

BELIEVERS, THE SPIRIT & THE *EKKLĒSIA*
TRANSFORMATION & UNITY

Books by David H.J.Gay referred to in this volume:

Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder.

Battle for the Church: 1517-1644 (second edition).

Fivefold Sanctification.

Infant Baptism Tested.

New-Covenant Articles: Volume Two.

Public Worship: God-Ordained or Man-Invented?

Public Worship Notes.

Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly.

Sowed Much, Reaped Little: Why?: The Sermon: The Gap between the Claim and the Result.

The Pastor: Does He Exist?

The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?

Weakness: The New-Covenant's Forgotten Virtue.

Believers, the Spirit & the *Ekklēsia*

Transformation and Unity

My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!

Galatians 4:19

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds-and-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

David H.J.Gay

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Scripture quotations come from a variety of versions

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Genesis of a Booklet

It all began with Rick Peterson.

Rick (an American) and I (an Englishman) have a weekly conversation on Zoom, bolstered by an interchange of emails. In one of our recent Zoom confabulations, Rick explained to me that he was troubled about American evangelicals (including the Reformed – especially, the Reformed) who seemed to be content as long as the biblical doctrine of justification-by-faith-alone-through-grace-alone was maintained in the pulpit. Even worse, that many American evangelicals were perfectly content to think that since they were ‘justified by faith’, they were home and dry. Rick was concerned to disabuse them of this defective view. He knew the new-covenant principle: between a believer’s justification and his glorification¹ there is a life of progressive sanctification to be lived, a life in which the Spirit of God increasingly transforms the believer into Christ’s likeness.

I got the point. Being a child of God is not just ‘being forgiven’ and ‘going to heaven when you die’. Without transformation by the Spirit, talk of justification is nothing more than that: mere talk (Heb. 12:14; Jas. 2:14-26). As a result, I started working on a manuscript setting out God’s eternal plan for his elect: Regeneration – Transformation – Glorification.

But I soon saw that the problem stretches far wider than those who make justification by faith the be-all and end-all of spiritual experience.² Let me explain. We are talking about the experience of a believer – or, more accurately, a professing believer: its starting point, its end point, and, above all, what happens in between. The end point for most professing believers is, as (almost) everybody ‘knows’, death and ‘going to heaven’. This, however, although

¹ See below.

² Indeed, I suspect that a growing number of believers are growing increasingly fuzzy about the scriptural doctrine of justification, and might well not think of it at all in this connection.

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almost universally taken as read, too obvious for words, is quite unscriptural. The end for believers is, in fact, their resurrection, their putting on immortality (1 Cor. 15:52-54), their complete transformation into Christ's likeness, and their entrance into the eternal kingdom in the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13), and all at the return of Christ. Now for the starting point. For many, things are less clear here. In fact, they are utterly confused. For some, it all begins with their birth to a believing parent, followed by their baby-sprinkling which initiates, ratifies, or whatever, them 'into the covenant'. For others, their baby-sprinkling is enough, no questions asked. For others, the starting point is 'church attendance'. The biblical starting point for the experience of salvation, of course, is regeneration leading to conversion – repentance and trust in Christ.³

My book was concerned with the period in between the starting and ending points. I contend that for a growing number of professing believers today, the long period between the start of their experience (however they define it) and their death and entrance to heaven (with little or no effective thought of what will happen at the return of Christ), is occupied with 'churchianity' – 'going to church', attending 'worship services', endlessly listening to monologues from 'the minister', and the like. My book, I hoped, would demonstrate the utter inadequacy of this common view. It is at this point that 'transformation' comes into the frame. And how!

Then, in another of our Zoom exchanges, Rick brought up Galatians 4:19. For the first time – what an admission! – I saw the significance of this verse in connection with what I was writing, and this led me to start a passage on the verse and insert it in my manuscript. This insertion soon turned into an article. And it did not take long to discover that the subject matter had to include the question of unity between believers.⁴ Moreover, it was all bound

³ Do not miss my use of 'experience'. The real starting point is God's election. But I am talking about the sinner's actual experience, and the starting point for that is the Spirit's regenerating power (John 3:3-8).

⁴ To make it clear: the spiritual unity in question has nothing to do with the Ecumenical Movement, a diabolical Christendom fabrication.

together by the activity of the Spirit in the new-covenant *ekklēsia*. Finally, it occurred to me that the article would make a booklet. Hence this little work now in your hand.⁵ The title may be a mouthful – *Believers, the Spirit & the Ekklēsia: Transformation and Unity* – but the work itself is short.

You will notice that I did not talk of ‘Believers & the Church’. I used *ekklēsia* and not ‘church’ because I want to draw attention away from the Christendom⁶ institution which we all know so well – the ubiquitous church – and direct it to the new-covenant body which, alas, very rarely exists outside the pages of the new-covenant Scriptures, is little understood, and is even less thought about; namely, the *ekklēsia*. It is my contention that the combination of ‘Believers & the Christendom Church’ and ‘Transformation and Unity’ simply does not get off the ground. Indeed, the Christendom Church is a major part of the problem; it certainly is no part of the solution. Hence my use of *ekklēsia*.

If anybody responds by saying that the Bible talks a great deal about ‘the church’, I flatly deny it. It doesn’t. Never. It always speaks about the *ekklēsia*. It is Bible translators who speak about ‘church’. And like other words – *baptizō* springs to mind – if only *ekklēsia* had been translated as it should have been, it would have saved a world of trouble. In the case of *baptizō*, we would not have been talking about baptism, to baptise – with all the nonsense that has been foisted on that word – but dipping, to dip, to plunge – which is what the word means. Likewise, we would not have been talking about ‘the church’ – with all the complicated nonsense that has been foisted on that phrase – but ‘the called-out ones’ – which is what the word means.

Semantics!

⁵ And it is only a booklet. For a full work on the subject, see, for instance, Frank Viola: *Reimagining Church*, David Cook, Colorado Springs, 2008.

⁶ See Appendix 2 ‘Christendom’ in my *Relationship*.

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Not a bit of it! Vital principles are at stake. And I have written much about some of them.⁷

In this booklet, however, I concentrate on one point, and one point only. I am writing about God's purpose for the *ekklēsia* and his elect in the time between their regeneration/conversion and their glorification at the return of Christ; namely, their transformation and unity by the Spirit.

As I have said, I am at present writing a volume on the theme, and in that book I will deal with the material in detail. My point in this little work is to draw attention to a key new-covenant aspect of the transformation and unity of believers, but which, sadly, is almost universally ignored; namely, the *ekklēsia*-work of the Spirit in every believer.

Let me make one thing clear – it will be part of my booklet's closing remarks: I am not publishing this small work to end a conversation, but to start one – a conversation first of all in your mind, reader; then between you and your fellow-believers. Let me say a little more. I see the issue. I see how Christendom has ruined the practical experience of the new covenant in regard to transformation and unity. I see the position we are starting from. I see where we need to be. But how to get from A to Z, from where we are to where need to be, utterly defeats me. God, in his sovereignty, by his Spirit – he alone can reverse 1700 years of Christendom. But, in a poor imitation of Elijah on Carmel (1 Kings 18:30-35), all I can do is try to set out what I see is wrong and what I see is right – knowing that only God can grant the necessary fire to set everything alight. Changing the illustration, is it possible that if I scatter a seed in the form of this booklet, it might germinate? And, if it does, who knows...

