

**Christian
Theology
in
a
Sudanese
Context**

by Colin Salter

**A primer in Christian Theology:
with examples throughout drawn from
Sudanese life and culture.**

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“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed”.
(Proverbs 15:22).

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Theology is

to be

Considered

and

Experienced

1. Introduction

In Khartoum we often hear people saying: “God is great”! Only they know what is in their minds as they say it.

A great person may be important because of his role as a village chief or as head of his large family. A great businessman may take significant decisions which affect many people, using the power of his wealth. A great widow may impress others by the exceptional way she overcomes the poverty and hardship brought on her by the loss of her husband in war, yet she raises her children beautifully well.

Think for a moment: which of these three people shows greatness which is like God’s greatness?

God is really great! He has high status, over everybody else. All submission is due to him. God is great in his person, in his nature, and in all of his living qualities.

Then think for another moment about the greatest life ever lived in this world’s history. One of God’s angel’s told Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth, that his intended wife was miraculously pregnant with God the Son. This was ‘Immanuel’ – God involved with humanity. (Matthew 1:18-25).

Is God great enough to be fully living in the newborn baby Jesus, while at the same time holding his creation together, using something more than those tiny wrinkled human hands? (Colossians 1:15-20).

Is God great enough to take a human body and human nature upon himself, without losing anything of his already existing divine nature? (Philippians 2:6-11).

Could God be great enough to die as this man, Jesus, substituting himself for humankind, in order to face his own living wrath against sin? (Romans 5:6-9).

The good news of Christianity is that our salvation does not depend on compulsory daily prayers, nor on bowing down, nor pilgrimage to the Ka’ba, nor even on jihad.

About two thousand years ago, “God was reconciling the world to

himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them", 2 Corinthians 5:19. God displayed one of several aspects of his greatness by his plan to serve his own people. He gave himself to set *us* free. (Matthew 20:25-28).

Some people in Khartoum live in large houses, with several sets of stairs to different floors. They have coloured stone walls, tiled roofs, electricity powering air-coolers and fridges, plus piped water flowing into private bathrooms and toilets. Other people live in one sun-baked mud room with large settlement cracks in the walls. They sit and talk or sleep when it gets dark, and their water is delivered daily by donkey cart.

Consider: which of these people are 'free' in the sense God intended for them? The answer may surprise you! It is not our living conditions which makes us 'free' or 'bound'. No matter where people live, they are only really 'free' when they experience peace with God, made available through the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1-5). Once a person knows God in this way, he or she will want to get to know him better and better as life continues.

In 1972 J. I. Packer, an English clergyman who later served for many years as a Professor of Theology in Canada, wrote a book called "Knowing God". He was convinced "that ignorance of God – ignorance of both his ways and of the practice of communion with him – lies at the root of much of the church's weakness today". My brief experience of the Christian church in Sudan (visiting from 1979 almost annually, and serving as pastor for Khartoum International Church 1999-2003) made me sadly aware of many Sudanese Christians who plainly do not realise just how great God is. I quickly add that thirty-three years ministry in many churches of the United Kingdom tells me the experience of many British Christians is no better!

At its very best, the church in Sudan will be made up of people from all age groups, every tribal and religious background, a whole variety of cultures and all different levels of society. Christian people will fear and love God. They will show this in every aspect of their daily lives.

Even the word 'God' can mean a number of different things. Using words to talk or write about God is relatively easy. Wondering what those words really mean when applied to "the God of gods and Lord of lords, (God) the great, mighty and awesome", is the greatest

challenge to every Christian mind. (Deuteronomy 10:12-22).

When something about God cannot be fully explained, a humble person thinks, prays, studies his or her Bible, and worships 'God who is beyond full understanding'. At the same point, a proud person may simply say: "If I cannot explain it, it cannot be true". Which kind of person do you want to be?

I pray that this particular selection of Christian theology will lead you, the reader, into Christian worship that is both spiritual and true.

Please note:

- In the following pages, whenever I write: "I believe", it means that in my personal studying, understanding, and application of Scripture, this is what I conclude the Bible is teaching us. I submit this to the reader, for his or her consideration during Bible studies.
- I have tried to be consistent with English spellings that transfer from the Arabic language and script. However, as I have quoted *exactly* from other authors, and the way their books have been published, there will be apparent inconsistencies. I have included the everyday Arabic words in the One-line Dictionary at the end of the book.
- I have included '**Thinking it through**' points for special thought or discussion at the end of every chapter. These could be used for group discussions, for homework study assignments, or for individual thought. It is important to apply what we learn to our lives.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Describe in your own words the greatness of God.
- (b). From your memory: List all the things God is; then list all that God does.
- (c). How should we 'fear' such a great God?

2. Is the God of Islam the same as the God of Christianity?

Some Christians believe that Muslims worship a different 'God' from Christians. Orthodox Islam usually says that Christians are worshipping the same 'Allah', but in the wrong way. I take a different view to both these groups. There are sufficient common beliefs about God in Christianity and Islam to accept that we believe in the same God. But since proper Christian understanding of God is based on the Bible, while Muslim understanding is based on the Qur'an, many essential differences arise. (See chapters 21-23).

In Arabic 'Allah' means 'the God' as opposed to 'a god'. To Muslims who use Arabic, 'Allah' is the 'Ism adh dhat' – the 'essential name of God'. In the centuries before Islam existed, Arab Christians normally used the word 'Allah' as the name for 'God'. 'Allah' was the all-powerful creator God, high over all, including over the many lesser gods of polytheism. 'Allah' is the name used by Arab Christians today in their Arabic language Bibles, for the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have personally heard many Sudanese Arab Christian friends use 'Allah' in their own prayers.

The majority of Arab linguists understand the word 'Allah' to be "a contraction of the definitive article 'al' and the Arabic name for God, 'ilah'. Hence the name 'Allah' refers to God as the only God, 'the God'". Some Arabic linguists prefer to see 'Allah' as a noun, the proper name of God (as my name is 'Colin'). 'Allah' is similar to nearby Semitic languages: Aramaic – Elah; Syriac – Alaha; and Hebrew - El, Eloah, Elohim.

I take the view that Christians do believe in the same God as Muslims do, but we have a different understanding of this God because of our acceptance of the way the Bible uncovers him to us. It shows God, consistently and in everything, working out our salvation through Jesus Christ. I also believe that our different, Christian, understanding is right, and not wrong!

When Pastor Samwiil Janguul was first translating the gospels into Nuba Koalib during the 1960's, he began by using the local tribal name 'Thiru' for God. (He rightly did not want Christianity to be confused with Islam). However, when he began talking to his people about this 'Thiru', (his people were followers of traditional religions), he found that they already knew a lot about him and that he lived in a local hill! After he went on to explain what the Bible teaches about God, everyone understood that he was telling them about 'Allah', the

universal God.

The Forum of Bible Agencies around the world, have developed 'Basic Principles and Procedures for Bible Translation'. Point 4 reads that translation should "represent faithfully the original historical and cultural context. Historical facts and events should be expressed without distortion. At the same time the translation should be done in such a way that the receptor audience, despite differences of situation and culture, may understand the message that the original author was seeking to communicate to the original audience".

Perhaps this principle is best seen in Paul's preaching to followers of "an unknown God" in Athens. He began by saying: "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:16-34). We should do the same to people we often hear saying: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God". The God whom some others worship as 'Allah', we must reveal from the Bible.

In our worship and in our witness we must be careful to express accurately, as best we can, "...our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us.." (Titus 2:11-15). This book is offered to help us all in doing this.

Thinking it through.

- (a). When you talk with someone about God / Allah, how can you be sure you are talking about the same divine being?
- (b). From Acts 17:16-34 only, how did Paul define God?
- (c). Is there anything you would add to Paul's definition if you were talking to your friends? If there is, why?

3. Hungry to get to know God better

The study of the characteristics and attributes of God is dull to those who don't know God personally, but it is delightful to those who do know him. People who are alive to God have an appetite to know him more deeply.

Psalm 63:1 begins, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; .." The writer has an awareness that God is there, which is why he says

“O God”. He also has an assurance in knowing God personally, “You are my God”. Yet this assurance is still not the end. It leads forward into having an appetite to know God even better. He prays “Earnestly I seek you”.

I sometimes asked my students at Gereif West why they wanted breakfast at the end of the second class today when they had already had a breakfast yesterday. After some laughter they would realise that their appetite to eat daily bread and foule was one good sign that they were alive and healthy.

When Christians have no desire to know God any more than they do already, I usually wonder whether they really are spiritually alive. They are certainly not spiritually healthy.

In Philippians 3:7-12 Paul writes of the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ. But he immediately continues “I want to know Christ”, verse 10. How can he know, and yet still want to know, Jesus? All that he knows and experiences of Jesus in his life builds within him a strong desire to know and enjoy more and more.

My wife, Brenda, served with me when we lived in Bahri and pastored Khartoum International Church. We have been married for 33 years. We know each other much better now than we did when we were first married in 1970. As we have lived together and shared experiences together, we have discovered more about each other. We know what pleases and displeases each other. I know how to bring her enjoyment and I also know what troubles make her afraid. Knowing your marriage partner is very important. Knowing your God is even more so. The study and enjoyment of God is the work of a lifetime.

Thinking it through.

- (a). What things stop people from wanting to experience more of God?
- (b). What things do the opposite – and help people get to know God as a real friend?
- (c). Are there ways we can help each other live close to God?

4. What comes into your mind when you think about God?

How do we rightly think about God without breaking the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below”. Exodus 20:4. We even think in ‘forms’ as we picture things in the imaginations of our minds. Wrong thinking could lead us into accidental idolatry!

Firstly, we should think about the statements which the Bible makes about God, together with his activities which it describes. We must always use these to check against our own observations. God is the God who speaks. What he says is written in the Bible for us to read and learn. The Bible gives us several clear models to think about when it describes God as a shepherd (Psalm 23), as a parent (Matthew 7:7-11), as light (1 John 1:5), and God as a rock (Psalm 18:1-3). The Bible also likens God to a lion, to hovering birds (Isaiah 31:4,5), and to shady protection from the heat of the sun (Psalm 91:1).

Many roadside trees in Khartoum city shade seated tea sellers and drinkers. They give respite from the fierce midday sunshine. Seeing this happening every day can remind us to take daily moments of *spiritual* rest and refreshment. We do this by specifically turning to share our days’ events with God.

Secondly, we should think about God by using the things he does that we can see. He is the mighty creator of the wonders of our natural world. They show us something of how great he is. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands ... there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard”. Psalm 19:1-3.

It is the very nature of God, or essence of God, we are seeking to understand. “God is spirit,” John 4:24. A spirit is invisible. God cannot be seen; certainly not in the way that someone could see their friend when they get on the bus and go to sit next to them. Yet God is real. We don’t pretend there is God. He is genuinely here with us.

The heat of Khartoum was sometimes made more comfortable for me by a gently blowing wind. I couldn’t see the wind, but I definitely felt it. I would know the wind was there as I saw thrown away plastic bags blowing high across the sky. The fine dust carried on the wind was dumped on to the ground everywhere indoors and outside, especially during haboobs! The wind was without doubt real. I only ever saw the

things the wind did. I felt what the wind caused to happen. I lived with all the results of it blowing around without ever actually seeing the wind itself. So it is with God.

Thirdly, we can always think of Jesus Christ: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”. Philippians 2:6,7.

God the Son existed before becoming the baby Jesus. His first eternal form, (Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 1:1-2), took on to itself the form of a human being. He did not stop being at all what he was before, but he also became what he was not before. As the God-man, Jesus was fully God and fully man. The fact that we can read in the gospels about Jesus will help us think about his divine self. Jesus shows God perfectly because he is one with God essentially. When Jesus shows us God, he shows us himself. Meditating on the life of Jesus helps us understand his human activity and points us to who he really was, the Son of God. To know what God is like, read the story of Jesus, (John 14:9).

Fourthly, we can borrow the experiences other people have had, to think about God for ourselves.

I have never been to the Nuba Mountains. The closest I came was on a visit to El Obied via Kosti. My travelling friend, Pastor Nagi Konagi, originally came from near Heiban. He told me that the hills I could see in the far distance from the bus travelling along the main road, were just the small beginnings of the Nuba Mountains. I have met many people from the Nuba. I have seen pictures of the mountains, of village huts, of people hunting, of people farming and even wrestling. I have seen and heard enough evidence to convince me that the Nuba Mountains really do exist, even though I have never actually been there.

The experiences of many different people can also help us to think rightly about God. Theological writings are basically collections of people’s experiences and understandings gathered over many years.

I find these four ways helpful in trying to think correctly about God.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Describe some of the ways you personally think about God.
- (b). For each of these ways you have mentioned, decide did you learn it from the Bible, from nature or from another person?
- (c). Why is the Bible the most important resource (but not the only way) for thinking about God?

5. A helpful exercise

I have found the following exercise helpful using my Bible.

Read a chosen section quietly and carefully. Underline every word that describes God, or every phrase that teaches something about God. After finishing the reading, copy a list of all the different underlined words on to a sheet of paper. The result is the beginning of a theology: a study of the existence and nature of God.

For example, doing this with Genesis 1:1-2:3 (NIV text) would produce a list like something like this:

“God created, the Spirit of God, God said, God saw, God separated, God called, God made, God blessed, God rested, God made holy”.

A little more thinking may add still more to that list, from the same verses. These are not specific words about God but ideas about him implied by what the Bible says:

‘God has no beginning, he was already there’, verse 1. ‘God judges between what is good and what is bad’, verse 4. ‘God sets specific purposes for certain things he makes’, verse 14. ‘God wants things to happen’, verse 22. ‘God speaks to himself within himself’, verse 26. ‘God gave mankind a special role in his creation’, verse 28.

An exercise like this can be done with any part of Scripture. It should always be remembered that the result is only a part of what the Bible says God is like. Until you have done it with the whole Bible you will not have a complete picture.

Thinking it through.

Amongst other Bible passages for this exercise, try:

Psalm 145:1-21

Isaiah 55:1-13

John 17:1-26

6. Why study theology?

The study of the name, nature, person and work of God should lead us to worship him. A daily life of worship is where theological facts are turned into our own experience of spiritual truths. Our head-knowledge of God should change our lifestyle. If it doesn't, it is worthless.

Good theology will help us to recognise and reject bad 'Christian' and non-Christian practice. It should keep us God-centred. It will help us make good decisions as we love God with all our minds and show it in our practical everyday actions. It leads towards godly Christian maturity. (Matthew 22:36,37 and Philipians 3:12-16).

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a public affirmation of faith made by a Christian Assembly in the year 1646 A.D. We studied it as an introduction to theology at Gereif West during my last year in Sudan. Describing God in chapter 2 section 1 it reads:

“There is but one only, living, and true God: who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just and terrible in His judgements, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty”.

I suggest you get to know God so that your beliefs and convictions are your own! It is often too easy to say that you agree with a statement of belief written by a denomination or local fellowship. You may not even understand it! Translating your own believed doctrines into everyday language and life shows how much you genuinely understand of them.

While some of God's attributes – his truly real qualities – can be reproduced in our lives, others cannot. However, from observing Christian friends I have regularly noticed that personal holiness is an

outgrowth of a person's thoughtful worship of God.

Thinking it through.

- (a). What are some of the differences between 'head-knowledge' of God, and a 'living experience' of him?
- (b). Can you give at least four reasons for developing a good theology?
- (c). With your Bible closed, write one page (or speak for one minute) on the subject: 'Who is God?'

**The
Essential
Nature and
Character
of God**

7. God perfectly exists in a different life form from us - *God is Spirit*

In Bahri suk one day a man tried to sell me a small sewn leather pouch on a neck cord. He told me inside the pouch was some writing from the Qur'an, and if I wore it bad spirits would be kept away. He also sold little metal tubes for similar purpose. This is a folk-Islam belief, where traditional African spirit worship has adapted to partly receive Islam. Many traditional religions have beliefs like this, that something must be worn, or done, or sacrificed in order to keep the spirit gods happy.

The Bible says that "God is Spirit", John 4:24. Does this mean he is just one of many spirit gods? How is God different from a jinn in Islam? Jesus Christ gave the statement "God is Spirit" in answer to a question about holy places for worship. His answer showed that true worship is all about a person's spiritual condition, not their physical location.

Unlike ancestral or tribal spirits, God is not interested in just one family or a single tribe. God is not localised to any one place. He is not so small as to be here without being there. He is not so big as to be only partly here while partly there. No one person can ever have the exclusive presence of God. As Spirit all of God is everywhere. (Psalm 139:1-10).

God does not have size, nor take up any space. This enables all of God to be present everywhere at every moment in time. God has no body. He is invisible, yet he is real. Any image or representation of God limits our understanding of him. It may illustrate one aspect of God's being, but in doing so it will hide many other aspects of him. This is rather like some of the wooden carvings available from shops and roadside tables. An African female figure may be shown with very large lips or breasts, but her real beauty will be in her personality and character, neither of which can be reproduced in a carving.

God does not have the limits we humans do. His excellent spirit-existence means he is never tired, never hurried for time, never taken by surprise, never absent, never too busy, never limited – but always doing what he wants to do and when he chooses to do it.

Electricity is powerful and brings light to areas where it is taken. But God is not just a force to be used. God is an intelligent, purposeful, living being who always uses the absolute power under his personal control, wisely and well. (Isaiah 46:8-10).

In the same room, one person can be aware of God being there while another is not. Just as the radio waves in the air can only be picked up and heard by people using radios, so God is knowable only by those who are tuned in to him. To worship God in spirit and in truth we must be born of the Spirit ourselves (John 3:1-8) and we must set our minds to think often about God's spirituality (Colossians 3:1,2).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What does the description, 'God is Spirit', mean to you?
- (b). Explain how this is different from belief in 'the spirit of the tree' or 'the spirit of an ancestor'.

8. God is one complete God - *the Unity of God*

No one attribute of God is any more or less important than any other attribute. God's being includes all of his attributes equally. Every one of the attributes qualifies every other one: for example, God is full of mercy and full of wrath; God is always one hundred percent loving and always one hundred percent just, etc.

God is always the same. Everything he does is completely consistent with who he is. (Exodus 3:14). We must remember, however, that God does respond in different ways to situations in which people either act in one way or they act in another. For example, when he told Jonah that the wicked city of Nineveh was to be overturned after forty days, it was God's wrath and judgement that Jonah preached to the people. However, when the people immediately turned from their sin in repentance, because they believed what God told them through Jonah about judgement, the judgement did not happen. Instead, they saw and experienced God's patience and mercy. (Jonah 3:1-10).

While people strive to become something, God has always been all that he is. He is completely at peace with himself. (Psalm 102:25-27). God is perfectly self-controlled and keeps to his purpose throughout everything. This consistency of God encourages us to trust him

absolutely.

In Sudan tragically over the years of war, many landmines have seriously injured people who stepped on them unaware that the previously safe pathway had been dangerously changed. Walking in some areas even now people must take extreme care because there is uncertainty about what may be underfoot. Part of a Christian's security in facing the challenges of his or her life, is the fact that God can be relied on at every moment to be exactly who he always is.

My wife and I used to buy most of our fruit outside a small dukkan by a soccer pitch in the Shaabbia district. Bananas, oranges, mangos, melons, guavas, all put into the basket together made up our fruit. God is not a collection of separate attributes added together to total 'God'. He is totally and completely all of his attributes, all through his being, at any moment, in any circumstance. God is not made up of many parts, but we do see different attributes of God coming to the front of our human experiences at various times. It is comforting to know that nothing we foolishly do will ever change the eternal God. Everything God ever was, he still is, and he always will be. The God of the Bible is exactly the same God we know, love and serve today.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Some people say: 'I think the most important thing about God is his love'. Others say: 'I think the most important attribute of God is his righteousness'.
What would you say?
- (b). Why are there some qualities of God we always talk about: his love, holiness, etc., and others we seldom, if ever, talk about: his justice, patience, etc.?
- (c). Is any attribute of God less important than any other?

9. One God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – *the Holy Trinity*

God is mysterious as well as majestic. We do not understand all about him, which is not surprising since he is King of all other kings and Lord of all other lords. Paul uses three important words in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, describing how God works in a variety of ways through the church: "Spirit" (Greek - pneuma) verse 4; "Lord" (Greek - kyrios) verse 5; and "God" (Greek - theos) verse 6. Verse 3 links the first two together, as Paul writes: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit".

The word 'Trinity' is not written anywhere in the Bible. However, the thought or the idea is assumed throughout. The English word 'trinity' means "a group of three, or the state of being threefold". In Christianity 'Trinity' means 'the union of three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one Godhead'. The Bible's central message of salvation through Jesus Christ only makes sense if God is Trinity. No person less than God could ever be good enough to atone for the world's sin.

Think slowly and carefully about this. God is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is three distinct persons. Each one of the three is fully God himself. Yet always and forever there has been, is and will be, only one God. This is the mystery of God in his greatness, in his 'other-ness'. He is not like anyone else we know.

Although not a biblical word, 'Trinity' is a theological term that expresses what we believe the Bible teaches. The Latin term 'trinitas' was probably first used around 200 A.D. by Tertullian. Christians by

the 4th and 5th centuries had clearly stated in the Athanasian Creed: “the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity”. (‘Catholic’ here means universal, believed by the whole Christian church).

Trinity means that God is one in his essential being, while being at the same time three distinct persons. Each person is the fullness of the Divine Being and yet each person is also, at the same time, seen to be a different form of the Divine Being.

The Holy Spirit is a person who is fully God. Jesus Christ is a person who is fully God. The Father is a person who is fully God. Even so, there is only one God. This one God is not made up of Father, added to Son, added to Holy Spirit. In all schools small children learn logically that ‘one plus one, plus one, equals three’. Christians must think theologically beyond even logic! Stop to think again about this mystery of God: there is one God, of indivisible unity, in three distinct persons. Let your God become greater than you can even imagine him to be.

Faith, not logic, is needed to help us come to the right answers about just who this God really is. (Hebrews 11:1,6).

Three illustrations serve to teach us a little of what this God is like, although they are best used to highlight the differences between God and the example.

You are one human being. You are a child of your parents. You may be (or hope to be one day!) the marriage partner of your husband / wife. Perhaps you are also (or will be) a parent to your own children. As one person you are a child, a husband / wife, and a father / mother. Three persons in one human being. But, the differences with God can be seen in this: once, you were just a child. At that time you were not a marriage partner, nor a parent. God has always been, and will always be, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

We all use water. We wash in water. Perhaps we like to drink cold water, so we put ice into the glass. Ice is just frozen water. In making tea, we boil water on the charcoal fire. We know when the water is boiling because steam comes from the kettle. Steam is just water changed into a gas by boiling. Water can be water, or ice, or steam.

Three states of water. But, the difference between this example and God, is that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit all at one and the same time. Water can only be either water, or ice, or steam, at any one moment in time. It can change from being one to being another as time passes. But, of course, God does not change.

Imagine you are sitting in your living room. You are breathing air, though you cannot see it. There is sunlight in the room. You feel warm as the sun heats up the air temperature. The atmosphere of that room is made up of life-giving air, light and warmth. Three things in one. But, the difference to notice about God is that air, light and heat are all caused by something outside of the atmosphere itself. It is the sun that affects all three. God is self-existing and needs nothing outside of himself in order to be himself.

We cannot understand God partly because God is Spirit and we think in largely physical terms. We also cannot understand God because he is infinite, while we are only finite beings capable of only finite thoughts.

Christians do see a plurality within the Godhead, but this is not the polytheism Muhammad was concerned to avoid. Christians, along with Jews and Muslims, believe in one God. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 1 Corinthians 8:6; and Qur'an 112:14). The Old Testament word used here for "one" (Hebrew – echad), means one in unity rather than one on its own. It is used of a husband and wife being 'one' flesh in marriage (Genesis 2:23,24). If God is only one person, how could he love, and who could he love before anything else was created? God has always had a loving relationship within himself between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Islamic Tawhid, the confession of the unity of Allah or the Oneness of God, instructs Muslims "there is only one God, one truth, one straight line between two points: God and his servants, one family, one couple of parents - Adam and Eve, one human race, one heaven and one hell". Muhammad did not accept that Jesus was the Son of God (Qur'an 9:30), nor did he accept the Trinity (Qur'an 4:171). Usually Islamic traditions take references to 'the Spirit' to mean the angel Gabriel, although the word can also refer to Jesus as a Spirit from Allah, as well as to God's own creative power giving life to Adam and to Jesus.

As the word 'Trinity' is not in the Bible, neither is the word 'Tawhid' in the Qur'an. The different concepts of 'One God' which Christianity and Islam each hold, are both understood from their *entire* sacred texts.

Muslim scholars teach that "the essence of the divine being cannot be grasped by man by way of comparison and analogy" They also recognise that "men cannot imprison God in a description". Yet they appear able to definitely rule out the Christian concept of God the Holy Trinity.

The Bible says: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" Hebrews 1:1-3.

Jesus said: "I and the Father are one" John 10:30; "... the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you" John 14:26.

Each one of us needs to decide in whom we are putting our faith.

Thinking it through.

- (a). How can you define the Trinity yourself?
- (b). How do you answer a member of another faith who understands that 'Christians believe in three gods'?
- (c). Is it right or wrong for there to be some mystery about God? Why?

10. God is apart from and above time - *the Eternity of God*

Every 1st January since 1956 the country of Sudan has celebrated the anniversary of independence. Another year is added to the age of the country. I have seen the crowds on the streets, the fireworks in the sky near the presidential palace by Nile Avenue, and heard the special events being broadcast from the garden television studio

beside the river in Omdurman.

Like the country of Sudan, every human being gets older every year. Only God does not age. He is no older now than when he created the world! God lives outside of the passing of time. Men and women change as their years go by. A young boy becomes a keen student then a strong man. The strong man becomes grey haired with limited eyesight, perhaps with a bent back when he walks due to pain in his limbs. God does not develop or wear out as year follows after year.

