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www.whisperdivine.uk

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The Need For Change

The faith of one's childhood instilled by tales in school and nursery does not always fit an adult perspective, yet can be appropriate for that time; meet our childhood's needs.

Simplistic stories of unquestioned truth can be undermined by adult knowledge, for the reality of life's experiences, and even conflicts in the Christian body, demolish the consolation of conformity.

Our ideas of divinity must change, without necessarily invalidating past ideas, yet seeing many of them in a different light, presenting new angles on familiar views, projecting new perspectives of religion.

Such change may grow upon one as a stealthy adjustment to new concepts, or be forced by events in life's journey, changes in personal circumstance, or the words or deeds of others.

Peace lies in new alignments:
new birth into a new relationship,
new answers to the forbidden questions,
new pathways on the religious journey,
new concepts of the ways of God,
a new vision for mankind.

*Would this new territory be
a place of peace or of uncertainty and conflict?*

A Spiritual Journey

The God of my childhood was said to deal impartial justice from a glorious throne in that heavenly realm above the clouds, to which, if I was good, I could aspire.

The ideas presented to me pandered to my condition, with simplistic, childish, concepts of:
black and white, hero and villain,
God and Satan, good and evil,
Father Christmas.

As a child, church attendance on Sunday was inescapable, but it was a penance; for the church was cold and damp; even the seats were uncomfortable.

We sang boring hymns, without reality or rousing rhythm. The words were antique, often meaningless, and the tunes were seldom attuned to my youthful ears. Neither did they say anything that I wanted to express.

The Alpha Course poster on church noticeboards today asks:
"Christianity, boring, untrue and irrelevant?"
and we, my childhood friends and I,
would have cried, " Yes indeed!"
and, we might have added,
"cold and uncomfortable"
as well.

As I grew older, I met other situations, came to see a wider spectrum, for all is not black or white. There are innumerable brilliant colours and shades. For good intentions do not always work for the best, and goodness can mask another false agenda.

So, as I reached maturity, I discarded the stories of angelic beings with those of fairies and hobgoblins; discarded the tales of miracles with those of witch's spells; discarded religious fantasies, stories woven about divinity, and the reality of divine existence.

Although occasionally led by others to attend a church, it was for very human rather than any spiritual considerations. Thereby, I was unwarily drawn onto an Alpha course. Here I came to realise the reality of divinity. I was changed; forced to alter my views.

Introduction

Thus “Born Again”¹ through an experience of the spiritual,
I came to accept the concepts of the Alpha Course,
and thus the message of the Evangelical Church²;
Black and White, hero and villain: God and Satan,
good and evil, the eternal Trinity, sin and guilt,
an inspired inerrant Bible.

I embraced these concepts eagerly.
Herein lay truth, salvation, the meaning of life!
As I grew older, I met other ideas, read more deeply,
experienced a wider spirituality; one less structured, bounded;
a churchmanship and doctrine less certain of its rectitude.
For institutional piety can hide a less worthy agenda.
Bounded, strident, Christian doctrine
can often create division and hurt.
It can even be a power-base
for religious domination.

So, once again, though with a more reasoned approach,
I discarded the legends that support religious dogma;
discarded the sanitised tales of the early Church,
discarded the fantasies woven around Christ.
sought another, truer, way.

I was left with questions and challenged by unlikely answers.
The doctrine of orthodox tradition seemed no longer tenable;
its sacraments seemed tainted by an unholy agenda.
Truth seemed to lie beyond its boundaries.

So, driven to seek anew for truth, I took to the Internet;
found the Progressive Christian Network³;
fed off its ideas and those of others;
travelled beyond the boundaries of religious doctrine
seeking to find a fresh vision of truth, of God, of right religion.

I am still travelling even though sufficiently assured
to place this booklet as a marker on my journey,
but then, really, it's not all about me⁴, is it?

Edward Conder

Spring 2024

¹ That is changed to another set of beliefs. See “Born Again” at page 75

² The Evangelical doctrine is spelt out at page 89,

³ See “Progressive Christianity” at page 91

⁴ See “It's not all about me” at page 78

The Path of Jesus

Surely, as a Christian, we are meant to follow the path of Jesus, the founder of our faith.

The path of Jesus is shown as being one of experiential faith, based on personal experience of transcendent divinity, not on some convincing argument, written account, or self-centred desire for eternal salvation.

Jesus gave up his freedom completely to the will of God. In doing so he opened himself up to the fullness of the Spirit. Something which we only experience if we follow his example. Such sublimation is the supreme risk built on faith and on trust, and the supreme sacrifice of a life given for others,

This path is a denial of the capitalist values of society, of self-sufficiency, self-worth and individualism. It is a call for mutual sharing, distributive justice and sacrificial care for others.

This is a call for action on behalf of those without resources; the disabled, disheartened; those trapped in poverty or slavery. This is a call to address their material and non-material needs, to address the pain of those who can not forgive themselves, or the despair of whose lives have lost all meaning.

This is a call to free ourselves, from whatever limits us; to acknowledge the barriers and allow ourselves to go through; to recognise the barriers of others and break them down; maybe freeing ourselves to be what we could be.

It is also a call to turn away from foolish pride and ambition; to love our neighbour; be free of the need to conquer others. As scripture tells us, it is a path that can lead to execution, or to at least, in our day, ejection from religious circles. It is a radical and dangerous path.

It is The Way of Jesus.⁵

*It is path of danger and exclusion.
It is a path that can still lead to "crucifixion".
Is it a path that we dare to travel?*

⁵ See also "Thoughts of Jesus", starting at page 51

The Developed Pathway

Christianity has, over the centuries, revised its route from one of self-sacrifice leading eventually even to the Cross, to a path that is said to lead to a place of post-mortal glory, through humbly believing, supporting and obeying the dictates and inventions of the church.⁶

The principles of justice and equality, that brought new life and hope to those in poverty, were replaced by concepts of power and authority appealing to the elite and middle-classes.

Maybe the final phrases of the Lord's Prayer⁷ were added to clarify the doctrinal situation.

The Enlightenment challenged much of the teaching and authoritarian doctrine established by the churches, and sought the original, human, face of Jesus behind the sacramental veil.⁸

The resultant "Liberal" theology discarded much that was valued by the man-in-the-pew, undermined much that the church had taught as fundamental. This was subversive to clerical position and authority. The inevitable doctrinal backlash reverted to a fundamentalism spelt out today by conservative Evangelicals.

We are left to wonder whether the present preaching and doctrine of the churches can ever truly return to the radical pathway of Jesus. Do we dare to leave the comfortable, paved path of authorised, accepted, Christianity, and stumble down the track that Jesus pioneered?

*Do we dare to investigate the potholes,
of misconception and lost reality,
that have undermined
the path of Jesus?*

⁶ See "The Mutating Gospel" starting at page 65

⁷ For Yours is the Kingdom the Power and the Glory" see also page 86

⁸ The effect of The Enlightenment is described at page 82

POTHOLES OF FAITH

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Myths and Legends.

The legends of antiquity support the doctrines of today.

We may have heard of ancient myths and legends,
Angels and archangels, hierarchies in heaven.
Eternal physical existence in heaven or hell.
Salvatory crucifixion or even saving grace.

We may be told the written words of ancient priests,
their prophetic utterance of a non-existent future.
Satan and his Demons said to tempt and divert,
as concealment of our worst excesses.

Christ's immaculate conception, virgin birth,
abiding shepherds, wise men and their gifts.
All the legends of his unknown childhood
and the elevation of untimely death.

Biased history framed as Holy Scriptures;
Bloody conquest told as Godly action.
Even humanised, sovereign divinity,
defining our every action.

These can be images taught and given value
as concealment for a blood-soaked past,
ignoring schism and martyrdom,
and a power-based agenda.

It needs courage to rethink the ideas of ages,
in the face of firm rejection by all in authority,
yet this could be the path of Jesus
that we are called to follow.

Moving Onward

The precepts of religion have been developed over years of theological discourse, centuries of discussion, to leave us with a defined pathway to an eternal future.

Yet, in that path, we may discern a human hand, which ensures leadership by a feudal hierarchy; self-appointing, dominant and self-serving.

Realisation of the possibility of such an agenda may prompt suspicion over the veracity of the package. In it, we may find illogical and conflicting messages, or ideas which are described as eternal truths, yet are undermined by new discoveries or even the nature of everyday existence.

Scholars renew our ideas of when of the Bible was written and restate whose hand and mind composed its contents⁹

Yet some still demand agreement to an inerrant Bible; require obedience to ancient blind-fold ignorance¹⁰; despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Institutional religion often demands that we discard academic discovery about the errors in religious dogma. These ideas are excluded from what is fed weekly to the pews. Church-goers are held in ignorance, maybe to protect them against doubt over the potholed path of religion.

Much that we are called to affirm in our statements of belief is the invention of later theologians or steeped in argument.

Yet, weekly, we conspire to affirm the virginity of Mary and the existence of a three-part Creator, as we dutifully proclaim “the Creed”.¹¹

*Should such ideas still be promoted by the churches,
or should preachers reflect the scholars' findings?
Should “the pews” remain fixed in position
or be open to new ideas?*

⁹ Thus, many pundits of the church still insist on Paul's authorship of epistles which academia has shown to be foreign to his hand and mind. Some still affirm Mosaic authorship of the Torah.

¹⁰ Maybe the sun rotating round the earth, a physical heavenly realm above the clouds, or the place of the female in conception.

¹¹ Comment on the Apostles Creed is at page 84

Foundational Questions

Many ideas, promoted as foundational, expose a human agenda.

Such questions as these may arise:

Does the church own the exclusive truth that it proclaims? (see The Christian Church at page 19)
Does God intervene in the events of our daily life? (see An Intervening Deity at page 48)
Does divinity really respond to our prayers, or is answered prayer a pious fiction? (see Prayer at page 49)
Is the church a vehicle of divinity or of earthy power and domination? (see pages 73 and 74)
Is the Bible the inspired word of divinity or a record of religious fantasies? (see The Bible at page 29)
Does the idea of divinity have any material reality, or is the idea of God merely a delusion? (see page 35)
Do the Gospel stories represent true tales of Jesus, or are they concoctions of later religious need? (see page 51)
Is there any certainty of eternal life beyond the grave? Is there a judgement, a heaven, a hell? (see page 44)
Did Jesus bring salvation to faithful individuals or to the whole world? (see The Kingdom of God at page 80)
Has worship hidden the message that Jesus preached? (See The Mutating Gospel at page 65) ¹²
Does the church offer a holy path to travel or are there less structured ways to holiness? (see Page 75)
Do miraculous stories expose the supernatural, or do they signal a deeper meaning to the text? (see page 50)
Do the facts of Evolution bar the concept of a Creator, or is proven Evolution a God-given conception? (see page 83)
Is there reality in a personalised form of evil, of Satan, or is evil part of every person's DNA? (page 42)

Once we put aside the placid acceptance of orthodox concepts
the way ahead becomes uncertain, unclassified.

We are taken from the tarmac highway¹³
to the beauty of the country lane,
but may be threatened by
the lack of signposts.

¹² See also "The Call of the Prophets" at page 87

¹³ The comfortable unchallenging path of religious certainty, see page 90

Facets of Faith

For some Christianity is a retreat into safe solitude,
alone with the divinity of their own imagination or experience,
embracing the unconditional love of God in quietness.

For many the heart of Christianity involves pouring out praise,
unwanted glutinous flattery of divinity, in terms unjustified,
yet satisfying a need to affirm their value in God's eyes.

The focus is on sacrament, song or sacrifice,
and, through prayer, demanding reward.

For many Christianity lies as confidence in divine salvation
from eternal, unimaginable, torture of body and the soul;
salvation earned by Jesus for all who believe in him,
as a part of a tripartite eternal deity.

For many the heart of Christianity lies in service,
focussed on the needs of others, not of ourselves;
focussed on the needs of unborn generations
for a viable environment, an unspoilt planet;
following the path of Jesus, rather than
worshipping him as if divinity.

For some, Christianity embraces all of these,
in some measure.

We are all called to make this world a better place when we go
than it was at our arrival; so to advance God's purposes¹⁴,
but this may not always be straightforward.

We are called to follow the way of Jesus.
Yet over the years that way has become full of potholes
causing us to swerve into the ditch or bring us to a sudden halt,
trapped by the self-centred inventions of others
that protect the power-brokers of
the very established religion
that Jesus challenged.

*Might the vocal advocates of God's desire
be driven by quite another agenda?*

¹⁴ God's purposes (see page 39) must surely include the progress of human morality towards the path outlined by Jesus (see page 5).

A CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

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A TRADITIONAL and ORTHODOX VIEW

We believe that all people everywhere are lost and face the judgement of God; that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation; and that for the salvation of lost and sinful mankind, repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ results in regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

Such negative Calvinism pours cold water on Godly joy. As lost creatures, depraved, degenerate, we are hell-bound or said to face an unknown stay in purgatory, unless supported by, expensive, mediation through priestly prayers and supplication.

These are the provisions of medieval religion formed to promote the empire of the church; the power of the papacy. Thus such entry to heaven became, is still, a potent weapon in the hands of those who would control religious power; a power that Jesus was said to have left to all, through the Spirit within him.

Yet maybe Jesus pointed out that heaven lies around us, is to be lived; that God's purpose is to realise heaven here; that judgement is not a post-death experience, but met in the ordinary lives that people lead.

Could global warming and environmental disaster be the consequences of not following the Way that Jesus presented?

A Worthy Life

A worthy lifestyle implies following a set of universal laws, that all would follow, independent of who or what they are.

These are the 'givens' which no one would question, which apply in any situation or environment.

Maybe these guidelines lie at the heart of all religious teaching.

They are what is common to all, or most, human religions.

Maybe they find expression in the 'Golden Rule',
"Love your neighbour as yourself".

Such behaviour would require no aspect of religious belief; would be independent of any doctrine or set theology.

Though it might not be rooted in religious teaching, it could still point directly to the way of God.

Yet it seems to be the converse of such behaviour that emerges to drive the development of individuals and of society.

Self-centredness is the springboard of progress.

It is competition that advances civilisation and fear which holds it back.

This can be as true in the spiritual as in the material dimension.

We compete over concepts of holiness and worship, as much as over possessions and power.

But is that how it should be?

Perhaps we need to revisit the depths that Jesus taught¹⁵ rethink our behaviour to align with his message and abandon the power-driven ethos of many religious organisations.

This may impel us to be separated from the local church, because we can not support its misconceptions,¹⁶ nor give value to its biased framing story, and the wailing of the spiritual children.

