

Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

11: Salvation

It was quite a few years ago now when the phone rang. A male voice at the other end wanted some information about 'The Church of Christ'. At that time I was listed in the *UK Christian Handbook* as a contact number purely for information purposes, but he was only interested in what we believed and saw me as some sort of spokesman. Having explained that I was no such thing and that each congregation is completely autonomous, he asked me what we taught about how to be saved. This was really where he wanted to be. I do not know what his motives were, but suspected what he expected to hear. He did not sound hostile in any way at all, but you never know. I therefore took the wind out of his sails somewhat when I replied, 'That's easy; we're saved by grace through faith. It says so in Ephesians 2:8.' I could tell that this was not exactly what he thought I would say, despite the fact that this is what we teach, or should be! He had expected me to tell him that we teach that we are saved by baptism. I laughed gently, faced him with it, and then gave him a little lesson in what we really teach about baptism and not what the general perception amongst denominational believers who know something about us think we teach about baptism. He never got back to me again!

Why our emphasis

I must confess to having a certain amount of sympathy with him, for what we believe and what we seem to teach do not always obviously coincide. We know that we are backed into a corner over this point and spend time emphasizing the importance of

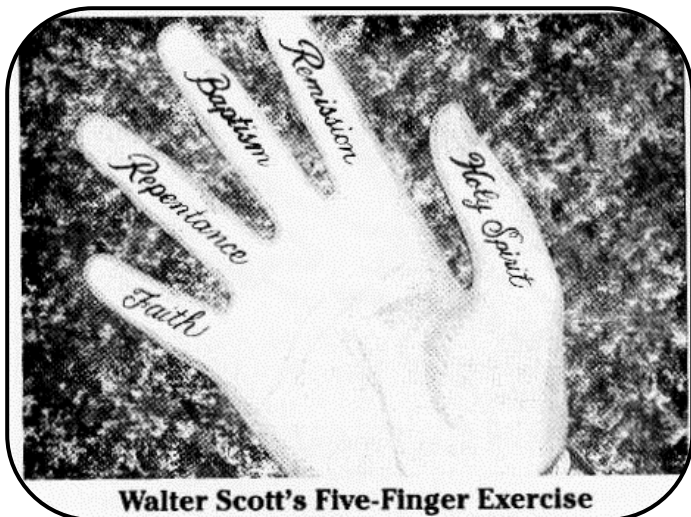


Walter Scott (1796 - 1861)
(Restoration Pioneer)

baptism because others in the non-Anglo-Catholic traditions will not, and do not, regard it as playing any part at all in the scheme of salvation. We 'fight' with the Anglo-Catholics over mode, method and when to administer it, but not over its fundamental importance. Protestant evangelical and charismatic groups practise believers' baptism but not '*for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit*' (Acts 2:38) as we do. (We also take the Lord's Supper far more seriously than the low church evangelicals do, siding closer to the Anglo-Catholics but with a very different understanding and teaching of what it means. We are a 'low church' but with an almost 'high church' view of these sacraments.) I get the impression that baptism was not a debatable issue in New Testament times. If you accepted that '*Jesus Christ is the Son of God*' (Acts 8:37, a footnote in more modern translations but definitely part of the original baptismal formula) and wanted to follow Him, you got baptized, no arguments, that's simply what you did. Whether you could then pass a modern 'church of Christ' university entrance examination on the meaning and purpose of baptism is open to debate, but I doubt it.

The Five-Finger Exercise and its problems

It was the great Restoration Movement pioneer, Walter Scott (see picture above), who developed his famous Five-Finger Exercise (picture over). On entering a town where he was to hold a meeting, he would seek out groups of children and teach them about how to be saved, via his five points on their fingers, and then tell them to go home and show it



to their parents. In this way he would drum-up interest and people would flock to hear his message. (It is somewhat salutary to think that if we attempted the same thing today we would be in danger of arrest on suspicion of being child molesters or paedophiles; such is progress!) Note that in his scheme the first three of the points are our responsibility towards the gospel, and the last two are God's response and blessings. There's a balance in place: man and God working together.