'Eternity' is defined as 'endless or infinite time'. In Psalm 90:2 Moses wrote: "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God". Think back to the beginning of history. God created the world. But God himself was already there existing. There has never been a moment in time when God did not live. God did not begin to be. He always has been. God does not need anything or anyone to support or keep him. Therefore he could exist before and after everything else. God lives in forever. To God, the past, the present, the future, are all now!

Think forward towards the future of this world. God will be there bringing about his purpose. This encourages us to trust him with our own futures. If we want *what he wants* for our lives, he can be trusted to bring it about. God has no beginning, nor will he ever end. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

God lives in eternity. In relation to time, he is "...the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come", Revelation 4:8. He is set apart from humankind. He was living at the time of our grandparents, he is living now, and he will be living at the time of our grandchildren. He is exactly the same as he always was. Time will never change him. Yet God does act within human time.

English people have different ideas to Sudanese about time. My calendar, diary and watch control my appointments with people. The eternal God is never late, never in a hurry, never has too much to do in too little time, and is always punctual to his own timetable. Both English and Sudanese Christians ought to learn to see time from God's perspective. Peter wrote to persecuted believers "Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" 2 Peter 3:8.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Try to explain 'eternity' without reference to time.
- (b). What is the relationship between 'time' and 'eternity'?
- (c). 'God is always working for things to be right in eternity' (Romans 8:28). How does this help us view things that happen around us in our lifetimes?

11. God is everywhere present at the same time – *the Omnipresence of God*

To be 'omnipresent' means to be 'present in all places at the same time'. Have you ever wished you could be in two places at one time? May be there is a conference you would like to attend in Khartoum, but you have responsibilities to your family at a wedding in Port Sudan. If only you could be there and here as well, but you cannot. God, of course, is!

A.W.Tozer, an American preacher and author of the twentieth century, wrote: "God is our environment as the sea is to the fish and the air to the bird". "The doctrine of the divine omnipresence personalizes man's relation to the universe in which he finds himself". We are never alone. God is with us everywhere.

The writer of Psalm 139:7-12 asked if there was anywhere he could get away from God's Spirit. The obvious answer is 'No'. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God declared that he filled earth and heaven, that he was both nearby and far away, and that he could see all that was happening even if people thought they were keeping it secret. (Jeremiah 23:23,24). We could think even beyond that: before heaven and earth were created there was no 'where' to be; but God was still 'there'!

It is all of God that is everywhere. Remember God is Spirit and has no size. God is not partly here and partly there. We make a mistake when we ask God to 'come amongst us' at a meeting. If he is omnipresent he is already there! Of course it is reasonable to ask for his help so that everyone there will recognise his presence, but leaders should be careful not to mislead by careless use of words. Jacob did not realise he was in God's presence when he was running away from Esau. Only after his dream of a ladder reaching up to

heaven, did he acknowledge he was always in God's awesome presence. (Genesis 28:10-22).

We often forget we are in God's holy presence. There are special times when God is felt nearby but other times when he seems away in the distance, or even not there at all. We can be more aware or less aware of his presence, but he is always there. God is always close to us whatever is happening. We should practise his presence. We should keep uppermost in our minds that God is there. I read of Dinka tribesmen who carved crosses on their walking sticks to help them remember that God was still with them even as they walked away from their homelands due to fighting, famine or both. Many Christians find the wearing of a cross or the early Christian sign of the fish helpful in remembering this. A favourite Bible text hand-written on a small card can serve the same purpose.

God is transcendent – over and above all of his creation, and he is also immanent – his strongly influencing presence is within all of life. He is distinct from the world, but directing the overall course of events. A major key to Christian living is to consciously recognise God's presence everywhere and in every situation.

People are more aware of God in some places than in others. Scripture shows that we can know God in some places more than in others (for example "the Most Holy Place", Exodus 26:33; Exodus 28:30; Hebrews 10:19). The following exercise caused much discussion among students at Gideon Theological College:

Keeping in your mind the omnipresence of God ...

1. How far away from the burning bush was the ground still holy? Exodus 3:5.
2. Could God's "Presence" possibly be taken away from Moses and the Israelites? Exodus 33:14,15.

3. What “presence” of God could David possibly lose?
Psalm 51:11.
4. What does Jesus mean on Judgement Day, “Depart from me ...”? Matthew 25:41.
5. What does James mean: “Come near to God and he will come near to you”? James 4:8.

God’s presence is not to be limited to being in one place, but is to be enjoyed within a relationship experience.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Since God is omnipresent, can it be right to say “We invite you to come and be with us, Jesus”, at the beginning of a worship service?
- (b). What do we really mean? How can we express it better?
- (c). If you were on your own in a very bad situation, (prison, danger, etc.), how would thinking of God’s omnipresence be a help to you?

12. God is a living being who can think, feel and decide - *the Personality of God*

God is a living person. He is more than a power or a force. You may have a photo of someone special to you. Having that photo with you is not the same as having the real person with you! In the Ten Commandments we are forbidden to make images of God. (Exodus 20:4; Psalm 115:1-8; Jeremiah 10:6-10). Any image of God would take away something from his glory. Any image of God would present a false idea about God. This is because God is alive! No image lives, but God lives. God’s personality enables us to talk with him as well as talk about him. God is a personal Spirit with whom we can have a relationship.

Although God does not have a body, he hears, sees, knows, feels, wills and acts. God is a real person. Idols are things; God is a person. In the Bible people were encouraged to know that the living God was among them. (Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:34-37; Daniel 6:19-23).

God cares for everything that he has made. He feeds and watches over the birds, even the house sparrows *passer domesticus*, and

common bulbuls *pycnonotus barbatus*, (Matthew 6:26; 10:29). Many of us have enjoyed parents who have looked after us while we were growing up. Jesus lived on this earth in constant touch with one he called 'Father' in heaven. Christians are brought to be children of God the Father in this close family sense. (Matthew 6:9). Our Father God will help us to walk properly, when we would rather just lie down and wriggle like babies. He will teach us how to work in order to feed ourselves, when we would like other people to serve us while we play at our own games. Our Father God will guide us and advise us through the most difficult circumstances. He has even more than the wisdom of experience.

God is used to relationships. He has them within himself. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one undivided being. God made us people so that we personally could have a relationship with him (Acts 17:24-27). Our relational knowledge of God is the fruit of the Christian gospel. A Christian is born by the Holy Spirit into God's own family. (John 1:12,13).

God is so great a person that he is always able to make even the activities of evil people work out to his own plan (Genesis 50:20). Things that give us great distress and bring much trouble for a while in this lifetime, are none-the-less activities of our living, loving Father in heaven (Isaiah 45:7).

Thinking it through.

- (a). The personality of God enables our 'relationship with him' rather than just a 'knowledge of him'. What are the differences between these two?
- (b). After thinking about this, list as many differences as you can.

13. God is able to do anything his character allows him to do - *the Omnipotence of God*

Which of the two following has the most power?

An electricity generating station like the new one, being built as I write, at Meroe, 400 km north of Khartoum on the Nile? The French company supplying the hydroelectric unit say it will be capable of generating 1,250 megawatts from its ten turbines. That is three times as much electricity as Sudan produces now. It is planned for the

building to be finished and fully working sometime during 2008.

Or a spectacular lightning storm in the dark sky, releasing flashes of light caused by discharges of electricity between clouds, or between a cloud and the earth? My wife, Brenda, and I used to enjoy watching these from the garden of our home in Bahri, often when the power was cut!

God's power is beyond measuring. It is much greater than either of the examples above. Every hour of the day, every day of the week and every week of the year, God sustains life as we know it. 'Omnipotence' means 'having very great or unlimited power'. It is right to stand in awe of God. The whole of creation and nature display his ability. From the huge starlit sky we see at night, to the smallest detail studied on a butterfly's patterned wing, the world around us shows God's power (Romans 1:20). From our home I regularly watched several *papilio demodocus*, the 4.5 inch (115mm) African lime butterflies with pale yellow patterns on very dark brown wings and two false red eyes on their back wings. (Locally they are called 'Abu Dagiig'). As they enjoyed our flowering shrubs, I enjoyed watching them, and I often thought about God's powerful care for his creation.

God spoke creation into existence. His word must be powerful too (Genesis 1:3,6, etc.; Hebrews 1:3). Scientists can achieve great things in our world because God's keeping power can be trusted. Things God has made will always act the same way under the same circumstances. These 'laws' enable agricultural and medical development among other things.

God is able to bring his creation to make exceptions to his own rules: the sea held back by wind (Exodus 14:21,22), the sun standing still in the sky (Joshua 10:12-14), hungry lions kept from harming God's man (Daniel 6:21,22). We call these 'miracles'. They are also signs of God's almost unbelievable power.

The word 'Almighty' is used 56 times in Scripture, but it is never used of anyone except God (for examples: Genesis 17:1; Ruth 1:20,21; 1 Kings 18:15; 1 Chronicles 11:9). Even in difficult times, the people in the Bible proved God was able to keep every one of his promises.

Important questions arise here:

1. *If God is so powerful, why does Satan appear to be able to do so much?* The Bible shows us that Satan only has the power to do what God gives him permission to do (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7). God does not destroy Satan, because Satan is working out a part of God's plan in others (Luke 22:31,32; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 1 Peter 1:6,7). God's will is the final cause of all things. He is the sovereign, independent, absolute, ruling person in power.
2. *Can God do anything?* No he cannot! He cannot make a square circle! Everything God does makes good sense, while a square circle is a nonsense. God cannot commit suicide! Suicide would bring a change into God's living being. Since God does not change, his suicide is not possible. God can do everything that his infinite and consistent nature logically allows him to do.

Nothing outside of God makes God do anything. God exercises his omnipotence by always putting his sovereign supremacy into practice. He will never contradict himself. He will never do anything he chooses not to do. God is so secure, so powerful, and so much in control of everything, that he is able to allow people to choose for themselves which path they will take. The Bible shows him saying: 'If you do this, I will do that' (Genesis 2:16; Exodus 19:5; Joshua 24:14-27). Human responsibility is the product of divine sovereignty. Human responsibility adds to God's sovereignty, it does not take away from it.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why does God do some good things and not others that we feel should be done – when he is obviously able to do them all?
- (b). Can God break his own rules?
- (c). How should we respond when God seems to be doing nothing to help us?

14. God knows everything - *the Omniscience of God*

God must know absolutely everything it is possible to know in order to be omniscient. The word means, 'having infinite knowledge or understanding'. God's omniscience governs his omnipotence: in other

words, God's infinite power is controlled in practice by his infinite knowledge and wisdom (Job 9:4). God knows all things perfectly. He never makes mistakes, he is never surprised by anything, he is never puzzled. It is a great comfort for obedient Christians to know that God knows all about ourselves and our circumstances (Psalm 139:1-6, 13-17, 23-24). It is a fearful thought to any whose lives are not God-honouring.

God can never learn anything. If there was anything he did not know, he would not be perfect in his knowledge. If he were not perfect, he could not be God (Job 37:14-16). God knows everything that happens. God knows everything that will happen. God knows best. And, God knows me and loves me still! (Romans 11:33-36). God knows that life sometimes presents me with big challenges, so he gives me the security of trusting myself to him (Proverbs 3:5,6).

God, and God alone, fully knows himself (Isaiah 55:8,9; 1 Corinthians 2:9-11). Just as no-one knows your thoughts unless you share them in a conversation with them, so we can only know the things of God he shares with us through his word and by his Spirit.

God sees everything, including the suffering of his people. He can be trusted to act at the right time (Exodus 3:7-10). When we think that God should act more quickly, we must remember that he knows all of the facts, past, present and future. He is working out his purpose for the world as well as for ourselves (Hebrews 11:23-29).

Since God knows everything, it is useless to try and cover up our sins (Joshua 7:19-26). Since God knows everything, all our serving of Christ which is unnoticed by people around us, is being noticed by our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1-4).

Thinking it through.

- (a). How does the omniscience of God help you when you are in great need?
- (b). How does it help when you are serving him?
- (c). How does it help when you are sinning?

15. God is purely God - *the Holiness of God*

'Holiness' can be described as being 'other'. There is nothing and no-

one who is close to being like God. God has no faults and is incapable of errors. God is distinctly different from our human expectations and values. He is attractive in his glory and yet, at the same time, we are fearful of his purity. Fire is sometimes used in the Bible as a symbol of God's holiness. Like fire, God's holiness shows us our lives by his warm light. Like fire, God's holiness burns the dead, diseased and dirty from our lives. In Old Testament history, we see both destruction and salvation coming from God's holiness (Exodus 15:1-10). The hymn of Exodus 15:11 declares this: "Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" The English word 'holy' means 'of, relating to, or associated with, God'. The Bible's words, in Hebrew and Greek, carry the meaning of 'being devoted to, or consecrated' with 'being separated, set apart'. Holiness for us has two sides. One is that we live totally committed to God. The other is that we live to very different standards from the world around us.

Love for God is the root of holiness in our lives. Christians want to be like God, with his characteristics in our lives. The Christian church is described as "a holy temple in the Lord", Ephesians 2:21. God's holiness means that he seeks his own honour and glory as the creator and keeper of all things. We must live for this too (Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15,16).

When two soccer teams have a match with each other, let's say El Hilal against El Merreikh in Omdurman, how do you know which player is playing for which team? You should be able to decide by watching the usual direction he is kicking the ball, the team members he is calling to and passing with, and of course from the colours of the shirt and shorts he is wearing. Blue with a crescent for El Hilal. Red and yellow with a star for El Merreikh. Our personal holiness should be visible to people around us, because we are followers of God who is holy.

American theologian R.C.Sproul writes: "God's holy character has something to say about economics, politics, athletics, romance – everything that we are involved in. God is inescapable. There is no place we can hide from him. Not only does he penetrate every aspect of our lives, but he also penetrates our lives in his majestic holiness. Therefore we must seek to understand what the holy is. There can be no worship, no spiritual growth, no true obedience without it. It defines our goal as Christians".

Because God is holy he hates all sin. This shows itself in his wrath. He strikes against sin in judgement. God's holiness is perhaps best seen in Jesus' death on the cross (Romans 1:18; Romans 2:5-8; Romans 5:8,9).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What effect should God's holiness have in our church? In our relationships with our neighbours of different faiths? In our politics?
- (b). If we sin easily or carelessly, what should we expect from the holiness of God?

**16. God's heartfelt and active care for our well-being -
*the Love of God***

God is love. This "love" is not self-centred, passionate or erotic love (Greek – eros), taking satisfaction only for itself. Neither is it brotherly love, tender affection being shared between equals (Greek – phileo), with each person unselfishly giving and receiving. God's "love" (Greek – agape) is love that does not depend on the merits of the one being loved. It is the motive behind the willing choice to serve, putting others before one's own self. God's love is God's heart exposed to the world. At great cost to himself, he launched a mighty war on sin. God's eternal and consistent love is always giving of itself. It is a "covenant of love" (Deuteronomy 7:7-13).

The eternal loving relationship between God the Father and God the Son (Matthew 3:17; John 14:31) extends to include us in his family (John 15:9). God's love is shown in his special relationship to humankind (1 John 4:7-12). In his love God saves us (John 3:16). In his love God provides for our needs (Psalm 107:8,15,21,31,43). In his love God keeps us (Romans 8:38-39). And in his love God disciplines us (Proverbs 3:11,12).

It is a mistake to take the words "God is love" as the definitive statement – the only authoritative definition – of the character of God. The Bible also says clearly that "God is Spirit" John 4:24; "God is light" 1 John 1:5; and "God is a consuming fire" Hebrews 12:29. Holiness and love lend unity to all the attributes of God.

It is worth meditating on this: R.T.Kendall, in his Westminster School of Theology, London, taught that “the glory of God is the sum total of his character and attributes.” Do not lose the glory of *all* of God by concentrating on *only one* aspect of God.

Being in love with the Lord Jesus will help you reflect his likeness (1 John 4:19). We do not really appreciate God’s love until we have seen how unlovable we actually are. The love of God is displayed in full by the cross of Christ. “... To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen” (Revelation 1:5,6).

Although in many places the Qur’an mentions that God loves certain kinds of people, such as those who do right, it also states that God *does not love* people who break the law, people who are wicked or ungrateful, those who reject faith, and those who do wrong, (Qur’an 2:190; 2:276; 3:31-32; 3:57). The Bible clearly teaches that God *loves all* people, even while they are not the kind of people he wants them to be (Romans 5:8; John 3:16-18). A God who *is* love, cannot stop loving! We may hurt him, and we may abuse his love; but he will always love us.

Thinking it through.

- (a). We understand God’s love by his care of us and his provision for us. What does this tell us about ‘loving one another’?
- (b). Why do you think Jesus said: “He who has been forgiven little, loves little”?
(Luke 7:47).
- (c). ‘God can never stop loving’. Why not?

17. God’s fair treatment of everyone while being true to his character - *the Justice of God*

Righteousness and justice are two English words that translate the same word groups from Hebrew (tsedek) and Greek (dikaios). Once a student in my class at Gereif was asked to give his own definition of God’s righteousness. He stood and said: “God’s holy conformity with himself in the Old Testament, interpreted by his relationship to his creation”. His fellow students were laughing at the way he said it and I think he may have been reading from a study-Bible! They were not

his own words at all! But perhaps I am doing him an injustice! Maybe it genuinely was his own definition.

Since God's character is holy, righteousness and justice are evident in his dealings with humanity. Righteousness means he will always do what is right (Deuteronomy 32:3-4; Psalm 145:17). God himself decides what is right and what is wrong. His justice means that he will always reward the right and punish the wrong.

On a number of roadsides around the three cities of Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman, men set up stalls or shops to sell the clay pots they have made. Some of the pots are used for holding water, others for earth and garden plants, while the more brightly coloured ones are only for decoration. Paul says that we are like the clay while God is like the potter. We cannot say to God, 'Why do you do this and not that?' The potter has every right to make what he wants from the clay! (Romans 9:19-21; Isaiah 64:8). However, because we know that God is perfectly just and right, we need never be afraid of him being bribed or corrupted in some other way, in his dealings with us.

God is our judge. He keeps a record of all that we do (2 Corinthians 5:10). God has authority to pass sentence on us. But he does not balance our good deeds against our bad deeds and deal with us according to the credit or debit balance!

A Muslim expects 'Allah Al-Adl' to be fair in giving out what is due to everyone. One tradition pictures Allah giving 'shade' on a day when there is no other shade, but he gives it only to fair-minded imams, to young men who really love Allah, to people whose hearts are attached to their mosques, to men who turn down illicit sex out of fear of Allah, and to men who give secretly to charity.

As a Christian I know I cannot possibly deserve anything but punishment at God's judgement. God's justice would be compromised if he simply ignored my sin or said it did not matter. So as a Christian I trust myself to a Saviour. The Lord Jesus Christ made atonement for the sins of the world when he died on the cross. Jesus represented me in taking the punishment I deserved. God can justly forgive me, because the penalty has already been paid by my Saviour (Romans 3:23-26).

If you were ever taken to one of the Ministry of Justice law courts, to be tried for an alleged crime, you would be entitled to a lawyer who would defend you. In God's final court, Jesus Christ is the only defence advocate (1 John 2:1-2). A Christian can say with Job that he is trusting in another to save him on judgement day, not trusting in his own good deeds (Job 16:19-21).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What is the difference between 'being given justice' by God, and 'getting what we deserve' from him?
- (b). Bribery may get you what you want – but is it 'just'? Why?
- (c). How do the other attributes of God that we have seen, give us the confidence that God will always be just and fair?

18. God does not give us what we deserve – *the Mercy of God*

‘Mercy’ in English means ‘the compassionate treatment of an offender’, ‘patience and forbearance towards those people in one’s power’. The main New Testament word (Greek – *eleos*), assumes the person who gives mercy has enough resources at their own disposal to meet the needs of the person who is to receive it. God has very, very large amounts of mercy towards humanity (Ephesians 2:4,5). We are individually invited to receive mercy from the holy God (Hebrews 4:13-16).

God is mercy. He does not merely have mercy. He will never lose it! He is merciful in his very self-being and he always has been. In the Old Testament God’s mercy is often spoken of (Exodus 33:19; Deuteronomy 4:31). In some translations different words are used ‘compassion’, ‘pity’, ‘love’, ‘kindness’, ‘patience’ – see Psalm 103:8-17 in the New International Version, and compare to the Good News Bible or the King James Version.

At the start of many Muslim actions, the phrase is used “Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim”. Muslims frequently remind themselves that Allah is ‘all merciful and all compassionate’, or ‘most gracious and the giver of grace’. These are important names (or attributes) of God to Muslims, emphasised by the repetition of this phrase at the beginning of almost every surah in the Qur’an. But we’ll see that their understanding of how God gives us mercy is very different from ours.

Mercy demonstrates the goodness and love of God in action. Christians believe we all stand guilty before God. But he does not forget us, as if we were in the condemned cell of Kober prison, Khartoum Bahri, awaiting execution any day now. God sees us as in urgent and desperate need of his own divine help! We do not deserve his help. We cannot earn his help. We cannot buy our release through a collection of money or good deeds from our friends. Our own goodness will never outweigh our badness! So, think about these next *five words* - and if you want to shout ‘hallelujah’ it may be a great time to do so - *God’s mercy gave us Jesus!* (1 Peter 1:3-5).

All people receive something of God’s mercy. The natural blessings of life are given by God to everyone, not just to Christians (Psalm 145:9; Matthew 9:27-31). God does not usually judge anyone instantly for

their sin, the mercy of his delaying is to give time for repentance (Romans 9:22-24, Romans 2:4). But only those who rely on Jesus Christ to be their Saviour experience the patient grace and mercy of God in full (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

God loves us because he is love. God has mercy on us because he is mercy. Why? I don't know! Some people continue to make God's mercy ineffective towards themselves, by trying different ways to make themselves right with him. None of them will ever work! Every person should trust himself or herself totally to the mercy of God expressed in Jesus our Saviour. We need to remember this attribute of God regularly and to be truly thankful for it. It is no more important than any other attribute of God, because all of God's attributes are actually God himself. But God's mercy is definitely something that this author is always thankful for.

Thinking it through.

- (a). List as many of the natural mercies of God you can think of – the ones that he gives to everyone.
- (b). Why does everyone need God's mercy?
- (c). Why is it important to understand, 'God's mercy gave us Jesus'?

19. God can always be trusted - *the Faithfulness of God*

God's faithfulness means that he will always do what he has said he will do, He will certainly keep his promises (Deuteronomy 32:3,4; Psalm 145:13). 'Faithful' means 'loyal', 'trustworthy', 'certain', 'reliable', 'true' and 'accurate'. God can never stop being who he is. God will always be true to his own character. God will forever be exactly the same. He can be completely relied upon.

My neighbour in Bahri, Ala Eldeen, became a good friend during the time we lived next door. We would sit outside his house some evenings and talk for hours about anything and everything. Sometimes it was world events, other times religion, or perhaps what was happening within our own families. We laughed and we drank many cups of tea together. Just once, for a couple of weeks, our relationship was other than friendly. That was when the American and the British governments led a military invasion into Iraq, in March 2003. At the beginning of that war he said to me in my driveway, "Mr

Colin, we have been good friends, but from today we are enemies – we are on opposite sides in this war”. However, once there was a change of leadership in Iraq, our friendship – which I really do appreciate – was resumed.

No-one will ever be able to say: ‘God is a different person today than yesterday’. Nothing outside of God influences him (2 Timothy 2:13). Our sinful disobedience may erect a barrier between us and God, but God will still faithfully do what is best for us. It may not always be what we ask for, but it will always be what we really need. God is always faithful to his higher purpose for our lives. His answers to our questions are the best answers, even if we do not think so! (Romans 8:28-30).

Because God can be trusted to keep true to his words, we can confidently put our faith in him. Such trust would be impossible if God changed. Three clever and good looking young men in King Nebuchadnezzar’s service were so convinced of God’s faithfulness they were ready to be burnt to death if it was his will (Daniel 1:3-5; Daniel 3:16-18). They firmly believed God would do what was best. If we are to be faithful servants to our God, who is himself faithful, it may bring big changes to our own plans for our lives. But we can always safely lean upon God.

The New Testament shows this is practical in our Christian lives. God will bring us to heaven in spite of our own weakness (1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23,24). God will give us a way to beat off all temptations (1 Corinthians 10:13). God will keep us from the evil one’s control (2 Thessalonians 3:3). God will forgive us as we admit our sin and turn from our sin to him (1 John 1:8,9). Our security comes from God’s faithfulness, not from our own. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”, Hebrews 10:23.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Since God is faithful to his word, how confident of it should we be?
- (b). Since God is faithful to himself, how can we discover if our ‘ideas to serve him’ come from him or from elsewhere?
- (c). How does God’s ‘faithfulness’ help us when we face an unknown future?

20. God always agrees with the mind of God - *the True God*

Jesus Christ called his Father "... the only true God..." John 17:3. God is true because he is not misrepresented by, or made up by, anyone else. God is the real and the genuine God. God cannot be judged by anyone or anything outside himself, because he is the only standard of being God. I cannot set standards for God! God himself is fully all that he knows he should be! Only the infinitely perfect can possibly know what infinite perfection should be like. God alone meets those standards he sets for himself. Our knowledge of the true God comes through Jesus Christ (John 14:6; 1 John 5:20-21).

I am diabetic and I have to be very careful about drinking too many sugary drinks like colas. King Cola, Pepsi Cola and Coca Cola were all available to buy in the dukkans near where I lived. Some of my friends would drink only Pepsi, others only Coke. They all said that 'no other cola was up to the standard of their preferred *true* cola'. Of course, that raises a question. Who sets the standard for what is a true cola and what is a false cola? According to the dictionary, 'cola' is "a sweet carbonated drink flavoured with cola nuts". These nuts come from trees grown in tropical climates. They contain caffeine (a stimulating tonic) and theobromine (used for medically treating some heart diseases and headaches). By that definition, I expect all three are true 'colas' and the difference in taste has a lot to do with the amount of sugar added in manufacture.