Alternatively, we may feel called to attempt its re-education.

*But what are those global values
to which we may all ascribe?*

¹⁵ See The Ministry of Jesus at page 54

¹⁶ Does the church today (see page 27) follow the way of Jesus?

A Life of Faith

The orthodox view of Christian Faith lies in firm adherence to the statements embraced within its Creeds,¹⁷ rather than to trust in the divinity which they try to describe.

We can not exist without Faith in the physical world around us; our cars and cycles, the walls of our houses or offices. We need equal stability in our mutual relationships. Earthquakes and divorce have a similar impact.

We do need our principles, moral boundaries, guidelines. Without them life becomes a mess, incomprehensible for then we can not predict the behaviour of others nor modify our reaction to their need.

Those lacking this condition are bereft, for faith generates hope of a better future, that all will not always be as things are now.

Lack or loss of faith leaves us exposed to life's vicissitudes. We have no foundation to hang on to, no stability. We may set off on a journey of discovery, but lack a port to which we can return.

Religions, whatever their form, provide firm principles, stability. Rules and boundaries are defined; ways we should behave. Those rules and boundaries are said to have been defined, though some medium of authoritative communication, in spoken, written or even human form, by the God of that religion.¹⁸

When we accept such constraints in order to ratify our faith, we fail to challenge the divine source of their presumptions. Maybe such faith is then based only on human values and thus, bounded by time and self interest.

When renewal of faith presumes the rectitude of the conclusions that others have drawn, are we merely hiding, fearfully, behind a protective barrier?

¹⁷ See "The Apostles' Creed" at page 84

¹⁸ Such religious certainty provides comfort and assurance, but, perhaps, not intellectual honesty – see page 90

Fearful Compliance

Fear dogs our every conscious action,
can lie behind our lightest decisions
and open the way to Armageddon.

We fear each other and so act to mollify.
We fear the future, so insure against disaster.
We fear each other further, so strike pre-emptively.
We fear derision, so hide our deepest feelings.
We fear dismissal, so work incessantly.
We fear, so take evasive action.

Even the most basic of religions exploits such fear.
The fear of religious exclusion in this life and
of eternal punishment after it is finished.
These are the vehicles of clerical power;
that fill pews and the communion rail;
that fill ecclesiastical coffers;
repair broken buildings.

Christianity paints a picture of post-mortal punishment,
so ensuring a life-time's obedience in thought and deed
to the precepts of a doctrine that few think through
and even fewer dare to challenge, openly;
For to do so exposes our fear
of final non-being.¹⁹

Yet, if we open the coffers of curiosity,
we may find the deeper truth
that our dread conceals,
or even reality beyond
the boundaries
of fear.

*Is fear then the prime mover of religion,
or perhaps the motive behind
much holy attitude
and behaviour?*

¹⁹ Does this lead to our need for a superior form of life.
See "Our Need for God" at page 40

Spiritual Materialism

“Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Spiritual materialism attempts to manipulate supernatural forces to fulfil our self-centred desires. Through sacrament or sacrifice, we try to placate the gods. We attempt to get what we desire through a spiritual covenant, hoping to see our behaviour reflected in divine response.

We pray - to assure our comfort, or another's.
We confess - so that our sins may be forgiven.
We look forward to a life of comfort and bliss
as a reward for our religious faithfulness.

We may even be given assurance that faithfulness,
to the principles and precepts of our religion,
will result in our personal prosperity,
in wealth or social standing.²⁰

Priests lay hands on another to bless,
and to promote their health or well-being.
They invoke the power of the Spirit of God
working through their anointed human hands.

Thus the charismatic pastor demands
divine adherence to his command in response
to the spiritual power vested in him,
or her.

This is also the path of the Prosperity Gospel
that has corrupted the path of Jesus
to one complicit with the many
Gods of this world.

The temptations of such ministry
are exposed through the story of Jesus in the desert.
Such temptations of power are as valid today
as they were attractive in his day.²¹

*Can human leadership be centred only on service
rather than on power and domination
and self promotion?*

²⁰ This may sound much like many a telephone scam!

²¹ See “The Temptations” at page 85

Eternal Life

The mists of eternity blossom beyond the grave
as invisible to mortal eyes as those before the womb,
for we are mortal beings, tied to the traces of our life-span,
yet inventive of what is beyond sight or feeling.

Our self-centred minds deny extinction
and so we invent new reasons for living
new hopes for what lies beyond life
and new strictures to apply.

Some see death as a gateway
paid for in the currency of life on earth,
opening the door to fresh opportunities
denied to those who ignore the rules,
which they, or others, have defined.

Many see a promise of eternal life
as a key feature in Christian belief and living
and visualise an after-life in which
they may meet, once more,
their departed loved ones.

Others might see death as an adventure
a step that we take bravely into the unknown,
or even as a final escape from their troubles,
without any certainty of what lies ahead.

Yet death remains that state of non-being
of which we have no realistic knowledge.
We can not know what lies beyond
that final gateway.

*When we lose the last of life's consciousness,
do we face the consequences of our past life,
or discard our past, and start anew,
or just stop? Run out of fuel?*

Seeking Truth

The priests and pundits of religious organisations
proclaim the febrile truths of their persuasion,
competing over the bounded detail
of their understanding.

Yet each is tied to their parental apron strings,
limited to the understanding of their founder
and, often, to the written opinions
of ancient theologians.

Beyond those boundaries must lie a deeper reality,
for each is undermined by challenges
that render its explanations
ultimately unsound.

Perhaps these are the potholes already identified above.
Perhaps there are other obstacles to what is real.

In our lives we are then called to seek for truth
and the underlying reality of life's purpose;
not accepting, without investigation,
another's explanation²²

The present understanding of Christianity
is not based on the foundation of a divine purpose,
but is the product of a much more earthly need
for mankind's comfort and assurance
to be of some eternal significance.

In seeking the meaning of existence
we are drawn down hidden byways
camouflaged and concealed
by religious certainties
and self-interest.

In seeking the reality of divinity
we may be drawn into uncharted waters;
threatened by the need to seek adventures
where few have dared to go before.

²² Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7)

Discipleship

We may travel down the path of discipleship,
following, faithfully, the route that another has trodden.
We may see that model in the teaching of the Christian church
or we may see the potholes in that well-trodden road
and search for a truer pathway.

The way of that Jesus followed
was modelled on that of ancient prophets²³
rather than on that of present priests.

We may also see that care for needy others,
reported as the behaviour of the earliest Church²⁴
was modelled on the teaching of those same prophets.

And maybe we may see that, later, it was embellished,
to meet the needs of the religious environment,
taking the Church back to the very situation
that scripture, and Jesus, condemned.

We may then see that the model for our lives
needs to be at variance with a religious institution;
which focusses on self-centred concern for individual salvation,
post-mortal bliss and placating a remote, judgemental, deity.

We may then need another model for our lives
centred on service to those less fortunate,
to give our lives willingly for others,
as Jesus gave his life for us.

*Should we be disciples of the Enlightenment (page 82)
rather than of the Evangelical doctrine (page 89)
prevalent within the Anglican church?*

²³ The prophets of the axial age found a new vision of how religions are called to respond to divinity. See "The Call of the Prophets at page 87

²⁴ See Acts chapter 4: 32-35, on sharing possessions, or Acts chapter 6, on feeding the hungry.

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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**We believe that all men everywhere are lost
and face the judgment of God,
that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation,
and that for the salvation of lost and sinful man,
repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ
results in regeneration by the Holy Spirit.
(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)**

The Christian church makes an exclusive claim to be
the only way to salvation, from eternal damnation.
It is a position that the religious hierarchy
defend with increasing desperation
for it is the foundation
of their power.

In a world where many religions co-exist,
it is a position that many challenge.

The threat of post-mortal condemnation,
for those who do not adhere to its provisions,
is exemplified by that instrument of execution,
the Cross, in every Christian church.

Yet that Cross is also portrayed
as the vehicle for eternal salvation
through the shed blood of Jesus.

*Is this not a power-play,
created by ancient shamans
to assure their position in the tribe
which we have developed and endorsed?*

Purpose of the Church

It is in our church the we would seek divinity,
hope to find our way to a life beyond our tawdry frame,
unearth from its ancient veils the reality of eternity,
uncover the depths of creation's purpose.

Yet the Church has abandoned its formative heritage,
surrendered to human concerns for power and position.
It has built ecclesiastical castles of medieval might,
become the very beast that Jesus challenged.

The history of the Church is one of conflict and division,
from the very start the leaders were divided
over doctrine and authority;
over power.

Our present Church arose from the Reformation
which challenged and divided the European Churches
but merely exchanged one power-block for an equivalent;
replacing subservience to papal and priestly dictates
by primacy of the Scriptures, as interpreted by
those self-appointed to the leadership.

In doing so it has established fixed practices, liturgies,
ways of doing things that stifle initiative, originality;
turn spontaneity of worship into a routine;
presented with a minimum of risk
and clerical effort.

The Enlightenment challenged church credentials.²⁵
The new ideas of free thought were rejected by the church
with its entrenched dogma and considerations.
In response came a new fundamentalism,
a bounded righteousness.

. We might wonder whether God's purposes
are being worked out despite our religious practices,
and the self-centred nature of evangelical theology.
Today we may even wonder whether the church
is still a viable institution in many eyes.

²⁵ See "An Enlightened People" at page 83

Church Community

Do the ways of the church still represent a genuine alternative to the ways of the dominant culture of our day, or has it become an agent of that culture, indistinguishable from society; just not as "cool"?

Do the ways of church represent a viable alternative to self-promoting, gang-culture of society today, or do the requirements for creedal conformity bar those with less certain beliefs?

Do the ways of church represent an actual welcome or has church become so separate, so holy, that outsiders feel rejected, even threatened?

We are called to value God and love of our neighbour over and above our need to feel safe and in control. We are called to be vulnerable, to one another and to the world around us.

The key question is, whether we can worship together in peace for it is disunity that repels those beyond our doors. Surely our goal is not uniformity of thought, but co-participation in worship.

This is not a struggle between right and wrong, but for oneness, togetherness, mutual love and unity. The heart of the church does not rest on our opinion of the controversial issues of theology.

We have strayed far from the path of Jesus and lost both truth and adherents on the way, but, even so, we may find that a Christ-like church is something to which we can look forward.

*At what stage did the message of Jesus
get lost in the panoply of Empire,
absorbed by Papal pomp?*

Church Buildings

Church buildings dominate the landscape
demonstrating the power of religion
over the people of the past.

Often the buildings are beautiful and valued.
They carry memories of past occasions,
the celebrations of life and time:
weddings, funerals, baptisms,
even confirmations.

But these buildings also carry the baggage of the past;
of a doctrine and a churchmanship now rejected
even by those who live by Christian principles,
often without acknowledging its source.

Do these buildings still support the purposes of God,
even if they ever did so in the past?

Yet they continue to absorb the time and resources
of the Christians that meet within them, weekly,
those who need somewhere to meet together.
These buildings are not fit for purpose
but still divert much Christian effort
from what they should be doing .

So should these ancient buildings be discarded, allowed to rot,
Could each parish offer solace, tea and home-made cake
in an place devoid of sacramental overtones,
yet filled with love?

Church Today

The role of members in the church is carefully controlled.
Passively we sit quietly in our constraining pews
awaiting direction, leadership, permission;
unable to partake as individuals
corporately conforming.

We sing in tunes crafted with inflammatory purpose
lift our hearts in praise and unthinking worship
enthusiastically proclaiming crude ideas
affirming current orthodoxy,

We read a selected extract from holy scripture
and listen to a talk related vaguely to the text
unable to comment, question or respond,
despite the shortfalls of the message.

We state our belief in words culled from ancient texts
in concepts few understand or have thought through,
repeating sheeplike, by rote, what we are told,
even though it may not reflect our feelings.

We may be called to admit to our failings, our unnamed sins,
for which, if we confess, priestly absolution may be given,
assuring us of our place in heaven among the saints,
even though we have not changed our ways.

We join in prayer to God for neighbours and our world
pleading, bringing to God's notice, our needs;
demanding God's obedience to our whim,
yet doubting his omnipotence.

We troop obediently forward to receive bread and wine
concealing, representing, the flesh and blood of Jesus
hiding the message of Christ safely in sacrament,
hiding reality behind symbolic action.

We meet cheerfully, released, over coffee,
free, at last, to gossip with our friends;
the dues of club membership paid;
duty done for another week.

Church Services

The word “services is a misnomer
concealing the reality of the occasion.

It is in its services that the church demands
the service of all those who join that Sunday meeting
and spells out the parameters of that service;
how to conform to its needs.

The church fails to waken to the realisation that ancient ritual
and a lengthy, unillustrated, speech from a position of power
do not meet the needs of the present generation.

Yet the church does provide events and festivals
which touch the needs of man to worship,
rejoice, grieve, or remember.

Sadly at such events, it may still cling to its own agenda,
preaching a message of its own concerns,
instead of the concerns of the world
and of its listeners.

Can we imagine the church revitalised,
serving the people in practical terms,
filled with those helping others
and those crying out for help?

Can we imagine a church
which is truly Godly?

Micah 6.

What the Lord requires is to act justly, love mercy
and walk humbly with your God

Matthew 23

You have neglected the more important matters of the law
justice, mercy and faithfulness.

The Preacher's Art

Many give great moment to the preacher,
proclaimer of God's word for the day,
interpreting the scriptures
interminably, eternally,

Some few are able, from their eminence,
to touch a nerve of actual interest,
to engage their captive audience
with a challenge or new concept.

Most preaching merely repeats past ideas,
regurgitating the thoughts of others,
affirming what we already know,
or believe, or understand.

"Well said!" we cry, "A goodly sermon!"
Praising those with whom our thoughts agree,
rejecting those who attempt, maybe,
to challenge our perceptions,
undermine our fragile faith
with new ideas.

Can we not proclaim our group identity
more clearly, practically, or better,
other than in liturgical religion;
discard ritual for reality?

Can we seek God together, as a group and individually,
seek the truth of divinity without losing God's reality?

Can we follow God's call through service not services,
be inspired to serve others in the name
of he whom we call Lord?

Can we follow Jesus outside the church,
or is he contained, constrained, within it,
transfigured into a figure-head,
immovably unbending?

Personal Prayer

The prayers of the faithful ring out in faith-filled congregations
religious groups of every faith and nationality.
Yet does Divinity respond?
Is there here reality?²⁶

In praying for others we show them that we care;
we demonstrate our love and our concern,
but does God also listen, absorb, act ?
Are our worries reflected
in divine response?