⁷ See, for instance, my *Battle; Infant; The Pastor; The Priesthood of All Believers*.

Believers, the Spirit & the Ekklēsia: Transformation

Let me set the scene. I do so by reference to ‘the temple’. But, to keep this booklet in bounds, I must be brief.¹

The temple (and the tabernacle before it) was of supreme importance for Israel – for what it represented; above all, it spoke of the presence and power of God among his people (Ex. 25:40; 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:22-66; Ps. 9:11; 11:4; 22:3; 73:17; 80:1; 84:10; 132:7-9,13-18; 150:1; Jer. 17:12; Joel 3:16-17,21; Hab. 2:20; Zech. 2:10-13). So much for the old covenant. But we know that Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, fulfilled the old covenant, and thus rendered it obsolete and abolished it, bringing all its shadows (including the temple, and all that went with it), to their God-appointed end (Matt. 5:17-20; Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:19-25; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:18,22; 8:7,13; 10:18). This, I hasten to say, was not simply to put an end to the old covenant. No! It was to bring in the new covenant. Nevertheless, like all the old-covenant shadows, ‘the temple’ continues to have a vital role in the new covenant – not now as a building, of course, but as a spiritual *motif*. Christ, himself, is now the tabernacle – the temple – God’s dwelling place, the house of God (John 1:14 – ‘tabernacled’, please note), Christ with his people and in his people (1 Cor. 3:9-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 2:18-22). Not only that. This new-covenant temple has its priesthood – Christ the great, the perfect high priest (Heb. 4:14; 5:1-10), but believers, too, being priests. Changing the figure, Christ’s people now form a spiritual nation of kingly priests under Christ as the great king, prophet and priest (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

Furthermore, as, in the old covenant, God dwelt (in shadow, in picture) in the temple, so Christ, in the new covenant, dwells (in reality, actually) in his people by his Spirit (John 14:15-18,25-27;15:1-8,26; Rom. 8:9; Eph. 2:22; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). Access to

¹ For more, see ‘The Temple and the New Covenant’ in my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume Seven*.

God is now totally independent of place or building (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:22; 12:22-24). Moreover, the temple *motif* plays a large part in the believers' (note the plural) progressive sanctification. Believers form a sacred house for God, a house which 'grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In [Christ we] also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit' (Eph. 2:21-22). Note the 'grows'. This must not be thought of primarily in terms of numbers. Spiritual quality – holiness – is the main idea. Being the Lord's temple, believers (note the plural) together, as a body, seek to be holy and to grow in the knowledge and likeness of Christ (1 Pet. 1:15-16; 2:4-12; 2 Pet. 3:18), to be a dwelling fit for God – and this, I stress, in a corporate sense, not excluding, of course, the individual. It also involves the principle of separation (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1). Hence the *ekklēsia*, 'the called-out ones'.

So much for this brief look at this vital biblical concept of 'the temple'. It has a huge influence on what now follows.

What is God's purpose for his elect throughout their life on earth following their conversion? In a word, it is their sanctification; more precisely, their progressive sanctification.² Speaking absolutely scripturally, it is their transformation by the Spirit into conformity to Christ's likeness leading to their eternal glorification:

Those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30).

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [that is, Adam], we shall [at the resurrection with Christ's return] also bear the image of the man of heaven [that is, Christ] (1 Cor. 15:49).

² See my *Fivefold*.

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The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we [that is, believers] all... beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:3-4).

...the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self [or man], which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self [or man], created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:20-24).

You [each of you believers] have put off the old man [that is, what you – the believer – was ‘in Adam’ – DG] with its practices and have put on the new self [that is, what you – the believer – is ‘in Christ’ – DG], which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:9-10).

When he was writing to the Galatian believers, Paul spoke of this transformation in these terms:

My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! (Gal. 4:19).

Paul was extremely worried about the Galatians, and in order to let them know how desperate he was, he used *ōdinō*; he was experiencing birth pangs, he said; he was in labour, travailing in birth.

Why was he so uptight, so troubled? What was he anxious about? ‘I am desperate, worried stiff about you, I am at my wit’s end, “until Christ is formed in you”’. This is how concerned he was; more, what he was concerned about.

We need to be clear: Paul was not saying he was anxious to see the Galatians converted; the apostle knew he was writing to believers

(read the entire letter), and here he calls them ‘my little children’. They did not need to be converted; they had long-since passed that milestone. So what was it about them that was causing Paul this much stress? Was he thinking in terms of what some now think of as ‘a second blessing’? Was he longing for them to experience this ‘second blessing’? No! He was desperate – desperate to see Christ formed in them.

‘Formed’? ‘Formed in them’? What is this? The apostle used *morphoō*, which, as William Edwy Vine explained:

...refers, not to the external and transient, but to the inward and real... expressing the necessity of a change in character and conduct to correspond with inward spiritual condition, so that there may be moral conformity to Christ.

Henry Alford thought it necessary to include the word ‘fully’ in order to capture the proper sense of the apostle’s aim. Which was? To see ‘Christ fully formed in them’. Paul was not going to be content with half measures!

One other point: the apostle was using ‘you’ in the plural. He was thinking corporately. He wanted the believers in Galatia to have Christ formed in them – not only individually, but corporately. To put it another way, he wanted their progressive sanctification, their transformation into Christ’s likeness, and he wanted it both individually and corporately; especially, in this context, corporately. That is what he was so desperately anxious about.

At this point, I want to bring in something the apostle said to the Ephesian believers (as before, see the entire letter). Having argued out – and in detail – God’s eternal purpose in calling them to salvation in Christ by his Spirit (Eph. 1:1 – 3:21), Paul left them in no doubt as to where this had brought them. Having set the tone from the beginning – ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him’ (Eph. 1:3-4) – the apostle spelled out their responsibility, making it clear that he wanted – he expected – them to live out, day by day, God’s purpose for them:

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I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you [plural] to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Eph. 4:1).

In short, God's purpose in choosing them, in Christ dying for them, in the Spirit regenerating them and bring them to repentance and faith, was so that they might be transformed – that is, increasingly conformed – by the Spirit into Christ's likeness. But, as can be seen, Paul did not leave it there. He placed the responsibility for this transformation through progressive sanctification squarely on the shoulders of every believer – both individually and corporately. Again, I emphasis the corporate.

Having made clear that he expected believers to be transformed into Christ's likeness, the apostle rapidly moved to set out a vital provision Christ has made to produce this individual and corporate transformation. I am talking about the *ekklēsia*. This is why I have stressed the corporate. This transformation is an *ekklēsia* affair, not simply an individual concern, each, as it were, in his 'own small corner' or private world:

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds-and-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry,³ for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

³ This does not mean 'the pastoral, preaching ministry'. Rather, it speaks of the enabling of all the saints to edify each other mutually. See my *The Pastor; The Priesthood of All Believers; Weakness*. See also my 'Can We Learn From Luther's "Ear"?' on my sermonaudio.com page.

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Here we reach the climax of this chapter. Paul made Christ's purpose in setting up a mutual, one-another ministry within the *ekklēsia* explicit.⁴ It is:

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

As can be seen, the apostle has forged a cast-iron link between *ekklēsia*-life and the transformation of believers into Christ's likeness. I have not forgotten the 'unity'; I will return to it. But for now I continue to concentrate on the 'transformation'. What a standard for the life of the *ekklēsia*! It could not higher. What dignity is placed on the *ekklēsia*! What an aim! It is that all the believers should reach:

...the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

'All', 'unity', 'knowledge',⁵ 'mature', 'stature', 'fullness' are big, big words. And they are brought about by the biblical exercise of *ekklēsia*-life leading to 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ', in the believers. Wow! What a thought!