Today this is usually modified to a five-point list: believe, repent, confess, be baptized, remain steadfast (or belief, repentance, confession, baptism, and steadfastness). There has been a subtle, yet crucially important, change here. Now it's all down to man and God's part has been gently pushed to one side. One result is that we are happy to flag up that a new convert was 'baptized for the forgiveness of his or her sins' when we send joyous notices to magazines such as *The Christian Worker*, but rarely ever do we let the Holy Spirit in on the event too. Frequently the angels are honoured with a mention of their joy over a sinner who has repented but the promise of the great gift of the Holy Spirit is woefully neglected, as He often is in our churches!

The effect of this change is to turn salvation from being taught as a gift of the grace of God because of our faith into a mechanical process controlled almost entirely by us: God hardly comes into it at all, and if He does He has no choice in the matter. We do not intend this to happen, but at times it has, and denominational people pick up on it as an example of salvation by works and not by faith. Of course what they understand by 'faith' is virtually synonymous with 'belief'. However belief can be

either static or active. For us it must be active, demanding a reaction and response, but not always so for them. Static belief is an assent to an idea but which carries no necessary implications beyond an academic interest. For example, I can believe that Mount Everest is 29,028ft. I've been told it is by good people who have measured it. Such knowledge may help me to answer quiz questions correctly but makes no impact on my life. I have no means of checking it. I'm not going to attempt to climb it, and if it turns out to be 28,995ft so what? Who cares? It's still rather high. Active belief is where the belief so affects our lives that we have to change our attitudes and actions as a result. Once we accept that Jesus rose, unaided from the dead three days after He was killed on a Cross there are implications which must impact our lives for we can never simply shrug our shoulders and mutter, 'I believe Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, so what?' The faith, or belief, which impacts on salvation cannot be a 'So what?' faith, it has to invoke the reaction, 'What must I do about it?' And then the answer cannot be, 'Nothing. God's done it all.' He has, nevertheless we have to choose to act on that belief as He has told us to and here is where repentance, confession and baptism come into the picture. We come to love God so we 'trust and obey, for there's no other way'. Baptism is an essential ingredient in the 'obey' part of our response to a belief in Jesus as Lord because, if for no other reason, He commanded us to be baptized. That should be sufficient for every believer, yet sadly it's too much for so many good people.

1 Corinthians 13

Once the 'process' of salvation has been taken over by a mechanistic formula controlled by human beings our response is in danger of being lacking in love. '*God is love*' (1 John 4:8, 16) and a relationship of freely offered love to the beloved is the basis of the relationship He wants with us. '*We love because he first loved us.*' (1 Jn 4:19). If love is not present it is no use our arriving at the Pearly Gates demanding to be let in just because 'We obeyed the Gospel'. God does not have to let anybody into heaven no matter what they have done. Salvation is still His gracious gift given freely by His love because of our faith. If we think that by obeying the Five-Finger Exercise, be it Walter Scott's or our now modified version, that God has no choice about allowing us through, think again. It is more than

possible that we can be obedient simply because we are afraid of hell - which is a very good thing to be afraid of - but not because we love the Lord. It was significant that when Jesus reinstated Peter after the resurrection He only asked him, “*Do you love Me?*” (John 21:15-19). He then told Peter to obey and do what He wanted but the basis of his obedience was to be love. Jesus knew Peter loved Him, nevertheless He wanted Peter to be absolutely certain in his own mind that it was his love for the Lord which drove him to obey, and only that.

Probably one of the most loved passages in all of Scripture is 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s great treatise on love. It is so wonderful a passage that we frequently forget the implications of the serious warnings of its opening sentences. *‘If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.’* (1 Co 13:1-3). Paul was writing to Christians, all of whom had been through the initial part of the formula, yet were struggling with the ‘little finger’ of steadfastness. Included in this was the simple fact they had all been baptized for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed it was their misuse of certain blessings from the Holy Spirit which was prompting Paul to include this as part of his letter. Our faith must be driven by love for no amount of loveless piety will avail. We can arrive at the gates of heaven demanding to be let in because our formula was intact and correct but there will be no gain for any who do not love. If we will not love God, how can we expect to spend an eternity of mutual love in His presence?