With many words we call out our requests to God
so sharing our needs with each other
sharing the pain of our existence
hopes for our tomorrow.
And with our ears
God listens.

For our prayers are reflected back to us for action
either directly as we hear another's need, or
in the whispered lure of God's voice
to fulfill the needs of others,
to act and rectify
injustice.

Yet we need to listen carefully for God's voice
not loudly demanding justice or provision
but, in silence, offering what we can do;
listening for divinity in open humility
ready to give not to receive.

In prayer we need to look for divine direction
not providing directions for divinity,
but asking God for guidance,
for what we should do,
write, think or say

(cont)

²⁶ See "The Reality of Prayer" at page 53

Personal Prayer (cont)

**Action is man's prerogative.
Direction is divine.**

For in the silence of our prayers
God speaks, can speak, clearly.
As we open ourselves to God
God gladly fills the gap.

In the half-light of sleep,
God speaks, invades our dreams;
Tells us what and when
and sometimes why.

Under the clamour of guitars,
God's whisper finds its way;
Reclaims our deafened ear
with shouts of wonder.

In the wonder of sunlit greenery,
God whispers of all creation;
Exposing its every wonder,
Claiming our attention

In the daily news of our hurting world,
God's voice impales our selfish minds;
Pity for the lost, the hopeless,
Shame over our inaction.

In the silence of our prayers,
God's calls us to respond.
Do we dare to listen,
Take the risk?

Revised Religion

Religions provide a place to express of our deepest emotions,
a guide to our behaviour and a place for spiritual encounter.
Yet, in doing so, they become subject to human failings,
the need to control others and for personal standing.
In accepting a religion we are forced to accept
rules, creeds, liturgies, and traditions.

So we are faced with religions bounded by their traditions;
Unable to break free from the concepts of past generations
but which are past their time of usefulness, of impact.

The church is waking to the realization that pews and organs
and a lengthy, unillustrated, speech from a position of power
do not meet the needs of the present generation.
but has failed to awaken to the deeper problem
that its core message needs to be reimagined
from its medieval theological perspective
into something for the modern mind.

Maybe something that reflects the concepts of Jesus
rather than those of his successors;
those who adjusted his message
to meet their own concerns
for power, pride,
and position.

So we see the new church as truly inclusive
embracing all who seek or worship divinity
or value the togetherness of community;
all those who would meet periodically
to share concerns, needs and news
with each other and their God,
of whatever form or nature.

Surely herein lies God's intention.
Surely herein lies future human welfare.
Surely as we come together in love and friendship
the message of Jesus is being worked out in our lives;
yet, as surely, this would be anathema to organised religion
and to the Christian church as it struggles with its role today.

THOUGHTS OF THE BIBLE

A TRADITIONALLY ORTHODOX VIEW

**We believe the Bible to be the inspired,
the only infallible, authoritative Word of God
revealing the love of God to the world.
(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)**

As we are assured by:

1 Thessalonians 2:13

We thank God continually because,
when you received the word of God,
which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word,
but as it actually is, the word of God,
which is indeed at work in you who believe

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching,
rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,
so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped
for every good work.

Some see the whole package as inerrant and God given,
bravely, often aggressively, struggling with,
its inconsistencies and errors.

Yet

It seems strange, unethical even, to reference the Bible
as the sole authority for its authority.

Modern biblical scholarship has no place in this view,
nor any thoughts of the bible's internal contradictions;
not even any view of the Bible as a child of its time.

There is no thought that the world has changed
and may need to look for new divine guidance
beyond the writings of ancient prophets,
nor that scholarly research has
discovered new truths
within ancient
conceptions.

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

The Bible consists of many ancient writings,
gathered, edited and selected by religious appointees
from a large range of other material now lost to us.
We often like to think of these as original material,
but that is seldom true. It has been sanitised;
adapted to fit some past current orthodoxy,
over centuries of copying and correction.

The oldest materials probably predate written script
and are the transcribed stories told by ancient man,
the legends told around prehistoric campfires
or whispered in the shaman's cave.

Here is a mix of ancient explanations for existence.
Here are stories of the interaction of ancient tribes,
the realisation of the concept of possessions
and the struggle to protect what is mine.
Here are supernatural explanations
to cover gaping gaps of ignorance.

Such stories were gathered and written down
at a later date, to meet the needs of another time,
so being preserved for all time, eternally
later to be taken literally,
unfortunately.

More recently there came the legends of a warrior people
convinced that their God was on their side
explaining or ignoring their reverses.
Presenting a history spiritualised
by religious explanations.

Later still came the stories of wandering preachers
in an age of social inequality, but peace.
They told of God's purposes
for a better world of love
and justice.

*Do we not now need to discern what God is saying today,
a message appropriate to our own time and place,
new guidance suitable for thinking man,
the product of a new millennium?*

A National History

The land of Israel acts as a conduit between land masses and thus between the powerful empires on either side.

It sometimes acted as an independent buffer state and at others its resources were plundered by the side which held the upper hand.

Its existence depended on the whim of others which could easily be seen as Godly intervention.

Reverses were explained as the result of sin.

Success came from national repentance.

This was a climate ripe for religion.

The pattern was repeated again and again, even today Israel acts as a buffer state, between West and Eastern cultures.

“The Exile”

Rebellion during a time of occupation led to exile of the leaders of the nation; defeat and enslavement in a foreign land.

Whilst common folk worked on, humbly, unconcerned by the whims of nobility, scholars and the priesthood.

Exile led to a time of introspection; time to rethink concepts of national identity, and the role of their supportive deity; times maybe of repentance.

Loss of the Temple focus for religion, led to new writings, new concepts, a new focus on the written word; the Law reconstituted.

It may be that most of the earlier writings were consolidated, or even compiled, during the time when the “chattering classes” found themselves without their normal occupations in their own city and political environment.

Can we be assured of the antiquity of any writing when it has been subject to the corrective action of later generations?

The Prophets

It seems strange that we place credence on ancient prophets speaking in the time of Exile, or in the settled time thereafter, when we ignore the prophetic voice today.

Today we have our own prophets telling out the word of God as in ancient times. We hear of the future horrors of climate change driven by our pollution of the world around us and, as the lives of others are destroyed, we look on in horror, unchanged.

We hear of the eventual demise of natural resources, which we use up faster than they are replaced, as our consumption grows ever greater, and, for our comfort, consume more.

We hear of the continuing horror of modern slavery exploited for our own convenience, and look the other way.

We hear the learning of Bible scholars, the findings of ancient historians, the facts of archaeology, and cling grimly to past theology.

We hear the voices of modern prophets the word of God for our time, and refuse to repent²⁷.

The destruction of civilisation lies plain before us yet, we, the church, remain oblivious, centred on individual salvation in some unlikely after-life.

*Is our current religious doctrine
too heavenly focussed
to be any earthly use?*

²⁷ See "The Call of the Prophets" at page 87

The “New” Testament

(Some 2000 years old, yet still, deceptively, we call it “new”)

The Christians took the Old Testament, much as it stood,
though with suitable adjustments to fit their new ideas
Then added new stories that told the tale of Jesus,²⁸
through their memories and inventions,
of his life, his teaching and his death.

The Story does not really start with a baby in a manger,
(as maybe both Matthew and Luke would have us believe)
but with the defiant statement of the young preacher:
reported to us as: “The Nazareth Manifesto”²⁹

This was defiance to the unjust ways of his world,
mirroring the call of Isaiah, Amos, Micah and other prophets
in a call for justice and equality and freedom from oppression;
in proclaiming the present imminence of the Kingdom of God
This was a statement of intent, which led to eternal renown,
but also, of course, to crucifixion.

In the end, this radical prophet was called to account
In a time of revolutionary tension, he was stirring up trouble.
The Bible tells the story of his trial and his execution,
adding suitably sacramental gloss, as needed,
and the Pharisaic concept of resurrection.

The religious twist, imposed by Pauline persuasion,
turned the revolutionary hero into divinity.
We are left with the unfortunate result,
of facts consumed by sacrament
and the message of Jesus
largely ignored³⁰.

*How has the tale of a wondrous preacher of ancient truths
been lost in the story of salvatory divinity?
How has his call to a new way of living
been lost in self-centred salvation?*

²⁸ See “The Writing of the New Testament” at page 92

²⁹ The words spoken by Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue; see page 84

³⁰ The Mutating Gospel (page 65 onward) exposes the way that the
message of Jesus has been manipulated over the centuries,

The Gospels

Despite their primary position in the New Testament, the Gospel accounts were written many decades later than the Pauline Epistles that follow them.

Though traditionally ascribed to the four Apostles, that authorship of the Gospels is doubted by scholars.

Each is written from a different perspective and aimed at a different audience.

These are not biographical, but settings for the new theology, which can be seen to have moved beyond that of Paul, and to be moving ever further from the initial stories, in developing the legends and the meaning of Christ.

The Epistles

Although often referred to as Paul's Epistles only seven are deemed to have flowed from his hand³¹. These were written earlier and have a more radical flavour than the conservative ethos of the remaining pseudo-Pauline letters.

However even at an early date, Paul's doctrine had moved on. The call of Paul differs markedly from the Path of Jesus, embracing the concepts of his Pharisaic background, including the full scope of the Messianic legends.

The later letters, written in Paul's name, focus more on ecclesiastical concerns and doctrine; the needs of church discipline and teaching; pastoral concerns of the missionaries; integration with gentile society.

The Christian world of the time was splintered, split over a wide range of divisive issues as it tried to absorb Hellenistic ideas into traditional Jewish doctrine.

The chosen content was carefully preserved. Views that undermined or conflicted with current orthodoxy were destroyed, often along with their authors.

*How literally should we take these writings?
Do they speak spiritual truths or doctrinal politics?*

³¹ See "The Writing of the New Testament" at page 92

THOUGHTS OF GOD

A TRADITIONALLY ORTHODOX VIEW

**We believe that there is one God,
of ultimate power, grace and holiness
eternally existent in three persons:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)**

Matthew 28:19

John 10:30

Ephesians 4:4-6

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

Throughout the Old Testament, God was seen as a Unity.
This was, and is, a major feature of Judaism.

The Trinitarian formula arose during the late 2nd Century
more than a hundred years after the death of Jesus.
It was fought over within the churches
for the next two hundred years.

Surely we can not be sure of the true form of divinity.
Trinitarian theory can only create a litmus test
for inclusion within the Christian community,
and thus a vehicle for clerical power,
which the church dare not abandon,
even if it carries little reality.

The medieval view of God was that of dominant majesty,
mirroring the structures of heaven to those of the secular world.
It saw God as intervening and controlling our every action.
Yet it is the lure of the Divine Whisper which leads us
from the complacency of self-centred secularism
to the challenge of selfless sacrifice.

*God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year.
Are we then but tools in Her endeavour,
mere dust on that carpet of time?*

God Eternal

An entity, that existed before existence began,
is beyond the comprehension of our minds;
exists, with infinite space or time,
in what we can not understand.

We do not know, can not conceive, divine reality.
We merely formulate ideas and fight over their veracity.
For God does not, can not, exist as a material being;
Is not subject to our limitations, or forms.

In our struggles to comprehend divinity
we introduce parable and analogy
substituting idolatry for reality,
placing things and people
in the place of God.

So, cross bedecked and priestly blessed,
Our charms and incantations mirror ancient ritual.
Little has really changed since that Calf ruled at Sinai,
The Golden Calf before which they danced in praise.
Little has changed even though Jesus came
to challenge such concepts in his day.

God has no sex nor form nor personality;
is alien to our human understanding,
despite priestly proclamation
of what they hope is true.

Yet Godliness is real, affects our lives
and our view of God conditions our behaviour.
The God that Jesus postulated brings hope
of a new world driven by love
and love alone.

*If God exists, how and where and in what form?
If we can not answer such questions
does existence have any reality?*

God's Reality

Personal experience and the myths of every people argue that there is another dimension which lies beyond our nature.

This could be an ideal spirituality that we could call God.

We may thus need to form an image for that God.

The Church presents God as a caring father,
forgiving our failures to live as we should,
but also as a fearsome regal judge
punishing our indiscretions.³²

Yet Jesus is said to have told us that God is purely Spirit.³³
God has no corporal identity, no material existence, no form.
God dwells in and around us but in no material way;
Is the ideal towards which we may strive;
is the impulse that drives us.

We may follow the example of scripture to say that God is Love.
Others may see God in different, even conflicting, terms:
as the spirit driving their thoughts and enthusiasm;
as the inspiration which guides their actions;
as the peace which underpins
their self-confidence.

We may realise that God is Real.
It can affect our lives, change us, as can other spirits.
There is something there, even if we have little idea what it is,
other than being an entity, intangible, but interactive,
which can guide us to the better way;
to which we may give thanks.

The Christian Bible and the books of other major faiths:
see God as the Creator, trying to provide reasons for our origin;
see God as wreathed in power and glory, imitating earthly rule;
personify their view of God as a superior form of humanity.
We imagine God in our own image, as we have no other
but there can be little eternal reality in such a concept.

*Is God then purely an ideal to which we should strive,
or an independent Spirit of what we could be,
yet fail finally to understand?*

³² Thoughts on "The Judgement of God" start at page 41

³³ See John's Gospel 4:24 and "the Holy Spirit" at page 59

God's Nature

All religions struggle to formulate a concept of divinity yet that concept remains ultimately inexpressible, and the meaning of divinity becomes a symbol, the wisdom of Ganesh, or the peace of Buddha the judgemental Jehovah, or the sacrificial Jesus.

Religious conceptions of divinity are but analogies, embraced within the legends and teaching of antiquity, that point to the best option for our personal consideration. Such conceptions insist on the completeness of one viewpoint, denying the place of other religions in other situations denying even variants within its own organisation; making an idol of their divine concoctions.

Yet God is common to all; not owned by any code or scripture. Like 'Love', in all its forms, Godliness, or otherwise, is something shared by all humanity.

Perhaps Godliness is best celebrated through action,³⁴ through shared, loving, human interaction? Does the Christian rejection of sexuality reject God's practical reality?

It is in the acceptance of a particular guide to goodness that we take up a particular religious adherence. It is in the acceptance of Christ's message³⁵ that we call ourselves Christian.

Yet each of us struggles with the divinity within us, that which really guides our lives, personal gods, for our God is truly what directs our actions, or lies in the purpose for which we aim. Without a God we lose direction.

