are married and having a difficult time of it raising a family, that is all [[@page:87]]very well. But in these affluent times how often is that the case? Isn't it the constant grouse of the old folk that when their children married they refused to be satisfied with anything less than a home at least as well equipped as that which it had taken their parents long long years to get together?

Then if the next generation, themselves now coming on towards middle age, are comfortably off, with good homes and incomes and prospects, is it wise to load them with temptation by leaving them an unneeded windfall? If we are really sincere, and not hypocrites, in lamenting the dangerous materialism of our times, must we show our intense love for our children by guaranteeing that they are well-loaded with temptation? How many fairly well-off parents give a thought to considerations of this sort?

In any case, whose is that money which inevitably must figure fairly largely in your will? There is nothing that a man has which did not come to him by the grace and kindness of God. Then, when making a will, ought not the first consideration to be: In what ways can my present prosperity be directed to the service of God who has been so good to me all my days?

An even better policy than this is to set about giving away one's bank balance to the glory of God before death hands that opportunity to others. It seems that a few fine Christadelphians - though not very many - have gone about things in this way. It is, to put it mildly, a pity that this has not become the norm.

### **Act of God!**

And now a third suggestion which may be confidently counted on to horrify and scandalise nine-tenths of Christadelphians worldwide. This is that our entire community consider what degree of godly wisdom there is in dependence on insurance.

Long ago the world in its wisdom came to the conclusion that it is far better to lean on an insurance policy rather than to have faith in God. Indeed, insurance is necessary, they assume, in order to safeguard against acts of God those who believe in God. There is a power about this logic which leaves the present [[@page:88]]writer bemused.

Scores of Bible passages bear witness to the truth that *the* key virtue in the Christian life is faith in God, the God who controls storm and earthquake and without whom not even an obscure sparrow falls to the ground. Yet we flatly refuse to believe that the same God can overshadow us with all the care we need and that He will bring into our lives only such cataclysm or adversity as is good for us (or for others who know us). And so we take out insurance policies to indemnify us against the damaging results of fire or ill-health or "accident". At a very conservative estimate there must be at least a million pounds a year of God-given money being paid out by Christadelphians to thriving insurance companies who gladly pay back a small proportion of that fairly useful sum to compensate the few who have been hit by uncontrollable contingency.

Who shows most business shrewdness here? - those who share the faith of Abraham, or the directors of the insurance companies?

Since faith is undoubtedly a precious commodity in the sight of Almighty God and since justification to everlasting life is only through the exercise of faith, it may be taken as axiomatic that any deliberate choice in life which calls for the exercise of faith, or which puts the strain on what "little faith" there is, is a choice that God is glad to see.

"Lord, bid me that I come to thee on the water!"

"Peter, stop behaving like a fool! You know you'll sink! And what's the good of it anyway?"

So, doubtless, said one or more of the others in that precarious little ship.

But Jesus said: "Come," and very soon was reproving Peter not for being foolhardy, but for not having more faith than he did have.

Of course, someone, attempting a *reductio ad absurdum* of the present thesis, has already muttered: "That means no Christadelphian car-driving, for it is against the law of the land to drive uninsured."

The conclusion does not necessarily follow, for there are [[@page:89]]those who regard their car-insurance as a special payment of tribute exacted by the government in return for permission to drive a car on the roads. This, surely, is how men of God will view this particular aspect of the problem.

The entire question, mentioned here only sketchily, is worth thinking out carefully. One has the impression that most of us just accept the conventional view without even stopping to ask a few questions. The world, with its usual slick cleverness, has sold us the idea without us even being aware that we have been conned.

## 21. RELAX

The family of the Lord Jesus thought the situation quite absurd. All day long he had been so beset by the crowd that he couldn't find time for a meal. Time for preaching, time for wonderful healings, time even for disputation with his adversaries - but no time for food! He must have gone out of his mind. It's high time we got him home (Mark 3:20, 21, 31).

That is how a perfectly normal situation appeared to his own folk. And right up to the present day some disciples of the Lord - not many! - have been written off as quite unbalanced because they have chosen to drive themselves hard in the Father's service.

Now and then the Twelve had a taste of this exhilaration, and found themselves being carried away by the excitement of it all. The startling character of the message about Jesus, the marvellous power which the Holy Spirit imparted, the thrill of being always beset by awestruck crowds, made them feel as though they could keep going for ever.

But Jesus, watching them with all the careful attention a mother gives to her baby, and alert for signs of fatigue, knew when they had enough: "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat" (Mark 6:31).

### **"Take care of yourself!"**

Alas, far too often that solicitude of the Lord for his workers has been miscopied by soft-hearted disciples. An over-anxious sister took a vigorous young brother to task for taking on such a full programme of activities: "Too often", she complained, "we have had useful brethren burning themselves out by trying to [[@page:91]]do too much. Soon you'll be no good at all in the Lord's work, and all through unreasonably attempting too much now!"

So kind, so considerate, yet so mistaken, as that brother was to observe in later days: "The work went on, the pressure did not ease up. But (he added with a wry smile) that prophesied collapse hasn't come yet. And why hasn't it? Because if a man wants to carry on, God gives him the strength to do so."

Yet how many brethren excuse themselves from a more dedicated life, or are encouraged by an over-solicitous wife to pity themselves, on the ground that modern life is too full of pressure. Ceaseless strain at work, wretched travelling conditions to and from - such surely qualify a man for a quiet evening at home with his feet up. And the ecclesial Bible Class won't miss him anyway.

But that Bible Class does miss him. And, without his being aware of the fact, he is the poorer for missing it. In plenty of ecclesias, it needs only half a dozen members to cosset themselves with this kind of self-pity, and the Bible Class is in a state of collapse.

### **The challenge of a hard life**

This is a soft generation. Compared with our brethren of any earlier period we have wondrous comfortable lives. At the end of last century, working conditions and working hours were

universally more taxing than they are today. And walking two or three miles to and from work, in all weathers, was a commonplace. Yet how many who read these words would maintain that our thermometer of zeal and our barometer of performance stand higher now than they did then?

“How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife?” complained Moses. Yet he did.

“There continues to come upon me daily the care of all the churches.” Paul mentioned it in passing, near the end of a breath-taking catalogue of things endured for Christ’s sake.

And who was it observed that whilst foxes have their dens and birds their nests, himself had nowhere to lay his head?

Said a young brother: “Two years steady application, and I’ll [[@page:92]]have the qualification I’m after. Then, assured of a good steady job I’ll have both leisure and energy for the work of the Lord. So I’d be justified, wouldn’t I, in dropping all my ecclesial commitments (he mentioned a commendable list) till this exam’s out of the way.”

He seemed surprised, and perhaps a bit hurt, when I said: “No!” Apparently it hadn’t dawned on him that, by a bit of ruthless self-discipline regarding the time-wasting and self-indulgence that young people are always good at, he could pack in all the study that his exam demanded and still fulfil all his current commitments in the ecclesia. He hadn’t awakened to the fact that his work for the Lord could prove so refreshing as hardly to merit the description “work”. Should it not be itself a relaxation?

### **A ruthless parable**

The Lord Jesus told a parable about a farm labourer who, at the end of a full day’s work with plough or cattle, finds himself faced with yet further duties: “Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink.” This done, the servant can now pity himself as an over-worked and under-appreciated minion. Can he?

The parable concludes: “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say (not in assumed piety to others, but in sober truth to yourselves). We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which it was our duty to do.” Unprofitable! That Greek word means “not needed”. Here is austerity and a spirit of ruthless honesty which effectively blasts into a thousand pieces any tendency we may have to feel sorry for ourselves or any inclination towards self-congratulation for sustained attention to duty. We are “not needed.”

Then why make the effort?

For two reasons. First, because he is Master and Lord. Calling him this, we say well. And *serv*ing him as Master and Lord, we do better.

Second, out of thankfulness that he is our Master and Lord.

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## 22. NEHUSHTAN

Hezekiah knew human nature well enough to be sure that cleansing the temple and inviting people to Jerusalem for Passover would not be enough in itself. As long as there were false gods around, for so long would they be a lure and a damage. Such was the weakness of human nature, *their* human nature.

So he began by picking on the one idol that was more sanctified than any other. Here was hoary tradition and undeniable power! Was not the brazen serpent made long long ago by that man of fabulous talent Bezaleel, and at the behest of the great Moses too? And were there not scores of families in Israel who still passed on vivid authentic stories of how some ancestor of theirs was saved by it from certain and agonizing death?

But it had to go. Hezekiah knew that right well. So he treated it as Moses treated the golden calf, smashing it up and, after gathering up the fragments that nothing be lost, he again did what Moses did - he threw the lot into the stream that came down from the mount of the Lord. Let the God-given Water of Life wash this evil out of the life of his people.

More than that, Hezekiah ran a propaganda campaign against it, that there be no reverence attached to its memory. He taught the nation to call it Nehushtan, a name that is susceptible of several translations, but all of them derogatory or openly contemptuous. "Second Serpent", perhaps, to remind everyone of the evil wrought in Eden. But more likely: "That Brass Thing". Without faith in the God of Israel, that's all it was I in Moses' day, and in Hezekiah's.

And today.

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### **Hypnotized**

If there is to be reformation among the New Israel of God, the worship of man-made things must go. And, by general consent the most imperious idol of the lot is the telly. Of course there are plenty of others - already mentioned in earlier chapters - but none is so compelling, so futile, so utterly insidious as this thing.

It seduces into endless time-wasting. And even when you know that one programme has been nothing but sustained futility, you are beguiled into more sitting and staring by a confident expectation that the next programme will be a lot better. And especially at the end of the day you are oftentimes lured into enjoyment of a late programme when you know that you should be asleep; and thus you guarantee to start the next day in the wrong gear.

But some of these programmes are simply not to be missed. So informative! So uplifting! Yes, and you take care to talk about these to your brethren after the meeting. But you are equally careful not to mention the vastly bigger proportion of other programmes which were at best mildly entertaining and at worst a sheer waste of time.

Nay, at worst they are a sordid defilement which should have been switched off as soon as their real character became evident.

**Save the children!**

And before the children go to bed they too get tanked up with “aural alcohol. “ Shooting, knifing, strangling, and all the apotheosis of bloodlust - they see and hear it all. And their parents rejoice that they are quiet and out of mischief, and being made into good little Christadelphians. “Suffer the little children to come unto me...” But they don’t want to, Lord! they are watching the telly.

And when they come into their teens, which should still be an age of innocence, there is nothing they don’t know - *and* think about when at last they are hounded off to bed. Television is such an efficient medium of education!

[[@page:95]]Of course, it is. No argument about that. Most people learn far better by eye than by ear. Television puts the two together. What could be better? A well-experienced teacher of young children tells me that television-reared youngsters are better informed than their deprived playmates.