As I was growing up in Liverpool we had a neighbour who was a very devout High Anglican. One of her sons seemed to follow her and considered being ordained; the other was a rebel. She told us she was determined that her rebellious son should be confirmed and he’d be safe in the lifeboat. “He can then go and do what he likes,” she added. I did not believe in her type of formula anyway but even going through the ‘correct’, biblical one only initially offers us a seat in the ‘lifeboat’. We can still jump ship if we choose, or die of bore-



The Pearly Gates

dom adrift at sea if we are not motivated by love. Preaching any mechanistic formula does not breed love. How can it? It is a very useful tool but it must be handled with great care for it will sell souls short if it is not.

Religious dispensations

One of the great contributions our 19th-century forefathers made to our understanding of the Bible was to recognize that there are three dispensations revealed in it. Each had different covenants which governed how worship was to be conducted and access to God thereby obtained, including especially the forgiveness of sins, which, of course, guarantees salvation. The first was the **Patriarchal Age** which ran from Adam to Moses but flowered from Noah to Moses. The second was the **Mosaic Age**, which obviously ran from Moses to Christ. Finally we have the **Christian Age** which runs from Christ, or rather the Cross, to the end of time.

We noted in the previous study that the priesthood of Melchizedek, set in the Patriarchal Age, was superior to that of Aaron under the Jewish system given by God to Moses. It had to be because ‘*It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior*’ (Heb 7:7), and Abraham bowed down to Melchizedek, paid him a tithe of all that he had, and was blessed by him. This defines a religious pecking-order. We must therefore ask the question as to why this was, and is, so?

Patriarchal Religion

We know very little about how the Patriarchal religious system worked. Authority and priesthood was in the hands of the heads of the families and those

who were heads of dynasties were King/Priests and particularly esteemed. We have considered in study Number 10 who Melchizedek was, and we concluded positively that he had to be none other than Shem, Noah's eldest son and therefore head of the Shemites (now called Semites). He was the very old, mysterious king/priest who came to meet Abraham after he was returning from a battle to rescue Lot from the clutches of a raiding party who had captured him. He lived in Salem, which is Jerusalem, and when Abraham met him, as already noted, he bowed down to him and gave him a tithe of his goods and received a blessing. It makes perfect sense that Abraham would bow the knee to his amazingly illustrious ancestor, whose origin was lost in the mists of time and whose beginning was in the now forgotten world before the Flood. His name means 'King of Righteousness' and if ever a man deserved that title, he did. He remained faithful before the Flood, helping his godly dad build the Ark when the rest of the world mocked. He remained faithful after the Flood when Ham's children at least went off the spiritual rails (a careful study of the genealogies listed in Genesis 10 will reveal that most sinfully godless nations, who appear throughout the Old Testament, had Ham as their original patriarch), as no doubt did Japheth's and some of his own too. Terah, Abraham's father, was an idolater. Shem remained faithful through the rebellion at Babel and the falling away of the values God wanted. This faithfulness is part of the key to the superiority of this order of priesthood, for the covenant had few rules and regulations for worship. It was based on faith, loyalty and love for God.

In the opening verses of the Book of Job we catch a glimpse of what this might mean in practical terms. *'There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three*



Job

sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.' (Job 1:1-5, emphasis ours). In this way Job honoured and feared God, turned away from evil and sacrificed diligently, especially for his family, whom he loved and wanted to see having God's favour too.

There were other faithful King/Priests who were staunch and loyal like Job. Moses's father-in-law Jethro was one, but Melchizedek/Shem was easily the prime example and type of Christ-figure he is seen to be in the New Testament. His was a priesthood based on faith and love.

The Law partly held faith at bay

Then came the Law and the Mosaic Age. We learn that the Mosaic Covenant was introduced as a schoolmaster or guardian, as Paul said in Galatians 3:24. He wrote: *'Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.*

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Gal 3:19-28).