Is it not clear that Galatians 4:19 and Ephesians 4:13 are speaking with one voice? Paul's? The Spirit's? Both!

In short, the scriptural experience of *ekklēsia*-life leads to the maturing of believers in Christ-likeness: 'Christ... formed in you' 'to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'. This is what Christ purposed when he set up the *ekklēsia* by his Spirit.

Douglas Moo, commenting on Galatians 4:19:

The imagery of Christ being 'formed' within the Galatians suggests that Paul will not be content until Christ so dominates

⁴ See my 'The All-Body Ministry' in my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume Two*.

⁵ Vine: 'To observe, fully perceive, notice attentively, discern, recognise'. Thayer: 'To the true knowledge of Christ's nature, dignity, benefits' (Grimm-Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

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their lives that there can be no possible change from a settled spiritual condition. While this is the only place Paul uses this particular verb, he uses several cognate words to express this sense of ‘conformity’ to Christ (see especially Rom. 8:29; also Phil. 3:10,21). It is not clear whether Paul thinks of Christ as being ‘formed’ within each of the Galatians... within the community of the Galatians... or perhaps both [Moo gave several weighty sources for each view]. But the first option seems better to respect the imagery and the way Paul applies it here.

I think both senses are involved here. As I have said, Paul used the plural ‘you’, and its cognates, and as I will show in the book I am working on, the fullness of transformation for believers – their glorification – will take place at the return of Christ, *and will be the glorification of all believers together, glorified as a body, as a race.* Hence the heavy emphasis on the corporate. Of course, the continued progressive sanctification of every individual believer is an essential. Even so, there is this corporate – whole body – aspect to this (Eph. 4:11-16). This needs stressing: too often the modern evangelical forgets the corporate and thinks only of the individual. But within the corporate, of course, the individual must not be forgotten or sidelined.

Charles Ellicott saw Paul’s aim in Ephesians 4:13 to be the same as he had expressed it for the Galatians. Commenting on Galatians 4:19, he declared:

The unformed Christian by degrees takes the likeness of Christ. As he grows in grace that likeness becomes more and more defined, till at last the Christian reaches the ‘stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13).

Albert Barnes on Ephesians 4:13:

The word ‘stature’... refers to the growth of a man. The stature to be attained to was that of Christ. He was the standard – not in size, not in age – but in moral character. The measure to be reached was Christ; or we are to grow until we become like him... ‘the measure of the fullness’, means, probably, the ‘full measure’ – by a form of construction that is common in the Hebrew writings, where two nouns are so used that one is to be rendered as an adjective – ‘as trees of greatness’ – meaning great trees. Here it means that they

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should so advance in piety and knowledge as to become wholly like him [that is, Christ].

John MacArthur on Galatians 4:19-20:

[Progressive] sanctification is what defines the work of the Spirit in our lives from justification to glorification, which means from the moment of our salvation until we [are glorified].⁶ If there's anything that we ought to know, understand, and be committed to it would be sanctification. And that is expressed in Paul's words where he says: 'I am again in labour until Christ is formed in you, filled out in you, so that you are like Christ. I settle for nothing less'.⁷

Again:

I [that is, JM] titled this little brief series here 'Sanctification: Christ Formed in You.' Between justification, the time when you were declared righteous by faith in Christ, and glorification, the time you enter into his presence,⁸ we live in the reality of sanctification. Sanctification means 'to be separate', a continual, progressive separation from sin. We were, in a moment, justified; we will be, in a moment, glorified. But all our life-long in-between we are being sanctified. That is the present, wonderful, gracious work of the Holy Spirit on our behalf, and it goes on throughout our life. And it is inevitable; and it is absolutely occurring in every true Christian; and it manifests itself in increasing holiness.

Now, as Paul declared in verse 19 that he was 'in labour until Christ is formed in you', he therefore makes the declaration that Christ already is in you; he already is in the believer. He wants Christ to be fully formed; that is to say to literally take over the believer's life so that the believer becomes a manifestation of Christ. This is sanctification; this is what sanctification is. It is becoming more holy, which is to become more Christ-like; becoming more righteous, which is to become more Christ-like...

Now that brings us back to Galatians chapter 4 – you can look at it again. Christ is in every believer. Christ is in every believer permanently. But Paul's agony here is that Christ be formed in you, that literally you take on the very person of Christ, so that

⁶ Original 'enter heaven', alas, showing MacArthur's acceptance of the notion of 'heaven when you die'.

⁷ John MacArthur: 'The Primary Importance of Sanctification'.

⁸ Did MacArthur mean that the believer's glorification occurs at death?

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there is less distinction between you and him. You are so much like him. I find this powerful, clear definition of sanctification, to have Christ formed in the believer, so that the believer takes on the shape of Christ, the mind of Christ, the attitudes of Christ, the words of Christ, the behaviours of Christ. Sanctification is the work by which the Holy Spirit, using the Word of God, shapes the Christian into Christ-likeness. And that goes on through your entire life.

Conformity to Christ is a lifelong work of removing sin and replacing sin with thoughts and words and actions of holiness. And it, as I said, is taking place all through our lives, never complete, never complete until glorification. Again, it is the present, continuous work of the Holy Spirit in every Christian on earth between justification and glorification; which is to say that it is *the* dominant work of the Spirit of God in the church among believers. How is it that this critical doctrine, truth, reality, can be so minimised in this contemporary Christian world?

As I told you last week, I am appalled at the indifference to the doctrine of sanctification. I hear a lot about predestination, a lot about justification, and even some about glorification. Rarely do I hear in the contemporary scene much about sanctification, sanctification.⁹

MacArthur, it would appear, was thinking in terms of the individual. And he seemed to regard the believer's death as the time of his glorification. Excepting these two important points, he was good.

So... we are all agreed! No! Not quite. Indeed, not by a long chalk! In fact, we are poles apart. This is where things fall apart.

Let me explain.

Galatians 4:19, alas, has afforded a field-day for those who instinctively cling to the clergy/laity template forged by the Fathers, and effectively forced the new-covenant *ekklēsia* into that template. Galatians 4:19, we are expected to believe, shows the concern 'the pastor' must have for 'his flock'. Apparently it is he who must care for the host below him, those gathered around his pulpit, sitting under his ministry, that they might have Christ formed in them. On

⁹ John MacArthur: 'The Right Motive in Sanctification', emphasis his.

this reading, Galatians 4:19 becomes the model for ‘the ideal pastor’ in the Christendom church, the ideal ‘Reformed pastor’ in the ‘Reformed Christendom church’.

This view, though common – almost universal – is disastrous. Read again the extract from Ephesians 4:11-16, just above. It speaks of a whole-body, one-another ministry, not a one-man voice with a multitude of silent hearers. The new-covenant principle is that every believer should be concerned for himself, that he should want ‘Christ fully formed’ within himself, and, beyond that, and in conjunction with that, he should be fully engaged in showing the mutual concern which each believer should have for his fellow-believers, that ‘Christ might be fully formed’ in all the body. And active participation by the Spirit in mutual edification is a major ingredient in this mix. It is not too much to say that Christ’s purpose for the *ekklēsia* is that each believer should be engaged in this mutual edification so that ‘Christ might be fully formed’ in all the body: as the apostle said, it is in order:

...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, *until* we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:12-13).