Well, suppose that’s true! Isn’t it also true that those poor deprived ones have been kept from a lot of foul soul-warping influences? And it certainly is true that when those youngsters come to the real business of education, which has to be done through hard personal application to books, and not through enervating pictures, the non-telly child will be way ahead because that’s what he’s already used to. More than this, he will be much more apt with his Bible.

### **Apologetics**

All sorts of apologies can be made for television, have been made - in the pages of Christadelphian magazines too. The shrill protest is heard: “Why pick on those who like to have TV? Are there not plenty of other abuses that need excoriation? Bad books, bad newspapers. Then why hypocritically go for television, and ignore the others?”

This is very illogical logic. Because there are other evils, shall we therefore blithely tolerate the worst of them all?

No doubt in Hezekiah’s day there were some who said: “But that brazen serpent is a masterpiece, the handiwork of the greatest artist of all time. Its destruction would be an obscenity. Besides, it is so ancient. Our people have treasured it for 700 years. And if it survived all through the years of Joshua and Samuel and David, it can’t be as bad as all that. Who does our new young king think he is?”

### **Strong action**

But Hezekiah knew what he was doing when he went for the biggest evil of the lot. All reformations have to start that way. And if Christadelphians are to have their much-needed reformation, here is their Nehushtan.

To be sure, there are plenty of other idols. When Hezekiah [[@page:96]]destroyed the brazen serpent, his people quickly got the message and proceeded to such a rampage of idol-smashing as had never been seen in Israel. Please God, that will happen in our time also.

It will have to. The Lord Jesus has told us so, using some of his strongest language:

“If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.” But he refuses to do it for us.

“But, Lord, I don’t want.” So also said Lot’s wife. With two eyes we may enjoy the sights of Sodom. With two eyes also we may share Sodom’s Gehenna of fire.

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## **23. HAIR SHIRT OR VELVET JACKET?**

Get any of the old folk talking about the war, and sooner or later they will begin to pile one recollection on top of another about the austerity of the life they lived - had to live - in those drab years. “Make do and mend” was the governing principle regarding everybody’s clothes. Nobody, except royalty, looked smart. They just put up with what they’d got.

And food, though not much limited in quantity, was wondrous stodgy and unappetising. The sheer lack of variety and piquancy was such as people could hardly imagine today.

Yet in those austerity years the nation was healthier than it had ever been.

### **The modern philosophy**

Today you would expect that runaway inflation would bring vast numbers of people back to the plain simple wholesome-ness of food and clothes that Uncle Adolph imposed during those dreary war years.

But no! Everybody seems to have money to spend, and they spend it prodigally - on themselves!

This is the very backbone of modern philosophy - that life owes you a good time, so see that you get it.

In this way, by slow imperceptible degrees, the present generation of Christadelphians has been kidded - “conned” is the fashionable jargon, I believe - into adopting similar standards of selfishness.

Never did those who are in the world but not of it manage to emphasize their separateness by such wholehearted self-indulgence on food *and* drink, clothes, cars, holidays, pastimes, fine homes, and all the impressive gadgetry that alluring [[@page:98]]glossy magazines and slick television shots display.

### **The Christ pattern**

To be sure, God did encourage, nay, command His people to have jolly self-indulgent harvest festivals - their Feast of Tabernacles. But such occasions came just once a year, and were strongly God-centred. And at those times all - rich and poor alike - lived in booths fashioned by themselves, not in four-star hotels.

If there should be any people in all the world given to the simple life, it should surely be those who deem themselves to be disciples of that wandering preacher who had not where to lay his head. Yet in everything to do with the material comforts and joys of life, is it possible to distinguish those who are disciples from those who are not?

In Pennsylvania the descendants of early religious immigrants still go on making their protest against modern flashiness by continuing the old out-moded way of life - long skirts, clothing of a drab hue, the horse instead of the internal combustion engine, and so on. But the virtue has gone out of even this old-time life, because now all this is done by time-honoured rule and not from inner conviction. Thus human nature succeeds in spoiling even its own best intentions.

### **Modern trends**

Taking a long cool look at the modern Christadelphian way of life, can it possibly be maintained that our spending habits are a clear reflection of a spirit of other-worldly dedication to a life of high spiritual endeavour?

Consider the lavish richness of the food provided at many a Fraternal Gathering. Glance round a Sunday morning meeting, and ask yourself, *why such* “fine raiment.” Is this a worshipping of the Lord “in the beauty of holiness”? Even if that phrase means “in holy array” (which is very very doubtful), how many of the brethren and the sisters present have got themselves up smartly that particular morning intending that it be to the glory of God?

[[@page:99]]It is indeed a thing not to be argued that as a community we would be all the better for a little more emphasis on austerity and self-denial in the kind of life we live.

### **The spirit of the Gospel**

Everyone who reads these words is already familiar with such Scriptures as these:

“Whose adorning let it not be that outward appearance of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel...”

“... in modest apparel... not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array...”

“He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise.”

Agreed, there are certain difficulties and problems about how we should put these words into practice. But the *spirit* of these Scriptures is not to be missed. And most of us would be none the worse for a little quiet heart-searching (and wardrobe and deep-freeze searching) as to whether we put these principles into practice at all.

### **Rules and regulations**

Let it be remembered, though, that ours is not a religion of rules and regulations regarding such outward matters, save what rules and regulations we each personally frame for ourselves. This is one of the glories of our Faith, and must not be interfered with.

Yet it comes to one’s knowledge that there is at least one ecclesia (not in Britain!) where brethren are expected to wear dark suits (nor are these to be enlivened by gay ties!); and sisters are frowned upon if their skirts do not terminate below the knee and above the ankle.

If such rules are accepted by all as part of a unanimous protest against worldly fashion, fine! But if this uniform adoption of unworldly styles is the result of dictatorship, then it is much to be deplored.

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**Why? why?**

Motive, motive is the thing that is all-important in this field of Christian discipline. “Lust of the eyes, pride of life” - these are what make us outwardly like the world. *Why* do I want to spend on new clothes? *Why* are we so eager to indulge in this lavish expensive party? *Why* that immense conglomeration of cosmetics on the bathroom or bedroom shelf? *Why* must I have a different camera with twice as many clever contrivances and at four times the price of the old one?

“I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” There’s the secret. A spirit of contentment. Less materialism. And a constant feeling of thankfulness to Almighty God for what we have already.

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## **24. CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER (1)**

ONE of the best-known Christadelphians in the world wrote rather sadly: “The fact has to be faced, I fear, that we are not a praying community”. This was a judgement formed out of long and wide experience. But how could he *know*? Presumably, from personal conversations, and even more from the quality of our public prayers.

One imagines that very few would be disposed to disagree strongly with such an assessment. But, at least, if we are aware of this spiritual deficiency there is some hope that something might be done about it.

In this particular respect, our tradition is not as good as it might have been. This truth was brought home forcefully at a recent Youth Gathering. In that sequence of meetings all the prayers were offered by young brethren with little experience, but it was evident that those boys, of no special reputation in the ecclesias, knew how to pray. And the contrast in phrasing, style, tone made it evident that it was not from their elders that they had learned. They had taught themselves and one another, and - please God - they will yet teach their elders too.

### **Impromptu - pros and cons**

The Christadelphian tradition of impromptu prayer from the platform and of calling on brethren in the congregation to lead in prayer probably came into existence in the early days as a reaction from the formal set prayers, beautiful in phrasing yet so often empty in spirit, which are normal in the stablished church. Alas, several of our Christadelphian traditional practices are traceable to the reaction which, in effect, says: Orthodoxy does this, therefore it is wrong.

[[@page:102]]Yet, in this instance, there is good Biblical warrant for both practices. The Book of Psalms was the prayer book of the temple in Jerusalem. Our own modern counterpart to that is the happy acceptance of a number of the Scottish metrical psalms (Robert Roberts

was raised in Aberdeen). Would that there were more of them. Neither the Church of Scotland nor the Church of England picks and chooses out of the Psalter as we have done.

But what is the good of praying to God and praising Him in the words of the Psalms if the mind is giving more attention to tune than to words? One recalls hearing rueful confession of lusty but thoughtless singing. But that is another subject.

### **Paul's counsel**

There is also the plain counsel of the apostle Paul: "I will therefore that the men pray in every place, lifting up holy hands." And this is a practice to be followed "without wrath and disputing" (1 Timothy 2:8 R. V.) - prayer, in other words, is not a thing to argue about.

The *men* are to pray, and "in every place." This, of course, does not mean in the office and the shopping precinct and the garden and the park and the garage (though doubtless there are often times when prayer *should* be offered in all these places). What Paul meant here is that not only those on the platform but also those in any place in the congregation may be called upon for prayer. Here is the vindication of our modern practice which at first so often startles those not accustomed to it.

But we go only part way with Paul. "Lifting up holy hands" is a custom honoured in the breach and not at all in the observance; it is done in theory perhaps, in the spirit doubtless, but not in practice. There is certainly room for adoption of this apostolic custom, especially in those ecclesias where arrangements to help the partially deaf are so unsuitably done that the brethren seem to pray to a microphone.

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### **Prayer or performance?**

Obviously what is much more important than posture in prayer is the attitude of mind which one brings to this highly responsible role. Far too many brethren, it is suspected, are more conscious of the assembly they are praying for than of the God they are praying to, and thus the prayer becomes a performance. This attitude, which aims at impressing rather than expressing is often readily perceptible by members of the congregation, and when that happens the prayer is poisoned. Strange fire before the Lord!

### **Quantity or Quality?**

In their prayers brethren - and young brethren especially - often confuse quality with quantity. Yet there is no special virtue in making a prayer go on a long time. "God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2). This is good counsel which doubtless related, in the first instance, to the taking of vows or the use of oaths, but the principle is certainly sound in the wider field also. "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin" (Proverbs 10:19).

### **"Our Father"**

The Lord's pattern prayer is a model of brevity and conciseness. One of our finest brethren was once heard to take each phrase of the Lord's Prayer in turn, and turn that into a small prayer in itself. As result that prayer went on a good long while, but in every way those

petitions were so superbly expressed, and so humbly, that only a boor could react with impatience or a critical spirit. In this instance, there was only a spirit of thankfulness that one was being given such a strong helping hand into the divine presence.

There was also the Breaking of Bread service when the late C.C. Walker was called on to offer thanks for the Cup, and did so with exceptional brevity - three sentences, at the most; yet how effective those well-chosen words were! One could not help feeling thankful for the prayer and the prayer, as well as for the Wine about to be shared.

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### **Words**

But how, as a community, we run to words, words, words. Some brethren spoil their well-intentioned efforts in this direction, without realising it, by saying everything three times. What a contrast with the prayer our Lord gave us!

Some ecclesias have an admirable custom of beginning their Sunday morning service with a short prayer of dedication, the more comprehensive prayer coming later on after the Bible reading. But one observes with dismay that there is often a tendency for this first prayer to proliferate beyond a half-minute of communal consecration into something dangerously close to verbal display. Again - words, words, words!