*There are many ways to goodness, eternally existing.
Are these all avenues to the reality of true divinity
or do we, in our bounded, jealous, ignorance,
fail to realise the barriers to our sight?*

³⁴ Jeremiah 22:16: He defended the cause of the poor and needs and so went well. That is what it means to know me, declares our God.

³⁵ Is it through the corruption of Christ's message that the church has gone astray? See "The Mutating Gospel" at page 65
See also "How the Church might be" at page 74

The Purposes of God

Are we created for our potential, not for our presence?

Over millennia, the moral and spiritual compass of man has evolved from brutal mindless aggression to the sort of morality that many hold today, following the lure of God to care for others though usually still second to ourselves.

The purposes of any God surely requires that such evolution takes us further onward on the route to ultimate holiness, from morality to love of others without thought of self; to love even the invisible God, in God's very image³⁶ to be equally loving, loved and lovable.

Maybe our God does care for every hair on our heads, but often She must find them to be distasteful, for we have not yet evolved into our destiny, traversed the path that Jesus showed us; become what we could be.

Salvation may not be for an individual, nor lie in the hands of any divine judge, but lie in the growth of God's Kingdom, here;³⁷ lie in its survival from climate change and pollution through the application of the teaching of Jesus to the behaviour of the Kingdom's population.

Does the purpose of God then lie in the guided evolution of a beloved entity, humanity, to live and love in the exalted manner of divinity?

Does the purpose of God lie in leading us towards that perfect state of existence which Jesus is said to have called the Kingdom of Heaven?

³⁶ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 1 John 4:20

³⁷ See "The Kingdom of God" at page 80

Our Need for God

Before each of us lies the canyon of non-being;
the abyss that we must all face at the end;
the place of our non-existence
that we all face with horror,
for we shall no longer be!

It is into this terror that God emerges
as our saviour from worthlessness
to give point to our lives;³⁸
to provide something
to which we can
appeal.

For,
if God is there eternally,
then mankind may also have eternal value.
We may play out our lives on a larger stage;
There may be meaning to our existence.
We may even, as a further conjecture,
find worth beyond the grave.

Thus our God rescues us from the terror of mortality
generated by our realisation of personal existence,
and the unknown that lies after our demise.

We may be but dust on the carpet of time;
essentially and ultimately meaningless,
with no purpose, or future,
but we have lived!

*We may need a God to console our fears
of any lack of personal purpose,
but does this give reality to
that divinity?*

³⁸ Saint Augustine (see page 93) is quoted as saying that
“God without us will not. Man without God can not.”
Yet the converse of this statement is also true, that
God without us can not, whilst we without God will not.”
Maybe we need the concept of divinity to give purpose to our existence.

THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD

**“We believe that all people everywhere are lost
and face the judgement of God;
that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation;
and that for the salvation of lost and sinful mankind,
repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ
results in regeneration by the Holy Spirit.”
(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)**

**This statement from Evangelical doctrine
presumes a super-natural entity³⁹
but raises many issues:**

How should we interpret the word “lost”?

Does it refer to a lack of direction in their lives, or
that they have already missed the proper path?
What is God's view of sin? -see [page 42](#).

What is the “way” of Salvation?

This could be the way of Jesus described at [page 5](#)
or there could be other ideas ([page 75](#))
and new hazards on the way.

Salvation from what fate or situation?

See “Salvation” at [page 43](#)

What is meant, here, by faith?

Trust in what Jesus said or what was said about him?
See “The Mutating Gospel” at [page 65](#)

How has God's Spirit regenerated what?

Is this a change to our mortal being,
or something entirely spiritual?
See “The Holy Spirit” [page 59](#)

Surely these are questions that we need to address
before accepting the doctrinal statement
at its face value.

³⁹ Is there reality in our supernatural craving? See [page 47](#).

A Godly View of Sin

We are called, repeatedly to repent of our sins,
But what is "sin"?

Surely it is our failure to heed the guiding hand of divinity.
Our deafness to the voice of love and justice,
Our focus on self-gratification and
On our own need above all else
despite its effect on others.

Surely our failure to reconsider
how we might view our deeds in future years,
when we may come to review what we have done;
to act without consideration for our self-worth;
yet also to act focused only on self-worth
ignoring our effect on others.

Forgiveness then lies in putting such memories behind us,
but also in rejecting ways which may lead to their repetition
and changing our behaviour and nature accordingly;
Lies in repentance and a new life.

The potential for good and evil exists within us all.
Each has the option where in that spectrum to reside.
how to respond to the attractions of each pole.
How to live their lives.

However, the medieval concept of original sin,⁴⁰
and the place of the priestly confessional,
can be seen as a cunning clerical connivance
to maximise congregational obedience,
without real consideration of
its personal impact.

**As the Bible tells us
we always have the option,
to eat or to reject "the apple".**

⁴⁰ *"As a result of Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, we are all born as sinners and require immediate clerical intervention to prevent eternal damnation and suffering in the depths of hell."*

A pernicious dogma?

Salvation

“We believe that God will reward the righteous with eternal life in heaven, and that He will banish the unrighteous to everlasting punishment in hell.”
(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)

Much doctrine and teaching focuses on personal salvation from the possibility of eternal condemnation in a final court of judgement over our behaviour during our time on earth.

It is the threat of such a sentence⁴¹ that is
the basis of priestly power
in every religion.

Behind this concept lies that of post-mortal existence;
the hope that death is not the very end,
the haunting fear of non-being.

Behind this concept lie the rules and doctrine of religion;
the regulations and beliefs devised by man
to explain and endorse their faith.

Behind this concept lies the attraction of group membership
the enjoyment of fellowship with all of those
who, alone, will join us on that journey.

Behind this concept lies the principle of fair reward,
and equally fair punishment for those.
who do good or evil in life.

Behind this concept lies a childlike view of divinity
as the dominant father, judge and ruler,
overseeing our every action.

Behind this concept lies the draw of individualism
the focus on my importance, my welfare,
to the exclusion of others.

*This concept forms the basis of much Christian doctrine,
but is it compatible with the basic Christian message
of loving God and our neighbour?*

⁴¹ The message may also be take the form of a promise of eternal bliss, in some form, for those who meet the required criteria.

Our Heavenly Home

**We have no material evidence for heaven's existence
nor concept of how or where it may lie.**

Heaven is generally imagined as a place to which the godly go and enjoy eternally the wonderful rewards for living a good life.

What is more the atoning death of Jesus is said to ensure that our ungodly ways are forgiven so that now everyone⁴² can, seemingly, go to heaven.

This consoling doctrine allows us to imagine continuation of our consciousness and relationships after death.

“We shall meet our loved ones again.”

“They are at peace in God's arms.”

The ancients created a three-fold existence,
with the delights of heaven above,
the tortures of hell below and
humanity in between.

We were all poised to go
either way at our inevitable demise,
depending on whether our behaviour in this life
followed the rules that they devised.

*“Somewhere in the skies above lies a place where God dwells.
It is place of unending delight and love and peace.
It is place illuminated by the glory of God
from where He sits on a glorious throne
with Jesus seated at his right hand.*

*If we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour,
we can be forgiven for our inevitable sins,
(our failures to follow the appointed path)
and join the eternal heavenly throng
gathered around the throne.”*

It was an effective religious strategy
which lasted for millennia, but
has credibility only when seen
through the blindfold of faith.

Cont.

⁴² Or perhaps only those who “believe in Jesus”; that is those who can honestly say the Apostles Creed, (see page84), maybe..

The Judgement of God

Yet this is a doctrine that we dare not fully deny,
despite realising the frailty of its veracity,
for it impacts the comfort of the widow,
those who have lost loved ones.

It is a doctrine that we dare not fully deny,
as it supports the controlling concepts
of final reward and punishment,
so valued by the church.

It is a doctrine that we dare not fully deny,
for to do so exposes the reality of
our personal final non-being.

It is a doctrine that we do not wish to deny,
because it gives hope and meaning
to our present mortal existence;
a cause for our behaviour;
a point to our lives.

The present situation suits those power-brokers of religion
and all who are employed by and dependent upon them.
There appears to be no way to escape
its comforting conceptions.

We long to know that we shall meet our loved ones again,
when we shed this mortal coil for another dimension.
We see the righteousness of eternal punishment
for those who break religious regulations.

So, we concur and place our hopes
in the puerile doctrine of reward-driven religion,
the simplistic inventions of ancient shamans,
and the demands of present priests.

*Can we find a more credible explanation,
something that fits our present place in existence;
all that we now know of our world and the universe?*

Reconsidered Truth

Can there be any verifiable veracity in those religious doctrines that point to a post-mortal judgement over our deeds on earth? Are these just vehicles for priestly dominion over congregations, constructed to make a prison of our guilt for unidentified sin? Are they weapons forged without evidential backing, but with crippling effectiveness?

There is no verifiable truth in tales of bodily resurrection, nor in the theories of salvation surrounding Christ's crucifixion. These are vehicles for comfort of the bereaved and for retention of the congregation.

The message of Jesus, the life and death of Jesus, had little to do with any after-death fate or experience⁴³. He was firmly focussed on life as lived on earth, today, showing us how we should act, behave, listen, obey.

There is no actual reality in our conceptions of divinity, crafted after an image of ultimate human perfection, for God has no material or comprehensible form, merely the nature of unmitigated Goodness.

Our purpose is to be loving and lovable. We are lured towards that purpose with intimate whispers. Mankind is free to accept or reject such Godly guidance; the tendency towards all that is Good.

We are free to make decisions. There is always an alternative. The suffering of Creation is a bye-product of wrong decisions. The Bible exposes our alternatives as "The Temptations"⁴⁴, describing vividly the options available to man.

Such freedom denies the concept of divine fore-knowledge. The future is completely indeterminate until it arrives, until all relevant decisions have been made. We may predict but never fully know what is over the horizon of time.

⁴³ Many of the thoughts attributed to Jesus could be seen as the result of corrective action, to the written word, arising from the need to present the accepted doctrine of a later century.

⁴⁴ See The Temptations of Jesus at page 85

SUPER-NATURAL CRAVING

“Supernatural” is defined as phenomena or entities that are beyond the laws of nature.

Belief in the supernatural is a common part of human life. Although its expression varies between individuals belief in spirits, mystic forces, or similar occurs in every age and culture.

The term emerged in the Middle Ages and did not even exist in that ancient world, when non-physical entities, angels, demons and spirits, were commonly accepted as part of everyday life, as were the claimed abilities embodied in, or provided by, such beings.

Our species strives to understand nature and its complexities. When we don't understand, we seek supernatural possibilities. Supernatural beliefs, including those of organized religions, promise explanations for otherwise baffling events and some relief from the discomfort of not knowing.

Experience of the supernatural is endemic in religious contexts:
Through the concept of an interventionalist God: page 48
Through a belief in the efficacy of prayer: page 49
Through a focus on miraculous powers page 50
and on personal eternal existence: page 44.

Even the concept of any post-mortal judgement can be seen as created both to give meaning to our lives: page 43
and as central to a controlling doctrine: page 89

Yet, the veracity of the super-natural still remains suspect. It is still used to explain events we do not really understand, whilst being chipped-away by new discoveries.

Even so it does sometimes seem that there is more to this life than a material viewpoint perceives.

*How else can we explain
the inexplicable?*

An Intervening Deity

A great weight is given in Christian doctrine and tradition,
to the concept of a God who intervenes in human affairs
to heal the sick and rectify the errors and horrors
created by man's inhumanity to man.

But it is then hardly realistic,
to put our faith in a God of love and power,
when tales of misery and horror fill our daily news.

Yet loyalty to the fables of the Bible and to the common view
that there is a consequential link between sickness and sin
bolsters the traditional view of such magical intervention.

Physical healing seems to be reported repeatedly in the Bible,
because, without modern medicine, this was the only hope.

A shaman, or priest, was expected to offer healing
It was, and is, a key part of the religious package
and sometimes it worked, and works.

Yet many Gospel reports may cover another change,
aligned to a change of heart rather to a physical healing;
A change of heart that needed to be hidden from authority;
A report of changes to a person's politico-religious allegiance;
Salvation from the soul-destroying nature of peasant life,
or the hopelessness of poverty in urban squalor.

Here, we may see the message of Israel's salvation
from the domination of Rome, the brutality of the Roman army.
Here we also see a reflection of the reports and messages
circulated, in code; even of mass conversions
undetected by authority, even today.

Could this be a truer explanation, for some is needed,
of many of the unrealistic healing miracles reported,
or is the whole story contrived to build our faith
and so to bolster the standing of the leader
in the eyes of his obedient followers?

Today miracles are claimed by charismatics of every faith,
in response to their prayers for divine intervention,
and the spiritual power vested in them.⁴⁵
Yet prayer remains an activity with
the highest of all failure rates.

⁴⁵ That such claims are often proved to be the false ministry of charlatans,
does not necessarily invalidate every such report.

The Reality of Prayer

It seems extraordinary, utterly incredible, to imagine a divinity, that could act but may choose not to, until asked, repeatedly; that an all-knowing God would need reminders, or that an all-loving God would not care.

Prayer is thus not truly a reminder to divinity of our needs, but a reminder to others of personal responsibility; to care for others or to act on their behalf; to love our neighbour, practically.⁴⁶

Prayer can also reassure another that you care that another knows what troubles them, or that another cares about them; their situation or concerns.

Prayer, through meditation, can also be a time of personal introspection and perhaps of challenge to do the right thing.

But prayer has no impact on the situation except through the hands of those who pray. It is truly a call for human action, not divine intervention.

Such practical reality undermines church liturgy and the stylised liturgical prayers which, form its core, become vehicles for our further education.

Even the Lord's Prayer can be seen in a new light as a summary of our Lord's teaching, crafted by early church leaders, for their advantage⁴⁷.

*Is prayer then a decoration around the neck of spirituality,
or a time for internal revision of our deepest thoughts,
or a vehicle for divine communication?*

⁴⁶The virtue of "The Prayer Group" is that the needs and aspirations of the group are shared amongst the members and may thence be spread to where effective action can be taken.

⁴⁷ See thoughts on the Lord's Prayer at page 86

Miracles?

The magical element in many of the biblical accounts alerts us to the fact that these could be analogies, parables; “true” but not an historical, literal, account of events.

The ethos of magical transformation within such stories as casting demons into pigs, of angelic beings preaching to unlikely virgins, or healed paralytics taking their first steps, is repeated today by charismatic healers, denying the power of infectious disease, preaching that they have defeated it through the power of prayer.