Paul could not have made the primacy of this mutuality any clearer. We are talking about the priesthood of all believers. All believers, I repeat. The exercise of the priesthood of one¹⁰ believer (a cleric in all but name)¹¹ adoringly looked up to by the silent *hoi polloi* (the laity, in all but name)¹² is remarkable for its screaming absence in Scripture. Consider the following passage. Some of the following clearly refers to extraordinary gifts, but this must not be made into an excuse to avoid the obvious permanency of mutuality in the *ekklēsia*. Let me say that again, and say it a bit more bluntly: it will not do – it would be shabby in the extreme – to dismiss the obvious import of the following extended extract on the grounds that some

¹⁰ One only, or, maybe, one of a tiny number.

¹¹ ‘In all but name’, existing in reality but not acknowledged as such, not being willing to recognise it.

¹² See the previous note.

things at Corinth were clearly extraordinary. Alas, many do retreat behind such a tawdry zariba,¹³ and are satisfied to bury their heads in the sand. Shoddy is my response. True, the apostle needed to correct excesses – excesses of activity, please note, excesses of participation – but how very different his correction – rebuke – would be today. Attending the vast majority of ‘preaching services’, ‘services for worship’, he would surely be staggered and burst out: ‘Are 99.9% of you asleep, stunned? Where is edification? Where is mutual edification?’ Well, that’s my take. Let the apostle’s words tell their own story:

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a language speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their up-building and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a language builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the *ekklēsia*. Now I want you all to speak in languages, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in languages, unless someone interprets, so that the *ekklēsia* may be built up...

So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the *ekklēsia*.

Therefore, one who speaks in a language should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a language, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in languages more than all of you. Nevertheless, in the *ekklēsia* I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a language.

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature... If, therefore, the whole *ekklēsia* comes together and all speak in languages, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?

¹³ From the Arabic for a fence made of thorns, a stockade protecting the area to be defended at all costs. Originally in Sudan.

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But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a language, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a language, 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 the *ekklēsia* 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 (1 Cor. 14:1-33).

Here we get an invaluable glimpse into *ekklēsia*-life in Corinth, 2000 years ago. This is what it was like. The apostle had just spoken in detail of the *ekklēsia*, the believers, as being one body (1 Cor. 12:12-31), and in the following chapter of my booklet I will return to this. But, for the moment, just linking what the apostle said in 1 Corinthians 12 with what he said in 1 Corinthians 14, and applying that to the present issue (Gal. 4:19), what do we find? According to Paul – no doubt because of the slowness of his readers he felt it was necessary to state the blindingly obvious – ‘the body does not consist of one member but of many’ (1 Cor. 12:14, but entire chapter). According to the Fathers, however – and the overwhelming majority of Christendom churches ever since – ‘the body *does* consist of one member, and he the all-dominant member – the voice, the cleric – and of many subservient members, the laity – the ears’.¹⁴ What is more, the apostle’s: ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together’, has become: ‘If one member fails, the pastor worries about it, and, from the elevated safety of his pulpit, he preaches to try to improve things’.

¹⁴ See my ‘Can We Learn From Luther’s “Ear”?’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

A man of straw? Oh? Listen to John Calvin and John MacArthur on Galatians 4:19.

John Calvin:

This is a remarkable passage for illustrating the efficacy of the Christian ministry [Calvin meant the pulpit ministry of the stated (ordained?) preacher – DG]. True, we are ‘born of God’ (1 John 3:9), but, because he [that is, God] employs a minister and preaching as his instruments for that purpose, he is pleased to ascribe to them that work which himself performs, through the power of his Spirit, in co-operation with the labours of man. Let us always attend to this distinction, that, when a minister is contrasted with God, he is nothing, and can do nothing, and is utterly useless; but, because the Holy Spirit works efficaciously by means of him, he comes to be regarded and praised as an agent. Still, it is not what he can do in himself, or apart from God, but what God does by him, that is there described. If ministers wish to do anything, let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves [or some man-made theology – DG], in their hearers.

John MacArthur:

And I might add at this point, this [Paul’s concern in Galatians 4:19] is the concern of every faithful pastor for his people. This is the pain of the ministry, the pain of seeing your [*sic*] children become like Christ. And nothing is enough short of that. Nothing is enough short of that.¹⁵

Let’s not beat about the bush! This Christendom template is not only wrong, clearly at variance with the new covenant (see the passages quoted throughout this booklet), but though it has been given plenty of air-time – 1700 years – its track record is miserable; it signally fails to produce transformed lives, lives which conform to Christ.¹⁶ Indeed, I question whether such a purpose ever crosses the mind of most believers, that it appears on their agenda. So much so, I doubt that many believers, on being asked: ‘Why do you go to church (I am, for sake of argument, accepting this Christendom-terminology, even though it is quite unscriptural)?’, would reply: ‘To participate in the mutual edification of all the saints by the

¹⁵ John MacArthur: ‘The Primary Importance of Sanctification’.

¹⁶ See my *Sowed*.

Spirit, and for two main reasons. *First*, that I might be increasingly transformed into Christ's likeness, that Christ may be formed within me, that I might attain to the stature of the fullness of Christ. *Secondly*, to look for, and do what I can for, the spiritual transformation of the whole body into Christ's likeness'. Far from it! It would more likely be along the lines: 'I go to church to worship God, worship him by singing hymns and, above all, as the climax of the service, to listen to the pastor giving us his sermon'. (I leave you, reader, to work out how many non-scriptural concepts are in that short sentence).¹⁷

And unless we drop the Christendom-model, and go back to the scriptural pattern, I am very much afraid – with today's overbearing emphasis on inclusivism in 'church attendance'¹⁸ – that this wretched state of affairs will continue, and get worse. I think I know the sort of thing the writer of Hebrews would say to most believers today:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:12-14; see also 1 Cor. 3:1-2; 14:20).

As a matter of urgency, we must get back to the new-covenant. On this question of mutual edification through instruction, reproof and encouragement by the Spirit, Ephesians 4:11-16 does not stand alone in Scripture. Quite the reverse:

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14).

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God

¹⁷ See my *Public*.

¹⁸ See my *Attracting; Relationship*.

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the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:18-21).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16).

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up [that is, edify one another], just as you are doing (1 Thess. 5:11).

Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end... Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 3:13-14; 10:24-25).¹⁹

It stands out a mile: the first believers certainly did not go to ‘the house of God’ to confine themselves to submitting as silent listeners to monologues delivered from on high by a minister, presbyter, elder or whatever: call him what you will, such a man is a virtual priest, full stop, if not a local pope!²⁰ No! The early believers assembled to engage, by the Spirit, in mutual encouragement, to teach and admonish one another from Scripture. They did not do this by some kind of silent sign language: they actually spoke to each other. Wow!

Of course, in addition, the Spirit equipped the *ekklēsia* with specially gifted believers, including teachers (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; and so on). These able teachers would teach the *ekklēsia* with the intention of making every believer a profitable priest engaged in edifying the body of Christ – precisely the force of the apostle’s words (Eph. 4:11-16). They certainly did not teach them so as to put a stop to mutual edification!

¹⁹ Incidentally, I used to think that ‘the Day drawing near’ refers to the day of judgment. In writing this present book, I now see another reference alongside that: the day of glorification for believers.