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## **25. CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER (2)**

WHEN it comes to the phrasing of public prayers, there are two extremes to be avoided. The one - a special danger to the younger generation - is the temptation to use up-to-the-minute slangy or chatty phraseology. This is unseemly and irreverent. A young brother with a bent of this kind needs to listen to himself, or - better still - invite comment from someone who is close enough as a friend to be able to speak frankly.

### **The “modern” style**

A widespread modern development, not entirely successful, perhaps because learned from our “with it” contemporaries, is the substitution of “you” for “Thou” and “Thee” when addressing the Almighty. The reason for this twentieth-century fashion is difficult to appreciate. So far as one can tell, it springs from the current assumption that Bible language is difficult because archaic. But what is there difficult about “Thee” and “Thou”? Is there one English-speaking individual in a hundred thousand incapable of grasping the meaning of these simple, if old-fashioned, pronouns?

It needs to be pointed out also that hardly any brother who has fallen for this style of prayer shows himself able to carry it off successfully. Almost invariably there is a sorry mix-up between “Thee” and “You” and “Thou”. Even well-educated brethren, who should have verbal skill enough, manage to get tangled up.

Far better to stick to the old forms. There is a certain reverence about these. And is it not seemly that the Almighty should have reserved for Himself a pronoun which is nowadays not used for any ordinary person?

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### **Trite phrasing**

A far worse feature of many many prayers is the loading of its petitions with meaningless Christadelphian clichés, phrases which through countless vain repetitions have lost all meaning such threadbare expressions as “strive earnestly” (utterly un-Biblical both in form and idea), “hear and bless us”, “guide and keep us”, “give him mouth, matter, and wisdom”, and that special Christadelphian preposition “in-and-through”. Some of these may have served well in their time, but the depreciation which inevitably affects all well-used verbal currency has certainly had a deleterious influence. Every ecclesia has its own special crop of these clichés, every individual his own besetting vocabulary which has the mastery of him. Yet the honour of God in heaven and the spiritual well-being of our brethren on earth alike call for something better than this.

A partial cure for this endemic weakness may be found in a few minutes dedicated now and then to the writing out of prayers. This is hard work, but a discipline which pays big spiritual dividends, for self and for others. Some brethren, overly conscious of their own limitations in this field and semi-paralysed by “nerves”, go a step further and regularly carry with them two or three prayers already written out. This is better than making a turgid, uninspiring bungle of things. But better still is the resolution to learn how to pray impromptu through the short but heartfelt exercise of the best one is capable of in this most taxing of all duties. It will come in time, if there is thoughtfulness and prayer about one’s prayers! No public prayer should begin without first the silent and intensely felt: “Lord, teach me how to pray!”

### **Self-conscious prayer**

This problem of nervousness, amounting sometimes to a mental “seize-up” is an almost universal affliction. If this were nervousness at being in the presence of God there might be some ground for it - though not much, especially if the prayer begins with: “Our *Father*”. But personal experience and the talk of others suggest that mostly this nervous paralysis springs [[@page:107]]from an over-consciousness of one’s brethren and what *they* think about the prayer being offered.

It is needful therefore to emphasize in one’s thinking that the prayer is being spoken to God. He, and only He, is to be kept in the forefront of one’s thought and speaking. As far as possible let the presence of others be forgotten. Then the prayer will be a prayer.

Also, before the prayer begins it is advisable to encourage in one’s thinking the idea that the occasion is not important in the sense that it is a formal occasion where everything must be just right and proper. Let it rather be thought of as a family gathering. The fact is that you, the brother who is praying, are not in the midst of a bunch of critics with ears cocked for the slightest slip. Your brethren - *all* who are present - are on your side; they all of them *want* you to pray well and worthily, because you are praying for them.

### **Some useful negatives**

There are one or two warnings which need to be said; such as:

- Beware of obsessive repetition. Who has not heard the prayer which had “Heavenly Father” in every sentence? The occasional use of “Please, O Lord” can most effectively underline a specially urgent petition, but this repeated a dozen times inevitably loses its power.
- Never - repeat, never! - tell the Almighty that you are coming into His presence “in great humility”. Genuine humility doesn’t talk about itself. And in any case, the Lord knows whether you are humble or not.
- Never speak of the Lord Jesus as “our elder brother”. This (though doubtless well-meant) is specially unseemly in prayer and, besides being without Biblical warrant, it is demeaning to his high honour as the Lord of Glory.
- What about the problem of “for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord”? There are those who believe that no prayer will be heard which does not include these words or their plain equivalent. Just to make sure, some even begin and end their [[@page:108]]prayers in this fashion. This practice springs from a sadly limited understanding of the Lord’s words: “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do” (John 14:13, 14; 15:7, 16) The fact is that any true disciple is “in Christ” and prays “in his name,” whether he says so or not. So the formula is not indispensable. Therefore, not always, but often!
- Some brethren presiding at a Sunday evening meeting seem to think they have not done their duty unless they turn the closing prayer into a recapitulation of the address just concluded, together with a pointed exhortation to the unconverted to do something about it. This - a common fault in some ecclesias - is bad, just plain bad. By all means allude to the discourse, but there is no need to repeat it nor to insult the Almighty by making a prayer offered to Him “in all humility”(!) a good opportunity for renewed preaching at certain people in the congregation.
- By all means let thought be given to the remarkable neglect of the Lord’s Prayer in our services (see also chapter 4). The reason for such deliberate abstention is simple enough - a sharp reaction from the “vain repetition” of orthodoxy. But as a policy this just will not do. Shall we stand for prayer simply because in church they kneel or sit? Or because, two generations ago, they held prayer meetings, shall we never pray? Or, looking at the question differently, is it possible that we deem our own prolix efforts at prayer an improvement on the Lord’s conciseness? Shame on us, that our Lord’s own prayer should be deemed inadequate or unsuitable!
- Mention of prayer meetings is a useful reminder that these may fulfil a very fine purpose in ecclesial life (chapter 13). Naturally there is a certain reluctance to be too pointed in specific petitions offered as an ecclesia, but the less formal atmosphere of a handful met together for a session of prayer may provide admirable opportunity for formulating more precisely before God the outstanding needs of the ecclesia and of individuals in it. But even on the platform the more specific a petition is, the better.

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### **Concentration**

A brief word in conclusion about the mental attitude of each member of the congregation at the time of prayer.

First, there should be from every one a brief silent prayer that the brother about to lead the ecclesia before God shall be given heavenly help to frame his prayer wisely and worthily.

This is the least one can do.

Then let there be concentration on each separate item of praise, thanksgiving, or supplication. This is far from easy, especially when the prayer turns out to be a somewhat uninspiring repetition of trite phrases and wordy platitudes. As a small boy, swinging my legs on a hard meeting-room seat, I early learned my own father's method of coping with this wretched tendency to mind-wandering. To every single thing a prayer said He added his own assent by means of a short emphatic nod or, when there was confession of sin, with a self-deprecating rueful shake of the head. Yet even such a practice does not provide an infallible cure.

One brother, discussing the problem, told me: "In every prayer that is offered there is something that is specially of value for *me*. I wait for that item to come, and fasten on it. Then I repeat it time after time. Much of the rest of the prayer may be lost as far as I am concerned, but at least this bit of it isn't." Again, not an ideal solution, but not without its usefulness now and then.

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## 26. "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY"

The singing of hymns and anthems has always been and will always be a vital part of our ecclesial services. Then it goes without saying that there is a responsibility upon all to see that this element in our worship be made as much as possible an honour to God and a help to all who participate. In all respects our devotions must be the best we are capable of. There is to be no easy-going tolerance of inferior standards, unless these are past mending.

By far the most important consideration here is summed up in Paul's familiar phrases: "Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord... making melody in your heart to the Lord."

This is not the place to parade a copious demonstration that the Bible uses the word "heart" where modern speech would say "mind". But without question here is Paul's emphasis on *intelligent* singing. It is not sufficient just to make a joyful noise. If that were the case we might just as well sing nursery rhymes (for they nearly all have good tunes). What is one to comment regarding the brother who observed that, given a good tune, he wasn't all that particular about the words?

### **Think about the words**

First and last, then, it is imperative that all the worshippers have their minds on what they are singing. There must be concentration not on a sonorous top-note but on what the words say, and on the devotion they express.

It is useful also to observe that in the phrases quoted Paul says "hearts" and also "heart", evidently emphasizing in the one place that each individual mind must be brought to focus its attention on what is being sung, and in the other that there be [[@page:111]]unison of purpose in this spiritual offering to God, even when the hymn is sung in harmony.

How well Paul stresses the same important reminder that our psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (what is the distinction here?) are also for “teaching and admonishing ourselves” (see RVm). Would any gainsay that, when there is due concentration on what the words say, there is more worthwhile practical exhortation to be had from almost any hymn or anthem than from most of the exhortations heard from our ministering brethren?

A brother of wide experience was once heard to say that in all the years one particular hymn at the Breaking of Bread affected him so much that he had not yet succeeded in singing all the verses without “seizing up” emotionally in at least one of them. But he attributed that as much to the power of the words as to the moving quality of the tune.

There are unquestionably some very fine hymns (meaning the words, not the tunes) in our hymnbook, and for these we ought never to cease to be thankful. But there are, alas, some of the other sort in which the words scarcely rise above the level of doggerel. When any of these is appointed to be sung I personally groan inwardly. But experience shows that with other members of my ecclesia these are really well-loved hymns, so there is nothing for it but to try to cultivate a tolerant spirit.

### **Churchy hymns**

From time to time the grumble is heard that such and such hymns ought not to find a place in our devotions at all because they are churchy. This is a short-sighted criticism, for it fails to take account of the fact that from the very earliest days, when Robert Roberts first compiled a Christadelphian Hymnary, this has been the case. We have *always* had to fall back on orthodox hymn-writers for at least ninety per cent of our devotions.

Those who insist that the latest hymn-book is utterly unsuitable, but that its predecessor, or the one before that had [[@page:112]]superlative qualities, proclaim their prejudices more than their sense of judgement, whether musical, poetical, or Biblical.

On the other hand, if by common consent an ecclesia judges that certain hymns are not to its taste (for whatever reason) then it should be fairly easy to exclude these by a simple once-for-all instruction to presiding brethren.

### **Our congregational singing**

It is time now to consider briefly the musical quality of our ecclesial singing.

It goes without saying that for the Lord’s sake, and for our own also, this must be as good as can be achieved, nothing less than the best we are capable of.

Again, if any thought is given to the words, neither speed nor fulness of tone will be the same for all hymns. Alas, how many ecclesias there are where the most devout sentiments and prayers are sung at the same *vigoroso ma non espressivo* as all the rest! And in the same ecclesias, usually, all the hymns are sung at the same speed, whether it be “Joy cometh...” or “Short is the measure of our days.”