There is only one true God! (Jeremiah 10:1-16). Any image or picture of God, however helpful it may appear, does not tell the whole truth about God. It probably hides more of the truth about God than it shows. This is why the Commandments so strongly prohibit idols (Exodus 20:2-6).

God is beyond our powers of imagination. There will always be mystery, many things we cannot know about him. He rises above every attempt we make to describe him. God is much more than our explanations of him can ever be (1 Timothy 6:15,16).

So how can we think about him? We must use the Bible, which is his revealed truth about himself (Psalm 119:159,160; Proverbs 30:5).

One of my ministry colleagues used to say: “the Bible is true truth”! We should try to think carefully on everything the Bible says about God himself. Fill your mind with the truth of God’s character, the truths he commands, and the way he wants us to live. Then, we should let those ‘God-thoughts’ shape our own viewpoint on all the events happening around us (Psalm 1:1-3).

And we should always speak the truth too! Sadly there are some Christians who ‘preach the truth, yet speak lies in their daily conversation’. Christians should not tell lies to anyone. We should be becoming more and more like our God, who is the truth and who tells the truth. (Ephesians 4:21-25; Colossians 3:9,10).

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why is it impossible to ‘measure God’ or ‘value God’ by anything else?
- (b). Jesus, speaking to his Father, used the phrase: “the only true God” (John 17:3).
What does this mean for other religions?
- (c). What is the best way to know the truth about God, according to this prayer of Jesus?

God's Word

Written down

and

Published

Reading this section, it is important to keep in mind these comparisons between Christianity and Islam:

In Christianity,	In Islam,
God reveals himself, in the Son, one with God from eternity.	God reveals his will, in the 'preserved tablet' or 'Mother of the Book'.
The ultimate revelation is: Christ, the living Word of God, (Arabic – kalimat allah) a person. (John 1:1-5; John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1-3).	The ultimate revelation is: the Qur'an, the Speech of God, (Arabic – kalam allah) a book. (Qur'an 85:21-22; 42:52; 43:4; 3:3-7; 27:91-92; 13:39)

21. God's purpose for the Bible

God the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of the authors of the Bible. He prepared and moved them so that what they wrote, in their own words, was actually the word of God. The people did not realise they were writing the Bible! They wrote for the situation in which they lived. Yet God the Holy Spirit, in his wisdom, supervised the collection and protection of these authors' works over the centuries. God very much wants us to have our Bibles. He always has lots to say to us through them (2 Timothy 3:16.17).

Of course, God shows himself to people in nature. We all have a natural awareness of God. Everyone sees *outside* of themselves, with their human eyes, the evidence in creation that God exists. This evidence is supported by a capacity *inside* peoples' minds and hearts to know God personally. J.M. Boice, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, U.S.A., until his death in A.D. 2000, once wrote: "There is enough evidence of God in a flower to lead a child as well as a scientist to worship him". But many people simply refuse to recognise that this Creator God has any claim upon their lives. So

they live as if there is no God. He still speaks clearly to such people, through the natural world and through their inward thoughts, but they inexcusably won't listen! (Romans 1:18-23).

The Bible takes God's revelation of himself one step further than nature or inward thought can. The Bible is God's method for communicating the *only* way that humankind can become the 'Christian' men and women God himself wants us all to be. The Bible is the selectively written history of God's dealings with the human race. It does not contain all of history. It focuses on people being 'saved' simply through taking God at his word (Genesis 15:6; John 20:30,31).

The Old Testament points forward to the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. It uses historical narrative, with illustrations from historical places and events, the poetry of peoples' real life experiences, plus some picture-language and prophecy, all to introduce and to help readers recognise Jesus Christ as the Saviour sent from God (Hebrews 1:1-3).

The Gospels record four accounts of the short life of Jesus on this earth. They all end with his crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 1:1-4).

The rest of the New Testament includes some narrative and some prophecy, but mainly pastoral letters that include a little historical data. It records how people who met *this* Jesus were changed into men and women totally given over to honouring him in every part of their lives. (Acts 11:19-24; 2 Corinthians 5:16-19).

The breath of God is seen and felt on every page, in every person, and through every teaching of the Bible.

Thinking it through.

- (a). According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, what are God's purposes for the Bible?
- (b). How would you tell your friend what the central message of the Bible is? (2 Timothy 3:15).
- (c). Where does the story of Jesus fit into the whole Bible?

22. The truth of the Bible

I believe that whatever the Bible asserts to be true is true. Sometimes

things are *figuratively* or *poetically* true, rather than *literally* true. For example Psalm 91:4 says of God: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” The usual meaning of ‘God having feathers’ is not meant. God does *not* have ‘a flat, light, waterproof outer layer of plumage’ like the delicate and colourful feathers of the birds we see around us! God is Spirit (see chapter 7). The writer of this Psalm is simply using birds’ feathers as a picture of the protection God gives to his people. Just like a bird is kept cool, dry and able to fly by its amazingly and deliberately designed feathers, so God can always be trusted to look after us in our circumstances. The Psalmist is using picture language to describe a truth.

So, I do not believe everything in the Bible is one hundred per cent *literally* true. But I do believe that the Bible never teaches anything that is not a true fact. The Bible does not lie, it always tells the truth. As in everyday English language, there is approximation in the Bible. If you were to knock at my gate I may call out to you, ‘Wait a minute please, I’m talking on the phone’. I do not mean that in exactly sixty seconds I will open the gate! You will have to wait, and the ‘minute’ is a fairly good guess at how long. It is true that I will come in a short time, rather than in a long time. Similarly, when Jesus fed a large crowd with specifically five loaves of bread and two fish, it was ‘about five thousand men, besides women and children’ who enjoyed their lunch (Matthew 14:13-21). I speak the truth when I announce that I am going to preach on ‘the feeding of the five thousand’. The number is understood to be approximate.

The Bible quotes freely, and not exactly, from itself. Old Testament verses are quoted in the New Testament, not word for word exactly the same, but still conveying the same meaning and still being true to the original context. (In the NIV, for example, see Exodus 20:13 / Deuteronomy 5:17 and Matthew 5:21, which have one difference between them; or see Psalm 16:8-11 and Acts 2:25-28, which have four differences). You may be waiting at your church for the visiting preacher to arrive. You have personally arranged for him to come. As time passes people ask you where he is. You reply to them: “I don’t know where he is. *He said he would come*”. You have told your people the truth, although you did not use the visiting preacher’s actual words to you, which were: “I will see you at Fittihab church to preach this Sunday at 5pm”. The truth is passed on, but in different words.

The Bible is God speaking in a way he does not do anywhere else.

God speaks words that express his will and encourage his will to be done. It is the accurate and complete word of God. The person with the Spirit of God living in their hearts and lives will understand these 'spiritual truths' (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). No other words have the same authority.

Jesus Christ accepted the eternal truth and value of the Scriptures (Matthew 5:18; John 5:39,40; John 17:7,8 & 17,18). He frequently quoted from the Old Testament and never once questioned its authority (Matthew 4:4,7,10; Matthew 12:40,41; Matthew 13:14,15). Someone has discovered that Jesus quoted from 22 out of 39 Old Testament books. In Matthew there are 19 Old Testament quotations, in Mark 15, in Luke 25, in John 11, in Hebrews 85 (quotations and allusions), and in Revelation 245! Jesus accepted the Old Testament as a body of objective truth and so did his early followers. He applied it to life as it was being lived when and wherever he was. Christian disciples today are followers of Jesus Christ, so our attitude towards the Bible should be the same as his. He knew it in his mind and heart. He placed his life's situations alongside Scripture and decided what should be done by letting God's Word be the guide. He was committed to the total trustworthiness of Scripture.

The debate about 'inerrancy and the Bible' in America, (or 'infallibility and the Bible' in England), has caused much thinking. In my English dictionary, inerrancy is defined as a less common word for infallibility! They are interchangeable terms. Because the Bible is God's word, it must be totally true, as God himself is true (see chapter 20). If the Bible only *contains* the word of God, and is not itself *completely* the word of God, then someone will have to decide which parts of it are the word of God and which parts are not. That person is almost sitting in judgement on God himself. We are not police detectives investigating the word of God. We are disciples proving the word of God to be true in our daily lives. I am willing to trust God and to believe that the entire Bible is God's word and it is therefore free of imperfections or mistakes (Psalm 12:6; Proverbs 30:5; 2 Timothy 3:16).

We do not have any of the original Bible manuscripts for which inerrancy is claimed. There were thousands of copies made over the centuries, some of whole sections, others just small parts. To have so many copies must mean there were originals to begin with. In the making of these copies, we know that some unimportant errors may

have crept into the texts. People do make mistakes. But the essential message of the original Bible is still clear. God can be trusted to have given us the truth in words he wants us to have.

Thinking it through.

- (a). 'Every word in the Bible is literally true'. Is this statement true or false? Why?
- (b). List five or more things that Jesus did with the Old Testament.

(c). “Truth is truth. It means what it says”. Think of some things that you say, or others say to you, that make you want to challenge this statement. (For example: ‘I died from embarrassment’).

23. God breathed the Bible

Muslims believe the Qur’an was dictated by Allah, through the angel Gabriel. Muhammad learned and recited precisely what he heard. He made no other contribution of his own to it. Any good electronic recording machine would have made an identical text by listening to the sounds he heard (or understood), and then having the words written down. It was all done in the Arabic language. Muslims believe the Arabic Qur’an today to be an exact, word-by-word, reproduction of this dictation. They believe the Qur’an is the earthly edition of this heavenly book. The activity of God’s ‘sending down’ (Arabic – tanzil) the first few verses of the Qur’an, to the lowest of the heavens, during ‘Laylat al-Qadr’ – the ‘night of power’, is celebrated towards the end of Ramadan. (Many Muslims have the idea that somehow the entire Qur’an was sent down at one time on that night). Orthodox Islamic teaching is that later, over some 23 years, the Qur’an was communicated by Gabriel to Muhammad using ‘divine inspiration’ (Arabic – wahy). This happened bit by bit, and in no particular order.

The Qur’an 42:51 gives two brief descriptions of ‘divine inspiration’: Allah speaking from behind a veil to someone, or Allah sending a messenger-angel to reveal his will. Various Hadith literature, or traditions, list the ringing of bells, physical stiffness and concentration, sweating even on a cold day, dreams, visions while awake, and transportation into highest heaven, as all parts of the process which allowed Muhammad to receive and recite the Qur’an. Muslims take the Qur’an in letter and in spirit as the word of Allah.

I believe the phrase “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16), to mean that God breathed out, over and through the human authors of our Bibles. God’s influence moved these people to write what he wanted. Yet, at the same time, every author’s characteristic style of writing, including his or her own personality and understanding, was preserved. The Bible was not a mindless receiving of dictation, but an actively stimulated and superintended outcome of human research

and thinking under God. (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3). God used his people chosen for this work, in his own way.

There is a parallel to consider in how Jesus Christ himself came to be born. It was definitely God's will to begin with. He called a willing person, in this case, Mary. God the Holy Spirit 'came upon' or 'overshadowed' her. This cooperation resulted in the perfect Son of God being born (Luke 1:34,35). Jesus is the living word. His conception was the result of something quite unique. But he was born in a normal, human way. In a similar way, the Bible is God's word written. God the Holy Spirit has overshadowed it from start to finish. The people, the documents, the words, the ideas and the means of writing were all quite usual. But the resulting words and message remain unique. Since God is omnipotent (see chapter 13), he is certainly more than able to give us his word this way.

Someone may ask: 'Did God write the Bible, or did people?' The correct answer is that "both God and people wrote the Bible". Imagine you sent your child to the suk to buy bread for a family event. You gave him a thousand pounds to buy a bag with 8-10 pieces in it. Your son physically went along the street to market. He smiled happily at the man in the white jellabiya behind the table, and asked him politely for bread. He looked at the sweets in a box nearby, but he did not buy any. Ask yourself this question: 'Who bought the bread?'

The shopkeeper met your son and he saw your son's personality and he recognised the child's desires towards sweets. Your son handed over your money and returned home with the bag of bread. How do you answer the question: 'who bought the bread?' It was your idea, your money and it was at your request. But your son actually carried out your wishes, in his own free way. He went to the shop. He met the man selling. The result was the bread arrived at home for the meal. So, you *both* bought the bread and achieved your desired result!

What we believe about the Bible is very important. If we believe it only to be the product of men's work, we will share it and preach it as just one book among many others. It is much better to believe it to be trustworthy, divine-given revelation of God through men. Then we will prove its power in our study and our ministry. God uses his word (Isaiah 55:10,11).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What are the differences between the way the Qur'an was 'dictated', and the way the Bible was 'God-breathed'?
- (b). Why is it important to believe the Bible to be the word of God?
- (c). Which other attributes of God help you to accept the Bible as God's word?

24. How our Bible is like it is

It took over 1,600 years for the Bible to be written. God the Holy Spirit used people who were as different as kings from peasants, fishermen, poets, clerks and doctors. Between them they authored the sixty-six books. Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek languages were used. While lots of different subjects are covered, there is one underlying message throughout it all: God the Father saves people through faith in God the Son, as witnessed to by God the Holy Spirit.

The original documents were written on papyrus, parchments (shaved and scraped skins), vellum (specifically calf skin), pottery, stones, clay and waxed-wood tablets. All of these have limited life spans. They are easily destroyed. This resulted in new copies often being made by hand, for hundreds of years before the printing press was invented. The first Hebrew Old Testament ever printed was in A.D. 1488 at Soncino, north Italy. The first Greek New Testament ever printed was contained in *Complutensian Polyglot*, Volume 5, in A.D. 1514. Printing multiplied the number of copies more easily.

The standard collection of sixty-six books in our Bible is called the 'canon'. The church did not *create* the books included in our Bible. It *recognised* them as being given from God and it set the limit on further additions. From early in the second century five basic questions were asked as they evaluated all the documents going around the Christian gatherings:

1. Does God's authority come through this one?
2. Was the author a known, godly servant of God?
3. Is everything in it authentic and proven to be reliable?
4. Is there evidence of God speaking and working through it, transforming people's lives?
5. Did the very earliest church accept it and use it?

The Old Testament canon accepted by the church was the one Jesus had used and never questioned. The New Testament canon was needed by this time, to *keep in* the authority of the original apostles' teaching and to *keep out* writings from the growing number of false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 2:18-27).

The same Holy Spirit who superintended the writing of all the individual books, also superintended the recognition, selection and collection of them into our Bible. By doing this, Jesus Christ kept his promise to guide his disciples into the truth (John 16:13-15). The written canon of Scripture meets the church's two great needs: for teaching the truths by which all Christians should live, and for pointing out errors into which Christians frequently fall, encouraging their correction.

Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, wrote the earliest list for a New Testament canon the same as ours, in his Easter letter of A.D. 367. The same list was recognised at the Synod of Hippo A.D. 393 and the 3rd Council of Carthage A.D. 397.

Thinking it through.

- (a). What is the difference between a 'church-created' Bible and a 'church-recognised' Bible?
- (b). Why was a 'canon' (standard) of Scripture needed?
- (c). How did Jesus describe the Bible in John 16:13-15?

25. How the Bible came to Sudan

The very earliest Christians in Cush had formed "a church in every village by the 5th century A.D." The Ethiopian eunuch, probably the finance minister from the royal court at Meroe, had a copy of Isaiah's prophecy in Greek. He was educated enough to read it while he travelled. As a result of his reading, together with Philip's explanations, the man became a believing, baptised Christian (Acts 8:26-40). Paintings or engravings available to be seen in Khartoum's Sudan National Museum today, show pictures of Daniel's three friends in a fire, shepherds coming to Joseph and Mary at a baby's birth, Jesus' dead body being taken from the cross - a soldier on a ladder removing the nails, and the cross of Jesus opening up the glory of heaven. In this way Bible stories and theological truths were

passed on by those few who knew them, to uneducated and illiterate people. This affected at least the three states of Nobatia, Makouria, and Alodia with its capital at Soba. Greek and Coptic authors record the conversion of Nubian kings to Christianity by the sixth century. It is of interest to note in the museum how changing theology is reflected by Jesus getting smaller while Mary gets bigger in nativity scenes made about 300 years apart. These were saved from Faras church and cathedral, now under Lake Nasser, between Wadi Halfa and Aswan. I wonder if a greater availability and more practical application of Bible truth in life would have changed history, and kept 'Christian Sudan' from the influence of later religions?

Roman Catholic missionary Father Ueberbacher translated long extracts from the Gospels and Epistles into Bari, soon after A.D. 1854. These were resources for clergy more than for lay people, as the church put restrictions on their use.

In 1854 the Smith Van Dyck, American Presbyterian missionaries, 'Classical Arabic Bible' was printed outside of Sudan, but distributed here from Egypt.

In 1867 a Bible Society depot was opened in Khartoum, the result of British, American and Swiss missionaries working together.

A variety of New Testament books were published in local languages as soon as practically possible: 'Luke' in Cic Dinka 1905; 'John' in Shilluk 1911; 'Mark' in Sudanese Arabic 1927; 'Mark' in Moru 1928; 'Mark' in Heiban 1931; 'Mark' in Krongo 1934; 'Mark' in Koalib njirere 1937; 'Mark' in Mabaan 1947; 'Mark' in Lotuko 1954; 'Luke' in Sudanese Arabic 1955.

Anglican (Episcopal) missionaries translated the New Testament book by book into Dinka Bor during the 1920's and 1930's; and into Zande by 1938; Moru by 1951; and Bari by 1954.

It is interesting to see how our Sovereign God used the many troubles, including the expulsion of missionaries from Sudan, to enable this work to continue. Exiled people in neighbouring countries continued their own education and then worked in translation or publication. It has been said to me that the most recent years of displacement for Sudanese people, have been used by God to speed up Bible translation. The process has been shortened by several years as some tribes-people are more easily accessible to linguists and translators, in Khartoum, Nairobi and elsewhere. God is using his

power to encourage local language Bibles.

The cost of producing translations was mainly funded through overseas missionaries. Usually a language group was first provided with a Gospel and then with the rest of the New Testament. Audio cassette recordings were used as they became available. More recently, the 'Jesus' film has been widely seen using suitable up to date technologies. In the last 25 years a greater emphasis has been made on enabling Sudanese to take responsibility for the whole process of Bible translation in their own languages (2 Timothy 2:2). Of around 117 languages of Sudan, less than one quarter have significant parts of the Bible available.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Is there a Bible in your mother-tongue? If not, what can you do to help one be translated?
- (b). What attributes of God are seen by the recent speeding up of Bible translation in Sudan, thanks to the war and displacement of people?
- (c). What specific responsibilities do Sudanese people have for enabling the production of the Bible in all Sudanese languages?

26. Translating the Bible

Some of us may take for granted the Bible we have to use. It has taken a lot of work by many people to produce God's word in the language we can best understand. To begin with, a lot of research is carried out. A language is identified as a suitable target by examining factors like: 'will the language survive or die out?' and 'do the speakers speak other languages, or only this one?' Contact is made with appropriate leaders in the language group, and a suitable base established to house the work.

The next step in preparation is identifying language helpers, learning the language, studying of the sound systems used by the language speakers, analysing the way the language holds together and the grammar rules it follows. A suitable way of writing the sounds is developed. A group is formed with representatives from first language speakers, translators and linguistic advisors.

Later on, a first draft - idea for the eventual text - is produced after looking carefully at both the source text (usually in Hebrew / Aramaic and Greek), and the target language. Translation involves carefully discussing cultural understandings, word meanings in and out of their context, ideas clearly understood in one language but not at all in another (for example: "white as snow"). The exact biblical *understanding* has to be maintained throughout.

The first draft is passed around to advisors as well as all group members, for checking and suggestion. It is tested by asking a different first language speaker to read it, one who is not involved in the process in any other way. It is also tested by translating it back into a national main language (for example: French or English), to see how well the meanings are kept true. Translation consultants are asked for their opinions before a second, revised, draft is produced. The second will include all of the accepted changes from the first one.

Next, proofreading is done to detect and mark errors for correction. More first language speakers who have not seen it before, are shown the document. A few trial copies are produced at this point, for chosen Christians to use as their 'Bible'. Their comments and feedback is valued, especially over readability. With all these suggestions gathered together, a third draft text is made.

Now the final moment is getting closer! Checks are made to ensure there is consistency in use of key terms and accuracy of revisions against the source document. The spellings, the writing system, punctuation, paragraphs, chapter and verse numberings etc., are all checked too. Then, when final approval is given by consultants and group leaders, typesetting, cover design, printing and shipping can be arranged. At last the 'dedication day' will happen! God's word is then put into the hands and hearts of people in their own languages. God speaks to people and they can understand!

I was asked to preach at the dedication service of 'Genesis', in the Maban language. It was during June 2000. About thirty people gathered at Banat. The joy on the faces of those who could read 'Genesis' for the first time in their own mother tongue, was exciting to see. The challenge of so many people still needing the Bible in their own languages *must* be taken seriously by those God has gifted and called to be involved.

The 'Preface' or 'Introduction' to your English Bible should tell you what type of translation it is. There are basically six types:

- A *common language* translation uses language that can be understood by almost all speakers of that language as their mother (or first) tongue. This may involve using a deliberately limited number of words to keep it as simple as possible.
- A *literary language* translation has a higher language level and requires more academic understanding from the reader.
- A *dynamic equivalence* translation aims to reproduce the meaning of the original text, even if this involves changing words and grammar.
- A *formal correspondence* translation follows the words and grammar of the original as closely as possible, while trying to convey the meaning.
- *Paraphrases* do not translate as such, but they freely convey the meaning of the original languages, in modern English.
- *Revisions* are new editions of previously translated works, which use more up to date understandings of all the languages involved. Bibles *with study notes* usually try to present a particular theological position. It should always be remembered that those 'added notes' are not part of the 'God-breathed' (Greek - theopneustos) inspired text.

In this book I have always quoted from the New International Version. I have used it since the beginning of its publication in 1973, two years after I entered the preaching ministry in England. The NIV aims to translate into modern English. (I must remember *that* 'modern English' is now over 30 years old!) It has an emphasis on the form of words and their structure in the original texts. It is a formal correspondence translation. I have used just the one translation for almost all of my ministry. This has helped me to memorise passages of the Bible, which I feel is very important. Of course, I do consult different translations to bring out the meaning more clearly in my sermon or teaching preparation. But ninety-nine per cent of the time I read just the one Bible version. I begin with a prayer and I ask God to speak to me through it; and he does!

Thinking it through.

- (a). Look in the front of your Bible: does it tell you what type of translation it is? (Read the Preface or

Introduction). Compare this to the six types listed in chapter twenty-six.

- (b). As well as being true to the old texts and original Bible languages, why is it important that translators keep up to date with modern language usage?
- (c). How do we know that God himself wants to speak to us through the Bible?

27. Interpreting and applying the Bible

Hermeneutics is the science that teaches principles, laws and methods of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics tries to take the student into the time, place and cultural understanding of the forty or so Bible authors. The aim is to discover the mind of God himself and what he wants us to know and to do today. Because the Bible was written a long time ago, in a different language and culture to ours, when people had different understandings of the world, we need hermeneutics. How can we understand the Bible correctly? To be able to test what preachers and teachers are telling us, we need good methods of understanding the Bible for ourselves. To be able to preach and teach others, we must correctly explain and interpret the Bible to ourselves first. "The pulpit is not the place to ventilate our own opinions, but to unfold God's Word". We are all sinners and our own thoughts are badly affected (2 Corinthians 3:14-18; 2 Corinthians 4:4)

Good interpreting of the Bible involves *examining the text* itself. Don't just read commentaries or listen to preachers! What does the Bible actually say itself? Reading more than one translation, or in more than one language, may help here.

Next, *discover the meaning* of the text. What did the writer want his contemporary readers to understand when it came into their hands? What is the most obvious and common sense understanding of it? What do we know from elsewhere in the Bible about the content and context of this passage? If the actual practice described is not relevant today, what principles are found there that may help us understand up to date issues?

It is very important to put today's life alongside the Bible and see what needs to be changed in our lives to make them more Christian. I call this *putting God's word into practice*. Having read what the text says,

then seen how it fits into to the entire Bible message, we must bring our lives into line with what God wants. We put our lives under God's authority using the Bible like this.

Cultural transposition concludes 'this is what God was saying then, and this is how it applies today'. Interpreting the Bible in this way removes the clothing of the ancient text and dresses it with modern life, but it does not change the living text at all. We can discover and apply biblical truth, without necessarily using biblical terms. All of our Bible reading should be with the aim of meeting the eternal God whose speaking it is, in a fresh new way. The principles he has given are universal and timeless even as our practices will vary from place to place and year on year.

These twelve helpful guides are good to follow when you study your Bible:

1. Prayerfully seek the help of God the Holy Spirit.
2. Generally take the words to mean their usual, everyday meaning.
3. See if the surrounding context requires a different meaning, or confirms the usual one.
4. Keep the whole of the Bible in your mind to let it guide your understanding.
5. Leave debatable issues until you have a good grasp of the essentials!
6. Remember the original readers and what it all meant to them.
7. Begin with the easier to read passages, like the Gospels.
8. Move from the known to the unknown, as one passage explains another.
For example: discover what Acts says about Ephesus while you read Ephesians.
9. Enjoy biblical imagery. It makes the Bible sparkle.
Word pictures are to make you think.
10. Be aware of differences between short-term and long-term prophecies. Some have been fulfilled while others have not.
11. Get the big picture first. Read whole letters or historical narratives, noting issues to return to for study later.

12. Recognise your limitations. God's ways are beyond full finding out (Isaiah 55:8-11). None of us will ever 'know it all'!

The Bible is one book and yet it is made up of sixty-six. The Bible may be said to have one 'Author' over its many writers. The Bible has one theme running throughout all of its many events. Context, style, purpose, and actual words used, must all be carefully thought about while reading in a particular chapter. God the Holy Spirit can be trusted to make our study effective as we do our hard work (2 Timothy 1:6,7; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16,17). Meaningful obedience comes from applying the Bible to today.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why is it necessary to follow rules for reading, understanding and applying the Bible?
- (b). Why is it necessary to 'get the big picture first', and see where an individual verse, or story, or Bible book, fits into the whole Bible?
- (c). Discuss the twelve guidelines given towards the end of chapter twenty-seven.
Which are the most important for you at this time?