²⁰ John Milton’s ‘new presbyter, old priest writ large’ still stands.

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In short, the man in the pulpit is not meant to be the only voice in the *ekklēsia*. Indeed, his work is to train all the believers to fulfil their new-covenant ministry – not to make them increasingly dependent on his endless monologues delivered from on high. That is why I used ‘confine themselves’ a moment or two ago: ‘the first believers certainly did not... confine themselves to submitting as silent listeners to monologues’.

Christendom, alas, has turned Christ’s horizontal and mutual participation for edification into an exclusive ministerial vertical and solo diet of monologues. And the majority of believers continue – like docile sheep – to go along with it. Even though it has, as I said, signally failed.

That’s not all. Another mark of this disastrous loss can be clearly seen in the way Christendom as managed to reduce or confine its corrupt adaptation of mutual edification to a once-a-week (or, possibly, twice or thrice each week) ‘preaching service’ (in reality, a monologue lecture) instead of what Christ established and promised to adorn with his presence:

Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Matt. 18:20).

What do I mean? Is it really such a leap as to think of this as: ‘Wherever and whenever two or three are gathered in my name...’? Are we so besotted with the Christendom model that we must understand this to mean: ‘Where two or three (preferably, thousand) are gathered once-a-week²¹ in the house of God to listen to the pastor delivering his monologue...’? And take the question of numbers. Clearly, in the early days (after the initial – and atypical – expansion at Jerusalem) the believers assembled in private houses.²² Naturally! Mutual participation demands a relatively small number. Christendom, however, is a global enterprise which – again, naturally – sees the obvious economy and efficiency of size. If the minister can deliver his monologue to thousands, how

²¹ Or... see above.

²² See my *Public*.

much more efficient than dealing with a few! It is all so self-fulfilling!

A re-quotation of the following passage should disabuse us:

Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end... Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 3:13-14; 10:24-25).

In the days of the old covenant, God certainly sent prophets to proclaim his message to his people, yes. But this did not rule out conversational participation: God commended those Jews who met to mutually encourage and teach each other:

Those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him (Mal. 3:16-18).

Fellow-believers: Will we continue to exist at a poorer level than those old-covenant Jews? Why have we allowed the founders and present administrators of Christendom to rob us of our Christ-given birthright and responsibility, so that, almost without exception, we have lost the principle and practice of mutual edification within the *ekklēsia*?

Sad it is, but we are forced to admit that the evangelical world has, in large part, allowed the heavy biblical emphasis on the corporate, the mutual – the ‘one another’s’ (John 13:14,34; 15:12,17; Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 14:13; 15:7,14; 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 5: 13,15,26; 6:2; Eph. 4:2,32; Col. 3:13,16; 1 Thess. 4:9,18; 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 1:22; 5:14; 1 John 3:11,23; 4:7,11-12; 2 John 5) – to be replaced by the individual, the narcissistic.

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The loss is catastrophic, striking at the very heart of God's eternal purpose in saving his elect; namely, their increasing conformation to Christ's likeness by the Spirit, 'Christ being formed in them'. Scripturally, the *ekklēsia* has a dominant part – a non-negotiable part – to play in God's plan. Which is, the life-long process of believers being stimulated to engage in mutual edification to bring about their transformation by the Spirit, to see 'Christ formed in them', for them to 'come to the stature of the fullness of Christ'. I am convinced that in this matter evangelicals by and large are quenching the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19). And it is a disaster.

Believers, the Spirit & the Ekklēsia: Unity

I turn now to ‘Unity’.¹ And what a subject that is! Unity – the unity of God and believers, the unity of believers with each other. Unity among believers flowing out unity of believers with God himself. This unity among believers is an absolute in the new covenant. If anything breaks it, it is a sin; it is tragic. ‘Vital’, ‘essential’, are words woefully inadequate to qualify the unity in question. So much so, I confess I feel presumptuous even to be discussing it. But nobody can think of believers and the *ekklēsia* without thinking about unity between believers. Unity is right at the top of the list. In Scripture, I mean. In Christendom? That’s something altogether different.

Let me start with the key apostolic passage on the oneness of believers in the *ekklēsia*:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say: ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say: ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand: ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet: ‘I have no need of you’. On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on

¹ To repeat an earlier note: the spiritual unity in question has nothing to do with the Ecumenical Movement, a diabolical Christendom fabrication.

those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more representable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the *ekklēsia* first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of languages. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with languages? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts (1 Cor. 12:12-31).

Let me explore this precious *ekklēsia*-unity a little more.

Paul has drawn his illustration from the world of anatomy, a world with which we are all sufficiently familiar. We don't have to be anatomical experts to get the point: we all know that a human's body, when it is functioning as it should, is united, is one, all its parts working in unison, to one common end. Yes, the body has many members, many different members – arms, legs, hands, eyes, ears, and such like. And today, of course, with our vastly increased understanding of human anatomy, we can go further, much further than Paul could. The human body is made up of many various internal as well as external organs, a myriad of different glands, all connected and controlled by the head by means of a tip-top nervous system, every part working all the time, all working in concert. The body, though amazingly, wonderfully varied in its composition, is one, with every individual part working for the good of the whole. When this principle breaks down, it spells grief, grief with a capital G. A body at war with itself is a pitiful sight to behold. It is appalling to see a man when some of his organs or glands are failing or positively working against his overall good. For instance, if his immune system is over-active, the man will be grievously ill. If his nervous system is impaired by a stroke, if his brain misdirects his body's reactions, if his body produces too much, or too little, insulin, and so on, we stand horrified, distressed at such a

devastating sight. We know that in the ideal, the body is one, with every member working for the overall good. Anything less is disastrous.

Paul built on this undeniable self-evident truth, declaring: ‘The *ekklēsia* is a body. Indeed, it is the body of Christ himself. Think of that! So unity must be a mark of the *ekklēsia*’. This happy unity (Ps. 133) must be the distinguishing characteristic of the *ekklēsia*. Unity is an absolute. The *ekklēsia* spells unity; unity spells *ekklēsia*. If not – calamity!’

I am not overstating it. Listen to the apostle’s own words: ‘Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it’ (1 Cor. 12:12-13,27); see also John 15:5; Rom. 12:4-5; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:4-6,15-16; 5:30; Col. 1:18; 2:19; 3:15). The *ekklēsia* is a body with Christ as its Head. This is not a mere figure of speech. The Spirit produces an organic (living) unity under Christ as Head; namely, the *ekklēsia*, the body of Christ himself.

And do not miss the final paragraph in the extract from 1 Corinthians 12:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the *ekklēsia* first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of languages. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with languages? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts (1 Cor. 12:27-31).

The *ekklēsia* is the body of Christ with Christ himself as Head, all being bound together by the Spirit. So what purpose does this body serve? What does Christ want from and in the *ekklēsia* – his body – by his Spirit? Many things, of course. But clearly, at the top of the list, is... what? Mutual edification! And this does not mean all the other members encouraging ‘the pastor’ by devoted ‘attendance at services’. Participation! Participation! Participation!

One final point. We are not talking about the individual. Paul was adamant. To think that one individual member of the body might say that he is of no use because he is not such-and-such an organ, or tell another individual member that the latter has no value, is incredible. All the members make up the body. And this applies whether it be the human body or the *ekklēsia*. The *ekklēsia* is one in the corporate, corporate in one. It is one or it is nothing.

Let me now turn to Ephesians.