### **Individualism**

The situation has been known to arise in which one member of the ecclesia, usually with fairly powerful vocal organs, takes upon himself to express dissatisfaction with the speed at which a certain hymn is sung (or maybe all of them) by singing a note behind, or, more often, a note in front of all the rest. This is bad.

Such individuals fail to grasp that the singing speed should always be set by the accompaniment, so that when there is a crying need for *allegretto* or *adagio* it is to that quarter where appeal needs to be made, and not by the method just mentioned.

Some ecclesias are afflicted with a single powerful voice used with more enthusiasm (or self-advertisement) than good sense or consideration. If such an individual must always be in full spate, then by all means let him (her) concentrate on singing the air, so that whatever unmusical imbalance there [[@page:113]]may be is not quite so disturbing to others.

### **Harmony - Unison**

In earlier generations part singing was the thing in most ecclesias (does anyone remember the old hymnary with tonic solfa and standard notation printed side by side?). Today's impaired standards (and the obvious need for reformation in this relatively minor matter!) have sent part singing into decline, even in the north of England, but there are still plenty of ecclesias where the quality of the praise of God is worthy of its theme.

On the other hand - and this paragraph expresses a personal predilection - it seems a pity that in some hymns, if not in all, either the first verse or the last is not sung in unison. This could be a very effective and helpful feature of our services. There are a few of our hymns where the last verse cries out for a faster speed, but it never gets it.

It is especially in this field where the presiding brother carries a good deal of responsibility for helping the quality of our worship. Some brethren have a positive genius for choosing hymns that are just right in that they chime in with the theme of the rest of the service and accord well with the spirit and singing ability of the congregation.

But we also have the thoughtless ones who, disregarding the limited ability of a nervous (and press-ganged?) accompanist, choose a hymn that is nearly unplayable; or else, equally heedless of what the congregation knows or is capable of, they select a hymn that is too high-pitched or quite unfamiliar. Such presiding brethren do not know their job.

### **The small ecclesia**

How is a small ecclesia to make the best of very limited musical resources? This is a perennial problem. Some soldier on valiantly, and steadily improve themselves, to the glory of God. Others come to terms with the difficulties by limiting their repertoire to what they know is within their capabilities. Certainly it is a good idea, and not at all inglorious, for such [[@page:114]]ecclesias to concentrate on unison singing.

For such, also, accompaniment of some kind is highly desirable, indeed almost a necessity. If no organist or pianist (or organ or piano) is available, then modern technical resources can save the situation, for it is now a relatively easy matter to get tape-recorded accompaniments; and more than one of our choirs have made quite superb recordings of many of our hymns.

Why should not a small ecclesia enjoy being helped in its worship by joining in with what has already been done so splendidly?

In this sector of our devotions there is need for constant awareness and careful thought how we may best improve existing standards. But, first and last, the *motive* must be right. The aim is not to produce concert standards for their own sake, nor to foster a higher degree of personal enjoyment in the music itself, but to tone up the quality of our *worship*. Let us show the angels that we are as zealous as they for the glory of God!

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## 27. TIME-WASTING

Tell anyone that “Thou shalt not frivol away thy God-given leisure” is one of the Ten Commandments, and you have little prospect of being believed. But it is true nevertheless.

For, just as God appointed a Year of Jubilee to teach men that the Land was theirs not by right but only through mandate from the Almighty, so also He bade them “remember the sabbath day to keep it holy”, thereby providing a recurring reminder to His people that their *time* also belongs to God. The sabbath was designed as a token payment to underline what is really a self-evident truth - that the whole of a man’s life really belongs to His Maker.

But how many people feel that way about it? Indeed, how many good Christadelphians have their attitude to the daily round shot through with this kind of thinking?

### Whose time? - mine or God’s?

In reality, what happens is precisely what C. S. Lewis described in his matchless fashion in “The Problem of Pain”:

“We try, when we wake, to lay the new day at God’s feet; before we have finished shaving, it becomes *our* day, and God’s share in it is felt as a tribute which we must pay out of ‘our own’ pocket, a deduction from the time which ought, we feel, to be ‘our own’.”

This exposure of what is, for the massive majority of us, a normal way of thinking is, to put it mildly, withering. Kid Lewis pulls no punches.

With many of us the rot sets in not at shaving time but the night before. As a teenager I was ever blithely indifferent to what the next day might bring forth. “Tomorrow can look after [[@page:116]]itself” was not so much my philosophy as my careless indifference. But then one of my friends talked about how always when he got his head on the pillow, he set about planning the next day’s activities down to the last detail.

I caught that bug readily enough. There was a splendid gain one way- a greater efficiency and zest in a purposeful day. But it was only years later that I realised how I had also lost through developing an ingrained assumption that every minute of every day was *mine* to use just as *I* might choose, for the glory or pleasure of *me*.

It takes a long time to learn, via plain-spoken C. S. Lewis or blunt William Law, that one’s days are too precious to be frittered away in valueless self-entertainment and futile pastimes.

Imagine it! we have but three score and ten years, and every day beyond that a special bonus added by gracious dispensation of God's Providence, and in order to make this valuable endowment of time pass the more easily we have to dedicate long hours to television or radio, newspaper or nasty novel, hobby or pass-time.

### **Time-table re-assessment**

All activities (non-activities, really) of this kind need to be brought under careful scrutiny. There is no servant of the Lord now reading these words who, if he will be honest with himself, will not find himself under censure as a dedicated waster of his Employer's time. Could there be a more worthwhile few minutes than those spent in review of how the average week goes by? No need to add: And now make Reformation on the basis of that analysis. For in every case the nett result is bound to be so horrifying that some positive improving reaction is sure to ensue. The odd case where there is no reaction at all is past hope - dedicated, truly, but only to self and self-corruption.

The obvious starting point is a frank assessment of the number of hours spent in bed. There are very few who could not clip half-an-hour or a whole hour off that cosy assignment, to the glory of God. The time spent either in sleep or in indulgent reading in bed is largely a matter of psychology - [[@page:117]]what we have taught ourselves to be used to: "That's the way I'm made. I *need* all those hours." The one who says that is rarely telling the truth.

### **18th century reproaches**

William Law, a very difficult man to live with, shatters our complacency and self-excuses:

"I take it for granted, that every Christian that is in health, is up early in the morning; for it is much more reasonable to suppose a person up early, because he is a Christian, than because he is a labourer, or a tradesman, or a servant, or has business that wants him."

"We naturally conceive some abhorrence of a man that is in bed when he should be at his labour or in his shop. We cannot tell how to think anything good of him, who is such a slave to drowsiness as to neglect his business for it."

"Let this therefore teach us to conceive how odious we must appear in the sight of Heaven, if we are in bed, shut up in sleep and darkness, when we should be praising God; and are such slaves to drowsiness, as to neglect our devotions for it."

And then, even more caustically:

"Sleep is the poorest, dullest refreshment of the body, that is so far from being intended as an enjoyment, that we are forced to receive it either in a state of insensibility, or in the folly of dreams."

"Sleep is such a dull, stupid state of existence, that even amongst mere animals, we despise them most which are most drowsy."

“He, therefore, that chooses to enlarge the slothful indulgence of sleep, rather than be early at his devotions to God... chooses that state which is a reproach to mere animals, rather than that exercise which is the glory of Angels.”

### **Redeeming the time**

There is a lot to be said not only for getting out of bed a bit earlier than we are normally inclined for, but also - having won that fight - for making a list of useful jobs or activities which it is [[@page:118]]desirable to get done before day's end. It is really surprising what a salutary effect such a list can have on the quality and quantity of the day's achievements.

Also, it is desirable and probably necessary to re-cast one's standards of judgement regarding the relative value of the hours spent on this or that. Should the criterion be: What entertainment or relaxation shall I derive? or should it be: What's the good of all this? is there any intrinsic value or usefulness or unselfishness in what I have now taken up?

Young people especially are in need of this kind of regimen, for they are all of them inveterate time-wasters. Who was it said: Youth is wasted on the young? And so also is leisure.

One of the apostle Paul's most familiar aphorisms is that which he knew all his Ephesians and Colossians needed: “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” But isn't it strange that his apodosis does not run: “... because your days are few”? Perhaps, as he often did, he was jumping a step here: “Redeem the time because there isn't much of it - and there isn't much of it because these days are evil.”

If he could imply that then, how much more vigorous would his language be if written in the vileness of our deplorable 20th century? With world conditions and political affairs as they are who would have the crass idiocy to say: “There's plenty of time yet!”?

### **Paul and Daniel**

Paul put point to his exhortation by making it through the medium of a Bible quotation - that oh! so familiar Daniel 2: “I know of a certainty that ye would gain the time (literally: buy time)” to save having your heads chopped off, said wrathful suspicious Nebuchadnezzar.

It may be taken as certain that that sorry assembly of sorcerers was not inclined to pass the time that day with a long drawn-out feast, or with the entertaining torture of a slave or two, or even with the seductive delights of temple houris. For them, that day, life was real, life was earnest.

And those who will bestir themselves to ponder carefully [[@page:119]]Colossians 4:2-6 will be rewarded with another half-dozen glimpses of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar to the glory of God.

Not for him the Lord's censure: “Thou wicked and slothful servant”, nor even the (maybe undeserved) reproach thrown at the unemployed in the parable: “Why stand ye here idle?” Yet these last did at least stand. They were not layabouts. And when a call came, they responded readily enough.

Thus they, the last, became first.

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## 28. THE YOUNG AND THE NOT-SO-YOUNG

It is a thing not altogether unknown in some Christadelphian ecclesias, that the generations at opposite extremes fail to be interested in each other. Which is a pity, and not at all what Almighty God designed. In ancient Israel the Feasts of the Lord were family festivals. Passover and Tabernacles especially so - and it can hardly be that God wants His New Israel any different.

Yet how we tend to segregate! For in those enjoyable chatty times when formal meetings are concluded and nobody wants to go home because there are so many one wants to talk to, how perceptible it becomes that the old talk to the old (about ailments and grandchildren), and the young talk to the young (about clothes and cars and impending exams). Which is a pity. For these are the God-given opportunities for the age-groups to mix and so to get to know each other better. And if there were this *intention* in the minds of even a few, what a leavening of increased good feeling and affection would be bound to follow!

### Segregation

But alas, in our wisdom we have seen fit during the past thirty years to give every possible encouragement in the opposite direction. Every ecclesia has its Youth Circle and associated activities, which make it almost a virtue for our teen-agers to pull out from their parents. This in itself would be relatively unimportant, since it normally mortgages only one night a week, and that in wholesome activities (sometimes).