**The Beginning
of the
Story of God
and
Humankind**

28. Starting where the Bible starts

The Bible is not a collection of independent verses that can be taken out of context, in any order or priority. The Bible is a progressive revelation of the one and only true God. It shows us God's creation of humankind (Genesis 1:27). It shows us people choosing to rebel against God's will and his purpose (Genesis 3:1-20). It shows us God's plan to save us from the sin in which we were hopelessly trapped. It records how Jesus Christ opened the way of salvation (John 14:1-7). The Bible ends with the symbolic unveiling of "Jesus making everything new" (Revelation 21:4-6). From the beginning to the end, the Bible is one grand and true story that moves from start to finish. It should always be taken as a whole.

As we read all through the Bible, we must see what God is doing. The Old Testament is the 'covenant' or 'agreement' God made with people about salvation before Jesus Christ came into the world (Genesis 15:1-6). The New Testament is the new covenant Jesus achieved, as the only mediator between God and humankind (1 Timothy 2:5,6). In one sense, they are not different covenants, but the same one – started in the Old Testament and finished in the New. Abraham demonstrated that God enjoys people having faith in him (Hebrews 11:6, 8-10). The Old Testament Law shows us that no-one can live up to God's standard. The New Testament Gospel – good news – shows us that we can be made acceptable to God, through Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:19-25).

It is essential that we connect all the stories together when we are reading the Bible. We must see the place that every single one has within the whole. If we do not do this, we could easily get completely the wrong idea!

It is a good idea to keep in mind *a summary of the Bible's big story*, like the one that follows:

God is – Genesis

God creates – Adam and Eve

Humankind rebels

God judges by flood – Noah

God scatters all the people – Babel

God calls his chosen person – Abraham

This continuing special family move into Egypt – Joseph

God brings them out of captivity, after the Passover –

Exodus / Moses

God gives the Law

Disobedience results in aimless wanderings

Entering the promised land – Joshua

Ups and downs under the leadership of Judges

A king is appointed – Samuel / Saul

The best times for Israel – David / Solomon,
the prophets speak for God

The kingdom divided – the prophets continue, but
are largely ignored

Exiled into Babylon

Years after, going back home – Ezra / Nehemiah

The birth of Jesus Christ – Gospels

His life and teaching

His death and resurrection

The Christian church in Jerusalem – Acts / Peter

Persecution and the problems of growing – Paul

Expansion to all peoples everywhere

God brings everything to its climax – Revelation / John

Thinking it through.

(a). From reading ONLY Genesis 1:1; Genesis 3:1;
Genesis 12:1; Genesis 46:1-4; Exodus 3:7-9; Exodus
20:1-3; Joshua 1:1-5; & Jeremiah 32:36-41; what do
you think is THE theme of the Old Testament?

(b). From reading ONLY Mark 1:1; John 20:30-31; Acts
1:1-5; Colossians 1:3-6; & Revelation 21:1-4; what do
you think is THE theme of the New Testament?

29. God's creation of man

In the book of Genesis God uses the word 'Man' for naming 'people', both male and female (Genesis 5:1,2). It is the Hebrew word 'Adam'. It refers to human beings, *Homo sapiens*. It is 'man' as opposed to animals or machines, not as opposed to 'woman'. This word 'man' includes 'woman'.

The English dictionary defines 'human' as "characterizing, or relating

to man and mankind; consisting of people, man, woman or child". In the older creeds and confessions of Christian theology, 'man' usually means 'human being' in this way.

God did not need to create humankind. He was not lonely because he had perfect fellowship within the Trinity (see chapter nine). God created us, not because he had to, but because he wanted us! We are formed and made to live for God's glory (Isaiah 43:6,7; Ephesians 1:11,12). Therefore, every person who lives is important to God.

When you walk through the industrial areas of Khartoum you can see men making things. Wood is used to make tables and chairs. Steel is used to make cupboards. Plastic or rope twine is used to string beds and stools. Even tea leaves are used to make 'chai' in early morning and when it is time for 'fatur' in mid-morning. The people who make these things have purposes for the items they make. And God has a purpose for us. Every person is best fulfilled by doing what God made him or her to do.

Man is made to reflect God's own likeness, within the limits of our humanity (Genesis 1:26,27). We should be the image of God, each with a good, holy character, knowledge and lifestyle (Ephesians 4:22,23; Colossians 3:10). Man represents God in governing the rest of creation and is like God in many ways. The same words 'image' and 'likeness' of Genesis 1:26,27 are also used when Adam and Eve had their son, whom they called Seth (Genesis 5:3). As a child has characteristics of its parents, but is not exactly the same as its parents, so we are made to be mirrors of our creator God – being as much like him as we can.

Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" and the "exact representation of his being" (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is man as God wants all people to be. One day in the future there are going to be many, many people in heaven who are like Jesus! All Christians, from every tribe, nationality, and people-group, will be there and will be like him (Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:2)!

At present we all have an inner sense of right and wrong, which shows we have a morality like God. We can also reason and think in logical ways. We begin to think the thoughts of God that we should. By this we show that mentally and spiritually we are made in God's image. We can relate to God and to each other in family and

community. In its turn this reflects God and how he personally relates to himself.

The dignity every person has undoubtedly been given by God, should always be reflected in the way we treat every other human being (Psalm 8:3-6).

Thinking it through.

- (a). In what ways are all people 'in the image of God'? (Genesis 1:27).
- (b). Why did God create people?
- (c). How is Jesus different from all other men, in God's image?

30. Mankind's sin against God

Sin is any rebellion against God and his will for our lives. Sin involves choosing to please ourselves and not to please our Father in heaven. I sin when I do not love God with all my heart, my soul, my mind and my entire self. As a sinner I miss the mark God has set for me. The fact that *all* people are sinners is obvious from thinking about the world in which we live. We, the people who share our lives, as well as others we only hear about, all fall below the high ideal God has set for every person and revealed in Jesus.

I confess I am 'a young earth, seven day, mature creationist'. I believe that the world was made in seven days, but with an appearance of age – as Adam was made in one day, but looked as if he was a man of (say) twenty years. Students in my classes at Banat, Bahri and Gereif were sometimes puzzled about what I personally believed. I reveal this now, because it introduces the Genesis 3 account of a breakdown in the close relationship between God and humankind.

Adam and Eve chose to doubt God's word, to follow their own way of satisfying their personal desires, and to deliberately disobey God's specific command. I see that as sin three times over! The couple added again to their sin, by trying to fix it themselves and then by trying to hide away from God. All of this is often known as 'the Fall' – the first distinct act of rebellion against the will of God. The New Testament refers back to this event several times (Romans 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 15:21,22; 1 Timothy 2:13,14).

All people have sinful natures. Parents never have to teach children to be bad! All children know how to be bad. All human nature is still in rebellion to God, as a result of the events in Genesis 3. I do not have to *do* anything to be a sinner. I *am* a sinner, seriously cut off from the Holy God.

Let's imagine there is disagreement between a group of Nuer and a group of Dinka over cattle grazing. Two young boys, one from each tribe, had become friends at school in the town. For several years they had walked to school together from their houses on the edge of the grazing land. They had learned together, they had played together. But now, their tribes had become enemies because some from the Nuer accused some from the Dinka of stealing animals. The boys themselves had not actually done anything that would change their personal friendship. But because of the actions of others in their tribes, they found themselves suddenly to be 'enemies' of each other.

Because of Adam's sin against God, I am no longer God's friend. Adam was a human being just like I am. His actions have affected my relationship to God. "... sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ..." (Romans 5:12).

Sin is universal in that it affects everyone. It is also universal in that it affects everything. So our minds, our emotions, our behaviour, and our created world, our community systems for government etc., are all infected with the deadly, corrupting influence of sin.

Wilbur O'Donovan taught at the Evangelical Theological College, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as well as six other African schools or colleges. He wrote clearly on this subject: "Little did Adam realize how terrible death would be! Physical death of the human body is only part of the terrible death penalty. Death touches everything in a person's existence. It touches a person's body, mind, emotions, relationships, marriage, family life, society, government, and even the physical earth itself".

The results of sin are everywhere about us. Work is often hard and joyless. Childbirth is regularly painful. Snakes slither with menace along the ground (Genesis 3:14-19). The created world itself struggles as cruel natural disasters happen now within its cycles of life (Romans 8:19-22).

God created humankind to reflect his own glorious self. Men and women have amazing ideas and abilities. We enjoy the freedom to choose to live holy and loving lives. But we have thrown it all away! Rebelling against God's way, and thinking our own way was better, we have made the mess we are now in. Humanly speaking, there seems to be no way out.

We were *created* by God. We have become *separated* from God. We are *unable* to enter heaven. God has closed the door and put his own guards outside (Genesis 3:23,24).

In Khartoum many guards are employed to look after buildings used by companies or families. Jobs may include looking after the grounds, cleaning the vehicles, answering any knocks at the gate, and overall, keeping out any thieves, and other people who should not be allowed in. I had several friends from congregations at SIM, who worked as guards in the three cities and at some other properties along the Blue, White and Nile rivers. Sometimes thieves would still manage to break in, perhaps while the guard was asleep or away for just a moment.

The guards of heaven never make any mistakes. Since it is God who has closed the door, we must listen to him as he tells us what to do next.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Suggest a general definition of 'sin'.
- (b). "I do not have to do anything to be a sinner. I am a sinner". Explain what the difference is between 'being a sinner' and 'sinning'.
- (c). List as many things as you can – at least seven – that are affected by human sin.

**God's
Chosen
Saviour –
Jesus!**

Reading this section, (as section 3 earlier), it is *still* important to keep in mind these comparisons between Christianity and Islam:

In Christianity,	In Islam,
God reveals himself, in the Son, one with God from eternity.	God reveals his will, in the 'preserved tablet' or 'Mother of the Book'.
The ultimate revelation is: Christ,	The ultimate revelation is: the Qur'an,
the living Word of God,	the Speech of God,
(Arabic – kalimat allah) a person.	(Arabic – kalam allah) a book.
(John 1:1-5; John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1-3).	(Qur'an 85:21-22; 42:52; 43:4; 3:3-7; 27:91-92; 13:39)

31. Jesus, the man who is God

What is remarkable about Jesus as a man, is that he is actually God! And what is remarkable about Jesus as God, is that he is actually man! The message from God to the shepherds, through the angels at the birth of Jesus, was: "Today in the town of David a *Saviour* has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Nine months earlier the angel had told Joseph that Mary's expected son "will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

At his baptism, when he was an adult, Jesus and many other people heard God's audible voice from heaven saying: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). A couple of years later, a similar statement was made from a glorious cloud covering Jesus at his transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-6). This was probably on Mount Hermon, 2814 metres above sea level, north-east of Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus was God walking on our earth. He is God speaking to humankind. He is God himself overcoming our separation from him. The incarnation is "the act of God the Son whereby he took to himself

a human nature”.

During his earthly life, Jesus showed some of the attributes of God. He showed *omnipotence* in stilling the violent storm (Matthew 8:23-27). He showed he could do anything his character allowed him to do. He changed water into wine at a friend of the family's wedding (John 2:1-11). Jesus showed *omniscience* by knowing the unspoken thoughts of his opponents (Mark 2:5-8). He proved he knew everything, even where he was not present. He said to Nathanael “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you”, John 1:43-51. This convinced Nathanael that Jesus was the Son of God.

Jesus revealed his *eternity* by saying to the Jews who thought he was demon possessed, that he was alive before the patriarch Abraham (John 8:57,58). As God the Son, he was apart from and above time. He spoke of having been in the presence of God the Father before the creation of the world (John 17:5). Answering the disciples questions about his second coming to the earth, Jesus spoke about an everywhere visible and spectacularly glorious return, in the future, for himself (Matthew 24:3, 30,31). The immediate mention, in verse 36, that only the Father knows the timing of this event, shows Jesus ‘hidden omniscience’ in a specific area. As we’ll see in a moment, this is consistent with Jesus’ full entrance into the condition of humanity.

In a similar way, God the Son is *immortal* and could not die (John 2:19-22; John 10:17,18). Yet as a man Jesus did die for the sin of the world. These things do not prove that Jesus is not God, or that he is not a man. Rather they point to the fact of Jesus being both God and man.

The *sovereignty* of God was seen in Jesus. He claimed to have the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-8). He also assumed the right to sharpen the application of Scripture. He exercised his power over his own word. The much acclaimed ‘Sermon on the Mount’ shows this six times, ‘You have heard in Scripture ... but I tell you’ (Matthew 5:22,28,32,34,39,44). If Jesus was not the sovereign Lord God, he would have to be seen as a false prophet for ‘changing’ Scripture! If anyone else did it, it would be wrong. Only Jesus’ divinity gives him the right to say what he says and to do what he does.

Jesus is called 'God' in the Bible (John 1:1; Hebrews 1:8; Titus 2:13). He is shown to do what only God can do (Hebrews 1:2,3). His claim of equality with God was a cause of conflict with the Jews (John 5:16-23), but it was something he consistently reaffirmed (John 8:23,24; John 10:30).

The early disciples realised Jesus was more than just a man. Peter said to him, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", Matthew 16:16. Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God", John 20:28. The Christian church recognised the significance of the man Jesus being God. One of their earliest hymns is recorded in our Bibles as Philippians 2:6-11. It is "the cross as seen through the eyes of the Crucified, and allows us to enter the mind of Christ". God the Son while in heavenly glory, did not hold on at all costs to his equality with God. He did not exploit for his own advantage, his equality with God. Instead, Jesus chose to appear on earth in the exact likeness of men. He still kept all of the very nature of God. God became flesh and lived in our world. His purpose was to do something as a man that no other person could ever do. Jesus would give his human life away, to pay once and for all humanity's outstanding debt which was owed to God (Matthew 20:28), (see chapters 44 & 45).

Jesus the man was the fullness of God. He was not just a part of God (Colossians 1:19,20; Colossians 2:9). This miracle is possible when we remember three things we already know: first, that God is Spirit; second, that God is omnipresent – everywhere present at the same time; and third, that God is omnipotent – able to do anything his character allows him to do. God himself became the *second* Adam he had made!

(1 Corinthians 15:45).

As Oxford University theologian Alister McGrath teaches: "Jesus is a window into God".

Thinking it through.

- (a). Give at least five reasons to believe 'Jesus was God as a man'.
- (b). Was Jesus 'part of God' or 'all of God'?
- (c). Explain your answer, using some of the attributes of God.

32. Jesus, the God who is man

Khartoum is famous for its bridges. The bridge over the White Nile to Fittihab, Omdurman, was built while I was in Sudan. Watching it at the different stages of building was interesting. The pillars were sunk firmly to the river bed. The spans were connected one by one. Eventually, all was finished. The Chinese built it for the Sudanese. Unfortunately, when it first opened, traffic going to the bridge from either side had enormous bumps and ridges to slowly struggle across before actually joining the new, fast, smooth road. Someone from the Chinese embassy once apologised to me at an embassy function, pointing out that his Chinese government were only responsible for the bridge itself, and not for the adjoining roads!

Imagine for a moment, a bridge with a piece missing. If the White Nile bridge had a gap on either the Khartoum side or on the Fittihab side, it would *not* be possible to cross. A bridge broken anywhere, is no longer a bridge.

Jesus is the bridge between God and humankind. If he is not God, then the bridge is broken at the far end from us. If Jesus is not man, then the bridge is broken at the end nearest to us. In either case, no-one can cross over the bridge.

The disciples who lived with Jesus for about three and a half years, saw many things in his life that showed he was a real man. He was connected to humanity! The Gospels record Jesus being tempted to sin (Matthew 4:1-11), sleeping (Matthew 8:24), being hungry (Matthew 21:18), being angry (Mark 3:5). He is seen in emotional agony (Luke 22:44), being physically tired (John 4:6), crying sadly (John 11:35), being thirsty (John 19:28), and physically dying (John 19:33). Luke, who was a doctor, records Jesus' natural birth (Luke 2:6,7), his human growth and development (Luke 2:52), and his physical death (Luke 23:46). Even after the resurrection, Luke notes that Jesus had 'flesh and bones', and could eat food (Luke 24:39-42).

Many of the people who did not agree with what Jesus was saying and doing emphasised his manliness. It was as if they said: 'He is not God, he is just a man'. The people of his home synagogue at Nazareth knew the family Jesus was part of (Matthew 13:53-57). His brothers did not believe he was anything more than a man seeking to be famous (John 7:1-5). These people who had seen Jesus living and working among them for about 30 years, saw him as an ordinary man, with some rather extraordinary ideas.

Over the centuries people have reacted differently to Jesus. Many believe he was *only* a man. In so doing they acknowledge half of the truth! He was a genuine man. He was one hundred per cent a real man. But that is not *all* he was!

We should think about two key points in Jesus' life, which are both denied as truth by some who think he was merely a man:

1. The *incarnation* of Jesus involved God the Son, who lived from eternity past, becoming a human being. (See chapter 31). Until the miraculous conception happened, God was not man. When the human baby was *born*, God the Son was *given* flesh. God the Son was *sent* from heaven and he *arrived* as the baby Jesus. (Isaiah 9:6; Galatians 4:4-5). The incredible fact of the incarnation is that God took on to himself the complete experience of life as a man.
2. The *crucifixion* shows us the reason for the incarnation. No human being could ever be free from sin, since Adam our representative turned away from God's will. God wanted people to be free from sin. Therefore he himself became the one and only perfect human being. Living as Jesus he gave that human life over to death on the cross. It was the ransom payment made to the justice of God. It, and it alone, brings salvation from sin. "God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, *the man* Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men" 1st Timothy 2:3-6. God the Son was born as Jesus in order to die as a man on Calvary's cross.

In Sudan I learned what being a mediator meant. As a pastor I was asked to speak to people I knew, on behalf of others I also knew, about different things. The situations ranged from marriage proposals, to job opportunities, even the repayment of debts.

This 'mediator' of 1 Timothy 2:5 must represent God to humankind, and humankind to God. He must be in touch with both and yet distinct

from both. He must be the go-between in the process of reconciliation. The very best go-between would know all about being God and would also know all about being man. He would understand completely the needs of both parties, because of his personal experience of being both parties. No-one except God could be the man in this role.

How Jesus Christ is truly human and the true God at the same time is a mystery. Through Christian history, there have been many errors. The explanations which countered the errors form the basis of the Church creeds, but there always remains room for worshipping and wondering. Some have thought Jesus was only a divinely appointed human being. Others believed he appeared to be human, but was not really so. Different people taught that God came upon the man Jesus in a special way, making him neither man or God, but some 'half-caste' being. Arius (A.D. 246-336) taught that Christ was a created being: the best of all God's creatures, but a creature at best. How the two natures of Christ are complete and yet not compromised in one person, is something only the omniscient God himself knows. And he has chosen not to explain it to us!

A striking difference between Christianity and Islam can be highlighted at this point. Muslims believe that Jesus Christ was only a man, though an important prophet equal to Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses. Like them, Jesus is believed to be below Muhammad in importance. Muslims do not believe Jesus was crucified for the sin of the world. The Qur'an states that the Jews *thought* they crucified Jesus, but somehow it only *appeared* so to them; in reality Jesus was not killed at all (Qur'an 4:157). The understanding of this passage for most Muslims today is that the Jews *actually* crucified Judas, although they *thought* it was Jesus.

Christians believe the Lord Jesus Christ to be: "the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us..."

The Nicene Creed, A.D. 325.

We must always remember that Jesus is in a class of his own, yet he is also one of us – and he is God!

Jesus is referred to more than eighty times in the New Testament as “the Son of God”, (Mark 1:1). Jesus speaks of God as “Father” fifty-one times in the first three gospels, and more than one hundred times in the fourth gospel. He always addressed God in prayers as “Father”, (for example: Matthew 11:25; Mark 14:36; John 11:41; John 12:27; John 17:1,5). Matthew’s gospel carefully presents Jesus as the Son of God, from the time his birth was announced, (Matthew 1:23), through his baptism, (Matthew 3:17), his temptations – which have no real force if Jesus was *not* the Son of God, (Matthew 4:3,6), and his transfiguration, (Matthew 17:5). His claim to be the Son of God was challenged again at his trial before the Jewish high priest, (Matthew 26:63-64), and even while he was being crucified (Matthew 27:40,43). Jesus was put to death for simply claiming to be who he really was! Matthew concludes his writing with a clear statement of the three-in-one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, (Matthew 28:18-20). Christians are commissioned to disciple, baptise and teach all people everywhere that ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ – and he is in a way that no-one else is. This Son of God is God the Son!

Jesus is *not* the Son of God *because* he was miraculously conceived in Mary’s womb. The reverse is actually true! It is because Jesus is God the Son that he could be conceived so miraculously. His existence before he lived on this earth raises the important question of why he became a man (John 17:1-5).

Jesus refers to himself more than eighty times in the four gospels as “the Son of Man”. When challenged by the high priest to say if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus answered: “Yes, it is as you say. In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64). The high priest immediately knew this was a reference back to the prophet Daniel. In the Old Testament book of Daniel “one like a son of man” appears. He stands between the Almighty God in heaven and the suffering people on earth. This ‘son of man’ mediates between God and the people. He is given complete reign over all peoples of the entire world (Daniel 7:9-14). So, in his answer to the high priest, Jesus has claimed to be both Son of God and Son of Man. God the Son, from forever in the past, stepped into our world as Jesus. As the man Jesus, he died on a cross: God himself paying the

price of humankind's sin. And because it was God who paid the price there is no balance left for anyone else to pay!

If I could re-write Matthew 16:13-16 as a question for ourselves, it would read like this:

'Who do people think Jesus, the Son of Man, is?'

'Some say a prophet. Others say a good, moral teacher. One of the best. But nothing more'.

'Never mind the others for a moment. Who do *you* think Jesus is?'

What would your answer be?

My answer is: "Jesus is God the Son in human form – the only Saviour for all people of the world".

Thinking it through.

- (a). What is the best evidence we have supporting the fact that Jesus was a real man?
- (b). Why did God become a man?
- (c). What difference would it make to the Christian gospel if Jesus was not God?

33. Jesus, past, present, and future

The Bible's book of Revelation opens a window into the future for us. The title comes from the first verse in the first chapter and it means an 'uncovering' (Greek – apokalupsis, which transliterates into the English word 'apocalypse', an event of very great importance, usually including some violence with dramatic change). A lot of symbolism is used in Revelation because the scenes described in it are beyond anything mankind has ever yet experienced. The symbols represent truth, but need not be understood as literal realities themselves.

Other Scriptures sometimes give us clues to understanding what is meant in Revelation. As an example, you could study Revelation 5:5-6 and compare the words used in it to those in Genesis 49:8-10, Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew 2:1-12, Matthew 27:27-56 and John 1:29. My conclusion from doing so is that the central person, at the throne ruling all of creation, is Jesus Christ. He is born within the descendants of the family of Judah. He existed *before* King David (like the root before the fruits on the mango tree), yet he came *after* David into history. His right to rule came from his sacrificial death on the cross.

A careful reading of Revelation chapter 4 and on into chapter 5, shows that Jesus, God the Son, is at the centre of the throne of God the Father, 4:2, in the presence of God the Holy Spirit 4:5. Jesus is standing *alive* although he had been *dead*, 5:6, and is receiving the worship of everyone 5:13. All of this points to the central truth of Revelation: Jesus is God, who is working out his purpose, which will definitely be fulfilled (Revelation 22:12,13).

However, I do not deny that many mysteries in Revelation will remain. We will do well to hold our beliefs about the details gently and with graciousness towards those who understand them differently.

Jesus is the central message of Scripture. The Old Testament shows the roles of the prophets, the priests and the kings during Israel's early history. The *prophets* represented God to the people, (for example: Elijah – 1 Kings 18:1-46; Jeremiah – Jeremiah 1:1-19). When they spoke, the prophets spoke in the name of God. The *priests* represented the people before God. They brought the sacrifices God required to make the people fit to be God's people, (for example: Aaron and his sons – Leviticus chapters 7 & 8; the Levites – Ezra 6:19-22). The *kings* were to reign over the people of God for the glory of God, (for example: David – 2 Samuel 5:1-5; 2 Samuel 7:16; Solomon – 1 Kings 2:1-12). None of these men were perfect. They were only human. But they all pointed towards the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ as prophet (Luke 24:19); Jesus Christ as priest (Hebrews 2:17); and Jesus Christ as king (Matthew 4:17; Matthew 27:27-31; Revelation 19:16). Jesus Christ meets our need for a prophet, for a priest and for a king. The old need, to be born into an earthly nation, is replaced by the new need, to be born again into the kingdom of God (Jeremiah 31:31-37; Hebrews 9:1-28).

We have already seen (chapters 31 & 32) that God the Son existed before his incarnation as Jesus. His birth into humanity was prophesied (Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6), and so was his death (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:6). The fact that Jesus existed as a man is well known from history, both in the Bible and in historical documents. His resurrection from the dead sharply divides believers from unbelievers. The Gospels are clear that Jesus really died on the cross (Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30 – 34), that he was buried, and that he rose again to life afterwards. Those who believe, and receive the living Christ into their lives, are born again into eternal life (John

20:31; John 1:12).

The resurrection was testified to by angels (Matthew 28:5,6; Mark 16:5,6). It was testified to by an empty tomb (Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1-8). The guards being posted earlier at the entrance to the tomb, and the bribery given to false story-tellers later by the chief Jewish priests and elders, add impressive evidence for the resurrection (Matthew 27:62 – 28:15). Though he had always existed as God the Son, the man Jesus Christ was actually born twice. “The (first) birth at Bethlehem was a birth into a life of weakness. The second time, he was born from the grave – ‘the first-born from the dead’ – into the glory of heaven and the throne of God”. Jesus opens the eyes of the heart in those who listen to, and learn from, his teaching through Scripture (Luke 24:25-27 and 44-45).