Paul spoke of God the Father who:

...put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave him as Head over all things to the *ekklēsia*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22; see also Col. 1:18).

With this reference to the body of Christ, Paul was immediately in the region of unity. He spelled it out. He spoke of 'the unity of the faith' (Eph. 4:13). What did he mean by this? He had just spoken of 'one faith' (Eph. 4:5), doing so in the heart of a passage heavy on 'unity', 'oneness' and 'sanctification', all in 'one body' by 'one Spirit' producing 'the unity of the Spirit':

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift (Eph. 4:1-7).

And, as we have seen, this led the apostle directly into saying:

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds-and-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry,² for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to

² I repeat an earlier note. This does not mean 'the pastoral, preaching ministry'. Rather, it speaks of the enabling of all the saints to edify each other mutually. See my *The Pastor; The Priesthood of All Believers*;

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the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

I have re-quoted this extract because of its paramount importance in the matter of unity. Unity in Christ, unity in the gospel, mutual edification leading to transformation: Paul forged (what should be) an unbreakable link between all three. Believers, said the apostle (including himself), are to be taken up with mutual edification through *ekklēsia*-life, ‘until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13). It could not be clearer. A leading purpose in Christ’s setting up of the *ekklēsia* is the promotion of such a glorious end: unity in likeness to Christ.

Notice how Ephesians 4:1-7 leads to Ephesians 4:11-16 which leads to:

Put off your old self [what you were in Adam], which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self [what you are in Christ], created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to

Weakness. See also my ‘Can We Learn From Luther’s “Ear”?’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

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those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:22-30).

Once again, we have the corporate. You cannot have *ekklēsia*-life as an individual. Whatever else *ekklēsia*-life is, it is corporate. Unity! This is why Christ established the *ekklēsia* – to foster this unity, unity in the faith, unity in Christ, unity under the gospel, and around the gospel. Unity could not be higher in God’s purpose in the new covenant. As Christ prayed just before his crucifixion:

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one... I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:6-23).

Once again, do not miss the link between ‘sanctification’ – transformation – and ‘unity’. And, once again, note the plural.

In the early days of the new covenant, the first believers joyfully lived out this unity (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32), but, alas, this happy state of affairs did not last, and strong apostolic teaching on unity was soon called for. Experience always confirms that maintenance of spiritual unity is a perennial difficulty. Indeed, the effort it demands

is in itself sanctifying and transforming. It was so for the first disciples. So much so, the apostles not only instructed on the question of unity itself – they were not concerned with the unity as an intellectual exercise; far from it! – but they found it necessary to insist on the practice of unity, the nurture of unity, and that’s how they repeatedly addressed fellow-believers, as can be seen from the frequency of the theme in their writings (Rom. 12:16; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:3-4; 11:17-22; 12:12-13; 2 Cor. 12:20-21; 13:11; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:1-6; Phil. 2:1-2; Col. 3:13-14; 1 Pet. 3:8).

We have a classic example of all this among the first believers. Imagine it! Former Jews and Gentiles sitting down together, eating together, living happily with each other, even when faced with troublesome issues such as the observance of days, the eating of food which had gone through the rites of idolatry. We may – mistakenly – think we have outgrown such things (we have not! – in any case, new causes of division arise all the time). These hangovers from their pre-regenerate days, whether Jewish or pagan, were real and pressing – sharp – questions of conscience for the early believers. How would they cope? How could they cope? How would all this work out? How could unity be fostered? This is not a trumped-up case; it was a real bone of contention 2000 years ago. Strong feelings were aroused. Strong words were used. Tradition (always a powerful driver) came into play. Principles were at stake. Mistakes were made. Romans 14:1 – 15:7; 1 Corinthians 8 – 10; Galatians 2:11-21; Colossians 2:16-17, and such like leave no room for doubt on that score. It is possible that the events of Acts 6:1-7 had such overtones.

Let me explore how Paul approached this issue when writing to the Romans. He was blunt: ‘Live in harmony with one another’ (Rom. 12:16)! But how? Wishful thinking? Not at all! The believers, as I said, had real differences of opinion, sharp differences, over the various matters just mentioned. To deal with it, Paul put Christ right at the top of the agenda. If you read the following passage aloud, the apostle’s emphasis will spring into life:

The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord.
The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord

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and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every language shall confess to God'.

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God...

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...

Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but...

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom. 14:6-17; 15:2-3,5-7).

'The Lord... the Lord... Christ... Christ Jesus... the Lord Jesus Christ... Christ...', and all 'in the Holy Spirit'. In short: 'Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires' (Rom. 13:14). Christ! Christ! Christ! Regeneration leading to conversion has united the elect to Christ, they are in Christ, and Christ is in them. 'Now live it out!'

The second strand in the apostle's instruction to the Romans about unity concerned the mutual edification of the believers in and through all the various divisive issues which reared their head:

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building [that is, edification]... Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up (Rom. 14:19; 15:2).

And, clearly, Scripture was to play a vital role in bringing all this about:

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For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).

They had Christ's own example:

I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:15-17; see also Matt. 11:29).

Peter never forgot Christ's words and the point they highlighted:

If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:20-23).

Nor John:

Whoever says he abides in [Christ] ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:6).

As the writer of Hebrews said:

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him... Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 3:1-2; 12:1-2).

As Paul put it:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1; see also Eph. 5:1-2; Col. 3:13).

And who is the one who can enable believers to do all this? The Spirit:

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Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:16-26; 5:1-2).

And this has consequences, big consequences:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:16-21).

Christ appears six times in that extract on reconciliation. Yes, the fundamental reconciliation at issue is that which Christ, by his death, accomplished between God and his elect (Rom. 5:10-11; Eph. 2:14-17; Col. 1:19-20). No question of it! But since every believer is reconciled to God by Christ, every believer must be

reconciled to every other believer. This is the standard. And it is more. By the Spirit, Christ himself, in the believer, is the power which enables believers to be reconciled to each other. Christ! Christ! Christ!

Take the experience of Philemon and Onesimus as another classic example. To bring about an effective reconciliation between two believers who were in serious dispute, is it not significant that, in his short letter to Philemon, Paul referred ten times to the Lord Jesus Christ? Paul didn't, as so many 'pastors' do, nag Philemon and Onesimus; nor did he do as so many Reformed 'pastors' do, and reach for what has become known as Calvin's whip of the law,³ and lash them with that. No! It was Christ all the way!⁴ Christ! Christ! Christ!

And new-covenant unity, unity in Christ, has massive, far-reaching benefits extending far beyond the *ekklēsia* – even to unbelievers, convincing them that believers really do belong to Christ, that Christ really was sent by God the Father, that he – Christ – and believers are one in being loved of the Father. As Christ declared to his disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

And as he expressed it in his mediatorial prayer:

I do not ask for these [that is, the apostles] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may

³ See my *Christ*.

⁴ Yes, the apostles would use the Mosaic law to illustrate their argument (Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 9:8-14), but the great stimulus, the great standard, for the believer is always Christ. Take money (2 Cor. 8:9), showing kindness and forgiveness (Eph. 4:31 – 5:2; Phil. 2:1-2; Col. 3:12-13; 1 John 3:17-18; 4:11), and so on.

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become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:20-23).

To state the obvious, disunity among believers is tragic – both internally (in the *ekklēsia*) and externally (in the world), and, above all, it robs the triune God of his glory.

Gathering all this together, the following extract, taken from the apostle's letter to Corinth, makes explicit the link between mutual edification, unity and sanctification, all in Christ:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:4-10).