But we have gone on from these to encourage proliferation of a wide diversity of other functions, all of them concentrating on pulling our young people away from the family and away from the ecclesial family, so that now we have achieved a degree of [[@page:121]]lopsidedness (in Britain) in which the young folk will attend only the functions arranged for and by themselves, and the Fraternal Gatherings are attended only by the oldies. Which, again, is a pity.

Brother Philip Walker, as dedicated a disciple of the Lord as I ever knew, a man who gave much energy to the initiation of our Youth Circles, said to me shortly before he died that he now recognized, with much misgiving, that he had encouraged a mistaken emphasis. But enough on that for the present.

### A worldly trend

One looks with a further misgiving on the development of other tendencies of a similar kind. The young folk want their holidays away from their parents (or is it the other way round?).

Also - and this is infinitely more serious - it has become commonplace for a well-paid youngster to move away from home into a flat shared with one or two buddies. It is hard to believe that many parents view such a change in the family pattern with enthusiasm. The God-less social system we belong to imposes this practice on many of our youngsters who go away to college or university. But is it necessary for us to crow: "How right the world is in its judgement! Let us do all we can to accelerate and intensify family decay, to the glory of

God.” Every young Christadelphian who deliberately chooses to join in this trend is passing a vote of no confidence in his parents, and should be ashamed accordingly.

At the same time it needs to be recognized that parents far too often goad their children into this kind of reaction. An experienced grammar school teacher was once heard to remark that in his staff-room the comment was too often made: “The people least fit to bring up children are their parents.”

This acid untruth at least crystallizes out the unhappy fact that, especially when children are in their teens, parents often make a botch of their personal relations with their maturing youngsters. There is either a lazy indifference to many things the offspring think highly important, or a crass failure to recognize that children do not stay children.

[[@page:122]]To be sure, parents have both a right and a responsibility still to require obedience, but “Forbid as little as possible” is a mighty good rule for parents at such times. However, once a parent has said “No”, that should be firmly insisted on, unless a reasonable compromise heaves in sight.

### **Keep friends**

Parents who do not go absolutely all out to cultivate good relations with their teen-age children are asking for trouble. This is specially true regarding father and son. In Christadelphian life there is a widespread weakness here.

The same goes for the relationships between old and young in the ecclesia. Lack of mutual understanding not infrequently sets up a certain amount of strain.

### **Thoughtless young**

For instance, the young, with no thought to the irritable reaction of their conservative out-of-date elders, naturally go in for the fashions of their own age-group - hair-styles, clothes, beards, cosmetics - and thereby provoke no little head-shaking.

On the other hand how often has it happened in such situations that the oldies have sadly failed to appreciate that if only the youngsters have a basically sound attitude to the Truth of Christ these other features of their age group are relatively unimportant superficialities that will be outgrown one day.

Mark Twain once wrote: “When I was a boy of fourteen I could hardly stand to have the old man around; but when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.”

### **Short-sighted old**

The corresponding fault of the older folk in the ecclesia is a very natural failure to recognize first, that their younger generation has energy which needs to be - ought to be -harnessed to wholesome activities, and, second, that most of our youngsters have a fairly well-developed sense of responsibility.

[[@page:123]] Too often the elders of an ecclesia assume that wisdom will die with them. Too often there is love of office and of the exercise of power by those who give whole-hearted approval to the idea of retiral at 65, or earlier if possible, but who when well over 70 still have no use for the same principle in the ecclesia.

But how the younger need to realise that long experience of life breeds in most ecclesial leaders a sense of judgement which does not come easily to a man in his teens or twenties. Forgetting this truth, Rehoboam made a sorry mess of things.

No one can question the wisdom with which Paul wrote to Timothy:

“Let no man despise thy youth, *but* be thou an ensample to them that believe.” Over the years not a few grow into a fulfilment of this wise advice, but if a young brother makes it his *deliberate* clear-cut *aspiration* to fulfil both sides of the exhortation, can he possibly fail to achieve it?

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## 29. “THE SINS OF MY YOUTH”

WITH a title such as this, lifted out of Psalm 25 (or, Hymn 39, as you will), this chapter is off to a bad start. For, as soon as the younger generation sees it, there will be an inward groan at the prospect of another ill-tempered lecture from one of the oldies. And the older readers will, with a certain satisfaction (or relief), recognize at a glance that this chapter is about “them”, not “us”:

“Here I can relax. There is nothing here bidding *me* achieve an uncomfortable reformation. It will be interesting to see what the prescription is for these deplorable thoughtless youngsters.”

### Regrets about the past

But indeed those who so comfort themselves should not be allowed to forget that they were young once, and that all young people prove themselves fools at some time or another, and usually often. So there is never any shortage of shameful memories, rarely any lack of “sins and faults of youth” for which forgiveness may still have to be sought.

It may be, too, that if many a young man (or young woman) were to realise how probable it is that one day they would have plenty of repining over a mis-spent youth - the sowing of wild oats, or the assiduous cultivation of bad habits - then (it may be) forewarned would be fore-armed; and thus happier, more profitable, years would ensue. It may be! In this field of education human nature does not learn readily. I make no doubt at all that before ever the Prodigal left home, his Father, accustomed for years to reading his son’s mind, knew what was afoot and warned him solemnly against the un-wisdom of it, but of course he went just the same.

[[@page:125]] Even the imperative of Holy Scripture can be lightly disregarded when inclinations run strongly the other way.

“Flee!... Pursue!”

Hence, then, Paul's blunt exhortation to the young man for whom he had such marked affection: "Flee also youthful lusts." Every one knows that in King James's Bible this word "lusts" is not normally restricted to the specialised purple meaning which invariably goes with it in our modern sex-ridden society. But can anyone doubt that in this context *that* is the meaning Paul intended? And would anyone say, would any of our youngsters say, that such an exhortation is not tailor-made for our time?

It is useful also to note that Paul's imperative is, in Greek, continuous: "Keep on fleeing." There will never be a time when you need feel so sure of yourself that instead of seeking safety in flight you can confidently stand and fight.

Paul's next imperative shows no abatement of wisdom: "But follow - that is, pursue, keep on pursuing - righteousness, faith, love..." This is what those pretentious fellows, the psychologists, used to call: "expulsive power of a new affection." Right, for once!

### **Day dreaming**

This "fleeing" and "pursuing" must inevitably mean - and here is another imperative - a farewell, however reluctant, to one of the most entertaining and seductive and abominably evil habits that beset human nature. I mean (if you haven't guessed) indulgence in fantasy - beguiling the time - when you are loafing in bed, or sprawled in an armchair, or walking down the road, or even listening to a drab uninspiring exhortation -with the kind of film show which your imagination can readily turn on even without encouragement.

This prostitution of a God-given faculty can be, with young people (and the girls especially), a vice with a grip of steel. "The imagination of their evil heart" is a Bible phrase which recurs time after time. Always, in a couple of dozen places, this word "imagination" comes in an evil context. Only once is it [[@page:126]]used in a good sense: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind (imagination) is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. " Here, once again, is the heavenly psychologist insisting on the expulsive power of a new affection.

And how it is needed, if only (but alas, not only!) because the corrupting power of this evil goes almost universally unrecognized, as you may learn by a diligent enquiry amongst your Christadelphian friends as to when they last heard an exhortation warning against this obsession.

Even if there were not the testimony of Holy Scripture regarding this, the evil of it would be evident enough, for it is not only a time-waster (this is bad enough, but relatively harmless); it is also a tyrant, etching brain-tracks in your mind so as to make further indulgence all the easier (in other words, you get hooked!); but worst of all, it sets your affection on things below, as it gives free rein to what is hardly ever the better side of your human nature. How many of these home-made movies would you care to throw on a screen for the edification of your friends?

There is a biting irony in the incisive words of Ecclesiastes:

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth... and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement. Therefore remove provocation (that which provokes God) from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh."

Let all young Christadelphians develop a tender remorseful conscience regarding their own powers of fantasy, and have done with this unspiritual window-shopping.

“The glory of young men is their strength”, but only as long as they do not sell themselves to the Philistines.

Then, “wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy Word.” And whereas “Word” and synonyms for “the Word” come in every verse of that 119th Psalm, “imagination” or its equivalents do not occur once in all those 176 verses.

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### **30. “STIR UP THE GIFT”**

WHEN Paul wrote to him, Timothy was leader of the thriving ecclesia at Ephesus. That does not necessarily mean that he was then a man of maturing years. Indeed, all the indications point in the opposite direction. He was still Paul’s “beloved son in the faith”, and Paul still exhorted him: “Let no man despise thy youth. “ But this was at least 14 or 15 years after Paul first took Timothy as one of his helpers in the arduous work of preaching in cities and lands where the gospel had not yet been heard. So Timothy must surely have been still under 20 when big responsibilities first came his way.

It is a fact which older brethren, prone to look down on the immaturity of young men, would do well to bear in mind. The ideal combination is doubtless that which Paul and Timothy together exemplified. The wisdom and experience of middle-age (for Paul was about 50 probably, when he made his first “missionary” journey), with the vigour and unquenched enthusiasm of youth.

#### **Timothy not without faults**

But Timothy was not the ideal preacher or ecclesial leader. Various small indications point to the conclusion that he was actually more retiring and self-effacing than he should be. His was a soft, passive, undynamic nature. It has been said that we need to cultivate deliberately the opposite virtues to those which we incline towards by nature. This seems to have been true regarding Timothy.

“If Timotheus come, see that he be with you without fear”, wrote Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:10). The language suggests that Timothy was one who could be easily overborne by stronger personalities.

[[@page:128]]On another occasion Paul wrote to him: “I greatly desire to see thee, being mindful of thy tears” (2 Tim. 1:4) - tears in a grown man! It suggests a soft womanly nature or else one in whom emotion was strong beyond control. Other words point to the former of these conclusions: “Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3).

In the same epistle Paul forthrightly urged him: “Stir up the gift of God which is in thee by the putting on of my hands. For God hath not given us the spirit of fear...” There seem to be hints here that Timothy’s timidity was allowing his own special gift from God to suffer neglect.

Paul's phrase is specially vivid: "Stir into flame the gift that is in thee" (RVm). And there is similar strong language in his concluding exhortation: "I *charge* thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ", to whom you must one day answer ... (2 Tim. 4:1).

Timothy was evidently in need of these vigorous reminders. So Paul spared neither his own deep affection for his beloved son nor Timothy's own sensitive feelings. The exhortation is downright and forceful.

### **Modern Timothys**

There are, alas, far too many with just the same defect as "beloved Timothy". In fact, not one here or there, but a great many have some gift from God which they neglect to use. True, Timothy's gift (prophecy or knowledge or interpretation?) came or was intensified by miraculous Holy Spirit power, whilst we have nothing of so special or supernatural a character. But that fact gives no one licence to say that Paul's exhortation is not for himself also.