Such stories are rife in the Bible, endorsing childish concepts of wizards and witches, spells and magic. They even feature in churches today as a tool of dominant ministry.

They represent the attraction of a childish faith, drawn to the maternal figure who rights all wrongs, or to the paternal who is all-powerful, conquers all. Such a faith dares not question its basis, nor look its dubious reality in the eye, but accepts what it is told and follows obediently, even blindly, maybe.

Such a faith can not be challenged for it can only repeat the "truths" of what it believes. It can not discuss further, for such truths are foundational. It dare not seek a reality that lies beyond its boundaries nor stray beyond the lines that have been drawn. Yet that is where life really lies in practical terms.

So,
when we hear of miracles or other magical events, is it the meaning behind the tale that we should seek rather than reverting, wistfully, to our childish concepts of witches, wizards and other such playground perceptions?

THOUGHTS OF JESUS

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A TRADITIONALLY ORTHODOX VIEW

**We believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ,
in His virgin birth, in His sinless life,
in His miracles, in His vicarious and
atoning death through His shed blood on the cross,
in His bodily resurrection,
in His ascension to the right hand of the Father,
and in His personal return in power and glory.**

(see Evangelical Doctrine at page 89)

Matthew 1:23; John 1:1-4; John 1:29;
Acts 1:11; Acts 2:22; Romans 8: 34;
1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 5:21;
Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-4; Hebrews 4:15

An Alternative View

**Whilst the Evangelicals put Jesus centre stage,
that stage could be in the wrong theatre.**

Many of these ideas are medieval, constructs;
developments to support a very dubious theology.
They are concepts which have consoled many,
though Jesus never claimed divinity⁴⁸.

It is these concepts which deny the reality of the life of Jesus,
ignore the example that we are called to follow
to focus instead on a dogma without veracity,
except through constant repetition.

Yet we dare not breach the bubble of metaphor and sacrament
to expose the frailty that shields reality from our common view,
for to do so would undermine the faith of our fellows
and the standing of the church
that bears his name.

⁴⁸ Some might say that statements reported in John's Gospel are a claim to divinity. However, John's Gospel is written to prove that very thing!

The Birth Of Jesus

Nothing is actually known about the birth of Jesus.
Neither Paul's letters nor the earliest Gospel tell of it.
It was, in fact, unremarkable and unremarked.

Later, of course, that all changed into a paean of glory.
The birth became wrapped in theological gold
and clothed in divine, angelic, majesty.
It had to be so to challenge other
divinities of antiquity.

So we end up with the mixed messages
of humble birth and angel trumpets;
dominant majesty and humility,
scouting around the truth
of ignorance.

And from that we grow the Christmas Festival,
aligned to the midwinter pagan celebration,
as Easter aligns with the coming of Spring.

At Christmas, today, we meet new Gods of consumption,
maybe endorsed by the Magi's expensive gifts,
which walk abroad to deny a humble birth
but focus on angelic choirs
and royal gifts.

Humility is too hard anyway
and not very profitable,
commercially.

*In denying any veracity to the stories of the birth of Jesus
do we make any impact on the truth of his teaching?
In rejecting the factuality of a virgin birth
how do we affect the Christian story?*

The Purposes of Jesus

After attending a meeting run by John the Baptist,
Jesus retired to a place of meditation,
referred to as his “Temptations”⁴⁹.

“Tell these stones to become bread.”

Should he base his ministry on material miracles,
perhaps following the path of Moses in the desert⁵⁰,
to satisfy the hungry crowds and obtain earthly wealth
and all the adulation that would go with such a ministry?
It was a path that he rejected. Life is more than material riches.

“I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you worship me.”

Should he aim for secular rule,
domination of the earth's kingdoms,
authority through the spiritual power within him
by turning to a new, and power-based, way of living?
It was a path that he rejected, for only the Godly path is true.

“Throw yourself down from the temple.”

Should he base his ministry on dramatic acts,
miracles that forced others to pay attention to him?
It was a path that he rejected, as an unworthy option.

Following these meditations in the desert, Jesus pointed
to his purpose as the coming of God's Kingdom,
as he must have often related to his disciples.
It did not lie in saving mankind from sin,
but in the redemption of this world
from its heartless practices.

Thus Jesus returned to the world with his mind resolved,
and a ministry centred on the Kingdom of God
and the needs of the peasant economy,
as described in the preaching
of his opening manifesto.⁵¹

Does the church really understand the focus of Christ's ministry?

⁴⁹ Luke 4:1-13, Matthew 4:1-11 and (briefly) Mark 1:12-13.

See also “The Temptations” at page 85

⁵⁰ Exodus 16

⁵¹ See “The Kingdom of God” at page 80 and
“The Nazareth Manifesto” at page 84

The Ministry Of Jesus

The ministry of Jesus lasted for three brief radical years
He emerged, from the desert, as a firebrand of reformation.
He addressed the injustices of the "system"
and the people loved him for it.

He preached against religious intolerance and hypocrisy.
He took up the prophetic cudgel and lambasted Judaism.
He explained, again, the true meaning of religion⁵².

The legends told about him were exacerbated by his demise.
The simple myths of a peasant people were focussed on him;
tales of miracles, of healing and of special unearthly powers.
His family took on a special status, despite their poverty.
His disciples took on his mantel, his aura, his fame.
His revolutionary message brought new hope
to the subjugated people of the Empire.

He preached of the coming of the Kingdom of God⁵³,
and pointed out that it could be here and now.
He described that kingdom in his teaching,
which Matthew consolidated as
the Sermon on the Mount.

But, in all of this, he did not, could not, claim divinity.
The concepts of later ages were foreign to his thoughts.
He was a Jew, committed to a single God, monotheism.

His ministry was taken by the church leadership
and twisted into a self-protective format⁵⁴
redolent of the Temple structures
that Jesus had condemned.

Sadly, that situation has never yet been rectified.

*Can we align our lives to a faith centred on the teaching of Jesus
without accepting the doctrine of his death and resurrection
and the other legends that surround him?*

⁵² "What is required of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8 (see "Call of the prophets" at page 87)

⁵³ A very practical reality, not some heavenly dream. See page 80

⁵⁴ As described at The Mutating Gospel, from page 65

Teaching and Parables

The teaching of Jesus comes to us through his parables,
and much of the teaching about him also takes parabolic form.

Yet we seek in vain for uncompromised tales of Jesus.

He taught through stories addressing the needs of the moment,
when explaining a particular point or challenging another.

These are often not eternal truths, but
instant solutions to a question.

Even so, we must realise that what he is said to have taught
will have been adjusted to fit some current doctrine;
and what he is said to have done will have had
that same doctrinal bias applied.

The tales that he told and reports of what he did
are both crafted from the same agenda.

What is more, they are stories,
not factual reports.

We need to look behind the reports of miraculous events
for the practical reality that they effectively conceal.

When a person is reported as healed or saved
what is the true message of the story?⁵⁵.

We need to look behind reports mirroring an ancient world-view,
or the bounded learning of a medieval monastery,
and re-imagine the reality that they record
in the light of modern knowledge.

We need to look behind reports that promote present authority
for those that challenge and proclaim a new way;
a way that fills the potholes of faith with
fresh hope, love and inspiration,
and with practical reality.

*How much of the message
that derives from the teaching of Jesus
do we still find in the doctrine about him?*

⁵⁵ Can we detect reality behind the miraculous myth? See page 50

The Death Of Jesus

In the heat of Passover, the preaching of Jesus was dangerous;
unacceptable to the authorities seeking peace on the streets;
with protecting the tourists and those gathered for the festival.
This was a situation that was soon to morph into open rebellion,
whence the people fell victim to the edge of Roman swords,
or hung in thousands from roadside crosses.

The elders attempted to negotiate in the dark of night,
sent an escort to lead Jesus from Gethsemane to the meeting.
When he refused to compromise, the results were inevitable.
Perhaps he thought that the people would rally to his support.
Perhaps he misjudged his impact on the capital city
after his successes in the countryside;
for they did not back him up;
he was left to his fate;
deserted.

It was only later that the craven disciples reviewed their actions;
re-imagined that bloody pain-filled death into heroic mode;
put dramatic speech in place of screaming agony;
sacrificed reality in the pit of sacrament.
In fact, they knew little of the deed;
fled back to Galilean poverty,
in terror of a similar fate.

The death of Jesus has become central to Christian theology,
seeing this as a sacrifice, rather than miscalculation.
Through this, we are told that salvatory action
has opened the door to eternal life,
for those who believe,

It is a consoling concept,
consolation at the graveside,
but one which carries no reality,
when seen through uncluttered eyes.

It is a disciplinary concept,
demanding adherence to set doctrine,
for those who would find their way to paradise,
threatening eternal suffering for those who do not.

*But is such an idea an honest reflection of the facts
as far as we know them?*

Resurrection Of Christ

It seems that it was the women who awoke their spirits,
frozen as they were by a brush with a tortured death.
As they hid behind locked doors in fear,
the women challenged them.
Jesus, they cried, might be dead,
but his mission, his spirit, could live on.
This was not a time to give up and hide.
They had to take up the mantle that Jesus had shed.

The focus of their new radical faith may have been lost,
there was not even a body around which they could gather,
but ideas, of equality, justice, sharing and love, lived on.

So, as they sat there in that closed room, Jesus came to them.
As they remembered his life, they were given new hope,
new vigour to go out and to continue his work;
encouraged by others with the same vision.

Thus the spirit of Christ was truly resurrected amongst them,
both those seated in that room and those discussing the events
as they traveled the byways on their journey home.

This was the resurrection of the message of Christ,
of ideas that undermined any cooperation with Roman rule,
of ideas contrary to the principles of Temple authority,
ideas that promoted the coming of God's Kingdom
in place of the brutal reality of Roman rule.

Later reconsideration concealed such radical concepts
removing the unacceptable impact of the message
on the local religious and secular institutions
Christianity became a world religion
at the expense of its heart.⁵⁶

*How has Christ become an idol to be worshiped,
instead of a leader that could be followed?
Has Christianity become an empire
instead of a challenge to one?*

⁵⁶ The original message of Jesus became subsumed by the desire for personal salvation, embraced by Messianic legends the Gospel mutated to fit the needs of religious doctrine (see page 65).

The Divinity Of Jesus

In the bible, Jesus appeals to a higher power.
When he, as a son of God (ie a Jew), refers to his Father,
this is not a claim of divinity, rather the reverse.
“Son of God” implies a family resemblance;
that he acted as God might act.

Much is made of Jesus forgiving people's sins
but that had always been done by ancient shamans.
It is still a powerful weapon in the priestly armoury
and fundamental to much Christian liturgy.

Much is made of his reported miracles.
People respond in the same way today to healing evangelists.
Such miracles were reported as facts, then as now,
but often with a dubious credibility.

There is no reality in considering any man divine⁵⁷
though any human may have divinity within.
The proclamation of the divine Christ
has become a smokescreen
hiding his message

Present orthodoxy sees Jesus as a God to worship,
a saviour through whom we may receive forgiveness
and thence an eternal life of immeasurable bliss.
Another thread sees Jesus as a teacher to follow;
an example to emulate in sharing and loving and giving,
whose example points the way to a fulfilled life, here and now.

Each, of course, pays some small lip-service to the other,
but they are, in fact, conflicting in any real sense,
for one is self-centred and driven by fear
whilst the other is self-denying
and driven by gratitude.

*Here we see two main threads of Christianity.
But which is the path of Jesus⁵⁸?*

⁵⁷ Perhaps treating a human as divine is a form of idolatry, somewhat equivalent to seeing him/her as a form of “graven image”.

⁵⁸ Is that path the example that we are called to follow (see page 5), or are we called to worship the walker of that path?

THE HOLY SPIRIT

**“The Holy Spirit is God Himself,
as He is at work in our hearts and in the world.
Although He is a spiritual being and therefore isn’t visible,
the Holy Spirit is powerful and constantly at work.”
(Billy Graham Association 2024)**

In the Old Testament, God is often referred to as
"The Spirit of the Lord",
perhaps to avoid writing the holy name.

In John 4, Jesus is reported as saying **"God is Spirit"**.
As a Spirit, God can have no physical existence.
Like hunger and thirst or bravery, that Spirit
(the Holy Spirit) can directly affect our lives,
on a short-term or permanent basis.

In the Nicene Creed, the Holy Spirit is described as
***the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.***

BUT

finding that the idea of a non-physical entity difficult to relate to,
we tend to make an image of our God, either as man or beast.
We even constrain divinity to holy locations.

In around the second century, Christianity absorbed ideas, and
converts, from Greek and Roman religions, where God was
given a physical form. It was an aspect of their faith
that the converts could not abandon.

Thus we find the image of God sitting on a royal throne
of Prince Jesus being sent on a vice-regal mission to earth,
and the Spirit became their ambassador, working in the world.
The Spirit's power then became a focus of the church,
as the outworking of omnipotent divinity.

*Yet, if God is truly Spirit and is at work within us,
does such a physical manifestations,
or powerful external presence,
make any sense?*

The Work of the Spirit

“God **is** Spirit”⁵⁹
lives and works within us
guides and initiates our better impulses
points each of us to where we should be going
but
can be ignored, rejected, even opposed
by the temptations common to all mankind.

The concept of an empowering Spirit
was devised from pre-Christian religious practices
and the ideas which they passed into the Christian frame.
For our God does not come and go.
God is always with us.

Yet such practices and ceremonies still empower
and may overwhelm the Christian believer.
We can be “slain in the Spirit”
fall prostrate at a touch
speak in “tongues”.

We can surrender to divinity,
perhaps through another's hands or words,
and feel the immediate reality of the Spirit's presence.
And the consequences of that surrender
can be life-changing.

Once surrendered we may be led
to seek anew the depths of divinity,
to work anew in the service of mankind,
to look to the ways of Jesus as our guide;
or we may stray down contrary paths
of self-empowering, magical works,
and submission to the draw
of another's charisma.

*Is the risk of corruption then
the partner of The Spirit's anointing?*

⁵⁹ Gospel of John chapter 4 verse 24

The Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles is often seen as the Gospel of the Holy Spirit.

Through its pages the early church's understanding of the supernatural is explained, and extended to embrace the ministry of the Apostles and the leaders of the church.

Despite the evidence of Old Testament appearances, the Spirit is said to have arrived at Pentecost,⁶⁰ inspiring those leading the assembly and causing all those present to manifest the Spirit.

St Paul in his letters, covered below, expressed his understanding of the Spirit as both a provider of gifts, spiritual abilities, and an inspirer of good ways of living, when writing to churches that questioned or misunderstood the Spirit's role.