Such is the way Paul dealt with these thorny problems, and provoked spiritual unity among believers. It was the only way. It still is.

Incidentally, all this furnishes us with a first-class illustration of what I meant when I said that the teachers in the *ekklēsia* are to teach all the believers – *not to silence them* but so that they can all the more profitably participate in mutual edification and, consequently, reach unity through edification. And if that is not transforming, what is?

And what is the key to unity? Love. Of the many, many scriptural passages which speak of it, let me give but a selection. Some of them have appeared already in this work, but they bear repetition. Indeed, let us not forget that these words were read – almost certainly, listened to as they were read aloud – by the first believers as they assembled in the *ekklēsia*. In addition, notice how the themes of progressive sanctification, unity, the Spirit in the name of

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Christ are all interlocked with the bond which cements everything – love:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality (Rom. 12:9-13).

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet’, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love (1 Cor. 16:13-14).

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love... You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another... The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:6,13-15,22-26; 6:1-2).

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...because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers (Eph. 1:15-16).

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift... Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:1-16).

Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:2).

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (Phil. 2:1-2)

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid out for you in heaven... Epaphras... has made known to us your love in the Spirit (Col. 1:3-8).

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess. 3:11-13).

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more (1 Thess. 4:9-10).

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Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God (1 Pet. 1:22-23).

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing (1 Pet. 3:8-9).

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another... We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him... Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us (1 John 3:10-24).

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if

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we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says: 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome (1 John 4:7-21; 5:1-3).

Phew! How much Scripture is devoted to love!

1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14 are two chapters which have a massive role to play in what I have been saying: chapter 12 on the one-another body of Christ; chapter 14 on mutual edification among the believers. And what unites them? 1 Corinthians 13 – the chapter of all chapters in all Scripture (closely followed by John 13 – 17) on... on what? Love!

Nothing could be clearer than this:

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self [man] with its practices and have put on the new self [man], which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

I break in: think of all the trouble which 'Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free' could have caused if it had not been for 'but Christ is all, and in

all'. Think of the troubled areas of the world, even as I write: the Middle East, for example. Politicians do not have the answer. They, perhaps, can produce a temporary cessation of open warfare, but it is Christ and Christ alone, by his Spirit changing men's hearts, who can actually bring about such concord as this passage of Scripture is describing.⁵

To let Paul continue:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:9-17).

Before I close this chapter, a necessary word of caution. Without love, knowledge, instead of leading believers to edification, produces believers who are merely bags of wind, 'puffed up', proud, 'arrogant' (1 Cor. 4:6,18-19; 5:2; 13:4; Col. 2:18). The antidote? As Paul told the Philippians:

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the Day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Phil. 1:9-11).

Here it is: 'It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with [full, practical] knowledge [in experience] and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent'. In short, love and a discerning-knowledge, a discerning-knowledge and love, must be bed-fellows in every believer. Without love, as we have

⁵ See also Rom. 10:11-13; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 2:11-22.

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just seen, the result is pride. Without knowledge, the result is mere sentiment, a fuzzy, misty well-meaning-ness. It has to be both love and knowledge, knowledge and love. Knowledge is the Spirit's gift (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 12:8), and love is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Even that is not all. As the apostle explained, he wanted all this to be transforming: 'So that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the Day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God'. And, moreover, with it all he was appealing for unity (Phil. 1:1,4,7,8,27; 2:2-4,17; 4:2,23).

As he told the Colossians:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ (Col. 2:1-5).

Thus the new covenant. By the Spirit in the *ekklēsia*, brothers and sisters in Christ are to edify each other in scriptural instruction, reproof and encouragement, working all the while in love to bring about a unity in which the whole body matures in Christ's likeness.

A Last Word

Transformation and Unity. Unity and Transformation. Not either/or, but both. Attempted transformation without unity leads to isolationism; attempted unity without transformation degenerates into marshmallow. It is both transformation and unity. At the same time. Thus the new covenant. And that in a hostile, pagan world. And all centred in Christ, through weakness and suffering. Weakness? Yes, indeed. Christ was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4), and believers are weak (2 Cor. 12:9-10; 13:4).¹ Impossible? No! All is made possible by the power of the Spirit. And, although it has not been part of my theme in this present work, this will lead to the believers' glorification at the return of Christ:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine

¹ See my *Weakness*.

A Last Word

as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the Day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me (Phil. 2:1-18).

Thus the new covenant and the *ekklēsia* by the Spirit. Thus it was in the early days.

Following the death of the apostles, however, as we have seen, when the Fathers arose in the second and third centuries, and unity was one of their over-arching concerns, they adopted a different approach. A very different approach. But, mistaking uniformity for unity (just as today, many are mistaking outward conformity for inward conversion), they went back to the old covenant and imposed that on the new, introducing into the *ekklēsia* – which became ‘the Church’ – the notion of a clergy presiding over the laity. Unity would be accomplished, they thought, by exalting the clergy, with, supposedly, all the laity happily clustered under this hierarchy. Now, while this scheme certainly produced a catholic uniformity which nearly everybody pretended was an expression of unity, it was in fact a sham; the so-called Church was grievously flawed, divided, and failed to deliver what was required. Naturally! It was a man-made institution trying to ape the Spirit at work in the *ekklēsia*!

But things did not stop there. They got worse – with the invention of Christendom. Replacing the ministry of the Spirit with the power of the sword, the State Church of Christendom certainly enforced some kind of outward uniformity under a princely clerical hierarchy. But it flattered to deceive. Only the Spirit of God can produce real, inward, spiritual unity in the *ekklēsia* (Eph. 4:1-6).

The 16th-century Reformers, although they made far-reaching radical and scriptural changes over soteriology (but not all their enactments were scriptural, by any means!), they stopped short: they only tinkered with ecclesiastical matters. The basic institution remained intact. In particular, the Reformers elevated the role of the preacher with his monologue ministry, leaving the priesthood of all believers languishing on the sand after the tide had gone out,

largely confining the laity to faithfully attending the minister and accepting his unassailable discourses, and making the appropriate responses in the liturgy and hymnology.² Under such a system, confessional correctness ousts real, spiritual transformation and unity. The Christendom Church promotes conformity to rules; the new-covenant way is for conversion and change – transformation into the full stature of likeness to Christ.

As for transformation, as I have already intimated, Calvin was clear: the progressive sanctification of the believer is by repeated application of the whip of the Mosaic law. The Puritans, latching onto this, set it in concrete in their Westminster documents in the 1640s. Many today, even though they are unaware of this history, are the children of such a process.³

Although an increasing number are seeing the failure of the system, alas, the Christendom-church institution maintains its grip. So much so, this institution has become the unquestioned norm for the overwhelming majority of believers. Even to question it marks one as ‘suspicious’. But question it we must! Some do. Some have.

Alexander MacLaren:

The apostle’s great thought is made small [it is ruined – DG] and the truth of it is falsified when it is...⁴ embodied in institutions. It has been sought in a uniformity which resembles unity as much as a bundle of faggots, all cut to the same length, and tied together with a rope, resemble the tree from which they were chopped, waving in the wind and living one life to the tips of its furthest branches. Men have made out of the apostle’s divine vision of a unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God ‘a staunch and solid piece of framework as any January could freeze together’, and few things have stood more in the way of the realisation of his glowing anticipations than the formation of the great Corporation [that is, the Christendom Church – DG], imposing from its bulk and antiquity, to part from which was branded as breaking the unity of the Spirit.