Again, it is not to be thought that the gift to be stirred into flame is necessarily some talent for public speaking. The very nature of modern ecclesial organization lends itself to thinking on those lines. But the fact is that every individual member of the ecclesia is able to do his part (or hers) by the exercise of some special ability or bent or aptitude - or simply through having better opportunity than others.

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### **The willing-hearted**

For instance, in most ecclesias, there is some sister, a typist, who is always ready to take on useful jobs of that sort to help our the administrative and clerical side of the ecclesial work. There is a brother with an uncanny knack for doing simple repairs, whether it be an electric light switch or a too-collapsible chair. There are old sisters, creaking and infirm, who by their very presence at the meeting week in and week out, do more than they ever imagine to maintain good morale among the rest. Then, too, there is the brother struggling against ill-health, whose bright smile and warm handshake achieve more than many a Sunday morning exhortation. There are the few faithful who are always ready when there is a call to go to the home of an ailing brother for a Breaking of Bread service. There is the young brother who has all kinds of odd jobs thrown at him -tasks, very often, that nobody else wants to do - and who agrees readily with the cheerfulest smile imaginable and then does the job dependably. In every ecclesia there are people like these. And the ecclesia should be duly thankful that it has such in its midst.

### **- and the unwilling**

But in nearly every ecclesia everywhere, there are, too, those with undeniable gifts and talents and opportunities for serving Christ, who are nevertheless content to let those abilities go unemployed.

What would Paul write to the brother with a manifest flair for the explaining of Scripture, who busies himself in his own study at home and will not take the trouble to attend Bible Class? What would he say to the sister who is so wrapped up in her only child that she has neither

time nor care nor even thought for the rest of the ecclesial family? What trenchant words would he have for the elderly brother who stifles conscience about his own lack of service in earlier days by throwing all kinds of discouragements in the way of the young and zealous? What admonition would Paul address to the brother of intelligence and exceptional education who perverts such blessings into the [[@page:130]]making of money or the realising of ambition? What would be Paul's comment on the individual of ample means who can find no time to visit the poor and widows, though there be time enough for weekending?

### **Only one talent**

When examples such as these are cited, let not those who read relax with the comfortable feeling that their own mediocrity or insignificance exempts them from further responsibility! Nothing can more effectively strangle a vigorous ecclesial life than to have a majority of the ecclesia's members excusing themselves with the thought that, well, after all, it is only right and proper that brethren with ability and opportunity should be exhorted to bestir themselves in the work of the Lord.

But this appeal to "stir into flame the gift of God that is in thee" is for *all* — *for* the clever and the wealthy, and also for the poor and uneducated, the ungifted and the ordinary.

It was the man with *one* talent, not with five, who hid his Lord's deposit in the earth. How true to life is the parable there! Experience shows that it *is* the one-talent disciple who is most commonly afflicted with the grievous spiritual inertia which the Master reprobated. And the twin parable of the pounds issues pointed warning against the danger of a double sin. For when the servant hid his pound in a sweat-rag, he made useless both the pound *and* the sweat-rag! Neither was intended to be put out of use.

So let the one who deems himself of so little consequence that he has abandoned all hope or intention of being active and useful in the ecclesia begin to think again. Let each ask himself: "What small thing is there that I can do to help forward the service of Christ, the praise of God, and the well-being of the ecclesia?"

A deliberate conscious effort to please the Lord by some small extra labour or duty will not be despised by the one who bade his chroniclers tell everywhere how a woman anointed his feet.

Paul's exhortation to Timothy was pointed and practical: "Let [[@page:131]]no man despise thy youth: but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee... Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed to thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:12-16).

### **Three sons**

Jesus spoke a parable about a man with two sons. "Go, work in my vineyard today", he said to one. "Why, yes, certainly, father, I'll go at once," was the bland, facile reply. But the vineyard never saw him, either that day or that week.

With what disappointment did the father turn to the other. "Son, go work in my vineyard, will you?" There came a crude reply: "Me? not likely! Do you take me for your slave?" But whilst

the father grieved yet more, that boy thought again, then he repented of his rough response, and within the hour he was toiling in the vineyard, trying hard to make amends by extra-vigorous and more sustained effort for his earlier churlishness.

Which of these examples is to be followed? Or is there another which is better than either? - the son who first says: "Father, it is but little use I'll be in your vineyard, for I have neither the skill nor the strength. But since you wish it, I'll go and do what I can." And then he goes - and does *more* than he can!

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### 31. CONFIDENCE

ASK anyone you know, be he raw inexperienced youngster not long new-born in Christ or one grown grey over many years in the Lord's service: "Will *you* be in the kingdom of God?" Ask that question point-blank, and require a point-blank answer: Yes, or No - and you will not get it.

There will be swithering, hesitation, an expression of pious hope maybe, or more likely of doubt with even a flavour of despair, but not from anyone a straight "Yea, yea" or "Nay, nay."

The latter answer would be just too much a self-condemnation, too frank a self-revelation. The former answer would be sheer presumption, wouldn't it? Am I the judge of all the earth? Is there anyone who dare make such a blunt assertion of his own worth?

Of course, questions of this sort need to be answered, not out of any exercise of dependable (sic!) personal judgement, but from the pages of Holy Scripture. And there we encounter only a series of "difficult passages." Here they are with brief comments appended.

1. "And now, little children, abide in him, that when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28). Here two phrases seem to fix the reference to the Day of Judgement: "when he shall be manifested... at his coming." And "put to shame away from him" is surely a fairly close parallel to: "Depart from me, ye cursed..." Remarkably, the ground of confidence is not: "I have gained five talents more," but a response to this exhortation to "abide in him."
2. [[@page:133]] "For if our heart (i.e. mind, as in scores of other places in Scripture) condemn us, God is greater than our heart" - and will therefore condemn us even more, since His purity is far higher than ours at our very best! This is the development of idea one would naturally expect. Yet, clearly, the implication of the passage is the very opposite: "... God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things" concerning the ocean of weaknesses, frailties, and difficulties in which we struggle to survive. And the next verse continues: "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence (boldness) toward God" (1 John 3:20, 21). But is there any man whose heart does not condemn him? This is only possible for one who has an unquenchable conviction that he is dealing with a forgiving God. *Le bon Dieu, il pardonnera, c'est son metier.* God is good, he will forgive me, that's the thing He's good at. If this is true, and if a man knows it to be true, he has a right to feel confident, surely.
3. "In this hath Love (the Agape) been perfected with us in order that we may have boldness in the day of judgement" (1 John 4:17). Here the first phrase is ambiguous because of the

double N T meaning of *agape*. It is mostly the Christian virtue of Love. But in not a few places it is the Love Feast, the Breaking of Bread. In “Studies in the Gospels” ch. 192, it is shown that in 1 John 4:7-21; 5:1-3 (as well as in plenty of other places in John’s writings) the reference is to the Love Feast, and in this verse certainly, for the Breaking of Bread is declared to be for “the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28). When a man *knows* that his sins are forgiven hasn’t he a right to face the day of judgement with boldness?

4. So also the writings of Paul: “And you that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel ...” (Col. 1:21-23). But how can any man hope to stand “holy, and unblameable, and unproveable” before God?

[[@page:134]]“Certainly not by means of his own efforts, no matter how dedicated they may be. The more maturity and ripeness of experience there is in Christ, the more evident the futility of personal endeavour. Two other phrases here resolve the difficulty: (a) “present you” surely implies that what is done is done by Christ and not by our own poor selves; it is his achievement, not ours; (b) “if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled”, which clearly enough is the equivalent of the apostle John’s “if ye abide in him” - in other words, the emphasis (by both apostles) is not on strenuous endeavour, which is where the modern Christadelphian nearly always puts it, but on thankful loyalty, “not being moved away from the hope of the gospel.” How important here is that little word “if”!

5. “Waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7, 8). Here is the same spiritual headache: How is it possible for anyone to be *blameless* in the day of Christ? And again the answer must be the same: Never by one’s own merits, but only, and assuredly, through the merits of Christ. And again, also, there is the implied condition of continuing loyalty: “confirm you unto the end.” The apostles evidently deemed this of higher importance than rolling up one’s sleeves, and clenching one’s teeth, and setting one’s jaw. A man may go on saying, from now till Doomsday: “I *will* be good”, only to be made disillusioned, miserable, and perhaps bitter, by failure. He must find the alternative that works. He must!
6. The words of Jude’s doxology are often repeated rather glibly without clear realisation of what they are saying: “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you *faultless* before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty...” It is as clear as the day (and, alas, as dark as the night) that none of us can present himself before the Glory of the Lord faultless. Yet there is no doubt at all that *He* is able to do this for us. And the context suggests that He [[@page:135]] does it by keeping us “unfallen” (RV), that is unfallen-away.

Thus, once again, there is emphasis on *loyalty* to the Faith, no matter what the discouragements.

The problem of Judas is a very difficult one. But the question is surely worth asking: Was there any serious difference between his betrayal of his Lord and the way Peter, in spite of blunt warnings, repeatedly denied his Master, with oaths and curses? Yet he survived to

become the inspiring leader of the early church, whilst despairing Judas went and hanged himself. And why did he? - because now he knew that the one he had sold was indeed the Lord of Glory. "He'll never forgive me!" But Peter, for all his weakness, knew his Lord better than that, and that was the saving of him.

In the parable the ten virgins were all foolish, or they wouldn't have fallen asleep. But some were wiser than others, having with them a reserve supply of oil. The others can be pictured rushing off to knock up the village store-keeper, to make good their deficiency; and at last they come with lamps burning beautifully, eager to *present themselves faultless* - before a shut door! It was folly enough to be without oil. It was worse folly to attempt what they did. Instead why did they not go to meet the Bridegroom without lit lamps and tearfully plead that he forgive them for their spiritual inadequacy - and, of course, he would!

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### **32. MARRIAGE OUT OF THE FAITH**

First, is it forbidden in Holy Scripture? Certainly, ancient Israel was explicitly commanded that there must not be marriages with neighbouring peoples:

"Neither shalt thou make marriages with them: thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly" (Deuteronomy 7:3, 4).

"Else if ye do in any wise go back... and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them, and they to you... they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land..." (Joshua 23:12, 13).

And the ghastly example of Solomon's declension (1 Kings 11:1-11), when read and pondered, is at least a grim warning of what can happen to a man who, deeming himself to be spiritually secure, chooses to marry away from the faith of Israel.

In a variety of ways the people of God were warned against a definite evil. There must be no sowing of two kinds of seed together, no ploughing with ox and ass together, no weaving of wool and linen together. But there must be "holiness" fringes to one's garment as a perpetual remainder of obligation to live a sanctified life (Deuteronomy 22:9-12).

In themselves none of these four things were either spiritually bad or spiritually good; then why did God command them, except to impart an important lesson?

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#### **N.T. emphasis**

The trend of New Testament teaching follows the same pattern. The widow who remarries is to marry "only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). Clearly the words establish a principle for any others contemplating marriage.