We could summarise that in *past* history, God the Son pre-existed, Jesus was born as a human being, Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus was buried, and later he was raised to life.

At the *present* time Jesus is at the right hand of God acting as a mediator on our behalf. He represents us, advocating our case, like a barrister or lawyer in a court of law (Romans 8:34).

Jesus is now in the place of highest honour. He is exercising his sovereign right to save and secure people from their sins. He is waiting for the full benefits of his death to become actual reality *in our human history*, which is obviously restricted to the passing of time. The certainty that they will do so comes to us from the glimpses into this eternal reality that the book of Revelation gives us.

The disciples saw Jesus ascend into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). They ministered the gospel knowing that Jesus was standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55-56; 2 Timothy 4:8). They believed that the omnipresent Son of God was with the Father in heaven, yet, at the same time, he was with the disciples in the events of life they were passing through. His presence was both here and there, during every moment of time.

Jesus has taken into heaven the very humanity he assumed on earth. Jesus, the human being, is on the seat of power over the entire creation. At the very centre of everything, supervising and working together everything that is happening, is a man showing the glory of God! (Luke 24:50-53).

The words describing Jesus' ascension indicate how it happened. He was 'taken up' (Greek – analambano), meaning to be received or taken to oneself. He was 'lifted up' (Greek – epairo), meaning exalted and raised up higher. He was 'received' (Greek – hupolambano) meaning to be carried up under a cloud. The NIV translates this as "a cloud hid him from their sight". The disciples were inspired to witness immediately. And although Jesus had been taken from them into heaven, he was still there working with them! (Mark 19:19,20).

Now, Jesus sits in authority at the right hand of God the Father (Hebrews 1:3). He acts as the High Priest, representing us there (Hebrews 4:14-16). The head of the church is in heaven. He has released God the Holy Spirit to equip the church with every grace and gift necessary for the mission of the church to be completed (Colossians 1:18; John 16:7; Ephesians 4:8-13). When that job is done, the same Jesus will come back to this world as a man blazing with fire, to bring judgement and reward (Acts 1:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

Jesus who was real in the past, is also real in the present. He has gone from being seen to being unseen. The beginning of Psalm 110:1 is often behind New Testament thinking. "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'". Jesus seemed to have this in his mind as his destiny (Mark 14:61-62). The apostles used it against their powerful critics (Acts 5:31). The writer to Hebrews highlights the difference between the Old Testament Jewish priesthood and Jesus. Theirs was an endless series of sacrifices and ceremonies to be performed. Jesus completed his sacrifice once and for all, and sat down at the right hand of Father God (Hebrews 10:11-14). Jesus is the one in the honoured position of real authority. The earlier sacrifices were simply pictures.

How do you usually think of Jesus Christ? He is at this *present* moment waiting in heaven's glory for the time to be right – then he will come back!

When Jesus comes again he will complete our salvation and bring this world to judgement. These are two certainties of the *future*. There is no doubt they will happen. Eschatology is the term used for the study of the last things. The word is made up from two other words

literally meaning 'the word of the last' (Greek – eschatos meaning 'last', and logos meaning 'word'). It is often translated in the NIV as 'the last day' (John 6:40; 11:24; 12:48).

God has a purpose in history. The future is planned. Our all-wise and all-powerful God will achieve what he wants. Whether we are alive or dead we will meet the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:27,28). Every person will see him, but nobody knows when (Revelation 1:7; Mark 13:32). The second coming of the Lord Jesus will not be forced into our neat timetables! We are not to guess, but we are to be ready (Matthew 24:44).

I noticed that the brides and grooms were not usually on time for weddings I attended in Sudan. As a westerner I was sometimes told of two starting times for wedding ceremonies: one given to the public generally, and the other for khawajas like me. They were quite different, for example 4pm and 5.30pm. The public were given the earlier time and us khawajas the later. It appears that everyone knew that everyone else would be late and so an earlier starting time was announced in an attempt to get the late arrivals to be on time! As far as I am aware it did not work! In any case, even if the whole congregation had arrived, either one or both from the couple getting married would not be there. Wedding days were waiting days. Wait, wait and wait some more!

Jesus is coming. God has his own timetable. He may not turn up for a while. Yet we must be ready *at any time* to be welcomed into the heavenly city of God (Matthew 25:14-30; Revelation 22:12,13).

There are various Christian theological understandings of the major events surrounding Jesus' return. I am unable to be dogmatic in teaching these when I know well-respected and used-by-God Christians who hold very different views from one another. I also think that none of these understandings are *essential* to the views every Christian should have about the future.

The usual Muslim view of events leading up to the last Day of Judgement is taken from the Hadith literature (traditions) more than the Qur'an. Signs of the coming Day include great tribulation, a widespread decline of faith, the sun will rise from the west instead of the east. A mystery monster will come, possibly out of the Ka'ba (Qur'an 27:82). The anti-Christ (Arabic – Dajjal) will appear and then

Jesus Christ will return to the earth and kill him. Jesus' return is the firm sign of Judgement Day approaching (Qur'an 43:60-61). Jesus will lead the Muslims in prayer, he will preach Islam, destroy all crosses and pigs, and will defeat the Jews. Jesus will then die himself and be buried, to be raised on the last Day. Justice will be given to everyone according to the balance of good and bad deeds in scales (Qur'an 101:6-9).

Muslims differ over which ahadith to accept as authoritative. In the less widely accepted literature are teachings of Jesus destroying all Christians who refuse to submit to Islam, of Jesus marrying and having children, and of Jesus being eventually buried next to Muhammad in Medina.

Christians believe in death followed by judgement. Hebrews 9:27-28 says that we will all die and face judgement, unless we happen to be alive when Jesus Christ returns to bring salvation to completion. We do not know when either death, or Christ's return, will happen. Physical death is part of the result of sin in humankind, (Romans 6:23). Christians believe that *when* they are 'away from the body', they will be 'at home with the Lord', (2 Corinthians 5:6-9). But they do not know the date when that will happen. Eternity is not a prisoner of time.

Everybody in human history will be judged by Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31; Revelation 20:11-15). A person's religion makes no difference at all. At that judgement, even those who do not believe in Jesus will "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). It is a person's commitment to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that decides their eternal destiny – heaven or hell (Matthew 25:31-46). Since Jesus has received God's judgement on my behalf, I do not have to face it any more (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Approximately about the same time, Christians will stand before the "judgement seat" of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10). Some Christians will receive a reward in heaven for their pure following of Christ, while others will enter heaven, but only just! (1 Corinthians 3:14-15). It is *not* 'good works' that save a Christian. Jesus is the Saviour (Luke 2:11; Acts 4:12). It is good works done *because* a person is following Jesus in daily life, which will bring a reward.

As a Christian I believe I must seek to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus whatever the spiritual climate is around me. I should plan my life and ministry to use every day of my life obediently serving God (Matthew 25:1-13). I need to be personally ready to meet the Lord Jesus at any moment. I must pay close attention to my invisible heart-attitudes as well as my visible actions. I should expect Jesus to come back soon, but I should not wait aimlessly doing nothing. I must learn to look up towards his coming from heaven. Yet I should also keep looking at the needs of the world around me. I should try to discern what God is doing in my part of human history and think about where that fits into his overall plan.

In all of this, I am able to trust Jesus Christ to have clothed my life with his own righteousness, so that I do not need to trust in my own resources on the Day of Judgement (Matthew 13:36-43; Romans 1:16-17; Revelation 19:6-9). I can look forward to the mysterious reality of heaven and not be afraid of the equally mysterious reality of hell (Matthew 25:31-46).

Thinking it through.

- (a). How can Jesus have lived before King David and yet also lived several hundred years after him? (John 17:5; 2 Timothy 2:8).
- (b). In which ways is Jesus like a prophet? Like a priest? Like a king?
- (c). How is Jesus different from all human prophets, priests and kings?
- (d). What can we definitely know about Judgement Day?

34. A 'Just Peace' with God

In Sudan's long running civil war, there have always been those people who are seeking what they call a 'just peace'. While all sides militarily try to defeat the others, aiming to win a great and final victory, those seeking a 'just peace' are looking for ways the war can stop immediately – with a fair distribution of wealth, equal treatment for all people, shared rewards and responsibilities, plus full appreciation of each individual with his or her abilities and needs.

To bring together two or more human enemies, there will always have

to be some 'give and take', some compromises made. One side will give way on this demand as the other side gives way on that. The seemingly endless rounds of negotiations between the Sudanese Government, the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement, mediators from neighbouring African and Arab countries, and the past colonial and present world powers, have shown that reaching a 'just peace' is very, very difficult.

When thinking about the need for peace between people and God, there is a rather different emphasis. People and God do not 'negotiate' on any terms, and certainly not as equal partners. How can the created dare to negotiate with the Creator? Humankind has become the enemy of God due to sin (see chapter 30). In Jesus Christ, God has made a 'just peace' between himself and us (Romans 5:10,11). Each individual now has a choice. 'Do I remain an enemy of God?' Or, 'Do I accept his offer of friendship to me and meet the terms that he sets down?'

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:8). An individual's peace with God depends upon him or her approaching God through the Saviour Jesus Christ. There is nothing any person can do to earn or buy peace with God (Galatians 2:16). God has graciously *given* us the way we can come to him.

This is a huge difference between human peace negotiations and 'peace with God'. In talks between warring sides, concessions are often grudgingly given. This party does not really want to give up its claim to something, but it has to do so for peace to come. The party resents what it has to do. How different from God, who has freely, generously, willingly, liberally and lovingly given us what we in no way deserve: a peaceful friendship with himself!

This does not mean that the serious things which make us God's enemies do not matter. They are permanently real barriers between us and God. He has a holy hatred of sin and everything sinful. But – and here is the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ – God has fairly taken the barrier down himself. What no person could ever deal with, God has dealt with himself. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross paid the full penalty that was owing to the wrath of God (Romans 3:21-26).

Because God has paid himself what we owed to him, he remains 'just' while forgiving us for our sin. He can only forgive us 'justly' because everything that was due has been paid. Because of our sin we deserved eternal death. God the Son, Jesus Christ, died *that* death in our place. We do not owe God our death anymore. And, since Jesus Christ rose from the dead, we can now live life at peace with our holy Creator. "If, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" Romans 5:10.

Justification is a legal declaration by God that we are made instantly right with him. My sin has been taken away – paid for by Jesus Christ on the cross – and his righteousness is given to me for my clothing in front of holy God.

Imagine a man buys bread regularly from the back of a Hilux truck. Almost every day he pays his money and takes his bread home. Then imagine the time comes when he has no money to pay. He is hungry and still needs the bread. What can he do? He could try and steal bread, grabbing some and running away fast through the suk. If he did so, the law would be against him and he could be caught and taken to prison. But supposing someone else came along and gave the man selling bread a very large amount of money. He said to the seller, 'Every time this man comes for bread, please give him some, and take the cost from this very large amount of money I have given to you'. Our man could then take bread every day, without paying for it himself. The shopkeeper and the police would not mind him doing so, because the price has already been paid by someone else. He could keep on taking daily bread until this money was all used up.

God's just provision for our peace with himself through Jesus Christ our Saviour, will never, ever, be used up!

Thinking it through.

- (a). How does God's holiness affect our sin and our salvation?
- (b). What is the difference between receiving justice from God and getting what we deserve from him?
- (c). Describe how a person can experience complete peace with God.

35. The Unique Jesus

The word 'unique' means "being the only one of a particular type; single; sole; without equal or like; unparalleled". It is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ that makes Christianity unique among the religions of the world. Jesus Christ is the definitive way for humankind to come to know peace with God. In trying to compare the value of all religious systems around the world, it is their view of Jesus Christ which will finally show their truth or falseness.

In many universities of the western world it is taught or assumed that there is nothing much to choose between religions. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism etc. are all seen as different ways of approaching the same thing. The secularisation of my country, the United Kingdom, reflects this. Religious pluralism is promoted and yet relegated to the relatively unimportant. There is a tolerance of all religions *except* any religion that claims to be unique! Once people do not have a positive belief of their own, they seem to think everyone who does have a definite belief is a fanatic or a fundamentalist. This is where real Christians in England discover themselves more and more in conflict with the British and European governments, which are moving step by step further away from their historical Christian heritage.

Islam believes Jesus was only a man, a prophet equal to other prophets but below Muhammad in importance. He did not die on the cross. Orthodox Jews mostly believe Jesus was a good human teacher of human ethics, but they do not accept him as Messiah. They still await a man who will be sent from God to deliver the nation of Israel from oppression. Hindus believe Jesus to be only one of many incarnations, or sons of Brahman, the eternal being. He was a son of god, not *the* Son of God. He did not die for humankind's sin. Buddhists believe that Jesus was a good teacher, though less important than Buddha. Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus was not God, but God's first created creature. Some of them believed Jesus returned to this earth in A.D. 1914, but remained unseen by men. Groups who try to combine all 'Christian' groups or even all faiths, like Unitarianism or the Bahai, believe that Jesus was no more than a good man, and certainly he was not God. His life and death were inspirational, but did not bring salvation to humankind.

The unique recognition of Christianity is that *God himself has*

revealed that “Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man in one person, and will be so forever”. It is this narrow and singular claim for Jesus Christ that makes Christianity the way of salvation for everyone and anyone. “Every tribe and language and people and nation” will be represented in heaven because of the uniqueness of Jesus (Revelation 5:9,10). Who he was, was unique. And what he did was unique as well. As God he has a unique authority over all people. As the God-man Jesus has a unique significance among all people. Jesus shows us God. His death on the cross is God’s only appointed way for our salvation. Christians pray to God only through Jesus. And we preach ‘Jesus Christ’ to all who will listen. The person of Jesus Christ is more important than any practice of Christianity. All people of the world should judge Christianity by Jesus Christ, not ultimately by any Christians they may know. It is Jesus, and no one Christian or no one church, who is unique.

The Sudanese Christian Church will be at its strongest and most authoritative when all the members know, love and live like Jesus Christ. This is more powerful than political or economic power. Sudanese Christian culture should not be so much a matter of freedom to worship every Sunday in the church. It should be much more a matter of every Christian’s determination to live like Jesus, in the every day workaday world. Sudanese Christian theology will only ever change society when it is carefully applied by Christians in daily life. It must never be forced upon anyone, but it must be able to be seen as an option for everyone. This is noted in the gospels about Jesus, and in the Acts about his disciples. (Matthew 7:28,29; Acts 4:12,13; Acts 11:25-30).

There is a right time for holy boldness. When the early Christians were told not to preach ‘Jesus’ any more, they prayed. As they prayed, they thought about their situation. They put it alongside Scripture. And they prayed, ‘Lord, you look after the opposition, we’ll keep taking our opportunities’ (Acts 4:23-31). They obviously believed in the sovereignty of God and in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. As they chose to risk their freedom and even their lives, God gave them as much as they could possibly have of his own holy presence, through the Holy Spirit (see chapters 37-41).

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why does ‘their view of Jesus Christ’ ultimately show the truth or falseness of any religion?

(b). List all the ways that Jesus was (and is) unique.

36. 'Another one like me', Jesus said

While it is true that Jesus Christ is unique, it is also true that he told his disciples: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another* Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth." John 14:16,7. In English, 'another' means 'one more'. It can also mean 'a different example of the same sort'. The Greek New Testament uses two words, both of which are translated 'another' in English. However, they actually have separate meanings. 'Allos' signifies a numerical difference, another one of the *same* kind. 'Heteros' signifies a qualitative difference, another of a *different* kind.

This is an important distinction to make. Think about oranges and grapefruit. You buy three oranges in the suk. You want to get some more later on. The man in the suk does not have any oranges, but he offers you some grapefruit. It is a similar kind of fruit, a citrus fruit, but it is quite a different size, colour and shape. You do not want these. You want three more oranges – not exactly identical to the ones you have eaten, but very similar.

Jesus promises the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, is another one like himself. The Holy Spirit will not be a stranger to those who have known Jesus. They will recognise him. Just as Jesus had lived with his disciples, so the Holy Spirit will live with them. In fact, the Holy Spirit will be living inside of them as well as with them.

We must try to understand this truth, even though we are thinking about God. God is so great and beyond our full understanding. Whatever we can grasp of him, there will always be so much more that we know is there but we cannot understand.

I know that when it rains in places like Fittihab, Omdurman, there are large puddles of water and mud left around for days afterwards. Someone looking at the puddles may say, 'that's a lot of water just lying around'. But compared to the flow of water in the river Nile that puddle is nothing at all!

The Nile starts in south-central Burundi as a remote stream, called the Luvironza. That flows into Lake Victoria and then leaves as the Victoria Nile, flowing into Lake Albert. The water then flows through the Albert Nile into the White Nile on the border between Uganda and Sudan. In Khartoum this is joined by the Blue Nile from near Lake

Tana in Ethiopia. From Khartoum the River Nile flows north into Egypt and the Mediterranean sea. Altogether, it is 6741 km (4187 miles), the longest river in the world.

Yet even the water in the whole of the rivers and lakes that make up the Nile is nothing at all, compared to the water in the mighty Pacific Ocean. The world's deepest and largest Ocean is between Asia, Australia, South and North America. It's area is about 165,760,000 sq.km. (64,000,000 square miles). It is 11,033 metres deep at it's deepest point, the Marianas Trench.

Our understanding and appreciation of God is more like that of a man looking at a puddle and thinking about the river, while the reality of God is that our God created the Pacific Ocean and told it to stay in its place! (Genesis 1:9,10).

Before he left the disciples, Jesus told them he would not leave them on their own. He would come to them himself (John 14:18). And the Holy Spirit would come to them (John 14:15-17; John 14:25-26; John 15:26-27; John 16:7-11; John 16:12-15). What we have learned already will help us here. The doctrines of the Unity of God: *God is one complete God*; the Holy Trinity: *one God in three persons*; and the Omnipresence of God: *God is everywhere present at the same time* (see chapters 8, 9 & 11), must be brought into our minds to think about how this can all happen. God has disclosed all of these things about himself. It is up to us to enlarge our minds and hearts by thinking about them. As we do, we have a wonderful promise from God to claim for ourselves.

In those verses from John's gospel we discover that the Holy Spirit will teach us all we need to know. He will remind us of the teachings of Jesus. He will continually bear witness to Jesus and to the truth. He will convict people of sin, of righteousness and of judgement – making us conscious of our accountability to God for falling a long way below his purposes. The Holy Spirit will glorify Jesus by representing him and his word to us. The focus of everything the Holy Spirit does will be to make Jesus bigger and more important in our lives. He will prompt our minds and our hearts as we learn to love him in the right way (Matthew 22:37).

Some Muslims today claim that Muhammad is the 'other one' referred to by Jesus, in John chapters 14 – 16. They argue that the Greek text

has been corrupted in John 14:16; 14:26; 15:26; and 16:7. They say the Bible's word usually translated "Counsellor" or "Comforter" (Greek – parakletos), was originally "the praiseworthy one" or "Muhammad" (Greek – periklytos). This view is helped for them by twelve predictions in the Gospel of Barnabas that Jesus announced the coming of Muhammad after him.

We must remember that there is not one single Bible manuscript in existence that has this word 'periklytos' in these texts. None at all! Also remember, the Gospel of Barnabas is *not* in the Bible, and is not accepted by Christians as the real teaching of Jesus. It makes the false statement that Barnabas was one of Jesus' twelve apostles. The New Testament tells us that Barnabas was a close friend and fellow-worker *with Paul*, after Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 9:26-28; Acts 11:25-26; and Acts 13:1-4). The only surviving manuscript of the Gospel of Barnabas is written in Italian, a language that was not spoken in the time of Jesus. It is kept in a library in Vienna, Austria, and was probably only written in the sixteenth century.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why do people who know Jesus in their experience, also know the Holy Spirit?
- (b). What limits our understanding and appreciation of God?
- (c). From John 14-16, what can we be sure God the Holy Spirit will do?
Give chapter and verse reference for each one.

**God the
Holy Spirit
and Our
Christian
Experience**

37. A living person: God the Holy Spirit

What word, beginning with the letter 'P', do you know which would describe the Holy Spirit?

I expect you think of 'power'. You may also think of 'purity', because he is definitely called 'holy'. And, in my opinion most important of all, you will have remembered that the Holy Spirit is a 'person'. (If you are theologically trained, you may have been very clever and come up with the word, 'pneumatology', that branch of theology which studies the Holy Spirit and other spiritual beings. The silent 'p' is not pronounced when saying this word).

Wind and breath are used as illustrations of the Spirit (John 3:8; John 20:21,22). The Bible word groups (Hebrew – ruach, and Greek – pneu) both have the idea of 'the movement of air'. Wind turbines capture this movement in order to generate electric power. You may have seen their steel towers by factories and homes which are not connected to the national electricity grid. The wind itself cannot be seen, but its presence is known by what it does. The Holy Spirit can likewise powerfully influence the soul of a person for God, without drawing attention to himself.

Apart from Psalm 51:11 and Isaiah 63:10,11 the term '*Holy Spirit*' is not used in the Old Testament. On both of those occasions, the context is emphasising that sin in people stops the Holy Spirit from working in and through them as he wants to. There are many references in the Old Testament to 'Spirit' or 'Spirit of God'.

It is very important that we realise the Holy Spirit is *not* simply a power we try to connect up to in our weakness. He is a *person* who wants to relate to us, becoming himself our connection to God. The Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God (Romans 8:9; 2 Corinthians 3:3). He helps us think the thoughts of God the Father and the thoughts of God the Son, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 2:11-12; John 16:13-14). Our experience of God will always reflect our daily relationship with God the Holy Spirit. In a way we do not fully understand, the Holy Spirit is not *part* of God, but he is the *whole* of the divine essence, as are the Father and the Son. This is part of the mysterious 'otherness' of God.

Jesus used personal pronouns when speaking of the Holy Spirit. He

did not say to his disciples, 'I will send *it* to you'. He did say, 'I will send *him* to you' (John 16:7).

For a study exercise, you could read through John chapters 14-17 and see how many times Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as 'he', 'him', or 'his'. It may vary a little from one translation to another, but there should be around sixteen.

The Holy Spirit knows all about God the Son and his teachings (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit has his own mind (Romans 8:27). He looks for things and knows things (1 Corinthians 2:10,11). The Holy Spirit gives gifts to people as he chooses (1 Corinthians 12:11). The Holy Spirit enjoys the Fatherhood of God (Galatians 4:6). The Holy Spirit can be hurt and he can be insulted (Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 10:29). The Holy Spirit can be lied to (Acts 5:3). He also guided the missionary journeys of Paul, and appointed people as leaders of a congregation (Acts 16:6,7; Acts 20:28).

All of these characteristics are those of a person, not just a power. At various conferences I was invited to teach around Khartoum, I often heard the rhythmic chorus sung: 'Power, power, super, super power'. It is a good song, so long as we remember all the time that the Holy Spirit is a person who is powerful, and not just a power to be used.

The Holy Spirit came to be to us all that Jesus was to his disciples during his earthly life. "He is 'the Paraclete': Comforter (in the sense of Strengthener), Counsellor, Helper, Supporter, Advisor, Advocate, Ally, Senior Friend – and only a person could fulfil such roles". The word 'Paraclete' is the Greek word for the Holy Spirit in John 14:16; 14:25; 15:26 and 16:7. There is no single English word that translates its meaning.

At the end of many church services, either the minister says the 'benediction' prayer, or the congregation together repeat it to one another. This comes from 2 Corinthians 13:14: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* be with all of you". 'Fellowship' means the sharing of mutual activities and experiences together. It involves a friendly relationship of two-way trust around common interests.

We may often hear or say those words, but what do we really understand by 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'? He wants to be the

personal, pure and powerful presence of Jesus in our everyday lives.

Who gives the Holy Spirit to Christians? In A.D. 1084, almost a thousand years ago, the Christian Church split into two over the answer to this question. The Orthodox Churches, those in communion with the Greek patriarch of Constantinople, disagreed with a change put into the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 & 381 two hundred years later on.

The Catholic (meaning 'universal') Church, those in communion with the patriarch in Rome, adopted the following *additional phrase*:

"I believe ... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father *and the Son*; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified .." (Toledo, A.D. 589, reaffirmed A.D. 1017). The Orthodox Church is sometimes called the Byzantine Church, or the Eastern Orthodox. In Khartoum it is represented by the Coptic Church of ancient Egypt. The Orthodox Church disagreed with this addition.

Did the Holy Spirit proceed from just the Father, or from the Father *and* the Son? The issue includes apparently different understandings of the eternal relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, within the Holy Trinity. How can *one* 'give' and *not* the other, when *both* are 'one' anyway? Scriptures to compare include John 15:26; John 16:7; Acts 2:4; Acts 2: 16-17; Romans 8:9; and Galatians 4:6.

It seems that there were other issues involved which hijacked the debate in the church. One was a struggle about authority in the universal church. Should Rome be able to dictate to Constantinople? Could Constantinople go its own way regardless of Rome? The sad result has been a split lasting almost a millennium.

God the Holy Spirit emerges from the Trinity, *without being in any way less than fully God*. He does not leave anything of God behind when he comes! This again, is the mysterious 'otherness' of God. Just as the coming of Jesus, the God-man, advanced God's plan of salvation, so God the Holy Spirit has had a key role to play especially since Jesus ascended back into heaven.

I believe we should all think about and seek after the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He convicts us of our sin and makes us more

like Jesus (John 16:8; Galatians 5: 22-25).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What difference does it make in the way we speak of, and relate to, the Holy Spirit, when we remember he is a person and not just a power?
- (b). How many references in John 14-17 can you find where Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as a person?
- (c). What does “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” mean? (2 Corinthians 13:14).
- (d). Which attributes of God help you to appreciate the Holy Spirit as ‘all of God’ and not just a ‘part of God’?

38. An Old Testament pattern of the Holy Spirit

‘The fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ is his amazing, active, presence in our lives. He does whatever is necessary to deepen our awareness of Jesus Christ’s person and will. He also enables us to love God and to do his will (Romans 5:5).