The purpose of the Law

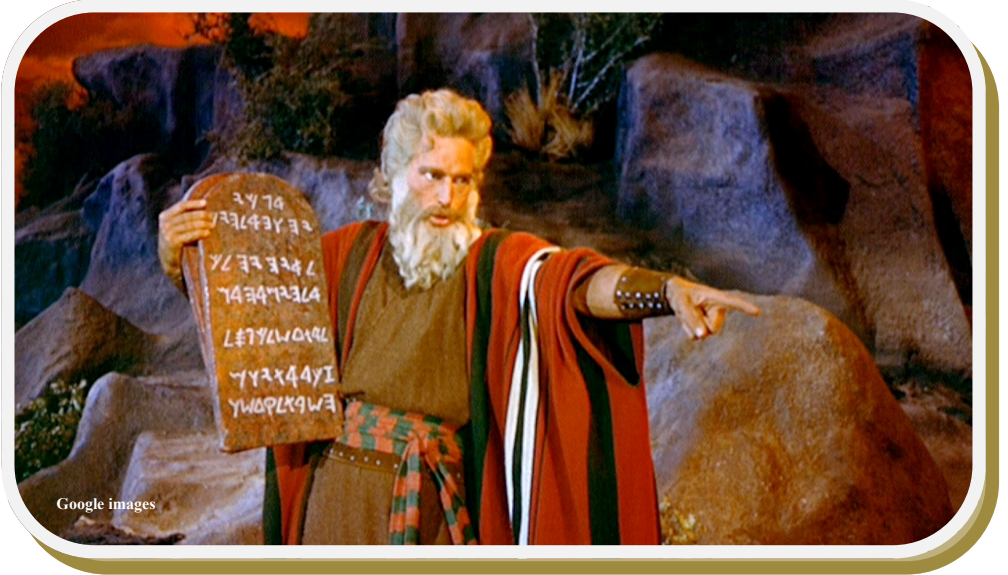
The Law was introduced because of transgressions. It was there to teach obedience, duty, and a strict moral code (necessarily redefined in some areas, like close marriages, because the gene-pool was now far more corrupted, cf. problems over first-cousin marriages in our day; though not forbidden by the Bible they are very unwise). It taught reverent worship, the awesome nature of God who now became far more distant and unapproachable than He had been in the Patriarchal Age. Though it was still a faith system it was much more of an imposed faith system than a voluntary one. Under Melchizedek there was much more of a joyous freedom, which had obviously been abused, hence God needed the Law to pull us back into line. But laws become rules and when keeping them is imposed from above, faith is easy to express mechanically by a works' ethic, and salvation comes down to us rather than by God's love and grace.

Restored freedom in Christ

Christ restored faith and easy access to God. He abolished sacrifices from both earlier systems so He ended both the Jewish system and the Patriarchal system and He brought back love and joy into the frame. He retained the lessons of reverence, obedience, duty, loyalty and morality, for these are always very important.

The Noachian covenant

However, as the final pointer as to why Melchizedek's priesthood is the superior one, we must also not forget the covenant under which Melchizedek operated. Immediately after the Flood, God told Noah and his family: *"I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."* And God said, *"This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the*



Charlton Heston as Moses in 'The Ten Commandments'

earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." (Gen. 9:11-16)

Noah's covenant still holds good

This covenant still holds good and will do so until the end of time. Its terms were relatively simple: *'God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.*

'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.' And you, *be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it."* (Ge 9:1-7)

So Jesus restored the system of faith based on grace, restoring ready and easy access to God, thus drawing us closer in love. He retained the morality

and sense of awe and wonder taught by the Mosaic 'schoolmaster' but nailed its legal impositions to the Cross, thus releasing us from its bondage into the love of the Father. Had the people been obedient and not transgressed, Melchizedek's priesthood would not have needed to have been overlain by that of Moses. Though it never actually vanished, we lost sight of it beneath the weight of the Law under which the bulk of the Old Testament operated. Jesus came and fulfilled that Law with its legal requirements under Moses and released us back to Melchizedek for salvation via faith and love. Now we are free again under Him for though Melchizedek's priesthood is everlasting, it is only everlasting under Christ who brought it to perfection and fulfilled it too by His sacrifice.