Such manifestations are present even today where the people are called to surrender their minds and bodies to the Spirit.

They may fall to the ground (“slain in the Spirit”), or speak in words they have not formed (speaking in tongues, “glossolalia”) as they surrender their faculties to the Spirit of God.

There can be peace in such surrender abandoning earthly cares to lie in God's arms, trustingly.

Trusting in God alone, as we are called to do.

⁶⁰ See The Acts of the Apostles Chapter 2

The Gifts of the Spirit

Many religions are focussed on the power of their divinity,
with tales of miracles and the supernatural;
tales that bear little concrete reality;
tales that others have discarded
in their infancy.

The early church in Corinth inherited such ideas
from the worship of pagan gods in their city,
a city notorious for immorality.

St Paul tried to explain spirituality to the Corinthians⁶¹
by listing gifts that seem to accompany the Spirit's indwelling;
gifts largely invoking seemingly supernatural attributes,
but which enabled the members to feel special,
gifted by God, powerful.

It is this spiritual power that many seek in their religious lives.
It is a power that makes a person feel special above others
despite their seemingly humble status in the world.
It is the power that Jesus rejected
in his desert meditations.

It is a power that believers call upon to demand
that their will be done by the God
to whom they call.

It is also the power that leaders seek
to impose their will on others, so as
to prosper through their Godly gift;
their anointing by God or man.

It is this power that leads to the Prosperity Gospel.
The Spirit's anointing is said to guarantee
the material success of the recipient.
Financial reward for faithfulness.

Thus the Christian is told to use God for his purposes
rather than being open to be used by God.

*Is this not a complete inversion
of the divine relationship?*

⁶¹ See 1 Corinthians chapter 12

The Fruit of the Spirit

St Paul, expounding his ideas,
also wrote to the church in Galatia⁶²
explaining the Fruit, or benefits, of the Spirit,
as another, more material, aspect of divine indwelling.

*“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness,
goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*

Here is the obverse of the coin,
where the impact of the Spirit causes human change
to support the demands and purposes of God,
rather than imposing demands on divinity
for our own self-centred aims.

As Paul also wrote:
*“the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit,
and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.
They are in conflict with each other.”*

Perhaps these two approaches expose
the prime division of the schismatic Christian church,
between a religion focussed, primarily, on divine reward
and one that is focussed on serving humanity.

Perhaps it is the conflict of this self-centred focus on
a heavenly reward, held by the evangelical church,
with the morality of much modern society
that is undermining church attendance;
for society has rejected an ethos
that seems to fall behind
its moral principles.

*If the church reverted to the message of Jesus,
rather than being centred on the doctrine about him,
would the lost members return to the pews?*

⁶² The Epistle to the Galatians, chapter 5

The Whisper Divine

Throughout the Old Testament
God spoke to His people
through the Prophets.

Some heard the Lion roar out his message⁶³
for others it was the still small voice⁶⁴
that whispered in the night.

This was, and is, something intangible., inexplicable,
something to which we may give unearthly powers,
attribute a prophetic view of things to come,
or a supernatural ability to execute
things beyond human means.

In the New Testament, the Spirit becomes
the pro-active power of God in the lives of believers
the generator of the supernatural events
on which so many Christians rely.

This was, and is, something claimed by those
who wish to provide a magical ministry,
filled by healing power and
self-centred certainty.

This was, and is, something attributed to the divine voice,
guiding us, or commanding us, to a new path
free of man-made constraints
and earthly promises.

As we are confronted by seemingly insoluble issues,
maybe we know, intuitively, what is right for this situation,
but need to overcome our own deafening ego
and 'wash the windows of our perception'
so that we can hear, clearly,
the whisper divine.

*Is this internal voice
the true reality of divinity?*

⁶³ Amos Chapter 3 verse 6

⁶⁴ Elijah in 1 Kings Chapter 19 verse 12

THE MUTATING GOSPEL

A Traditional, Protestant, Orthodox View

**“The gospel of Jesus Christ
is the message of the good news of salvation
offered to mankind by grace through faith
in the works of Christ on the cross.”**

This gospel, or "good news", is thus said to be that God has provided a way of salvation for mankind.⁶⁵
We are told that we need salvation because our sinw lead to death and eternal punishment.
Yet all men are sinful.

We are told that
we don't have to suffer punishment for sin.
Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice on the Cross.
He shed his blood so that we might be saved; for:
*"if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and
believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,
you will be saved"* (Rom 10:9).

We are told that
God does not want anyone to perish,
but for everyone to come to repentance.
However, in the end, not all people will be saved.
Only those who worship Jesus as Lord will go to heaven.
The gospel of Jesus Christ is the best news anyone can hear,
for the way that each person responds to this news
determines where he or she will spend eternity.

A further facet of this doctrine affirms
that our lives and thus our eternal fate are pre-ordained.

*“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed
to the image of his Son, so 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 (Ro 8:29-30).*

*He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ,
according to the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:5).*

⁶⁵ See “Salvation” at page 43

However!

The "Gospel", of today, is not that of which Jesus spoke.
The Gospel of Jesus was of the imminence of God's Kingdom.
He spoke of Hope of a better life, of Equality and Divine Justice.
He spoke of Unconditional Grace and of God's love for all.
He spoke to the needs of a people living under tyranny,
in fear and often in extreme poverty.

After Jesus died, Christians were a harassed sect of Judaism
discouraged by the loss of their leader but still active,
preaching a doctrine of spiritual equality and
the rights of the downtrodden poor.

Paul changed Christ's message to a fresh perspective,
a theology based on ancient prophecy explaining his death,
creating a new religion, outside Judaism, so not a threat to it.

Promotion of Christianity to a religion of the Roman world
absorbed classic religious teaching and Hellene considerations.
As secular authority became vested in the Christian leaders,
old ideas were swept away, their records were destroyed,
their priests and their proponents removed or executed.
Hard edges replaced the inclusiveness of Christianity.

The Middle Ages changed the perspective yet again
as divinity came to be seen through powerful secular rulers;
as Jesus took on a royal mantle and ruled from a golden throne;
as personal redemption from our sinful nature became crucial;
as forgiveness was vested in the power-mongers of the church.

We are inheritors of that Corrupted Gospel, centred on self.
It remains as a source of competition, warfare and evil
and a denial of the true message of Jesus,
but a very practical approach to power.

The demise of the church and of religious faith
reflects the untenable nature of the message it proclaims,
yet there is a truer way, Christ's way,
awaiting our consideration.

*We can still return to the message of Jesus,
updated for our time, but can we still speak
of the imminent reality of God's Kingdom?*

Corruption of the Gospel

The Gospel of Jesus was of Hope and of Divine Justice.
He spoke of Unconditional Grace and of God's Love for All.
He spoke to the needs of a people living under tyranny.

As reported in Luke's Gospel,
Jesus claimed for himself the words of Isaiah
as his opening manifesto.⁶⁶

Paul undermined Christ's message with new ideas⁶⁷;
a theology which ignored the radical message of Jesus,
and denigrated, as law-bound, those who held to his ideas.
These were the "Judaizers" of his Epistles.

Promotion of the Kingdom here was replaced by salvation;
and the resurrection to a new life in another, heavenly, realm.
The Gospel message became his role in forgiveness of our sin,
conditional on personal agreement to the doctrine
of his bodily resurrection.

Paul's letters and the book of Acts tell of his endeavours,
of how he convinced the Christian leaders when in Jerusalem
and struggled with them when they visited his own mission field.
He, an educated man, provided a reason for their loss;
explained why their leader died as he did, what it meant.

So "the Gospel" of Christ became one about Christ,
discarding the desires of the underclass for those of the elite;
remodelling the message as necessary to adapt to their needs.
Thus the new faith absorbed crucial aspects of the old
to meet the religious needs of Roman society.
Christianity was a faith without hard edges.
They were still to come!

⁶⁶ Luke 4:16-19 and see "The Nazareth Manifesto" at page 84

⁶⁷ Paul's knowledge of Jesus was, at best, second-hand. He never heard him speak (if we discard his vision by the roadside), nor gave any weight to his teaching, merely reflecting his life into a Pharisaic doctrinal framework. Thereby the practical and radical nature of Christianity was effectively displaced by a safe, if intellectually challenging, theology.

The Definitive Gospel

The Gospel that Jesus proclaimed was of God's Kingdom.
Paul explained the Resurrection as assurance of salvation
and that forgiveness of sin was certain for those who believed.

Medieval considerations added substance to Pauline ideas.
Authority was vested in Christian leaders
and old ideas were swept away,
their records were destroyed
and their proponents were removed.
Christianity became an institution of the state,
and has, largely, remained so even today.

So Christian thought changed to mirror secular principles
proclaiming a different Gospel that had to be endorsed by all,
proclaiming obedience to authority.

The story was of vengeance for our failure to obey regulations,
of forgiveness conditional on our acceptance of a formula.
Religion took on the structures and ethics of the regal state.
It reverted to much the same message that Jesus challenged.

**The message of Jesus put self second, even unto death,
but was replace by a revision of the Gospel,
which put self first, even after death.**

We are inheritors of that Corrupted Gospel, centred on self.
It remains as a source of competition, warfare and evil,
and a denial of the true message of Jesus,
but a very practical approach to power.

It is a message that must be re-imagined,
if Christianity is to survive the advent
of critical thought in our generation.⁶⁸

*Jesus put self second even unto death.
Do we dare to follow him?*

⁶⁸ See "An Enlightened People" at page 82

Revising the Message

Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God's Kingdom.
He spoke to the needs of a people living under tyranny.
Later theology explained the Resurrection as an assurance
of forgiveness of sin for those who believed in him and,
then, as assurance of eternal life of bliss for the faithful;
those who are willing to say "The Creed".⁶⁹

The message of Jesus put self second, even as far as death.
The corrupted Gospel put self first, even after death.
We are inheritors of that corrupted Gospel.
Today we are called to live our lives,
rather than to give them.

That corruption is crafted to give power to those in leadership
and is thus rigorously, notoriously, protected by the church.
If Christianity is to become true to its founder,
it must return to the message of Jesus:
"The Kingdom of God is at hand".

But it now needs to look more widely;
beyond the narrow world of a Judean peasant.
Maybe that Kingdom now includes other concerns;
such aspects as Care for Creation, Climate Change;
such as ethnic, sexual and national equality,
as well as care for the poor and needy.

These are the things that bother a moral thinking man.
These are things around which protesting groups gather.
Surely these are concerns that Jesus would focus on today!
Notably, these are things for which people give their lives
rather than focusing on their own eternal existence.
We need to express a new Gospel message
addressing the vital concerns of our day,
instead of those of inward looking,
ancient, but ignorant, savants.

*Can the church of Christ be saved
by going back to his original message of salvation?*

⁶⁹ Saying the Apostles' Creed (page 84) is commonly taken as an affirmation of religious allegiance.

Good News for Today

The message of Jesus put self second, even as far as death.
The replacement of that Gospel put self first, even after death.
The Age of Reason called into question such false teaching,
and its supporting doctrine of atoning sacrifice.

The Gospel of Jesus was oriented to present reality;
faced the needs of a poverty stricken, dominated people;
spoke of a time when such wrongs would be righted.

People flocked to hear him, sacrificially, after their days of toil.
The Gospel for today needs to hit a similar nerve in our day;
with a message that would inspire the weary working-person;
showing where God is at work in our embattled world today.

We can find the divine purpose where morality roams;
in the fight for ethnic and sexual equality, for distributive justice;
in the protection of the vulnerable; in feeding the poor.
These are ancient calls⁷⁰ of scripture that can still be endorsed;
that need to be brought to the forefront by every preacher;
that need to be the foundation of every church.

But we can also see the purposes of God in love for Creation,
in protecting our environment, our homes and places of work.
These are current concerns that wake people in the night.
In addressing these concerns by the message of Jesus,
Christianity can be shown to be as relevant today
as it was before it became covered
by a sacramental camouflage.

By taking a lead in addressing these issues,
the church can do, again, the work of Christ,
free of the incubus of the doctrinal power-block
which has stultified its potential.

So maybe the church can repent from its meaningless offerings,
its sabbaths and convocations, festivals and prayers
and learn to do right.⁷¹ in the eyes of the world,
in trying to save the world.

For, if the church takes a lead in this, the people will follow
and come to hear the meaningful Gospel of Jesus
above the blind guidance of present doctrine.

⁷⁰ Matthew 23:23

⁷¹ Isaiah 1:13-17

A FRESH PATH TO TRAVEL

The unrealistic doctrine of present religious dogma,
and its power-oriented, dominant, agenda
demand a fresh approach to religion;
a new reformation.

We need to replace appeasement of an imagined divinity
by the education of an irresponsible community,
into the ways of God's Kingdom
for their support and welfare.

We need to take and rationalise what Jesus taught
as was reported by Luke in the Sermon on the Plain,
and by Matthew's Gospel as the Sermon on the Mount,
into a modern, practical context, relevant to our world,
so becoming Christ's agents in the world today;
so becoming his disciples.

We can see these ideas reflected in the principles which lie
behind many initiatives of the democratic state
and in its caring, social, agenda.⁷²

Such principles have a secular, not a religious, foundation,
but this is where God is going – where true goodness lies.
Within this is the self-giving message of Christ's death,
rather than in the present self-centred doctrine
of the established church.

We need to reflect on the teaching of Jesus about religion,
its hierarchies, titles, rituals, buildings and boundaries;
and so, abandon our current organisational fixations.

Perhaps we should replace a faith based on doctrinal rectitude
and the magical intervention of an imagined deity,
by a much more practical interface to divinity;
as Jesus did.

⁷² Such ideas are often promoted, successfully, by the church in areas
where the state has failed, or fails, to provide any support network.

Purposes of the Church

The obvious failings of the established churches and the intermittent scandals arising from those unestablished, alert us to the possibility that there could be, there should be, a holier path; a way of honesty and integrity and goodness. This can only lie in a reflection of the teaching of Jesus. It can not be a vehicle for our need to worship, to control others, to state our allegiance, or even to share our lives and news.

What can that mean in practical terms?
How can we reflect those principles in what we do, as individuals, but more importantly, as a Christian group?

Surely it must mean caring for each other, but more, it must mean caring for our neighbour and for God's creation. If we are also to witness to God's Kingdom, as Jesus required, that means not "hiding our light under a basket", acting openly, publicly; spreading the news of how we care and what we do, and why.

The churches should become centres of concern for the planet, pressure groups against use of plastic, global warming, waste; promoting care for the poor, education and gender equality.