The Holy Spirit was present at creation (Genesis 1:2, Hebrew – ‘ruach Elohim’). He is the one who brings order and form out of chaos. He also sustains the creation (Psalm 104:27-30). Whenever you see a truck-load of sugar-cane going to the refinery, remember the harvest is an evidence of God’s Spirit at work. The whole of nature gives us patterns of God at work.

God also gives gifts and skills to people by his Spirit (Exodus 31:1-6; 35:30-36:1). While everyone can do something, God especially equips some people to be able to do certain tasks. He also gives them the responsibility to teach others to help in the work.

Moses appointed seventy men to work with him in leading the people and God put the Holy Spirit on them all (Numbers 11:16,17; also verses 24-30). Balaam prophesied when “the Spirit of God came upon him”, although the circumstances were not suitable for him (Numbers 24:2).

There are plenty of other examples in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God is sent to ‘come upon’ people (see: Othniel, Judges 3:9,10; Gideon, Judges 6:34; Jephthah, Judges 11:29; Saul, 1 Samuel 11:6; David, 1 Samuel 16:13; Azariah, 2 Chronicles 15:1).

As another study, you could look up the word ‘Spirit’ in a Concordance, and see how many of the references in the Old Testament are to the Holy Spirit ‘coming upon’ people.

A strong link is established between the Holy Spirit and prophecy – that is, speaking the words of God. Nehemiah summarises this: “For many years (God), you were patient with (your people). By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention ..” (Nehemiah 9:30). Reading through Kings and Chronicles, the lives of prophets such as Elijah, there are few examples of ‘the Spirit coming upon’ them *actually being said in those words*. A phrase with a similar result seems to be “the word of the Lord came to him” (for example: 1 Kings 17:2, 8, 14, 24; 1 Kings 18:1; “the power of the

Lord came upon Elijah” 1 Kings 18:46; 1 Kings 19:9 etc.). Devout people watching Elijah *were* able to say his activities were under the control of the Spirit of God (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16). But there was no single formula used to fit every experience.

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit *on* God’s chosen person, enabled them to know and to do God’s will. The Holy Spirit gave wisdom, authority, boldness, direction, and evidence that this was God himself who was at work. Perhaps we can best say that God ‘stirred’ people to accomplish what he wanted at the time (see of Samson, Judges 13:24,25). This ‘stirring’ excites, stimulates, awakens and moves people. Through the Holy Spirit, God became the dynamic of a person’s life. The breath of God was evident. God gave strong evidence through these people, usually at the times they gave themselves strongly over to him.

The two questions of Psalm 139:7 highlight the Holy Spirit as the very presence of God in a tangible way. His presence is obvious and can be known. “Where can I go from *your Spirit*? Where can I flee from *your presence*?”

Throughout the Old Testament there is always a hope of something more. The prophets say that a new era is coming which will release the Holy Spirit in a new way. It will all hinge on the coming of the Messiah – the long awaited king of God’s people (Isaiah 11:1-3; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:24-30; Joel 2:28-32). The fuller presence of the Holy Spirit, poured out under the sovereignty of God, will bring yet greater blessing from God, to his people and through them to the world.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Read the story of Gideon, Judges 6-8, and discuss 'why and how' the Holy Spirit came into his life and ministry.
- (b). Is it only 6:34?
- (c). Why do you think there are so few references to the Holy Spirit being on Elijah?
(See 1 Kings 17-19 & 2 Kings 1-2).
- (d). Discuss if there are any differences between 'the Spirit of God' and 'the presence of God'.

39. A New Testament presence of the Holy Spirit

Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost explicitly links the Joel 2 prophecy with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that day (Acts 2:16). Although there was an immediate application to Joel's own time, there was an ultimate application as well. In the life of Jesus Christ, the work of God would reach a crucial focal point. A body of God's people, not from one single nation but from every tribe under heaven, would be born. The life of that body – the Church – would be the Holy Spirit. He would birth people into it (John 3:3-8). He would bring them towards the likeness of Jesus through the mind and will of God (Romans 8:26-30).

"The extraordinary phenomenon of Spirit-filled believers declaring God's wonders in foreign languages is the fulfilment of Joel's prediction that God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh". 'The last days' of Acts 2:17 have begun at Pentecost. The 'afterward' of Joel 2:28 has arrived.

In between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ is the age of the overflowing ministry of the Holy Spirit. God gives generously, irreversibly, and universally. Like a deluge of heavy rain, the Holy Spirit cannot be gathered back again, and he affects everyone.

I have walked by the irrigation ditches on Tutti Island in the Blue Nile. As rain, channelled in the right way, can produce good crops, so the Holy Spirit will produce fruit to make Christians attractive (Galatians 5:22), gifts to make Christians useful (1 Corinthians 12:4-7); and he gives the unity which bonds Christians together (Ephesians 4:3-7).

It is also sadly true, that just as rain can be wasted, lost or left to become stagnant water breeding mosquitoes and disease, so Christians wrong response to the Holy Spirit can grieve him (Ephesians 4:30). The surrounding verses warn against bad talking and lack of self-control. Christians can also 'put out the Spirit's fire' (1 Thessalonians 5:19). This change of picture from water to fire, does not hide the fact that *how Christians live in* relation to one another, and in relation to God, directly affects the flow of the Holy Spirit into and through our lives. Once again, check the surrounding verses to discover the meaning of the text.

The last prophet immediately before Jesus came was John the Baptist. His life was completely occupied by the Holy Spirit from birth. He prophesied that Jesus would '*baptise* with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Luke 1:15; Luke 3:16). The word to 'baptise' means to 'bury people out of sight'. The record of John's life that we have in the Gospels, is an example of a person filled and overflowing with the Holy Spirit. He leapt in praise of Jesus (Luke 1:41). He preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). He fulfilled Scripture (Luke 3:4-6). John pointed away from himself and pointed towards Jesus Christ (John 1:29-30; 1:35-36). He clearly gave witness that Jesus was the Son of God (John 1:34). John was arrested for his bold confrontation with sin in the lives of men (Luke 3:19,20). From prison he asked Jesus himself to resolve his doubts (Matthew 11:2,3). He died for his ministry (Matthew 14:10).

But, think about this: Jesus said the people of his new kingdom were *all* more remarkable and impressive than John! (Matthew 11:11-15). Why is this so? How can this be? The answer is amazing.

The Christian church has, not just one or two 'John the Baptists', but hundreds of thousands of them! God the Holy Spirit floods into and over people to make them Christians. Having been born by, with or in the Spirit into the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), the emptier our lives are of sin, the more we can be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:17-18). The Old Testament age where the Holy Spirit *only* moved on a *few* people for specific tasks God called them to do, is now replaced. The age between the New Testament and the second coming of Christ, in which *all* born-again Christians know the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13) – and may experience the continuous filling of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), has arrived.

The first disciples knew the *baptism with* the Holy Spirit when he

came on them to *fill* them at Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 1:8; Acts 2:4). This *outpouring* of the Holy Spirit was a *gift* from God for more than just themselves (Acts 2:17; 2:38-39).

In the next chapters of Acts history, these same disciples and others, were filled over and over again with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak (Acts 4:8); he gave them boldness (4:31); he gave discernment (Acts 5:3; 5:9); he gave an evident godliness (Acts 6:5); he gave apologetic authority (6:10); he gave an inspirational vision (Acts 7:55), he gave confirmation of acceptance with God (Acts 8:17); he gave a prompting toward service (8:29); he gave the supernatural ability to travel (8:39); he gave equipment for service (Acts 9:17); he gave encouragement (9:31); he gave understanding of spiritual principles (Acts 10:19); and he gave them confirmation regarding a new development (Acts 10:44-48).

In Acts 11:1-18 there is an interesting parallel account of the Cornelius events (Acts 10) and the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Just try listing, on a piece of paper, the four different ways Peter describes the experiences of the Holy Spirit at Jerusalem's Pentecost, and at Cornelius' home in Caesarea. Then compare them with Luke's descriptions of the same events from Acts.

Continuing reading Acts with the theme of the Holy Spirit filling the believers again and again, we read how the Holy Spirit gave evident leadership ability (Acts 11:24); he gave a future prediction of famine (Acts 11:28); he gave a specific call to the local church (Acts 13:2-4); he gave brave discernment (Acts 13:9); he gave joyful satisfaction (Acts 13:52); he gave resolution of conflict, and good communication (Acts 15:28); he gave guidance over where to move and where not to move (Acts 16:6-9); he gave correction over mistaken belief (Acts 19:1-7); he gave an overwhelming desire to keep going (Acts 20:22); he gave warning of coming difficulties (Acts 20:23); he gave the appointments to church leadership (Acts 20:28); he gave tests over doing God's will (Acts 21:4); he gave predictions of future imprisonment (Acts 21:11); he gave a conviction of the authority of Scripture (Acts 28:25).

It should be evident from all of those happenings that it is impossible to be a Christian church without the Holy Spirit being involved at the heart of things.

It is noteworthy that some things are *not* attributed to the Holy Spirit – including specific preaching (for example Acts 17 in Thessalonica, Berea and Athens); raising the dead man (Acts 20:7-12); testifying before government officials (Acts chapters 24-26). I do not believe this means the Holy Spirit was not involved! Nor do I believe that all the times the Holy Spirit *is* mentioned, Jesus is not involved. There is no division in the Godhead. All the three persons in the Holy Trinity are one God.

I read Acts understanding that *the Holy Spirit is mediating the life of Jesus Christ into the church* and all of the events in which they are involved. This is true whether it is specifically mentioned or not. A mediator brings together. The Holy Spirit brings God into the church. He makes Jesus obvious and foremost.

This could be summarised by saying the Holy Spirit has four main functions in the life of a believer, and of believers together in the church:

- The Holy Spirit is the teacher. John 14:26 (Greek – didaskalos).
- The Holy Spirit is the witness. John 15:26 (Greek – martus).
- The Holy Spirit is the guide. John 16:13 (Greek – hodegeo).
- The Holy Spirit brings the ability. Acts 1:8 (Greek – dunamis).

All four of these promises are sayings of Jesus himself. And all four can be seen to have become true, reading through the book of Acts. The distinguishing mark and the driving force of the New Testament church was the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God.

There is a notable similarity between Acts 9:31; Acts 13:52 and Romans 15:13. Paul's prayer in the latter reference is that the dramatic movement of God among the early disciples will continue, even affecting those whom he has never met at Rome, who live at the heart of the dominant world power. It is of great encouragement to Christians today to realise that God's kingdom is not to be related to any plot of ground on this earth. It is a kingdom of people who chose

voluntarily to live under the daily influence of King Jesus! When he is present among his people, it really shows! Churches do not need any land of their own in order to exist. A *church* is the people who gather, it is not the place where they meet. (See chapter 48).

The New Testament witness to the Holy Spirit of Pentecost is Christ-centred (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 John 3:23-24). He draws people to know Jesus Christ. He explains and applies the teachings of Jesus. He makes people more and more like Jesus. He calls and equips people to serve Jesus. The Holy Spirit is a gift of the Father to come permanently alongside us, like Jesus was alongside his disciples while he lived on earth. We must learn to be at home with the Holy Spirit and we must live to ensure he is at home in our lives. The Holy Spirit may be said to be “the unseen presence of God” in the world or in the church. But although himself unseen, his presence should be visible in the type of people we are and in the things that we do and don’t do.

Thinking it through.

- (a). What different thoughts can you list that water, in some way, illustrates the activity of the Holy Spirit today?
- (b). How many different ways is the same ‘Pentecost’ experience referred to in Acts?
(Acts 1:4-5; Acts 2:1-4; Acts 2:16-21; Acts 2:33; Acts 10:44-48; & Acts 11:1-18)
- (c) What lesson should we learn from the several experiences that Peter had with the Holy Spirit?
(John 20:21-23; Acts 1:1-4; Acts 4:8; Acts 4:31; Acts 5:3; Acts 9:31).
- (d). How does ‘the Holy Spirit mediate the life of Jesus into the church’?

40. Recent controversies concerning the Holy Spirit

Many of the recent divisions between Christians concerning the Holy Spirit arise from *a desire towards holy living among all* Christian groups. ‘What will make me a better Christian?’ ‘What will give me more power to beat sin in my own life?’ ‘What will make my witnessing more effective?’

J.I. Packer has written an excellent chapter highlighting our need for personal holiness. He points to the pollutions of our busyness and our self-centredness. They make us look for *quick* answers to questions about *personal* needs. Packer states the need to refocus on 'learning to be what we already are' as Christians.

We should live the resurrection life given to us by the risen Jesus. We should try not to live that old life of ours, which was crucified with Jesus on the cross (Romans 6:6-14). The Holy Spirit helps us to focus on Jesus. He makes us very aware of our own sins. The Holy Spirit then reminds us that Jesus died to free us from these sins. He leads us to confess our personal sins. We receive forgiveness and cleansing. In this way the Holy Spirit is the agent we need to work with for our own personal holiness.

The Holy Spirit induces us towards the *means of holiness*: putting our own lives regularly alongside biblical truth, listening to God's opinions of us when we pray, offering him praise only from a pure heart. This can be at weekly worship, with disciplined self-examination before taking communion. It may also be done individually, and together with just a few others. The Holy Spirit is essential if any of these things are not to be just hollow rituals.

Developing holiness is a *process* over time, and not normally something that happens in an instant. The danger is that any of the things that tend to be substituted for these spiritual disciplines by some Christians, can become hollow rituals in themselves.

I have been with Christians who, probably misunderstanding the actual doctrine of their church, say that 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' is the instant means to holiness and power for Christian living. I have been with others who say 'you need to speak with tongues' (something I have never done, but something some of my closest Christian colleagues do regularly). My grandfather's family, the Dymond's, were involved in the charismatic renewal of the Methodist churches in England around A.D.1815-1907, when the 'Bible Christian Church' was formed. They believed in a 'second blessing' for holiness. The Bible College where I was trained in Australia during 1969-1970, taught that such 'second experiences' and 'charismata' (spiritual gifts), were *not* for today, but had ceased to be when the canon of Scripture was recognised. I never did agree with them on that, and I do not believe so today either, but I can still

respect those Christian brothers and sisters who hold a different belief to me.

It is easy for *any* words to be meaningless, if the heart of them is missing (1 Corinthians 13:1). Movements of church reform are usually characterised by people: having a changed relationship to God, having a new spirit of praise and worship, listening to God in new ways, and showing an enthusiasm in their ministry. Among the wide diversity of view in the Pentecostal Churches (since around A.D. 1904/1905), and the Charismatic movement (since around A.D. 1960), there has been a threefold emphasis that has caused some controversy and division around the world. Christians (1) are all urged to seek, (2) a baptism in the Spirit, some time after their conversion, (3) which is usually evidenced by speaking in unknown tongues.

I have never experienced number three, I believe I have experienced much of number two – but I would call that ‘a continual filling’ not ‘a baptism’, – and I have definitely sought after the fullness of God’s will for my life regularly. I never have been a member of a ‘Pentecostal’ or ‘Charismatic’ church, but I do recognise the validity of ‘life in the Spirit’ with all the fullness that brings (Romans 8:1-17).

There is no doubt that Christ-centred, Holy Spirit empowered living is a good thing. As Christians and as churches, we *do* need to be renewed regularly and that renewing usually involves painful changes of structure and tradition. But the emphases of *some* groups concerns me. Some imply the creating of a Christian elite (Charismatic or non-Charismatic). Others claim to have specific new divine revelation – sometimes beyond testing, because testing is said to show lack of submission to leaders. Others have an obsession with demons. More have an advertised focus on the material blessings of health and wealth in this world. All of these are practices that trouble my peace before God.

As I try to “understand what the Lord’s will is”, Ephesians 5:17, and to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”, Ephesians 5:21, I must also remember to “accept one another, just as Christ accepted me, in order to bring praise to God”, Romans 15:7.

I believe no-one should imprison the Holy Spirit within a rigid frame. He will break out from it anyway! (John 3:34; John 3:8). We are well advised to be careful in saying ‘never’, concerning the Holy Spirit –

unless it is something against the character of the God whom he is. And we are also well advised against saying ‘everyone’, ‘must’, and ‘always’. (See my suggested ways of discerning, chapter 41). God made a large variety of people. He surely intends to meet and use them all in a variety of ways.

Beware of always wanting ‘more’. Jesus Christ is sufficient for *everything* (Romans 7:24-25). Giving more and more of yourself over to him is the key. Beware of always seeking ‘power’. Jesus Christ shows best through weak people, not strong people (2 Corinthians 12:9,10). Beware of seeking ‘evidence’ that can be seen just to prove a point. Jesus Christ encouraged believing without seeing (John 20:29).

Scripture clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit would enable the Christian church to witness powerfully to those outside of its ranks. Beware of diverting too much energy that could be used in witnessing, into merely debate with other Christians (Acts 1:4; 1:8; Acts 2:4; 2:11; Acts 4:8; 4:31; etc. and Acts 15:1-35).

The phrase “baptism with the Holy Spirit” occurs seven times in the Bible. Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; and John 1:33, are all accounts of John the Baptist predicting what Jesus would do. Acts 1:5 records Jesus himself promising

something that would happen a few days later. In Acts 11:15-16 Peter compares the events at Cornelius' house with what Jesus had said. And in 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul states that the unity of the Christian church is based upon this one 'baptism by, with or in, the Spirit' into the body of Christ. I believe 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' is the initial event by which people become born-again Christians (John 3:3-8).

Outside of many churches I visited in Sudan there were large water bottles known as ziirs. Usually there were one or two tin cups nearby for people to use taking a drink of water. Anyone could drink from the water. As a khawaja I used to take my own water to those meetings in a plastic bottle, because my body would not be used to the untreated water from the area wells. It was my weakness, not my elitism, which made me do this! Ultimately, all of the water that everyone drank came from the rainfall God gave. Some of it was brought to the surface from underground streams at wells in the sprawling urban areas. Some of it was bottled in the factories of Khartoum North and sold on to consumers. More of it was piped by Khartoum Water into peoples houses in return for a monthly payment. I did also see a little water being drunk directly from the river – but I would not recommend that to anyone!

The Holy Spirit is the living water of God. He brings God's life into our lives. We may have a variety of different experiences. We must not let that variety divide us. The unity we have in all drinking from the same life-giving Spirit, unites us in a way that marks us all out together, from the world around us (John 14:17; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What do many Christians share in common, that makes all divisions concerning the Holy Spirit very sad?
- (b). What are the differences (if any) between 'being baptised with the Holy Spirit' Acts 1:4-5, and 'being filled with the Holy Spirit' Ephesians 5:18?

- (c). What differences are there (if any) in the end result in a believers' life?
- (d). While it is right to 'seek, knock and ask' for a greater experience of God (Matthew 6:33; Matthew 7:7), what dangers are there in always wanting more? (Philippians 4:4; Philippians 4:13).

41. Testing and discerning for truth

Every Christian believer has the responsibility to 'test' the claims of people preaching the Christian gospel. Not all of them come from God (1 John 4:1). I have been very worried when I have seen Sudanese Christians accepting any Westerner who arrives in the country with a Bible under his arm. Pastors invite them to preach from their pulpits without asking many – if any – questions. I would never put my congregation in such a danger! Any financial support that a false prophet can contribute towards my church, would be completely outweighed by the poison of false teaching.

The word 'test' (Greek – dokimazo) means to prove, to try out, to put on trial, with a view to approving (or otherwise). You may need to carry some water from the river to your plot of land a walk away. You look around for a suitable bucket or plastic jerry can. When you plunge the bucket into the water and lift it out, it is full up to the top. But there is something you should sensibly do *before* you start carrying the water to your plot of ground. Look around the bottom of the bucket carefully, to see if any of the water is leaking out through cracks or holes. If there is a leak you may not have any water left in it by the time you arrive back at your land! If testing is sensible for a water-carrying bucket, how much more so for any person who claims to be carrying the 'living water' of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Here are some good questions to ask:

1. Does the person clearly believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? (Exodus 20:2,3).
Is the Holy Spirit for him a person, or just a power? (Acts 8:9-24).
2. What do they believe about Jesus Christ? Does it include his virgin birth, incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection and return to earth one day? Is Jesus the only and all sufficient Saviour? (Hebrews 1:1-3).

3. Does the person follow the Bible and obey all its commands? Do they add anything to it? Do they distort it by concentrating only on some parts of it? (2 Timothy 3:16,17). Emotion does not guarantee truth.
4. Does the person live to a high moral standard, showing genuine love for God and for his or her neighbour? (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-40). Actions prove a person's real beliefs. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).
5. Does the person show a genuine desire to follow the Holy Spirit, or is there any legalism or shallow ritual being substituted for real Christian discipleship? (Romans 8:13,14).
6. Are 'followers' allowed freedom to have their own views, or is the leader beyond challenge? (2 Corinthians 3:17). Never give any human leaders uncritical allegiance.
7. Where does this 'teaching' fit into the church and Christian history? (Acts 2:42). Avoid the temptation to say 'It's all of God', or 'It's all of the devil'. It is often some of one and some of the other. Discernment can pick which is which.
8. Are all the claims being made, easily seen to be true? Is there any exaggeration – which amounts to lying? (1 Corinthians 14:29-33; 14:37-38). Be careful in the use of words and meanings.

Popularity does not make anything right, or wrong necessarily. Being new, or being old, does not make something necessarily false, or true. Be careful of the latest Christian fashion. Fashions may make us fit in with other people, but not necessarily fit in with God. Tradition is not *always* right, but it can be right. We must learn to choose between what is of God and what is not.

Discerning takes time. Our knowledge of both the Bible and the Holy Spirit will help us discern. To discern is 'to clearly recognise something'. Discernment separates what has come from God and what has not. There is a special spiritual gift given to some as necessary, to be able to distinguish between spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10). But *every* Christian is able to use objective questions similar to those above, in order to build up evidence and make a subjective decision over the 'Christian-ness' of any individual, a group, or a movement. Christians in fellowship with each other can help each

other over this, using biblical discussion and honest testimony (see, from Acts 15:13-19: Simon Peter's testimony, the agreement of the Old Testament prophets, and a concluding judgement from James).

Discernment is not always easy. But it is always necessary. We are in a spiritual battle and our enemy is clever. When the devil knows that he can pass undetected into our churches and congregations, he will do so. We must be on guard in love (Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 16:13,14; 1 Timothy 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 1:14). We must be discerning.

Thinking it through.

- (a). How do you "test which spirits are from God"? (1 John 4:1) What does the text mean?
- (b). Why should we "be careful of the latest Christian fashion", or Christian visitor?
- (c). What practical steps are you able to take to discover a person's answers to my suggested questions 1-8?

42. Spiritual warfare

Two dangers should be noted at the beginning of this subject. They are opposite extremes of each other. We should not *over emphasise* the devil and his spiritual forces, giving them too much attention. They do not deserve it! But neither should we *ignore* them completely, acting as if they do not exist. The devil is real and his forces are opposing all Christians who are seeking to live for the Lord Jesus Christ. "Satan is behind (and will help along) every belief or religion that is not honouring to Jesus Christ".

In Ephesians Paul links the visible world of church, community and family, with the invisible spirit-world. He makes reference to the spirit-world, "the heavenly realms", in Ephesians 1:3; 1:10; 1:20-21; 2:2; 2:6; 4:14 and 4:27. Many of the challenges we face in the visible world can be influenced positively and negatively by activity in the invisible world. If our aim is "to live a life worthy of the calling", Ephesians 4:1, then we will face many battles in both the physical and the spiritual realms. Holy living and prayer are our keys to spiritual victory.

Four general factors are involved in spiritual warfare:

Firstly, there are *the forces of evil* (Ephesians 6:12). They are wicked. They are spiritual. Although invisible, they are real. These forces have systematic plans and they exert their strength and energy against Christians, verse 11. (See also 2 Corinthians 2:11). Ephesians 2:2-3 names the 'world', the 'devil' and our own 'sinful nature', as the alliance of evil forces set against us. Words used in the gospels include 'demon' (Greek – daimonion), a spiritual agent at work in heavenly realms; 'evil spirit' (Greek – paneros), a wicked and bad effect, influencing to pain or sorrow; and 'unclean spirit' (Greek – akarthartos), something that defiles or makes impure.

The 'devil' (Greek – diabolos) is an accuser and a slanderer. He tries to influence Christians in bad ways (Ephesians 4:27; 6:11). God created the devil (Colossians 1:16-17). He was known as the "morning star, son of the dawn". He proudly rebelled against God and influenced other angels to do so with him. For this, he was judged by God along with his followers (Isaiah 14:12-15; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude :6). God has allowed the devil certain powers for a time, which are designed to prove the genuine faith that God's people have in God (Job 1:6-2:10; 2 Corinthians 9:7-12).

The devil knows and quotes Scripture (Matthew 4:5-7). He is Satan, the hostile enemy (Matthew 16:23). He is Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Matthew 12:24-28). He is Abaddon and Apollyon, Hebrew and Greek words both meaning 'the destroyer' (Revelation 9:11). He tried to destroy Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). He tried to destroy Peter (Luke 22:31-34). He opposed Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:18). Satan is able to perform imitation miracles and astonishing signs designed to deceive people and take them away from the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). He is Belial, a Greek word meaning 'worthless' (2 Corinthians 6:15).

Jesus used the names Satan and Beelzebub for the devil, and described him as a murderer, a liar, and the prince of this world, (Matthew 4:10; Matthew 12:26-27; John 8:44; John 12:31).