The wife of an ecclesial leader is required to be "*faithful* in all things," a phrase which does not mean "love her husband," but "full of faith, The Faith" (1 Tim. 3:11).

Man and wife are to be “*heirs together of the grace of life*” (1 Pet. 3:7). The apostle insisted on this, “that your prayers be not hindered.” And who can question that, when man and wife are not one in the Faith, their prayers are hindered? This is Peter’s counterpart to Paul’s insistence that one of the primary considerations in life shall be ability to “attend upon the Lord without distraction” (1 Cor. 7:35).

How are such aspirations as these to achieve fulfilment if one partner has not the slightest inclination to attend meetings for worship or instruction?

What kind of an atmosphere is likely to exist in a home where man and wife go off to different churches?

How is it possible to bring up children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4) when one parent has to attempt this single-handed or even against the inclination, and maybe the deliberately exercised influence, of the other parent?

In *every* religiously-divided marriage the scales are loaded heavily against the spiritual well-being of the children. It follows, then, that the brother or sister in Christ who chooses deliberately to contract a marriage of this kind is acting selfishly. For the sake of personal inclination he (or she) is gambling recklessly with the future of the (as yet unborn) children.

A further Biblical conclusion makes a situation of this sort even more bleak. When Paul expounds the meaning of Christian marriage this is the kind of language he employs:

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, *as unto the Lord*. For the husband is the head of the wife, *even as* [[@page:138]]*Christ is the head of the church...* Therefore *as the church is subject unto Christ*, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, *even as Christ also loved the church*, and gave himself for it... This is a great mystery: but *I speak concerning Christ and the Church*” (Ephesians 5:22-25, 32).

If these words are pondered carefully, it soon becomes evident that Paul is *not* saying that the joining together of man and wife makes a useful prototype of the *spiritual union of Christ and the church*; but, quite the other way round, he is saying that God designed human marriage so that it might provide a small-scale replica of the relationship between Christ and his redeemed. A true Christian marriage is intended by God to be dominated and actuated in every respect by a conscious aspiration in both partners to reproduce in their personal experience the big grand spiritual ideal - “the great mystery... concerning Christ and the church.”

It is here confidently asserted that when two people marry with the earnest intention of coming as close as they can to this ideal (so help them God!), there is no problem whatever in married life which is not capable of immediate and satisfying solution.

### **Scales loaded**

But now consider what is to happen to the marriage in which from the start one partner has no sympathy with such idealism, indeed knows nothing about it. How does the Lord in heaven esteem that marriage? Even if, in such an instance, through a spirit of mutual toleration there are no tensions, no cross purposes, it still remains to be asked: What *spiritual helpfulness* is

there about such a union? Has a man (or a woman) any right deliberately and with self-indulgence to load the scales against his (or her) own self-dedication to Christ? Is this wisdom?

Paul's incisive exposition leaves those who choose such a course of action without excuse - as those who have flouted his words, and later by the grace of God have learned better, [[@page:139]]can most emphatically testify. The idealism of the life in Christ is taxing enough, in all conscience, without that deliberate choice which makes it all the harder. There is specially strong testimony to the truth of this from those who have come to Faith and Baptism after marriage and without being followed to the Cross of Christ by the wife (or husband).

There can, then, be no manner of doubt that, from the double witness of Holy Scripture and practical experience, marriage out of the Faith is both wrong and downright foolish (and in the Book of Proverbs isn't folly a sin?).

### **Ecclesial attitudes**

However, human nature being what it is, it happens. And then arises the tricky question: What, if anything, should the ecclesia do about it?

Nay, what ought the ecclesia to have done about it? Isn't there a proverb about locking a stable door?

These questions highlight the intensely important ecclesial duty of providing clear and recurrent education on Christian marriage so as to forestall such issues. If young people are well instructed on the right lines their minds will be shut and will remain shut to all temptation of this sort. This is a consideration of first-rate importance.

But suppose, as may happen in the best-regulated ecclesial families, the problem does nevertheless arise. Then, what is to be done about it?

For most of this century the commonest practice has been to apply an automatic excommunication of the foolish offender, until such time that there has followed an acknowledgement that the principles of Holy Scripture have been flouted.

Now and then one reads: "Brother Y. Z. has married out of the Faith, and by that act has *placed himself out* of fellowship. " And yet sometimes this is certainly written regarding one who has no wish whatever to cease from fellowship. Then how near is this to ecclesial hypocrisy? Why not be honest and say: "We have excommunicated Bro Y. Z. for his marriage out of the Faith"?

[[@page:140]]This has not always been considered Christadelphian practice. In earlier days there was a good deal of variation in attitude even though the act itself has always come in for reprobation. And right now there are "soft" and "severe" ecclesias.

### **Arguments both ways**

It is known that Dr. Thomas did not view with very great favour excommunication of the offender. Nor is it difficult to see why. Whilst stringent discipline vindicates high principle in

drastic fashion, in a big proportion of instances (so experience has often proved) it has meant the permanent spiritual dereliction of the one subjected to such discipline. Would it not be infinitely better to find some way of saving such a one for Christ, and peradventure the new partner also? Is it wise to turn a potential convert into a highly indignant critic and even a bitter enemy?

Again, not infrequently the doubt has been expressed that current procedure might even prove to be an incitement to hypocrisy. How much sincerity can there be behind the deliberate planning of a marriage over a period of months, followed some time later by a ready acknowledgement of fault in this very matter?

It is often argued, very shortsightedly: "Here is an offence against the law of Christ. Therefore disfellowship *must* follow!" Then is *every* infringement of the law of Christ to receive like treatment? In that case, how long before we are all of us out of fellowship, and the ecclesia of Christ has gone up in smoke?

If it then be argued: "But this is a sin manifest to all the world and now of permanent duration," then is not good standing in the ecclesia being made to depend on one's ability to keep besetting sins secret? Again, how near to hypocrisy?

There is also the pragmatic argument: "But we *must* excommunicate, for otherwise there will be nothing to stop the rot." Pour encourage les autres? And it has to be admitted that this is a view of the problem which has dominated the thinking of many, perhaps of the majority.

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### **The command of God?**

The question needs to be asked: Even though the wisdom of Holy Scripture is so pointedly against marriage out of the Faith, is there any specific instruction that in such cases the extreme act of discipline must be applied? Is there Biblical justification for such drastic action?

The simple answer to this enquiry, is: No. Reprobation of the act, yes! But no indication of stringent measures to be taken.

In a discussion of these problems, in *The Christadelphian*, 1956, page 105, the late Brother John Carter had this threefold comment:

"It is evident that the ecclesial action of withdrawal does not rest on a specific command that such an action should take place."

"It appears then that the decision of ecclesias that this particular action is one where fellowship depends upon the acknowledgement of the offence, has been made not in response to a particular command in the Scriptures, but in the best judgement of the brethren."

"Where the offence is recognised there is call for sympathy and help, for if the rule rests on the decision of men (sincerely and earnestly framed though it has been) it follows therefore that the greatest care should be exercised in its application so that the spirit of Christ governs all operations of the rule."

So, then, in attempting to resolve such problems there should be three main motives:

- a. The honouring of the relevant principles of Bible teaching.
- b. The recovery of the offender.
- c. The conversion of his (or her) partner.

### **Alternatives**

Then, without dogmatism, may it be suggested that these aims and intentions are most likely to be achieved by adoption of measures something like the following?:

1. An open statement of marked ecclesial disapproval, expressed at a full meeting with the offender present. Does not Paul counsel: “Them that sin rebuke before all” (1 Tim. [[@page:142]]5:20), a thing that is *never* done in modern ecclesias? If such a course as this is adopted, it can never be said that there has been a condoning of that which Scripture censures. The quiet wiggling sometimes administered in private by two of the elders, the rest of the ecclesia being in complete ignorance of the transaction, is hardly adequate to the seriousness of the situation.
2. At the same time that this rebuke is expressed ought there not to be also an earnest declaration of the ecclesia’s desire for uninterrupted fellowship with the offender, at the Lord’s Table? This suggestion may seem revolutionary, yet it is surely entirely in the spirit of Christ. Experience over long years teaches one to believe that in such (and similar) cases as these the dominant consideration in the minds of the brethren should be the *maintaining* of fellowship, and not its severance. The parable of the True Vine is eloquent regarding this. And there need be no misgivings that to have an offender present at the Breaking of Bread somehow defiles the rest. Such a protest is not only selfish but preposterous (Judas was at the Last Supper!) And how can there be defilement when the ecclesia has already expressed its pointed disapproval of what has been done? In any case, “to his own Master he standeth or falleth.” If there has been an error of leniency, all will be set right one day. The Judge of all the earth may be trusted to do right. How odd if then He censures the unforgiving spirit and accepts the one whom the ecclesia has ostracized!
3. As a continuing reminder to the ecclesia, and especially the offender, it might be a wise thing to exclude the latter for an appreciable period of time from ecclesial office and from offering congregational prayers and from publicly reading the Word of God.

It may be that, unperceived by the writer, there are in these suggestions practical or Biblical flaws (not the latter, please God!). But it is believed that the spirit of these recommendations is somewhat in advance of the automatic root-and-branch method not uncommonly in operation at present.

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## **33. IRON CURTAIN**

ONE of the worst things that can be said about us Christadelphians is not that we have long been in a state of fragmentation, but that we put up with it.

If there is one Bible doctrine that is more basic and more obvious than all the rest, it is this: “There is One Body.” Nobody among us denies that the Bible teaches this plainly. Nobody believes that there is any alternative offered. Yet from our very earliest days division has taken place - approximately at the rate of once per generation. And Sunday after Sunday we go with relative complacency to the Lord’s Table, but with never a confession of our wilful rending of our Lord’s seamless robe.

### **A bad inheritance**

The iron-curtain method of resolving a disagreement came in at a very early date. So far as can be ascertained, it was an infection from the Church of Scotland; for in the nineteenth century Scottish theology was passing through stormy times, and “split the kirk” became a recognized specific when there was a bad situation. A generation or two ahead of us the Plymouth Brethren also went in for the same sort of radical purblind surgery.

It would be an intensely profitless diversion to investigate whether or not we have out-Heroded Herod. It would be much more to the point that we face frankly how bad this part of our inheritance is (though, in all fairness, it needs also to be recognized that our forbears bequeathed us much of superlative value). It will not do to be placid about the patchwork character of our quilt, even though our own corner of it keeps us tolerably warm. Ought we not rather to be either hot with shame or cold with horror that such blatantly evil results are allowed to continue?

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### **Majority opinion**

But - BUT - BUT - (one can hear the expostulations!) it is incumbent on all ecclesias, isn’t it, to make firm repudiation of false doctrine and of any evil way of life. And if some are unwilling to do this, what alternative is there to division?

These statements involve serious false assumptions.