It should be a place that people turn to in need or trouble and the central place from which love spreads to embrace the whole of creation.

It should be a place where these principles are actively promoted and pursued.

Surely God does not require, or need⁷³, our prayers, creeds, praises or bible readings. These are merely oriented to our need for group affirmation. The purposes of God have nothing to do with liturgy, on sacraments, prayers, praises and readings; on what we called to do on Sunday.

The church is called to apply and to promote the teaching of Jesus to the problems and issues that we face today, and so to become effective in the land.

⁷³ Amos 5:21. "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. "see "the Call of the Prophets" at page 87 . See also page 39, "the Purposes of God".

Hope for the World?

The world is suicidally bent,
driven by individuality and personal desire
to consume, pollute and to destroy its heritage.
We are assured, that, unless we change our ways,
the world will, in time, become uninhabitably over-heated
through nuclear holocaust or intensified global warming.
Sadly, these problems are not central for the church.

"Sadly" because the church fails to recognise that the eternal hell-fire of its teaching, may well become a present reality.

"Sadly" because herein lies the opportunity for the church to present a meaningful message to the world, and it does not.

"Sadly" because the church continues to proclaim personal salvation from divine judgement, and the satisfaction of individual desires, rather than one of self-sacrifice for others.

"Sadly" because the church, in its preaching and its behaviour, presents a message which is irrelevant to the current crisis.

"Sadly" because any re-alignment of the church's message, repentance for its past, is anathema to the power-brokers of religion, at every level.

"Sadly" because although the teaching of Jesus points to the way that would have, could have, led to global salvation, it has been ignored and a less challenging path adopted.

"Sadly" because the church's reaction to the threat of global pandemic was to close its doors to those in need of solace; to obey the secular power rather than to challenge its intentions; to fail to realise the impact on society of a mutuality of need.

Sadly because, although we are called, in church, to 'believe in Jesus', that is taken as believing in the church's doctrine about him, rather than in the message that he preached.

Yet hope for our world lies in following his teaching:

- Putting others first, our neighbour, our children or even the fate of our planet.
- Not responding with anger to perceived insult or injury, so avoiding dissension and the risk of nuclear conflict.
- Ignoring the lure of unworthy financial profit.
- Dispensing with the need for materials which can not be renewed.
- Not seeking for power over others but for ways to serve each other.

How the Church Might Be

The church is risk averse,
and unwilling to change its ways.
It is, sadly, driven by fear of change,
of losing its reputation, and its authority.
It remains afraid of losing the actual God,
of position and power, that it truly worships;
the God demonstrated in its titles and rituals
and in its dominating castellated buildings.

Churches could be centres of rebellion
against the self-centred purposes of power;
against the heartless destruction of human heritage;
against the mindless consumption of diminishing resources.
Church, when it has rethought its ways and its intention,
could truly become the gathering of the godly,
those actively pursuing God's purposes.
Such a church carries impact!

Church could be the centre of communal goodness;
the place from which flows care, love, integrity and justice;
a place where God is active, however God may be visualised.
For this people might gather to hear the news of other's needs,
be inspired to serve another, offer self for service,
follow, joyfully, the way that Christ devised;
gather to save the world from Self.

Sadly, I doubt that I shall live to see that day
for the evangelical church is dominant at this time
with its self-centred concern for individual salvation;
driven by the fear of divine retribution
and any challenge to priestly power,
rather than by the radical call
of actual divinity.

Yet we might add that quotation
attributed to St Augustine (354-430):
**“the church is a whore....
but she is still my mother”.**

Born Again

The Christian concept of being "Born Again" presumes a change of approach to support of the current doctrine. Yet, for Jesus, it was a call to an alternative viewpoint; a challenge to the religious of his day.

So, from ordained orthodoxy, we may be called, reborn, into a radical faith distanced from current religious dogma. We may be reborn as a new unconstrained creation. We may be called to reimagine reality.

The application of modern analytical tools question many of the legends, tales and stories of antiquity. We may come to doubt the veracity of much that orthodox religion proclaims.

Yet many fear to leave the comfort of firm boundaries, the certainty of unthinking compliance to orthodoxy, obedience to the whim of self-centred authority, the doctrine and disciplines of religion.

Out of that womb of misconception, we can be born again, emerging to new truths and conceptions, driven by new incentives or teaching, seeking for new foundations and ultimate reality.

*Can our ideas of divinity change
without invalidating past concepts?
Can we support new angles on our familiar views,
without losing our perspective of divinity?*

A New Pathway

I have been weaned from the breast-milk of doctrine,
fed to all church members by a dominant priesthood;
escaped the persuasive expertise of Alpha courses,
with their eager, earnest, graduates.

I have travelled the fresh pathways of thoughtful internet gurus,
exposing more analytical views of religious legend,
more honest approaches to scriptural stories;
maybe starting from a less doctrinal base.

I have questioned their conclusions, struggled with their ideas
and often faced the need to make my own decisions,
based on the evidence that they supply,
but unbounded by religious dogma.

I have come to wonder whether all religions
are truly a path to goodness or to slavery;
for all are primarily concerned with power;
Power to promulgate their own views;
Power over a captive congregation;
Dominant power over others.

We may well then ask ourselves, and maybe others,
whether God, divinity, and its support package
was created to console or to control;
whether the format of religion
is inherently good or evil.

In asking that question we must come to see
that divinity is not external to our being,
but lies as a guiding hand within us.
Religions exploit that reality
for their own benefit.

So, I am tied to a church with beliefs opposed to my own,
but holding the key to fellowship with those travelling
a different, if somehow related, journey.

For the cost of complete freedom
from the bonds of apparent religious adherence
exceeds my moral and spiritual budget.

My Eternal Value

Our individual craving for self-worth, importance, power,
undermines the fragile call of goodness in our hearts;
frustrates the working of God's Spirit,
the call of selfless love.

For I believe that I am right.
I matter over and above you
because you are not me.

The cult of the individual forms the foundation of evil,
of dog-eat-dog, pride, prejudice and domination;
creates the conditions for war and vice;
denigrates others because they
are not us.

Yet our society and religion are based on self-promotion,
structured to set one group or person against another.
We struggle to be better, earn more, to conquer;
for victory over others of the human race;
despising, fearing, diminishing
our brothers and sisters

Even Christianity is focused on individual salvation;
centred on God's love for the Christian community;
or the growth of one church over another;
on competition between denominations.

Jesus, amongst others⁷⁴, showed the way of selfless love.
Yet his story has generated the empire of the church;
Christ buried in the empty tomb of Christianity;
his example hidden under the altar,
safely sacramental.

**“Blessed”, said Jesus, “are the meek”;
didn't he?**

⁷⁴ The Way of Jesus (page 5) is not unique to Christianity, for it features in much of the teaching of other religions.

It's not all about me

Yet, surely, it is not all about my fate in the end,
but about what I can do for others,
even those unborn.

So where should I go,
what may I believe,
what should I do?

I have little belief in a transcendent or interventional divinity.
I have no belief in post-mortal existence or judgement,
but I do believe in a divine ideal, a purpose,
something which cares in the long run,
but is beyond my comprehension
and my spiritual pay-scale.

I came from nothing in this life and brought nothing to it.
I go to nothing and can take nothing away from it,
but maybe I can affect Life somehow.
Whilst I am here and active,
maybe I, in my poverty,
can enrich another.

Maybe what I can do will affect what others do
and so bend the course of history
to a better solution.

Maybe what I write or say may flow down
and touch another to do what
I should have done.

ADDENDA

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This booklet has been assembled, over many years,
as my own ideas have been changing and altering.

Putting some of it into print gives a finished form,
but hopefully not a final perception;
indeed, this version is already
much amended.

For further thoughts and ideas,

Open the website:

www.whisperdivine.uk

ADDENDA

The Kingdom Of God

In the Kingdom of God,
Self is subject to Service.
Need generates corrective response.
The whisper of God' voice is clearly heard
in the absence of personal, self-centred, desire.

In the Kingdom of God
There is distributive justice
equality of available resources,
of opportunity and of love.

In the Kingdom of God
There is peace, for all have what they need
There is peace, for striving is at an end
There is peace, for all are equal
and loved.

In the Kingdom of God
The faults of our fathers are repaired
There is no pursuit of wealth or power
Self-promotion and position are turned
to a new contentment.

The coming of the Kingdom of God
Is not paved in power or prayer,
in charismatic fervent praise,
or healing hands,
but
by humble service
based on love of others
respect for another's views
care for creation and community.

The coming of the Kingdom of God
is not signalled with blazing trumpets
but grows within us and society
like a seed or flavour of hope
infecting all with new life;
born again
gently over millennia
working out the Purposes of God
in God's timetable, not in our own.

cont

ADDENDA

The Kingdom of God is much written about;
the words of Jesus abound in teaching about it.
Yet it is much misunderstood within the churches,
that point to power rather than to service.

The ways of the Kingdom reflect care for others
and a desire to meet their need rather than our own.⁷⁵
In this Kingdom, there are no hierarchies or power struggles,
for all desire only to serve another as best they can.
Jealousy and anger are foreign to that Kingdom;
envy and avaricious desire are unknown;
pride and position have no place.
The pathway to that Kingdom
is the Way of Jesus.

This is in direct contrast to the ways of the Roman empire,
to ways of hierarchy and patronage and dog-eat-dog.
As such it was, indeed, treason in its day!
It is even counter-cultural today.

In its detail lies the reason for our living.
Outside its boundaries we are lost and straying.
Only within this Kingdom can we find true happiness,
the fullness of our lives and the true joy of living.
Yet such a Kingdom bears little resemblance
to the hierarchical, power-driven church
concerned over shrinking attendance,
influence, buildings and finances;
and personal salvation.

True salvation is not for any individual,
nor does it lie in any after-death existence,
but lies in the continued existence of our world,
through the values expressed as God's Kingdom,
for and by and through us on behalf of others,
even on behalf of future generations.

This is the message of Christ today,
spoken through modern prophets,
and even through social media,
but seldom through
his church.

⁷⁵ Yet our prayers and doctrine remain centred on personal concerns for health and wealth. See also "The Prophetic Word" at page 28.

ADDENDA

An Enlightened People

Christianity is supported by ancient stories
and thus, based on an undeveloped, untenable, worldview:
A sun that circles the earth; biological ignorance; magic;
all the fantastic legends of an impossible distant past;
a flat earth with hell below and heaven above;
God imagined as a superior form of man.

The Enlightenment⁷⁶ brought new learning and critical thought.
Central to the Enlightenment was individual liberty to reason,
in opposition to the fixed dogmas of the Church.

The Enlightenment was marked by scientific method,
and an increasingly critical questioning of religious orthodoxy.

Such critical analysis of religious texts has discovered facts
that have made a doctrine based on ancient legend untenable.
Such disciplines as archaeology, space travel and the study of
evolution, undermined many fixed concepts of Christianity,
and destroyed the concept of any literal veracity for the Bible.
Even the powerful principle of original sin could not contend
with a process of evolution from a pre-human baseline.

Denial of a fall from perfection undermined Atonement doctrine.
Biological learning negated the concept of virgin birth.
Space travel denied a place for heaven beyond the clouds.
Textual analysis undermined many ideas of biblical authorship.

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) explained religious immaturity
as the most pernicious form of ignorance, and pointed out that,
the Enlightenment aided man's emergence from childhood, but
the church used its power and doctrine to constrain the impact
and tried to constrain the progress of mankind towards truth.

This situation really has not changed.

A new Gospel is needed;⁷⁷
to replace the concept of "Gospel Truth"
with something that is Good News for an enlightened people;
for people who can think and reason for themselves,
who can all be filled with God's Spirit
and follow where Jesus led.

⁷⁶ See "Church History" at page 24

⁷⁷ See "The Mutating Gospel" at page 65

ADDENDA

Evolving Creation

Every ethnic group has its own story of creation
How God or Gods in local guise took action to create
and why God made that group special among the nations.
The Bible story, formed by Jewish priests, is no different,
though perhaps more logical, less prone to ancient imagery.

Scientists have shown the actual path of evolution and
archaeological evidence disproves ancient misconceptions,
just as it denied solar progress around the earth
or the place of heaven above the clouds.

Mankind evolved from ape and even
from more primitive forms of existence;
even from what we would not term life at all.
We have become what we are over many millennia.

We have evolved from thoughtlessness
through barbaric survival instincts
to a reasoning and caring being,
though with residual traces.

We have evolved and are evolving.
Despite set-backs and regional differences
we are becoming closer to what we could be,
as love of self gives way to love of others.

Yet mutual love may not be our destination.
Maybe there are more major milestones,
more steps in evolution to be taken
before we reach our full potential.

From motionless material, through slime,
through first mobility and basic thought
we have become what we are.
Surely there is more ahead.

**Traditional theology still looks backward
to its God as the cause of all things.
Emergence theology looks forward
to godliness as the goal.
Thus neither deny
God's reality.**

ADDENDA

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is
seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the
living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

This Creed is taken as crucial to much church ceremony.
It is, for many, key to any explanation of a true Christian faith.
Its exposition is said to be key to orthodox Christianity.⁷⁸
Yet speaking the Creed has no impact on how we live.
Much of the content is the product of ancient dogma.
None of the content reflects the teaching of Jesus.

We could say that:

They took his crucified body and stripped off his humanity;
took his human flesh and removed what made him real;
polished his whitened skeleton into shining glory
and lifted on high the residual relic
of what had been radical man.

The Nazareth Manifesto

**This was the message that Jesus gave immediately after
his time of soul-searching in the desert.⁷⁹**

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

Jesus turns away from all promises of spiritual power.
to focus on the very human needs of the people
in the devastated lands of rural Galilee.
It is The Way of Christ.

⁷⁸ See “Orthodoxy” at page 88

⁷⁹ See the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4

ADDENDA

The Temptations

The account of this event develops from a mention in Mark's Gospel to a full-blown narrative in Matthew's. It has an intermediate state, and different content, in Luke's Gospel:

It can be taken literally or treated as a decision-making parable.

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." *"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'*"

"To you I will give all the authority of the kingdom of the world and their glory, for it has been given to me, and I give it to whom I will, If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

"It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve' "

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple rock, for it is written, "He will command his angels to guard you, and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."

"It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Jesus is meditating on the shape of his imminent ministry, initiated by the message and encouragement of John the Baptist, as described in the previous chapter of all the Gospels.