Consequences of a mechanistic approach

A passionate desire and commitment to scriptural accuracy is one of the great strengths and blessings of the Restoration Movement; it is also one of its greatest dangers! Take a mechanistic, human-response-driven, view of the initial route to salvation and the road of faithful steadfastness can also be viewed and directed in the same manner. Salvation is gained by attention to duty. Correct worship is a matter of routine. We obey the formula and then maybe take a fairly mindless journey along life's path. It will lead us finally to heaven. This can so easily lead to a pharisaical approach, and many people feel that we readily fall into such a trap at times. A simple reading of 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 reveals something quite different in the First Century: *'What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is*

said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.'



Simple Lord's Supper gathering

As usual the Corinthians had gone overboard in their joyous freedoms in Christ. They had to be reined in. The brothers came along prepared to participate. They brought a hymn, a reading and thoughts to share. There was an ebullient joy in being part of a community who rejoiced in the Lord. They did not come to spectate; they came to lift their hearts and souls to God in prayer and praise.

This was no duty, no soporific experience where words went in one ear and out the other and they could comfortably think about yesterday's football results or the Test Match cricket score. They were excitedly part of an amazing community of like-minded brethren who were not part of a system which mindlessly carried them along on its back. Paul did not tell them to stop it. He said 'keep it under control so it doesn't get out of hand and become a shambolic disgrace to the Christ we worship'. They could never be dubbed as being pharisaical. Of course too much freedom becomes anarchic and in time the cramping notions of *'all things should be done decently and in order'* (1 Co 14:40), took over; then spontaneity fled out of the windows until calm peacefulness reigned. Worship became highly organized, even now rehearsed in some churches who have 'Worship Groups' for the purpose, and the spirit of man ruled where once the Spirit of God prevailed. Mechanistic salvation became mechanistic worship, frequently highly structured, elaborately orchestrated and then invested with an aura of holiness not found in Scripture. Somebody once wrote that initially the Lord's Supper was a celebration of the resurrection but we have turned it into a wake. There are dangers in mechanistic religion; it's all a matter of balance, and that's not always easy to achieve.

Conclusion

As a people who love the Lord, we are a group who believe that God said what He meant and meant what He said. We are not allowed to play fast and loose with the Bible, treating it more like a rough guide than a perfect design for godly living and spirituality, as is the habit of some! Somebody has said that the Ten Commandments were not Ten Useful Suggestions. God's Word is not a 'useful suggestion' but *'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.'* (2 Tim 3:16-17). It therefore behoves us to study this Word diligently, to find out what it teaches, especially about salvation, and for us to respond in faith - active faith which demands a joyous reaction from us - for nobody else can do it for us. We can teach reverence, obedience, rule-keeping, duty, even faithfulness, and all of this is absolutely necessary, but we cannot teach love.

Love is an emotion and emotions cannot be imposed on anybody. We can and do learn to love, and we learn to love in many different ways. I love the hymn by Francis Xavier (No. 301 in *Favourite Hymns of the Church*).

My God, I love Thee not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might for ever die,

But for that Thou didst all mankind
Upon the Cross embrace;
For us didst bear the nails and spear,
And manifold disgrace,

And grief and torment numberless,
And sweat of agony;
E'en death itself; and all for man
Who was Thine enemy.

Why then, O blessèd Jesus Christ,
Should I not love Thee well,
Not for the sake of winning heaven,
Nor any fear of hell;

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Not seeking a reward;
But as Thyself hast lovèd me,
O ever-loving Lord!

E'en so I love Thee, and will love,
And in Thy praise will sing,
Solely because Thou art my God,
And my eternal King.

We learn to love once we grasp clearly and fully what Paul wrote to the Ephesian church: *'God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...*' (Eph 2:4-10, emphasis ours).

Salvation is God's gift of grace - unmerited favour - through faith!

Tasks

Salvation is by grace through faith: a) What is grace? b) What is faith? c) What is the difference, if any, between belief and faith?

Compare and contrast 'saving faith' and 'non-saving faith'. (James 2:14ff could help you here)