Secondly, there is *the armour of God*. (Ephesians 6:11). The Lord Jesus is the one who gives Christians the 'mighty power' of this armour, verse 10. In Jesus Christ we have every spiritual blessing that we ever need, (Ephesians 1:3). Christians do not fight *for* victory in spiritual warfare, we fight *from* victory. In Ephesians 1, notice "how

incredibly great is His power to help those who believe in him” 1:19 (J. B. Philips paraphrase). (Ephesians 1:3; 1:4; 1:7; 1:11; 1:13; 1:19). The same God who puts us into Christ, provides us with armour. Our responsibility is to put the armour on (Ephesians 6:11; 6:13). The helmet assures the head of protection. Our salvation is in Christ alone. This indispensable doctrine is our indestructible defence. The sword can be used in attack and in defence. This word of God used under the influence of the Spirit of God is potent. The shield displays our colours – who we belong to – and it gives us cover whenever we are attacked. It is a protection as we advance, rather than something to passively hide behind. The breastplate protects the heart. Jesus is our righteousness. He cleanses us from all sins we confess to him. A person can survive a wounded limb, but a stab in the heart would be fatal. The belt gives support to the body and to the armour. God’s word is always the truth; we should live true to it. An honest walk with God leads to our witness being enforced by our own way of living. People around us see what we are, as well as hear what we say.

Thirdly, we must *take a firm stand* (Ephesians 6:13-14). If we give up the resources we have in Christ, and try to live on our own abilities, we give advantage to the devil. The words ‘stand’ or ‘withstand’ come five times in Ephesians 6:10-20. The omnipotent God waits for us to take the initiative in battle, and then he fights with us. We take our stand by counting on Jesus’ sovereign authority (Matthew 28:18). We use the name of Jesus in our prayers (John 14:13,14; John 15:16; John 16:23-24). We plead the blood of Jesus as our righteousness (Romans 3:21-26). We use the Scriptures as Jesus did (Matthew 4:4,7,10). We claim Jesus’ victory on the cross as the grounds for our victory whatever is facing us (Colossians 2: 13-15). To ‘take a stand’ means to maintain your position in the face of the enemy.

Fourthly, prayer is warfare. It is campaigning against the evil one (Ephesians 6:18-20). Prayer is the communication between the soldier in action and his headquarters back home. How should we pray? “In the Spirit”. For whom should we pray? “For all the saints”. When should we pray? “On all occasions”. What should we pray? “All kinds of prayers and requests”. How long should we pray? “Always keep on”. Paul has already shown how he prayed for the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:15-19; 3:14-19). He prayed that they would know God better, which is always *how* to ‘be strong in the Lord’. As we pray we realise “God’s incomparably great power for us who believe”, (Ephesians 1:19).

The New Testament shows Christians praying on their own (Matthew 6:6); praying with one partner (Matthew 18:19); praying in a small group (Matthew 18:20); and praying in a larger congregation (Acts 1:14). Every advantage should be taken of every opportunity to pray.

Christians need to be able to discern the origin and source of spiritual things. The spiritually alive New Testament church was told to be on the lookout for ‘christians’ in the churches who were not really of God. Some men had a desire to divide (Acts 20:30). Others were motivated by money (2 Corinthians 2:17; 2 Corinthians 11:13). More men said they had new and different understandings of old truths (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3; 2 Peter 2:1-3). Christians *must* carefully test all people (1 Corinthians 2:12-16).

The word ‘occult’ means ‘hidden’. Some of the Sudanese traditional religions and their associated practices with ancestral spirits, spells and curses, use witchcraft and sorcery to invoke the evil powers of Satan against Christians. The Bible does recognise the power of these things, but reminds us that their power is nothing at all in comparison to the omnipotent God (Deuteronomy 18:9-10; Isaiah 44:24-26; Mark 5:1-13).

All magic and occult activity is a perversion of true religion. Wanting an ability to affect others positively or negatively showed a wickedly evil hold over Simon the sorcerer’s heart (Acts 8:9-24). Using sorcery and persuasion to try and stop the work of the gospel, Elymas was described by Paul as “a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right” (Acts 13:6-12). Spirit-diviners, those who told the future, and those who made money from shrines, charms, curses and spells, brought great opposition to the young Christian church (Acts 16:16-24; Acts 19:23-34). A choice must always be made between following Jesus and following these other gods and their practices. There can be no mixing of the two (Acts 19:13-20).

Like people everywhere, Africans have invented gods to follow for themselves. Satan loves to destroy. Sometimes he uses a sincere commitment to a false traditional worship. The witch doctor says: ‘You’ll die if you leave the way of your ancestors’. Honouring Jesus means we have to make hard choices (Luke 9:23-24). Many traditions mix some good things among the bad. But would you eat a meal

knowing that part of it was poison?

The Christian gospel does not destroy the good values of any culture. The good is in that culture because God has graciously put it there by his general revelation of himself (Romans 1:18-23). The gospel of Jesus Christ can be translated into African and into Arab cultures. The secret is to position the culture with Jesus Christ, his person, his work, and his teaching, at the centre. Everything can then be accepted, or rejected, by discovering how it compares with the purity, morality, and God-honouring life of Jesus. Four good questions to ask are:

1. What does the Bible teach about this theme or topic?
2. What does our culture teach, and practice, about this?
3. How can we be true to Jesus Christ in a culturally appropriate way?
4. What price are we being asked to pay for following Jesus Christ?

Facing all of these issues from the past or in the present, to trust in God is a deliberate choice the Christian makes. We trust and we carry on honouring Jesus. We can pray prayers like Psalm 35:1-10, "O Lord, fight against those who fight against me". The opposition may become more and more intense, but God has promised the overall spiritual battle will be won. Jesus' death on the cross may have looked like an apparent victory for Satan, but God used it to bring salvation within reach of every person.

Satan can tempt us, but he cannot force us to give in to temptation. That is a choice which we make (James 4:7). We can set ourselves against the influences of the world, the flesh and the devil by the choices we make. Satan has ultimately been defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 3:8). Jesus actually prays now for us to make good use of his victory (Luke 22:31-32; Hebrews 7:23-25). Christians eliminate the influence of the sinful flesh-nature from our lives by putting that nature to death (Colossians 3:5-9). This means starving it, not feeding it. It means choosing to please God rather than to please ourselves. It means doing what comes supernaturally, not what comes naturally.

The cross of the Lord Jesus is our symbol of Christ's victory. It is easy to understand why the cross has been used as the mark of the

Christian in the long and troubled history of the church. The cross is the Christian's victory sign (Colossians 2:13-15).

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why should we avoid both extreme views of 'spiritual warfare'?
- (b). Since Satan can quote Scripture and perform miracles, what should our response be to those who quote the Bible and demonstrate signs?
- (c). What can we learn about 'prayer', from Ephesians 1:15-19; 3:14-19; & 6:18-20?
- (d). How is the devil defeated in the believer's life? (1 John 3:8; Colossians 2:13-15).

**How
God Saves
his People
from their
Sins**

43. Explaining a mystery – how God saves his people from their sins

Every person who is alive is on a spiritual journey. They are doing *one* of these three things:

1. They are walking *away from* God.
2. They are walking *towards* God.
3. They are walking *with* God.

In our evangelism and Christian discipleship, we need to meet these people where they are and encourage them all to walk *with* God.

‘Soteriology’ is the theological name for the doctrine of salvation. The word comes from the Greek words ‘soteria’ meaning ‘deliverance’, and ‘soter’ a ‘saviour’. It is often used to study different theories of the atonement – explaining exactly what Jesus did on the cross, and how it brings our salvation into real experience. It includes defining ‘salvation’. “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

As we shall see in chapter 46, salvation was accomplished in the single event of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, but it is applied to our lives by a continuing series of steps and processes.

‘Christology’ is the study of the person, attributes and work of Jesus Christ. Who Jesus really was (and is) is very important to what he has done. We have seen in chapters 31, 32, and 34 our belief that Jesus is both ‘the God who is man and the man who is God’. Jesus is unique. When we talk about Jesus, we talk about God *and* we talk about man, because Jesus is one hundred per cent both.

Alister McGrath lectures in Theology at one of England’s major universities, Oxford. He understands that there are four main areas of modern discussion in Soteriology. There is often some degree of overlap between them when they are discussed.

1. *The element of sacrifice* – the New Testament book of Hebrews clearly presents Christ’s sacrificial offering as an effective and perfect sacrifice for sin. It was able to accomplish what the Old Testament sacrifices were only able to imitate.

They could not achieve what Jesus Christ did (Hebrews 9:11-15). The word 'sacrifice' has changed its meaning today, at least in my country. It now means more 'an heroic action' rather than 'an event of religious significance'. There is discussion over whether the sacrifice of Christ was a 'once and for all event', or whether it is continually offered in, for example, the Roman Catholic Mass. I believe that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was full, final and complete on that one day (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 9:26; 9:28; 10:10).

2. *The element of victory* – the New Testament places great emphasis on the victory gained by Christ over sin, death and Satan, through his cross and resurrection. The celebration of Easter and of resurrection day on the first day of every week – a change from the Jewish Sabbath – were very important to the early Christians (Colossians 2:15; Acts 20:7; Acts 17:18; Acts 17:31,32). Some people today do not believe Jesus died on the cross. Without death there can be no resurrection! Some people today do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Without resurrection there is no victory over sin and death! Some people today do not believe in the devil. Without the devil, we must ask: 'who was defeated' in the spiritual warfare? I believe God has given Christians a great victory in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

3. *The element of legal satisfaction* – the idea of the death of Christ providing the basis by which God is justly enabled to forgive sin. God's wrath has been satisfied. Sin's price has been paid. Christ represents humanity. He was our substitute when he died on the cross. Believers participate now in the risen Christ (Romans 3:21-26; Romans 5:1). Some people today do not believe in original sin (see chapter 30) and so they see no need for this substitutionary death. Some people today say that it is not morally acceptable, in their view, for one to pay for the sins of another. Some people today believe that a truly sovereign God would find another way of reconciliation between himself and humankind, rather than through the suffering of Christ on the cross. I believe God is the ultimate judge. I believe the death of 'God as Jesus' for humankind on the cross, shows us that there is *no other way* people can be right with God on their own (Acts 4:12; Romans 8:1-4).

4. *The element of example* – Some people today believe that the most important aspect of the cross is that it demonstrates the love of God toward us. Jesus is presented by them, but as more of a martyr than a saviour. He is shown only as an example of self-giving love for others. I believe that this is certainly *not* the most important aspect of Jesus' death, although Peter does remind us of our responsibility to follow Christ's example in submitting to unjust suffering while continuing to do good (1 Peter 2:20-24). I believe the cross of Christ *did something* for us and did not merely *show something* to us. The 'cross events' actually make salvation possible. They do not only illustrate the saving will of God. People who believe the cross was only an example, believe a different gospel to me.

Salvation is a word with a big and comprehensive meaning. It embraces the whole of God's saving work in an individual from beginning to end. Salvation has three tenses in the Bible, past, present and future. John Stott records his frequent answer to the question: 'Are you saved?' He admits it is a kind of 'yes and no' answer. "I have been saved (in the past) from the penalty of sin by a crucified Saviour. I am being saved (in the present) from the power of sin by a living Saviour. And I shall be saved (in the future) from the very presence of sin by a coming Saviour".

Ephesians 2:8, "It is by grace *you have been saved* through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God". This verse teaches that I have been saved, in the past tense. 1 Corinthians 1:18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to *us who are being saved* it is the power of God". This verse teaches that I am being saved, in the present tense. Hebrews 9:28, "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but *to bring salvation to those* who are waiting for him". This verse teaches that I will be saved, in the future tense. Salvation belongs to God (Revelation 19:1). He has given it, is giving it, and he will give it, to those who choose to live under the authority of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:10; 1 Peter 1:3-9).

Christians know that they are forgiven, justified and reconciled to God through the death of Jesus Christ. But they also know that their own fallen nature within them, and the fallen world around about them, make them *long for their salvation to be brought to its completion* – which will be at the return of their Saviour (Philippians 3:20-21).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What are the main differences between the Old Testament system of sacrifices, offered for God's people, and the gospel sacrifice Jesus offered on the cross?
- (b). Which attributes of God mean that he must be legally satisfied at the way sin is dealt with?
- (c). Discuss your answer to the question: 'Are you saved?' Give Bible references to support your answer.

44. Extracts from statements of belief from different churches of Sudan

All Christians are agreed that salvation centres around Jesus Christ. Different church groups (denominations) state their beliefs in a variety of ways. Some mean virtually the same thing, while others are quite different concerning how a person is saved.

It is a useful study to compare the statements that follow. I have taken them out of complete doctrinal statements *in English* supplied to me while I was in Khartoum. The paragraph or section numbers refer to their publication that was supplied to me. Any Bible references the church included in relevant paragraphs, I have also included here. The student is advised to read those Scriptures, along with the church statements.

I have attempted to define some of the key 'salvation' words used in these statements, in chapter 45. The student may wish to refer to these definitions while reading this present chapter. Word meanings are important. (Old-fashioned English words used by the churches in their statements, are included in the definitions of my 'One-line dictionary', starting the Appendices at the end of this book. I quote the statements *exactly* in this chapter, in order to remain faithful to the church originals).

I list the churches' statements simply in alphabetical order.

Students should read the following statements asking themselves the basic question: 'How is a person saved?'

Assemblies of God

(selections from an undated statement).

"We believe in salvation through faith in Christ, who died for our sins, was buried and was raised from among the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures, and through whose blood we have redemption. (Titus 2:11; Titus 3:5-7; Romans 10:8-15; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

This experience is also known as the New Birth, and is an instantaneous and complete operation of the Holy Spirit upon initial faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (John 3:5-6; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 5:1)".

Christian Brethren

(Note: There is no 'official' statement of Brethren beliefs, other than the Bible. These selections are from a typical Brethren statement, undated).

Section (e): "Salvation is offered free – Christ paid the price of our redemption on the cross. Salvation is freely given to all who accept by faith what Christ has done on their behalf. (Ephesians 2:8-9). Through Christ we have: salvation from sin's penalty (the wages of sin is death); salvation from sin's power (sin shall no longer have dominion over you); and salvation from sin's presence (when Christ returns). The New Birth brings us into God's family and gives us new life. "You must be born again" (John 3:7).

The doctrine of Justification is taught especially in Romans, and puts the sinner in a position as though he had never sinned. Sanctification is a process which continues throughout the Christian's life. By sanctification we are set apart for a holy use".

Section (f): "Christ made atonement for sin when on the cross. He bore our sin and thus became the sin bearer for us".

Episcopal Church of Sudan

(Selections from 'The Thirty Nine Articles' of the Church of England, A.D. 1571). *Try not to be put off by the rather old fashioned English writing style! Think about the concepts being used. Use the word explanations in the next chapter, or in the appendix 'One-line dictionary', to help your understanding.*

From Article 11: "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine."

From Article 12: "Albeit that good works which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgement; yet they are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith".

From Article 14: "Voluntary works, besides, over and above, God's commandments, which they call works of supererogation, cannot be

taught without arrogancy and impiety”.

From Article 16: “Not every deadly sin willingly committed after Baptism is sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after baptism”.

From Article 17: “Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) He hath constantly decreed, by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent benefit of God be called according to God’s purpose by His Spirit working in due season: they through grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God’s mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity”.

Gideon Theological College

(Selections from the 1997 – 2002 prospectus).

Section (d): “Christ Jesus the Son, is fully God and fully man. He was born of a virgin and lived a sinless life, died an atoning death upon a cross and was bodily resurrected. He has been exalted to God’s right hand and shall bodily return in glory to judge the world. (Hebrews 1; Colossians 1:15-20; 2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Corinthians 15; Matthew 1:18-25; Philippians 2:10-11; Romans 3:21-26)”.

Section (f): “Men and women were created in the image of God and without sin. Due to the Fall they all became lost and are unable, because of their now depraved state, to please God. (Genesis 1-3; Romans 5:12; John 3:5)”.

Section (h): “Salvation has been made possible by the grace of God in the provision of His Son offered as a sacrifice for sin. Salvation is thus by grace through faith in the shed blood and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 10:1-18; John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7)”.

Khartoum Christian Centre – Pentecostal

(selections from an undated statement).

Section 4: “We believe The only means of Salvation is by God’s grace through the Lord Jesus Christ, effected by repentance from sin and faith towards God resulting in regeneration by the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:21; Acts 4:12; Ephesians 2:8-9)”.

Khartoum International Church

(Selections from the Statement of Faith in the Constitution, dated 6th February 2001).

“We believe in the Son, Jesus Christ; His deity, Virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, personal exaltation at God’s right hand, and personal return. (John 1:1; Isaiah 7:14; Hebrews 7:26; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Acts 1:11)”.

“We believe in salvation by grace through faith in the shed blood and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. (Titus 3:4-7; Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 5:8)”.

Nile Theological College

(Selections from the Doctrinal Basis with general information, December 1999).

Section 2: “We acknowledge that Jesus Christ is truly God, and truly human, and He alone is the Saviour of the world”.

Section 3: “We believe that humankind is totally lost in sin, and can only be saved through God’s grace. This grace is received and demonstrated by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ”.

Section 6: “The College will strive to be faithful to the Church’s tradition, particularly as contained in the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster Confession of Faith”.

Orthodox Church

(Selections from Timothy Ware, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, revised 1997. Note: there is a variety of belief in the various *independent* branches of the Orthodox Church).

Page 20: “The first six Councils A.D. 325-681, were inspired by a very practical purpose: human salvation. Humanity, so the New Testament teaches, is separated from God by sin, and cannot through its own efforts break down the wall of separation, which its sinfulness has created. God has therefore taken the initiative. He has become man, has been crucified, and has risen again from the dead, thereby delivering humanity from the bondage of sin and death. This is the central message of the Christian faith and it is this message and it is this message of redemption that the Councils were concerned to safeguard”.

Page 21: “St. Paul expressed this message of redemption in terms of *sharing*. Christ shared our poverty that we might share the riches of his divinity. 2 Corinthians 8:9; John 17:22-23. The Greek Fathers took these and similar texts in their literal sense, and dared to speak of humanity’s ‘deification’ (in Greek, ‘theosis’)”. “Now if this ‘being made god’, this ‘theosis’, is to be possible, Christ the Saviour must be both fully God and fully human. No-one less than God can save humanity; therefore if Christ is to save, He must be God. But only if He is truly human, as we are, can we humans participate in what He has done for us. A bridge is formed between God and humanity by the incarnate Christ who is divine and human at once”.

Page 236: "... In the third place, there is nothing esoteric or extraordinary about the methods which we must follow in order to be deified. If someone asks 'How can I become god?' the answer is very simple: go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God 'in spirit and in truth', read the Gospels, follow the commandments".

Page 237-238: "Finally, deification presupposes life in the Church, life in the sacraments. 'Theosis' according to the likeness of the Trinity involves a common life, it is only within the fellowship of the Church that this common life of coinherence can be properly realized. Church and sacraments are the means appointed by God whereby we may acquire the sanctifying Spirit and be transformed into the divine likeness".

Page 247: "... Outside the Church there is no salvation, because *salvation is the Church*". "The Church is infallible. This again follows from the indissoluble unity between God and His Church. Christ and the Holy Spirit cannot err, and since the Church is Christ's body, since it is a continued Pentecost, it is therefore infallible". 1 Timothy 3:15.

Note: for me, this view raises some important questions about salvation. Am I saved from sin to be with God, or to become so like God I am deified myself? Is my salvation dependent on Jesus Christ alone, or on Jesus Christ plus the church sacraments?

Presbyterian Church of Sudan, (and Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church)

(Selections from 'The Shorter Catechism' A.D. 1940, which is itself based on the Westminster Confession of A.D. 1643-1646).

Note: a catechism is instruction given by a series of questions and answers.

Q.29: "How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ?"

We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by His Holy Spirit".

Q.30: "How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?"

The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual

calling”.

Q.31: “What is effectual calling?

Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel”.

Q.32: “What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?

They that are effectually called do, in this life, partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them”.

Q.33: “What is justification?

Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone”.

Q.34: “What is adoption?

Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God”.

Q.35: “What is sanctification?

Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness”.

Q.36: “What are the benefits which, in this life, do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification?

The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification, are assurances of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end”.

Q.37: “What benefit do believers receive from Christ at death?

The souls of believers are at death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, still being united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection”.

Q.38: “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?

At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgement, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity”.

Roman Catholic Church

(Selections from ‘We Believe’, the Roman Catholic Enquiry Centre, 1980).

“Belief is based on Truth and Salvation. The Creed is the most fundamental expression of our faith. (Nicene Creed A.D. 325, revised A.D. 381). It starts not with *what* we believe but *whom* we believe in. We believe that Jesus is Lord. The Catholic Church claims the authority to help us understand this belief. The Creed is the result of the Church’s reflection on what we know of Jesus Christ from the Scriptures”.

“We believe ... in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven”.

“We accept the fact that it is in the nature of God to be forgiving, even though we find it hard to forgive one another. To understand the wonder of God’s forgiveness, we must first realise that there is something serious to be forgiven. Sin has a social as well as a personal dimension. Sin matters to God because we matter to God, being made in his image. Confession is a meeting with Christ wherein we hear him speak words of forgiveness. Confession has a psychological value. Meeting Christ in confession helps us to become what we are – redeemed and forgiven Christians”.

“There are two stages to be considered in deciding the place of religion in life: (1) reading, talking and thinking about it; (2) making a judgement. Jesus calls us to make a decision”.

“There are three steps in reaching a decision: (1) a vague inclination – somebody initially arouses our curiosity or attention; (2) thinking about it – various aspects of the life and teachings of Catholicism begin to fit together and require us to make a judgement; (3) an act of faith – faith is not just a rational process, but an act of worship by which we enter into a relationship of love and trust with Christ”.

“We are not able to meet Christ in the flesh, but we encounter him through the Scriptures, the life of the Church, and our brethren”.

“At every Mass, the priest asks: ‘Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father’. And we respond: ‘May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his Church’”.

“In the Mass the priest says: ‘In memory of his death and resurrection, we offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup’. Christ’s death and resurrection took place at a definite point in time. But, through the action of the Mass, the veil of time is penetrated and his saving action is applied to those present”.

“A prayer for the dead: God, the Creator and Redeemer of all the faithful, grant to the souls of your servants departed, forgiveness of all their sins, that through our pious supplication, they may obtain that pardon which they have always desired; you who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen”.

Note: for me, this view raises some important questions about salvation. Was Jesus’ sacrifice made once and for all, or is it continually offered by a priest and people in the Mass? Can I gain salvation after my death? Can I myself, or others, effect my salvation through acts of worship, prayers and associated good works?

Sudan Interior Church

(Selections from the Constitution – doctrine section, undated).

Section 3: “Our Lord Jesus Christ is God revealed in the flesh. Being born of the Virgin Mary, He became man, yet was without sin. (John 1:44; Matthew 1:20-21). (a) His divine power was attested to by His godly miracles, (Matthew 9). (b) His divine love was attested to by His sacrificial and substitutionary death, (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2). (c) His acceptance as our true mediator was attested to by His resurrection in bodily form and His ascension to the right hand of God the Father, (Romans 1:4; Romans 8:34)”.

Section 4: “All men are lost sinners, totally unable to do anything towards their salvation. They can be saved only by repentance from sin, personal faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and by regeneration of the Holy Spirit. They cannot be saved by good works. (Romans 3:10; Romans 5:12)”.

Section 5: “The evidence of regeneration is the progressive operation of the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer, producing in the believer a holy life and witness. (1 Thessalonians 1:5-7; Titus 3:5; Romans 8:1-17)”.

Sudanese Church of Christ

(Selections from the Constitution, undated).

Section 3: “We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is God revealed in the flesh. Being born of the Virgin Mary, He became man, yet was without sin. (John 1:44; Matthew 1:20-21). (a) His divine power was attested by His godly miracles, (Matthew 9). (b) His divine love was attested by His sacrificial and substitutionary death, (Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 5:2). (c) His acceptance as our true mediator was attested by His resurrection in bodily form and His ascension to the right hand of God the Father, (Romans 1:4; Romans 8:34)”.

Section 4: “We believe that all men are lost sinners, totally unable to do anything towards their salvation. They can be saved only by repentance from sin, personal faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and by regeneration of the Holy Spirit. They cannot be saved by good works, (Romans 3:10; Romans 5:12)”.

Section 5: “We believe that all who are born again from God, are one in Christ, because they are members of His body and the body of the church, whose head is the crucified Jesus, not only the crucified, but also the resurrected one who was victorious over death. (Romans 12:3-5; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 2:17-19)”.

Note: Throughout church history different Christian groups have taught their beliefs, creeds and doctrines by ‘catechesis’ – questions asked and answered by repetition between teacher and students. Perhaps this is still a good method to use in Sudan (and elsewhere) today – especially for people who do not, will not, or cannot read the Bible for themselves. (See ‘Asking and Answering Questions’ – in the Appendices at the back of this book – for one pastor’s idea of a Catechism for his congregation).

Thinking it through.

(a). Which of the church or college statements best

- expresses how a person is saved?
(b). Explain why this one is better than the others.