The first possibility is a ministry based on working miracles to overcome human needs. It is a path that is taken by many, but ultimately leads nowhere, for human need is unquenchable, without a global change of heart.

The second option points to the spiritual power and authority exercised by many church leaders and those on the evangelist trail. It is, and always has been, a position carefully protected through special training, anointing, knowledge and brotherhood.

The third alternative seems to be one of invulnerability to human ills. It is, perhaps, a more personal consideration than the previous two. He will be top dog!

There is here an escalation of possibilities from the power to do good, through the power to control, to absolute power. It is a route that we can see being taken by many, even today. It is a path that continues to be a temptation for any placed in a position of authority, whether in church or state or even local government.

It is a path that Jesus rejected for one of service - to all.

ADDENDA

The Lord's Prayer

In scripture, the Lord's Prayer comes in two versions:

Luke 11:1-4	Matthew 6:9-13
Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.	Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one

Since it is unlikely that an author would ignore any part of what Jesus said, it would seem that the shorter, Lucan, version is more likely to have been closer to the original version. Matthew's version is longer, so probably includes later additives, suited to the needs of the local environment in which it was written.

Different manuscripts of each version also contain small variations, as do the different translations into other languages. Further additions still were made in the variant which made its way into the *Didache*⁸⁰ and thence into the Book of Common Prayer These also included the final doxology: "for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever".

In fact, the prayers of Jesus are generally of a more immediate and more personal nature, so we may wonder whether this rather liturgical format reflects any original reality. If so, what was Jesus trying to say to his disciples? "Keep it simple", maybe?

⁸⁰ The *Didache* is a compilation of regulations for the Christian life, that had acquired the force of law by usage in the scattered Christian communities of the early 2nd C. It presents straightforward directions for living the Christian life and of Christian worship at the time.

ADDENDA

Call of the Prophets

Jeremiah 22:15-16

He administered justice and righteousness,
and so it went well with him.
He took up the cause of the poor and needy,
and so it went well with him.
Is this not what it means to know Me?"
declares the Lord.

Isaiah 1:17,

Learn to do right;
seek justice and correct the oppressor.
Defend the fatherless and plead the case of the widow."

Isaiah 58:6-7

Here is the way I want you to fast.
Set free those who are held by chains without any reason.
Untie the ropes that hold people as slaves.
Set free those who are crushed. Break every evil chain.
Share your food with hungry people.
Provide homeless people with a place to stay.
Give naked people clothes to wear.

Amos 5:21-24,

I hate, I despise, your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Micah 6:8

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Orthodox Progression

In olden times, man knew his place; inequality was a natural phenomenon; the social ladder was set and not to be ignored, nor seldom climbed.

Christ's concept of radical equality changed the world; gave mankind a vision of an unstructured society of individuals, leading to the recognition of human rights, liberalism, the separation of church and state.

However, such a vision threatened ancient empire; the radical teachings of Christ became hidden behind his worship, behind the trinity and blood sacrifice, resurrection and ascension. The facts of scripture were concealed from the illiterate populace; just as today the findings of academia are protected by the ordained from any lay consideration.

The Reformation did open a crack in the door of doctrine, but the Enlightenment opened the door still further for those not afraid to look and seek inside. It was a door that was swiftly closed and locked by the churches.

Along with the discoveries of scientific facts, the Enlightenment brought a new liberal theology and the critical reading of scripture. Belief in the supernatural and in an intervening deity declined. We were warned against “easy beliefism” and “cheap grace”.⁸¹ Liberation theology refocused the church on justice and charity, and the Nazareth Manifesto of Jesus⁸².

Conservative evangelicalism fought back!
Aghast at the decline of dogma that they deemed fundamental, they rejected the social gospel to focus on the worship of Christ. Individual salvation replaced communal welfare.
A Prosperity Gospel sanctified and blessed consumerism⁸³.
The Gifts of the Spirit took over from The Fruit, maybe.

Such a theology suits our troubled age.
The firm bounds of unquestioned doctrine are needed when the world is under other threats. Unfortunately, it is also the same self-centred theology that has exacerbated the situation.

⁸¹ Deitrich Boehoeffer “The Cost of Discipleship”

⁸² See “The Nazareth Manifesto” at page 84

⁸³ See Spiritual Materialism at page 14

Evangelical Doctrine

The Billy Graham Evangelical Alliance statement of belief (copied from the Internet website)

- We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
- We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
- We believe that all people everywhere are lost and face the judgement of God; that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation; and that for the salvation of lost and sinful mankind, repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ results in regeneration by the Holy Spirit.
- We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling enables the Christian to live a godly life.
- We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; the saved unto the resurrection of eternal life and the lost unto the resurrection of damnation and eternal punishment.
- We believe in the Spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ and that all true believers are members of His body, the Church.
- We believe that the ministry of evangelism and discipleship is a responsibility of all followers of Jesus Christ
- We believe God's plan for human sexuality is to be expressed only within the context of marriage, that God created man and woman as unique biological persons made to complete each other. God instituted monogamous marriage between male and female as the foundation of the family and the basic structure of human society. For this reason, we believe that marriage is exclusively the union of one genetic male and one genetic female.
- We believe that we must dedicate ourselves to prayer, to the service of our Lord, to His authority over our lives, and to the ministry of evangelism.
- We believe that human life is sacred from conception to its natural end; and that we must have concern for the physical and Spiritual needs of our fellow men.

Such strident certainty can lead to arrogant self-righteousness.

ADDENDA

Religious Certainty

The arrogance of religious certainty is terrifyingly widespread.

"We are right. You are wrong. We know best. Own truth."

"We are saved. You are damned. We are best."

"We are right. Do as we say or suffer.

Eternally!"

The religious righteous dominate with strident voice
the thoughtful considerations of owned faith,
drowning truth with dogmatic assertion,
drowning reality with doctrine.⁸⁴

There is no chance or hope of argument or dissent,
no pointing out places where concepts do not ring true,
where one-point conflicts with another or new ideas appear.
Their truth is fixed and may not be challenged.

"They" know that God came down in human form,
unable to realise that God was there already and still is.
"They" are certain of the existence of heaven and of hell
and of our eternal and physical existence
in one or other.

Even those people of the church with less fixed opinions
dare not oppose their personal views to such certainty,
for the children in the shallow end of thought
make much more noise and splashing
than those living with greater depth.

The church is thus stuck with its ancient creeds,
and the theories of past generations
stifle present thought.

For the church is unable to see beyond the boundaries
that it has set to where its people dare to roam.
Those who stray beyond those boundaries,
or are sat behind other castle walls,
are enemies to be conquered
in the name of "our" God.

It seems so like the situation
that Jesus challenged in his day.

⁸⁴ See "the Progress of Orthodoxy" at page 88

ADDENDA

Progressive Christianity

Attempts to experience the sacred in all of life,
guided by the life and teachings of Jesus.
Acts with compassion working to achieve,
a just, sustainable and peaceful world.

The Progressive Christianity Network Britain works to promote and support open and contemporary Christian understanding. It focuses on eight points:

1. To seek God, however understood, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus.
2. To affirm that there are many ways to experience the Sacred and that we can all draw on diverse wisdom on our spiritual journeys.
3. To recognise that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and to confront evil.
4. Placing hospitality at the centre of our communal and worshipping life and see the sharing of bread and wine as an expression of our common humanity.
5. Seeking to build communities that accept all who wish to share companionship without insisting on conformity.
6. Knowing that the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of our faith.
7. Gaining more insight in searching for understanding than in certainty.
8. Working together within and beyond the Church to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

The Progressive Network recognises the value and significance of tradition and the scriptures in the shaping of Christian faith, but also affirms that faith must be of today, not just the past. It values the Eight Points, above, first formulated by the Centre for Progressive Christianity in America, not as a creed or a statement of faith, but as an expression of how we should live as Christians.

ADDENDA

New Testament Writing

The New Testament, as we know it, is essentially a “collage” of various surviving manuscripts. It relies heavily on one, the Vatican Codex, which was written in the fourth century.

Fragmented papyrus, dating from the 2nd century onward, are the earliest witnesses to the original text of the New Testament. These are largely the rejected and discarded, copies of the text. Fair copies would have been taken into use.

There is thus a gap of over 100 years of which we have no real record on how the faith developed.

The authorship of most of the Gospels and Epistles has been questioned at some time, either because of the language used or the thrust of the content. Most of the writings have also been adjusted during the copying process to fit then-current doctrine. The main evidence for dating the originals is often that they are quoted by the early Church Fathers (see page93).

In particular it has been realised that:

- * **Pauline epistles:** Only 7 came from his hand⁸⁵. These are dated 52-62 AD, whereas the others are by unknown authors and came from the 2nd C. The earliest complete copies come from the 4th century.
- * **Hebrews:** It is dated at AD 80-90, but the author is unknown.
- * **James:** The dating and author is unproven.
- * **Petrine epistles:** Although the text identifies Peter as the author, most scholars find this extremely doubtful. The likely date of writing (after 70 AD) is after Peter's death (68 AD).
- * **John's Epistles:** One author wrote them, but that was probably not the apostle. They are dated as early 2nd century.
- * **Mark:** The earliest papyrus fragment comes from the early 3rd century. The book was almost certainly not written by the biblical John Mark. It is dated at AD 65-75.
- * **Matthew:** The earliest papyrus fragment is dated at 175-225 AD. It is written in Greek to Jewish Christians outside Israel. Matthew's Gospel relies heavily on Mark's⁸⁶.
- * **Luke-Acts:** A two-part work. The earliest fragments are dated at 200AD. The author is unknown, but it is dated at AD 80–110. It was still being revised late in the 2nd C.
- * **John:** The earliest fragments are dated at 200AD. The author is unknown, but possibly the same as Revelation and John's epistles. It is dated at 90-110 AD.
- * **Revelation:** Author unknown. Dated at 95 AD. A book of prophecy and imagery that was last (after 360 AD) to be added to the canon. It is a confusing conception, but much loved by those who focus on the return of Christ - eschatology.

⁸⁵ 1 Thes, Gal, 1 and 2 Co, Philip, Philemon, Romans.

⁸⁶ Mark has 661 verses and shares 600 of them with Matthew.

ADDENDA

Fathers of the Church

These, and their fellow bishops, are the people on whom we rely for our earliest ideas about the growth of Christianity. They are the ones who selected the stories that we read. They defined the doctrine and structure of the church⁸⁷. They even selected the books that were to be included in the bible, from others that existed in their day. Yet these are people of whom we know, or are told, so little.

In the main our information about them and their views comes from the letters that they wrote to other churches, for these were the bishops and leaders in their day. The earliest of them, the “Apostolic Fathers”, may well have spoken to, and learnt from, the last of the Apostles. Some of their letters almost became part of the canon of scripture⁸⁸. In other cases, the “Fathers” may well have been the authors of letters in the Bible for which we have no certain source⁸⁹.

A lot of the content of the letters is taken up with concern for church discipline, as the budding church hierarchy sought to stabilise the Christian organisation. Others struggle to give a credible explanation for the religious ideas of their day.

Ignatius of Antioch (died 110 AD) was probably the most comprehensive, and prolific, early writer⁹⁰. He would seem to have written seven letters.

He tells us to revere our bishop “as if he were Christ himself”. He attacks those who still observe the rules of the Torah. He affirms the human nature of Christ and the nativity story. He justifies his martyrdom as effecting a union with Christ.

However, the most influential has author been **Augustine of Hippo** (d 430), who lived after the decisive Nicean period. He adapted classical Platonic thought to Christian teaching to create the structures and doctrine that we meet today. He supported, illogically, both human freedom and divine predestination.

⁸⁷ Though this process was most prominent in the 4th and 5th centuries, it continued into the 8th century.

⁸⁸ **EG Clement**, bishop of Rome and apostolic father (d. 97)
His first epistle was part of the New Testament until the 14th C.

⁸⁹ **EG Polycarp**, bishop of Smyrna (d. 155). He wrote his own epistle to the Philippians and could be the real author of the canonical epistles 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus.

⁹⁰ There is a strong suspicion that the Ignatian letters were largely composed a couple of hundred years after his death. Neither his journey nor the thrust of his theology fit the known facts of his own time.

ADDENDA

Antioch and Alexandria were the first major schools of theology (“Catechetical Schools”). They spawned other schools.

ANTIOCH (founded, it is said, in 170 AD,)

This school held to a literal view of scripture and a Christology that emphasized the distinction between the human and the divine in the person of Jesus Christ, and thus a view of Jesus as the adopted son of God.

ALEXANDRIA (founded by 176, perhaps by St Mark⁹¹). It was the major centre of religious learning and philosophy in the ancient world. It was led by such scholars as:

Clement, Bishop of Alexandria (d 215)

He attempted to harmonise Greek philosophy with Christian doctrine. His life work was one of integration: transforming Christianity from a localised cult for the poorest class into a fully-fledged religion with a philosophy and a cosmology.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (d. 293)

He defended his concept of the Trinity, in the church councils and through violence in the streets, against Arian theology⁹²

Origen (d 254), who founded the school at Caesarea. He was one of the most brilliant minds of his day. He taught that God is primary, with Christ merely the way to salvation, and that the Trinity is a hierarchy⁹³.

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (d 340), who is known as the father of Christian history. He supported Arianism. He also claimed that the orthodoxy which he promoted derived directly from the teachings of Jesus.

CARTHAGE formed another school from which came:

Tertullian (d 220), who has been called the “father of Latin Christianity”, but later adopted a hierarchical (thus heretical) approach to the Trinity and moved on to become a Monatist.

Along with these orthodox teachers there were others who promoted alternative ideas (heresies?), including:

Valentinus of Rome (d 160) the Gnostic⁹⁴.

Basilides of Alexandria (d 132) another Gnostic

Marcion of Sinope (d 160) who taught a separation between Jesus and God.

⁹¹ An alternative theory believes that it was founded about 190 AD.

⁹² The **Arian controversy** was a series of Christian disputes about the nature of Christ, which divided the church for over 50 years. Within the Roman Empire the church was able to insist on a Trinitarian formula. Outside its bounds the Arian and Unitarian view persisted for many years.

⁹³ Origen’s ideas were condemned as heresies in the 4th C.

⁹⁴ Gnosticism emphasised personal spiritual knowledge and experience above the place of any orthodox teaching. The material world is flawed and evil. Salvation comes from a direct knowledge of hidden divinity and through mystical insight.

ADDENDA

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Wikipedia

On-line extracts from that broad knowledge base

It has often been a source of comfort and assurance for me to find a common theme between my own thoughts and those of these eminent authors, academics and speakers.

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