² See my *The Pastor; Battle*.

³ See my *Christ*.

⁴ I have omitted ‘over-hastily’.

And that, alas, is where we are today.

A last word. I have not published this booklet to end a conversation, but to start one; not to set out a blueprint for action in the sense of ‘this is how you do it’ – I wouldn’t presume to be able to spell out the way to reverse 1700 years of Christendom. No! – but I have set out what I see as the stark contrast between Christendom and the new covenant on this vital matter of spiritual transformation and unity nourished by the Spirit using a well-taught mutual edification in the *ekklēsia*. Christendom has failed in this, failed miserably. No tinkering with the institution will put matters right. They can’t be put right within the institution. God’s call is clear: ‘Come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord’ (2 Cor. 6:17). The only solution is the Spirit in believers who are practicing new-covenant principles; that is the only way.⁵ I hope that by placing a straight stick alongside the crooked I may not only have shown the crookedness of the crooked, but at least stimulated thought about these matters, encouraging some to make a start in getting back to the new covenant, and reclaiming some of the God-given treasures that we have for such a long time foolishly mislaid – or irresponsibly allowed ourselves to be robbed of.

And, it goes without saying, I hope this little work will encourage those believers who are trying to practice new-covenant principles.

I am only too conscious that I have been handling things which are too high for me. I see what I think I see, but I see it only ‘through a glass darkly’ or ‘in a mirror dimly’ (1 Cor. 13:12). Looking back over these pages, I can see that I have loaded a tremendous burden on the *ekklēsia* – the transformation of believers and their unity in Christ, no less; in short, the fulfilment of Christ’s mediatorial prayer. Can it bear such a weight? Of course it can! How can I be so sure? Because it is not I who has laid this burden on the *ekklēsia*, but Christ, Christ himself, and who, by his Spirit, used Paul and the other apostles to set it out in Scripture.

I have spoken of the way God uses the *ekklēsia* to speak to the world. But it goes even further. Indeed, it is impossible to overstate

⁵ My twofold ‘only’ is deliberate.

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the use God makes of the *ekklēsia* when it is functioning as it should. As Paul explained:

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the *ekklēsia* the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the *ekklēsia* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3:7-21).

What a tragedy, then, that we allow Christendom to ruin all this. Indeed, 'sin' is not too strong a word for it. We are sinning if we fail to do what we can to promote the work of the Spirit in the *ekklēsia*.

But, as I say, I have seen these things only dimly. Why? Because Christendom has been riveted into my DNA, and I have found it exceedingly difficult to shake off, almost impossible to read Scripture except through the film of Christendom-speak and Christendom-thought. And yet God, through Paul, has made it clear to all believers: 'Be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (Rom. 12:2) or: 'Be renewed in the spirit of your minds' (Eph. 4:23). I don't think it is too great a leap to bring that into the 21st

century and understand it to read: ‘Stop thinking in terms dictated by Christendom: you are children of the new covenant. Be renewed, therefore, in your thinking. Think new covenant!’ And act new covenant! As Paul told the Philippians:

Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27)

Better:

Behave [live] as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Why? Because of what you are. We may be citizens of Philippi, Rome, Little Snoring Under the Sea, or whatever, but the truth is, as believers, ‘our citizenship is in heaven’ (Phil.3:20). The meaning is obvious: believers are members of the new covenant, and they should think and act as children of the new covenant, not as Christendom-dupes. If we don’t think and act in new-covenant terms, we shall merit the apostle’s rebuke, having failed to carry out his command: ‘Brothers, do not be children in your thinking’ (1 Cor. 14:20). And the result will be dire; that is, it will continue to be dire, and get even worse.

And that leads me to add an important postscript. Such a confession as I have just made might encourage you, reader, to throw up your hands, and say all this is too difficult; let’s leave it alone. After all, the majority are happy with the Christendom-church system: can so many be wrong, and so few oddballs right? This, I am afraid, is getting near the heart of the problem. The Bereans, we know, ‘examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so’ (see Acts 17:11). Under Christendom’s influence, as I have tried to argue in these pages, many of today’s professing believers would not have been among their number: they take another course, an easier course. They prefer to resign their critical faculty, handing it over to ‘the pastor’. Not only does he know what’s what, but to question his pronouncements is tantamount to sinning. ‘Touch not the Lord’s anointed’ (1 Chron. 16:22; Ps. 105:15) is the mantra. Then again, a growing number are seemingly becoming dazzled by academe, overwhelmed by the output of the scholars. So much so, unless we have a thorough working knowledge of first-century Judaism and the Greco-Roman world of thought, a mastery of the

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original languages, and all the rest, we really can't be expected to understand the Bible, can we? So why bother? Take it as read! Listen to the scholars, the experts.⁶

Now in the worlds of medicine, philosophy, cosmology, and all the rest – including theology – trusting the experts is probably a sensible course. But I am not talking about theology. I am concerned with Scripture. And that is something altogether different. It is unique.

Let me explain. Take the post-Pentecost Scriptures. The first men and women who received those Scriptures were not experts in theology. Moreover, they didn't even have a personal copy of what Paul, John, James or Peter – whoever – had written. Even if they were able to read, they had nothing to read! They simply heard the inspired words being read aloud – and, no doubt, amplified, commented on, explained further. As we have seen, they would then discuss what they heard, chewing over the doctrine. And thus such people – many of who were ill-educated – Phoebe, Prisca, Aquila, Apelles, Julia, and all the rest (Rom. 16), were able to take on board the doctrine of Romans. Think of that! The two nameless ones on the road to Emmaus could absorb Christ's exposition of the law and the prophets (Luke 24). How? How could William Tyndale be sure that, by translating Scripture into English, the ploughboy would know more scriptural doctrine than the Pope? How?

The answer to such questions gives us the key. Pentecost – the gift of the Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, every believer – without exception – can read and understand Scripture. I am not saying that every believer is an expert in theology, but I am asserting that the Spirit in every believer enables every believer to know the truth and be set free by the truth (John 8:31-32). Every believer has the Spirit; every believer, therefore, can understand the truth (1 John 2:20-21,27; 5:20; see also John 6:45; 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:10,12,16; Eph. 4:21). Without the Spirit, a man may be an expert in theology, philosophy, history or whatever, but be utterly ignorant

⁶ I am not dismissing any of the above. Indeed, I have benefited by the labours of scholars. But there is a world of difference between using scholarship and making an idol of it.

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of the truth of Scripture (1 Cor. 2:6-16). He may know the structure of Scripture, its scaffolding, back to front, but as to the heart of Scripture... blank. And worse. But the humblest believer, led by the Spirit...

As Christ, addressing his Father, declared:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (Matt. 11:25-26).

It still is.

Well, that's a long-winded way of saying that for one reason or another many believers might well be tempted to dismiss what I have written as something too wacky to be worth thinking about, not worth exploring. Such an attitude would be a dereliction of duty. Not making the effort to pore over the Scriptures for oneself, resigning one's responsibility to 'the pastor' – the one 'who always knows best' – or to the scholar who really does 'have a handle' on these things, or simply going with the crowd, is wrong. It is culpable. Taking John 5:39 in the indicative or imperative, you have Jesus' command: 'Search the Scriptures'. Not Scripture filtered and glossed by Confessions or tradition. Scripture. In short, look to God to guide you by his Spirit through his word.