One is that in certain circumstances it is a virtuous thing to “split the kirk”. Such a procedure is *never* virtuous, but *always* wilful, a dogged assumption that “My judgement is *bound* to be right; how can anyone be so wicked as to disagree?”

Yet from earliest days the principle has been accepted by every member of every ecclesia that “resolutions shall be carried by a majority” (2 Cor. 2:6). Sadly, there is no alternative method available to us.

But what poor sportsmen we are (to put it at its lowest level!), for how often has it happened that “if you won’t allow me to be referee as well as player, I’ll join another club.” Even ungodly worldlings recognize how deplorable such a spirit is. We, the unworldly, who have given our hand to abide by a majority decision whether we like it or we don’t, conveniently forget that principle in time of stress.

### **Maintaining purity?**

But is it not a far higher duty to keep the Truth pure? So, if the majority make a wrong decision, must not a firm stand be taken?

Here, the unpalatable but undeniable truth has to be faced that the Truth cannot be kept pure. There has never been a pure ecclesia. Nominally pure, maybe. But “he who walks in the midst of the candlesticks with eyes as a flame of fire” knows the sorry truth about every individual in every one of those lightstands. These faults notwithstanding, he holds *all* the ecclesias, whatever their quality - even Sardis and Laodicea -in his right hand (Rev. 1:20).

And in any case, a righteous stand against error can be taken without indulging in irresponsible surgery. It is always possible to make protest - firm, loud, and clear - against some [[@page:145]]tolerated abuse; and if then no notice is taken, the protester has at least unloaded the responsibility from his own shoulders.

The Lord Jesus tolerated the continuing presence in *dead* Sardis of a handful who had not defiled their garments. He did not regard them as defiled because they continued to share fellowship with the rest.

To be sure, there are deplorable evils - besetting sins, encouragement of all kinds of evil thinking, and not a few respectabilised iniquities - in the life of every redeemed sinner in the ecclesial family, so that a small-tooth comb applied to any one of us would mean disastrous revelations. But, the apostle Paul counsels, when there is an example of an evil way of life - unrepented incest (as at Corinth), drug-pushing, trade union politicking - then the wholesome ecclesia *ought* to take drastic steps. But if it is too lethargic or cowardly for this, then having protested against the toleration of the abuse, I must come to terms with the discouraging truth that I am a member of a Sardis ecclesia, and make the best of the situation. But “split the kirk”? - NO!

### **False doctrine**

Doctrinal problems fall into a different category, but they too can be dealt with in a more tidy fashion than the shambles we have so often created.

The Bible passages about excommunication of unworthy brethren are all written about the false *teacher*; Titus 2:10, 11, 13; 3:10 (where “heretic” = “the leader of a faction”); 2 John 7-11; Romans 16:17. If a man begins to show sympathy with false doctrine, then in the first instance, he can be required by the elders to refrain from *any* form of propagation of the ideas he is in love with. If that condition is accepted, then - continuing in the wholesome atmosphere of a sound ecclesia - there is hope that by degrees he may recover sanity. And if he doesn't, his silence on controverted matters brings harm to nobody, and his own standing with the Lord can be safely left to an infallible judgement in the Last Day.

This is Paul's principle: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive [[@page:146]]ye; but not to doubtful disputations.” In other words the price of his continuing membership of the ecclesia is a permanent silence regarding questions which the ecclesia disallows. And this is the spirit of Paul's writing in several other places.

### **Contamination by association**

Suppose, however, that there is an ecclesia which either refuses or cannot bring itself to make a firm and wise decision regarding some problem. Then does this mean that that ecclesia has

declared itself unfit for the fellowship of those with which hitherto it has gladly been in communion?

This is a problem of considerable importance today, for in such a situation in recent times some have not only decided that the weak or tolerant ecclesia is unfit for fellowship but also that all other ecclesias not echoing their censure are likewise unfit for fellowship. Thus, without introducing iron curtain schism, an iron curtain has been very effectively lowered, to the grievous detriment of ecclesial life over wide areas. This is hypocrisy of the worst sort. There is no need to say anything more about it than that, for before very long the Lord himself will be taking such a deplorable situation in hand.

### **Marriage problems**

Lastly, in this all too short review of a thorny question, what about the wretched marriage problems with which the world has so vigorously invaded the ecclesias in modern times?

The first and obvious answer is: Prophylactic education of a very clear and emphatic character. In these days there must needs be clear and frequent Biblical instruction regarding these questions.

*But this is not being done!* Some are touchy about these matters, and so there is a decided inclination to let sleeping dogs lie. What is this but cowardice? Faithful elders will see to it that the minds of all are properly educated, whether the process be pleasant or disturbing. And of course the best time for such renewal of instruction is when there are no marriage headaches raging.

Even so, the wolf will not be content to stay at the door.

[[@page:147]] Sooner or later he will get inside.

This is not the place to attempt to explore all the complications of modern divorce-and-remarriage problems. Here, then, let it suffice to say that even if the ecclesia decide that the best it can do is to put up with a bad situation or after a while to come to terms with it, it should in any case declare loud and clear (and not via a tactfully worded note through the post) that it strongly disapproves of what has been done. An ecclesia that will do this in a plain forthright fashion can hardly be itself accused of condoning evil even if the offenders are received at the Lord's Table. After all, the Lord Jesus was willing to have Judas at the Last Supper even though he knew what vile betrayal was being contemplated. There is always hope for a man who wants to come to, and is received at, the Breaking of Bread. But what hope is there for him if he is permanently debarred from "the cup of the new covenant *for the remission of sins*"?

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## **34. FIRE — OR FIRE**

JOHN the Baptist was not a man who believed in prophesying smooth things. He was not as one that had a very lovely voice. Even so, in pointing men to Christ, he made alluring promises: "He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16). Which thing duly came about, in scenes of great excitement, on the Day of Pentecost four years later.

But John's austere spirit would not allow him to hide the other side of the picture. He also presented Messiah as one "whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable." Fire of a very different character!

### **Threshing and winnowing**

After the threshing, to separate out the wheat the farmer used a large shovel - a "fan" - to throw the mixture of wheat and chaff as vigorously as possible in the face of a stiff breeze. The heavier kernels of wheat fell to the ground a short distance away. The light chaff was deposited by the wind a good deal further off.

This process finished, the wheat was carried away in sacks, and the chaff got rid of by putting fire to the windward end of the pile. Immediately it flared up. Within a matter of minutes flames roared violently through the entire inflammable mass. Here was fire no man could quench until all was reduced to light ash, itself to be blown away. And then the flames died down of their own accord.

That, said John in solemn tones, in the only alternative to what I showed you earlier - either you allow yourselves to be consumed by the fire of God's Holy Spirit, either the zeal of God's House shall eat you up, *or* you have no better future before you than that worthless chaff. "What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord" (Jer. 23:28, 29). So, "choose you this day whom ye will serve" - your Saviour or yourself.

The temple where John himself could have served as priest, had he so chosen, had the inextinguishable fire of the Lord on its altar. But that temple stood on the site of a threshing floor (2 Sam. 24:24, 25), and a generation later fire inextinguishable burnt there, for there was then nothing but spiritual chaff.

John had quarried his figure of speech (as indeed nearly all his teaching) from an inextinguishable Isaiah:

"Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel" ([[5:24>> Isaiah 5:24]]).

### **The Lord's cleansing fire**

But again the alternative is at hand: "I (lamented Isaiah) am a man of unclean lips (as though defiled by the unclean people he was sent to)... mine eyes have seen the Lord of hosts." But then came a Fiery Being with a coal of fire from the altar of the Lord, and thus his unclean lips were purged. And the immediate effect of that cleansing was: "Here am I; send me" ([[6:1-8>> Isaiah 6:1-8]]).

Always the options are the same. At Pentecost men saw the token of the Holy Spirit inspiring humble men of God: "cloven tongues like as of fire." But Peter's message that day was not out of balance: for he not only promised: "Ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit", he also echoed the dire warning of the prophet Joel: "Blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke" (Acts 2:3, 19). Neither then nor now can a man be asbestos-clad on either side of God's iron curtain.

Malachi's (and John Baptist's) prophecy of the Day of Judgement presents the same alternatives: "The day cometh [[@page:150]]that shall burn as an oven... all that do wickedly shall be stubble... ashes under the soles of your feet." Whose feet? Those for whom the Sun of righteousness, that fiery ball of unquenchable fire, will arise with healing in his cherubim-wings" ([[4:1-3>> Malachi 4:1-3]]).

John used this Scripture with vigour. But he also brought home the force of Malachi's other figure of speech: "Who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire" ([[3:2>> Malachi 3:2]]). This fire separates metal and dross so that the metal is more pure than ever, and the worthlessness of the dross more than ever evident.

There will be a day - how far away now? - when this process will operate most infallibly.

### **Self-discipline**

Accordingly, the One who will be Judge of all bids men exercise a searching self-discipline.

Either it is this: "Every one shall be salted for the fire (of the altar): and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt" (in the light of Lev. 2:13 this parallelism in Mark 9:49 holds no difficulty). A man gives himself, disciplined and dedicated, to the Lord who has called Him - Or, it is this: "Better to enter life maimed, halt, with one eye... than to be cast (all complete and self-fulfilling) into Gehenna, the fire that never shall be quenched" (Mark 9:43-48).

What, then, is to be done?

If the Christadelphian body is to achieve a much-needed Reformation to make it spiritually presentable under the gaze of those "eyes as a flame of fire", there is to be personal individual Reformation provoked by profound consciousness that we are members one of another.

### **Half-dedicated**

We - every one of us - are to take a straight clear look at ourselves and "thoroughly amend our ways and our doings." Is there one reader of these words who can coolly say that in plain [[@page:151]]truth he is more than half dedicated?

But what, of a really practical nature, needs to be done? The really honest clear-sighted individual can review his own way of life and his own mental attitudes and within a minute can put his finger on the most obvious flaws and the most urgent needs.

If indeed there are any doubts, then this is where man and wife can help each other almost infallibly, for did not RLS write, with uncanny insight: "To marry is to domesticate the recording angel" (I could almost believe that he was inspired to write that!).

And if not married, then what is friendship for? A country walk with a true friend and with topics of this nature on the agenda can do you almost as much good as a recording angel.

### **Again, intention!**

But in the end we must all come back to the simple miserable truth already worn threadbare in these elementary essays that, if there is *intention* to be a genuine disciple of the Lord who issued the call to discipleship, then he will not need to go on saying to us through the pages of Holy Scripture, nor whispering to us through the niggles of conscience, nor shouting at us through the saintly example of others: *Follow me*.

In these pages the word “repent” has hardly been used at all, but its meaning is, one devoutly hopes, written across every paragraph.

Putting it differently, if there is *intention*, then (as the modern jargon has it) the reader has “got the message” - and the rest, please God, will follow.