45. Definition of key 'salvation' words

I have chosen the definitions that follow from several given for each word in a current English dictionary. The 'salvation' words are listed here in alphabetical order. I also give Bible references, in which the actual word is used in the NIV text. Any of the statements in chapter 44 should be read with these meanings taken where the words are used. I have *italicised* the word, *and my chosen definition*, which I believe is the closest dictionary definition to the Bible's meaning for that word.

adoption – *to bring a person into a specific relationship*. "...we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons" (Romans 8:23); "In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons" (Ephesians 1:5).

assurance – *freedom from doubt, certainty*. "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22); "stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (Colossians 4:12). Assurance can be developed by positive Christian discipleship.

atonement – *the reconciliation of man with God through the life, sufferings and sacrificial death of Christ*. "God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement" (Romans 3:25); "he had to be made like his brothers that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17).

calling (effectual calling) – *strong, inner urge to follow*. "... for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39); "for God's gift and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29); "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24). Calling is God's gracious act in which he invites sinners to accept salvation offered through Jesus Christ.

conversion – *transformation*. "they told how the Gentiles had been converted" (Acts 15:3); "you know the household of Stephanus were the first converts in Achaia" (1 Corinthians 16:15). Conversion is the superintending act of God upon a person's repentance and faith.

damnation – *the act or state of being condemned to hell.* Not in the NIV, which uses ‘condemnation’. “The judgement followed one sin and brought condemnation” (Romans 5:16); “the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (Romans 5:18); and “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

elect – *chosen by God to receive salvation.* “that God’s purpose in election might stand” (Romans 9:11); “to God’s elect, strangers in the world” (1 Peter 1:1); “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10).

faith (saving faith) – *trust in God and his actions and promises.* “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16); “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is by faith in Christ” (Philippians 3:9); “I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). Faith is a positive conviction given by the Holy Spirit, to a person who begins believing in the work of God in Jesus Christ.

grace – *the divine assistance and power given to man in spiritual rebirth and sanctification.* “saw evidence of the grace of God” (Acts 11:23); “urged them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43); “for it is by grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is undeserved and unearned. God freely gives it.

impute – *to attribute or ascribe something* (usually dishonest or dishonourable) *to a person.* (Note: the negative meaning of the word ‘impute’ in English usage today, suggests to me it should not be used if another word can take its place). Not in the NIV, which uses the words ‘credit’ and ‘count against’. “the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works” (Romans 4:6); “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (Romans 4:8).

justification – *the act and process of being accounted or declared righteous, by the attributing of Christ’s merits to the sinner.* “He was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25); “one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Romans 5:18); “it is God who justifies” (Romans 8:33). Justification is a legal act of God in which he declares a sinner righteous on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

new birth – *the moment or process of being born again*. This phrase is not in the English dictionary. “no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3); “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

pardon – *to release from punishment for an offence*. “let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7).

perseverance (of the saints) – *persistence in remaining in a state of grace until death*. “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Hebrews 10:36); “the testing of your faith develops perseverance (which) must finish its work” (James 1:3-4). Perseverance is the continuous operation of God the Holy Spirit upon the human heart, bringing the work once begun to ultimate completion.

predestination – *the act of God foreordaining every event from eternity*. “Those God foreknew he also predestined, those he predestined he also called” (Romans 8:29-30); “He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Ephesians 1:5); “in him we were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan” (Ephesians 1:11).

preservation – *keeping safe from danger or harm*. “The Lord preserves the faithful” (Psalm 31:23); “whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33).

redemption – *deliverance from sin through the incarnation, sufferings and death of Christ*. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Ephesians 1:7); “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (Ephesians 1:14); “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30).

regeneration – *the act or process of moral, spiritual or physical renewal or invigoration*. (Note: the idea in current English usage, that regeneration of anything is something that we do, or buy, for ourselves, makes it a word we should be very careful of using). The

word is not in the NIV, which uses 'gives birth to' and 'born again' in its place. "the Spirit gives birth to Spirit" (John 3:5-6); "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (James 1:18); "You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable" (1 Peter 1:23); "He saved us by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Regeneration is the act of God implanting the principle of new life in a person, changing the person's frame of mind and heart.

repentance – a sense of contrition, intensely hating past sins and resolving to make amends.

(Note: again, current English usage implies the idea of giving compensation oneself, for wrong doing. This is not the biblical idea, in which the repentant person knows there is nothing that they can do themselves). Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32); "let us leave the elementary teachings ... the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death" (Hebrews 6:1); "if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance" (Hebrews 6:6). Repentance is the change brought about in cooperation with the Holy Spirit in which a person sees themselves as God sees them, and turns from themselves and their sin, and turns to God.

righteousness – just and upright. (Note: current English usage often understands 'righteousness' as 'self-righteousness', righteous in one's own eyes, not necessarily in the eyes of others. Again, this means that if we use the word, we must carefully define it. Christian righteousness is God-given). "through the obedience of one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19); "Christ died for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Peter 3:18).

sacrament – an outward sign combined with a prescribed form of words and regarded as conferring some specific grace upon those who receive it. In the Protestant churches the sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches they are baptism, penance, confirmation, the Eucharist, holy orders, matrimony and the anointing of the sick, (formerly 'extreme unction'). Sacrament is a church word, not a Bible word.

sacrifice – the ritual killing of a person or animal with the intention of pleasing God. "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord" (Exodus 12:21-28); "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7); "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of

many people” (Hebrews 9:27-28).

salvation – deliverance by redemption from the power of sin and the penalties following on from it. “My eyes have seen your salvation” (Luke 2:30); “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12); “The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

sanctification – being made holy, free from sin, purified. Jesus prayed to God the Father, “Sanctify them by the truth ...For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (John 17:17-19); “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified” (1 Thessalonians 4:3); “May God himself sanctify you through and through” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Sanctification is a continuing work of God the Holy Spirit with a person’s willing cooperation, in renewing the whole of their life into the image of Jesus Christ.

security (eternal security) – the state of being free from danger, able to be relied on. Not in the NIV which uses the word ‘keep’. “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Jude 24-25).

supererogation – the performance of work in excess of that required or expected. Not a biblical word. Used especially in the Roman Catholic church of merit-earning extra acts of devotion.

As an example of how we can read and understand any statement of faith, notice what happens when I *exchange the meanings for the words used* in my own church – Khartoum International Church – statement of faith:

“We believe in *deliverance by redemption from the power and penalty of sin* (salvation), by *the divine assistance and power given to man in spiritual rebirth and sanctification* (grace), through *trust in God and his actions and promises* (faith), in the shed blood and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord”.

Thinking it through.

- (a). Give another Scripture verse (not the ones in this chapter) for every one of the twenty-six ‘salvation

word' definitions given in chapter forty-five.

- (b). How does the verse you have given help to explain the 'salvation word'?

46. Explaining how salvation is experienced

We have already seen there is a large element of mystery about exactly how salvation is experienced. Although the birth of any human baby is something all the family and their friends know about and rejoice in together, the initial conception some nine months before, is something very private between husband and wife. Even they do not know for a month or two that conception has happened. Some couples have to wait for months or even years to conceive their first child. I am honoured to know of three Sudanese children who have been named after me, simply because I was privileged to visit their homes and to pray with the families immediately after their baby's birth. One baby was a girl, so her name is pronounced 'Colleen' rather than 'Colin'!

It is possible to explain the 'salvation process' in different ways. But however it is explained, it is important we have a clear understanding of it. Much evangelism in Sudan (as well as in Britain, America, and elsewhere) is spoilt because of a poor understanding of the salvation process. It is not sufficient to get people to raise their hands at the end of a meeting and then to tell them (and our prayer partners) 'they are all saved'! I believe this does a lot of damage to the overall Christian mission, because it gives people the false understanding that they have become Christians. God may not have done his necessary work within their lives. Some who raised their hands may well be being saved as they respond to God. But damage is done to others, who while sincere, are simply being carried along by the occasion. They may later conclude "I've tried being a Christian, and it didn't work for me". The truth is that they were never 'saved' at all. We must be careful that our methods do not give *any* who listen a false understanding.

Evangelism must be seen as a partnership with God. God is the senior partner. We have a part to play, but unless God the Holy Spirit is at work, our efforts will not result in real conversions. We will look at this issue some more in the following chapter.

We will mention *three* good ways of explaining how salvation

happens. The first one, (Berkhof), I was taught in Bible College. The second one, (Grudem), I used to teach my students in England. The third one, (Reidhead), is my favourite, and I used to teach it especially to my students on 'evangelism' courses in England.

Louis Berkhof was a professor at Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in U.S.A. from A.D.1906-1944. In his 'Systematic Theology', he presents "the Doctrine of the Application of the Work of Redemption". Berkhof defines the 'order of salvation' as "the process by which the work of salvation, wrought in Christ, is subjectively realised in the hearts and lives of sinners". He aims to describe events in a logical order and in their relationship to one another.

Wayne Grudem was a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, in U.S.A. His 'Systematic Theology' also presents "the Doctrine of the Application of Redemption". Grudem defines his chapters as looking "at the way God *applies* to our lives" the "fact that Christ died and *earned* salvation for us".

It is helpful to look carefully at the two sets of chapter headings, and to compare them. They are two of several equally valid explanations of how God enables us to experience salvation. The student should refer to the definitions we have given in chapter 45 to help him or her understand these suggested stages.

Berkhof lists: the operation of the Holy Spirit (in general terms); Common Grace (what God does for *everyone*, not just for the 'saved'); the Mystical Union (between Christ and believers); Calling in General and External Calling; Regeneration and Effectual Calling; Conversion; Faith; Justification; Sanctification; Perseverance of the Saints.

Grudem lists: Common Grace; Election and Reprobation (the decision of God to pass over those who will not be saved, and to punish them for their sins); the Gospel Call and Effective Calling; Regeneration; Conversion (Faith and Repentance); Justification (Right Legal Standing before God); Adoption (Membership in God's Family); Sanctification (Growth in Likeness to Christ); Baptism in and filling with the Holy Spirit; The Perseverance of Saints (Remaining a Christian); Death and the Intermediate State; Glorification (Receiving a Resurrection Body); Union with Christ.

An initial glance at these lists shows that there is a lot more to

salvation than 'raising your hand' after a sermon!

Paris Reidhead was at one time a linguist and missionary along the Sudan-Ethiopia border. I met him in Washington, D.C., in U.S.A. during A.D.1991. We spent an enjoyable day talking about, and praying together for, Christians in Sudan. He gave me a copy of his book "Getting Evangelicals Saved". It was written because he was disturbed by the reducing of the term 'salvation' to mean *only* the forgiveness of sins, or the new birth. Reidhead felt Christians were missing out on appreciating what the Bible calls "*such a great salvation*", (Hebrews 2:3).

Too many Christians, just like followers of other religions, have a 'dead faith' rather than a 'saving faith'.

Reidhead gave the example of:

"Sahid, our cook at the mission home in Khartoum. He came to us on Sunday evening to tell us he was starting out with a group of missionaries to drive across the desert about 3,500 miles to Lagos, in Nigeria. Sahid was going to cook for the missionaries, but he was also going to his home. He had left forty-four years earlier on a pilgrimage to Mecca, but now he was going back.

"I want to say 'goodbye' to you", he said to me. "I'm leaving".

"You've been a devoted man, Sahid".

"Yes, I've been to Mecca twice," he explained.

"Have you fasted every Ramadan?" I asked.

"Oh yes, every Ramadan. Ever since I was a boy".

That meant for a whole month, from sun-up until sun-down, Sahid never ate, or drank, or swallowed his spittle.

"Have you tithed?"

"Oh yes."

To the Muslim, tithing is not merely giving ten per cent of what he earns, but each year tithing two percent of all that he possesses.

"Have you prayed, Sahid?"

"Oh yes! Five times a day".

"Sahid," I asked, "do you have peace in your heart? Do you know, if you died, that you would go to be with God?"

"Oh no! I don't have that. I can only hope that any good works may be such that, when I die, Mohammed will reach down and take my hand and help me across the abyss, so that I will not have to suffer."

Sahid observed rituals, rites, and taboos. There were things he could and could not do – things he could eat and not eat. He had observed them all. But his was a dead faith.

If I had asked, "Is Mohammed living in you?" Sahid would have laughed at me. ... Mohammed (died in Medina, A.D. 630 and) was buried".

And if I had asked, "Does God ever reveal to you that you are His?" Sahid would have laughed again.

Friends, there are multitudes who name the name of Christ, who are associated with Christian groups, but have accepted only rituals and taboos. They abstain from this and they observe that. They have been baptized and catechised. But they are unaware that salvation is not a system of doctrines, taboos or rituals.

They do not know that salvation means having the life of Christ in you. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). They have everything but Christ, and so they have a dead faith".

Reidhead wrote: *the meaning of salvation is 'having the life of Christ in you'*. I have used his simpler 'order of salvation' in my understanding and my evangelism for 13 years. I present it here, for you to consider. This is how God brings someone out of spiritual death into spiritual life through Jesus Christ.

Salvation is not giving mental assent to a set of doctrines. Christ did not *send* us salvation, he died to *become* our salvation. (Exodus 15:2; Luke 2:30; Luke 3:6; Luke 19:9; Acts 4:12; Titus 2:11; 1 Peter 1:10-11).

Reidhead lists eight chapter headings in defining 'Conversion': awakening; conviction; repentance; saving faith; new birth; the witness of the Holy Spirit; temptation and brokenness; victory through Jesus Christ.

1. *Awakening is that new sensitivity God the Holy Spirit works in people to cause them to realise their need.* It is expressed by feelings of dissatisfaction with life as it is, a growing awareness of an awesome God, the recognition of personal sinfulness, and the beginnings of a search for something more to be experienced. (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10; Luke 3:10, 12, 14; Acts 2:37; Acts 16:30; Ephesians 5:13-14).

2. *Conviction means seeing ourselves as God sees us.* God the Holy Spirit shows us that we are condemned, and deserving of God's righteous anger. Sin is essentially anarchy, living in selfish

rebellion against God's rule. Sometimes ignorantly, other times deliberately, we creatures challenge our Creator's control of our lives. The Holy Spirit proves to us that we are sinners in God's sight and he encourages us to accept responsibility for our sin. This is expressed in a heavy conscience, depression of mind and heart, an argument going on within oneself over what is right and what is wrong. (Genesis 42:21; Numbers 21:7; 2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51:3-5; Ezra 9:6-7; John 16:8-11; Romans 8:6-8).

3. *Repentance means a change of attitude involving a complete turn around.* God the Holy Spirit helps us to change our life's purpose from what it has been to what it ought to be. As the essence of sin is 'I'm going to do what I want to do', so the essence of repentance is 'from today on, I am going to please God'. The result is being absolutely committed to the practice of pleasing God. (Luke 13:5; Acts 5:29-32; Acts 17:30-31; Acts 20:20-21; Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 7:8-11).

4. *Saving faith means total personal commitment to the Sovereignty of God.* Jesus is objectively 'Lord', whether I acknowledge it or not. He is Lord of all! When God the Holy Spirit helps me to commit myself subjectively to Jesus as 'Lord in my life and all that is around me', I exercise the gift of saving faith. (Genesis 22:1-19; Romans 4:1-25; Romans 10:10-11; Hebrews 11:1-2). We need to be very careful here. There is a 'belief' – even belief in the truth – that does not lead to salvation. "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder". James 2:19. Saving faith is a gift from God to be received and lived upon (Ephesians 2:4-10).

5. *The new birth is the crisis of a changed relationship with God.* It is effected by God, in the heart of a person who has exercised a heart faith (not just a head faith) in the Lord Jesus. It is something God the Holy Spirit works within a person in response to their exercise of saving faith. That saving faith must be in the finished work, and exalted person, of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus has earned our salvation. We must accept it and act upon it. Three times Jesus said 'You must be born again' (John 3:3,5,7). God the Father purposed our new birth. God the Son purchased our new birth. God the Holy Spirit produces new birth within us, as we respond to his workings. Nicodemus showed this change of heart by a change in the motivating principle of

his life. (John 3:1-2; John 7:50-52; John 19:38-40).

6. *The witness of the Holy Spirit expresses saving faith and new birth.* No-one has the right to tell another person that he is born of God – you cannot tell your friends that they have just become Christians – this is the job of God the Holy Spirit. It would be a terrible thing if I told someone they were ‘saved’ when they were lost! I may give them a false sense of being right with God! When a person does what God’s word commands, they will be born again. When they are born again, *they* will have the witness of the Holy Spirit. I listen for people to tell me they have become Christians. The truth of their testimony will become more obvious as the weeks, months and years go by (Romans 8:15-16; 1 Corinthians 2:11; John 20:31; 1 John 5:9-13).

7. *Temptation and brokenness together are ongoing evidences of salvation.* Temptation is a proposition, presented to the mind and intellect, to satisfy a good appetite in a forbidden way. Sin is a decision of the will to gratify a good appetite in a bad way. Friendship with God is interrupted when a child of God sins. We should come frequently to the Scriptures and allow God to show us what we are like in his eyes. Confession of sin means that we completely agree with God, and that what he sees and what he says are absolutely right. We do not need to be afraid of this, because the blood of Jesus Christ is our continuing provision for forgiveness (Proverbs 6:16-19; John 15:1-4; 1 Corinthians 11:31-32; Hebrews 12:4-8; 1 John 1:8-9).

8. *Victory through Jesus Christ is a practical hope that we have.* As long as we live in this life we are going to be subject to temptation. We know this. As long as we live we will be capable of giving in to temptation. We know this too. Our salvation will only be fully complete when we are taken to be with our Saviour in heaven. This is the sure and certain hope that we have. We put it into practice in our everyday lives. Jesus gives us the daily victory over sin as long as we continually choose his way rather than our own (Matthew 1:21; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Philippians 2:12-13; Hebrews 2:1-4; Hebrews 9:27-28; 1 Peter 1:3-5).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What is the danger for an evangelist who misunderstands, and therefore misrepresents, salvation in his or her evangelism?
- (b). Grudem lists about seventeen steps in the salvation process. Which ones should you present in gospel preaching? Why?
- (c). Are there any of Reidhead's eight steps in the salvation process that you seldom hear preached in gospel sermons? Why do you think this is?

47. Taking care in our evangelism

It is possible to have a 'heresy of method' as well as a 'heresy of message' in evangelism. A 'heresy of method' is a method that takes little or no account of what God is doing in the hearts and lives of the listeners. Too much emphasis can be placed upon what we want to be able to report to our church head office or to our supporting organisation overseas. The love of money – even money to use in our evangelistic programmes – can corrupt the evangelism that we do (1 Timothy 6:5-10).

Examples of dangerous practices in evangelism would include giving Christian baptism to babies, or baptizing adults, *without properly discerning the faith of those involved*; saying or implying that those who are physically healed in a meeting have experienced the 'saving' touch of God; assuming that everyone who raised their hand – or came to the front – indicating they had prayed the 'sinners prayer', has actually done anything more than be moved in their emotions. There are plenty of evidences in Scripture, where people were very close to a life-changing meeting with God, but they did not experience it themselves: the rich young ruler, (Matthew 19:16-22); many of Jesus' own disciples, (John 6:60-66); the people travelling with Saul on the road to Damascus, (Acts 9:3-7); the others at Lydia's prayer meeting, (Acts 16:13-15); etc. If we give the understanding that people can be saved – or can show they are saved – simply by any outward practice (baptism of any form, healing, hand-raising, etc.), our evangelism is dangerous. None of these things *automatically* give us the life of Christ. Salvation is *only* experienced by having the life of Christ in you, not by any ritual! (1John 5:12).

Yet, in order to live the church must evangelise! I am not suggesting for one moment that we stop evangelism. I am strongly urging that we be careful how we do it.

Michael Green was a rector in Oxford, England, before becoming Professor of Evangelism at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada, and then the Archbishops' adviser on Evangelism in Britain. Quoting Archbishop William Temple he defines: "To evangelise is so to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept him as their Saviour, and serve him as their King in the fellowship of his church".

This definition demands that in our evangelism we trust in God the Holy Spirit to use the message of Jesus Christ – we do not trust in our own methods. People must be encouraged to respond to God – not to us, or to our methods. *The trustworthy evidence of salvation will be seen over a period of time as the person becomes a Christian disciple in their local church community and in their everyday life – it will not necessarily be immediately obvious at the initial meeting.*

The key message of the church is "Jesus saves" (Acts 2:36; 3:18-20; 4:12). These words include: the deity of Christ – Jesus is God; the incarnation of Christ – God became the man Jesus; the atonement made by Christ – God was in Jesus reconciling the world to himself. Evangelism centres on the cross of Jesus Christ. Who was Jesus and what did he achieve? Evangelism demands a response from people to the actions of God in Christ.

Evangelism focuses on facts not theories.

The Lausanne Covenant was drawn up by leading evangelicals under the auspices of Billy Graham in 1974. Here is their focus on the Lord Jesus Christ:

"We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one Gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel, every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who

gave himself as the ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men are perishing because of sin, but God loves all men, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. To proclaim Jesus as “the Saviour of the world” is not to affirm that all men are either automatically or ultimately saved, less still to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God’s love for a world of sinners and to invite all men to respond to him as Saviour and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him as Lord”. (Galatians 1:6-9; Romans 1:19-21; Romans 1:32; Romans 2:14-15; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Acts 4:12; Matthew 18:14; John 3:15-16; 2 Peter 3:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

In the diversity of approaches to evangelism, I strongly suggest that we give room to, and look for, the following – based on our understanding of the whole ‘salvation’ process:

1. Look for those God is awakening to an awareness of himself and of their personal sin. There will be some people in your class at university, some in your neighbourhood, some of your work colleagues. *Some*, but not all. When I take teams for outreach visiting from house to house, I encourage them to understand that even doors closed to us are being used by God, to move us along more quickly to *where he is working* in people’s hearts (Acts 16:6-14). Our responsibility towards all the others is to pray for them, live and speak in a Christ-like way before them, and watch for God to open their hearts.
2. Be sensitive towards people who are experiencing the pricking of their consciences by God the Holy Spirit. The adult person who remains unconscious of their own sin cannot be saved. They will not see the need of salvation, except perhaps to avoid meeting God as judge in, what seems to them to be, the distant future. The Holy Spirit ‘convicts of sin’ (John 16:8). He begins to accuse people of their guilt before a holy God. People do need to feel worse before they can really feel better! Do not offer the ‘good

news' until people have really grasped the 'bad news'. People need to have a firmly held conviction that they are 'wrong with God' before they can understand and appreciate being made 'right with God'. Do not try to limit the distress and heaviness people are under at this time. *It is God who is at work* (Acts 2:37; Romans 2:14-15; 1 Corinthians 14:24-25; Hebrews 4:12-13).

3. Watch for signs of a new way of thinking. Repentance will bring to the listeners a new way of thinking about God and about Jesus Christ. Repentance lays the foundation for their trusting in God – and not in anything they can do themselves – for salvation. In repentance people let go of all that God does not want in their lives. True repentance brings a fear of sinning. Someone has described 'legal repentance' as 'a fear of being damned by God's wrath'; while 'evangelical repentance' is 'a fear of sinning against God's holiness'. This is a living, and spiritually healthy, fear of God. Repentance brings a change of attitude. We do not bargain with God. We accept his offered terms. *God works repentance* in people who are open to him (Luke 15:7; 2 Corinthians 5:9-11; Philippians 2:12-13; Romans 2:4-5; 2 Corinthians 7:10).
4. Discern the presence of God's gift of saving faith. The Bible tells us all the way through that faith is seen by its actions, and usually actions over a period of time. If a person is seen to be trusting in anything they themselves have done, trusting in any ritual they have been through, trusting in any experience they have had at a christian event, then it is likely that they have not yet received the gift from God of saving faith (Ephesians 2:8-10). *God is the one who makes us spiritually alive* in Christ (Ephesians 2:5). Something may begin at our meetings, but it is unlikely to be clearly evident until it passes the test of some life in the real, everyday, working world. When a man starts telling the truth, instead of lies, even though it is going to cost him business, it is a sure sign God is at work. It is no accident that the name 'Christians' was first given to followers of Jesus, by those outside of the church. They noticed the lives of people who were so much like the life of Jesus, they

sneeringly called them 'Christians' (Acts 11:25-26). I believe it is also no accident that this happened after one year in a Bible Class with Barnabas and Paul as the teachers.

5. Celebrate and encourage the new birth. It is right to do this. The evidences of new birth are numbers one to four that we have just looked at! A person who is awakened to God, who is convicted of personal sin, who is repentant in heart attitude, and who has received saving faith from God, is born again. No-one expects a brand new baby to show the maturity of an adult in life. New babies in a family cry at the wrong and inappropriate times, demand feeding rather than politely ask for food, make bad smells in the most inconvenient places, and so on. New Christian babies will sometimes be an embarrassment to the Christian family too! But, no-one would reject a baby just because he or she still has a lot to learn about life. Parents, and older brothers and sisters, will help to train and encourage the new life. And we must do that for 'new born' and 'infant' Christians (1 Peter 2:2-3; Romans 14:1; Romans 15:1-2; and see what Barnabas did for Paul in Acts 9:26-30; 11:25-26; 11:30; 12:25; 13:1-3). *God uses Christians to help each other in this.*

6. Teach new Christians to listen to the Holy Spirit. Since God the Holy Spirit is the one who gives witness to the spiritual birth of Christians, there is no greater encouragement and help we can give them, than teaching them to listen. A young baby, growing into a young child, learns by seeing, hearing and copying its parents and siblings. A young Christian will learn from other Christians. Yet she or he must learn not to depend on other Christians only, but to develop their own, personal, life with God. Praying and reading the Bible, regularly thinking about life and about what the Bible says related to it, this is communication between the individual and God. It is a two-way conversation. Asking questions about 'why?' and 'how?' Christianity is worked out in everyday life situations, is an important aid to Christian growth. Questions can be asked and answered privately in devotions with God, and publicly in small groups deliberately aimed to nurture and establish new believers. *God makes his work in peoples' lives more*

and more evident as people become more and more Christlike in their lives (Romans 8:15-16; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:6-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4).

Evangelism is much more than the narrow preaching of the gospel to lost people. To quote Michael Green again, “Evangelism will not be effective unless it springs from community, and draws people into community: a community which is warm, accepting, unjudging and supportive. That will touch people at a level reason alone cannot reach”. Good evangelism makes Christian disciples in local congregations or churches.

The New Testament church had compassion for people outside of Christ, which moved them to evangelise in spite of the persecution they consequently suffered. Methods of evangelism varied. They included formal preaching in the synagogues, debating in public halls, giving personal testimony where opportunity arose – out among the lost (Acts 13:14-15; Acts 17:2-3; Acts 19:8-10; Acts 22:1-21). The New Testament church did not rely on ‘pastors, ministers and evangelists’ only. Evangelism was the spontaneous and natural chattering about Jesus by all people whose lives had been revolutionised by him, and who were themselves in vibrant touch with him day by day (Acts 5:41-42; Acts 11:19-21). They mixed with the lost, and as they did so, they saw God open the hearts of some to be saved!

God has placed his people in all walks of life in and around Khartoum – and I’m sure throughout the rest of Sudan. He will use you as your life shows the likeness of Jesus Christ to your colleagues. In university, in the suk, in the government civil service, in the shop, in the office, in the factory, in commerce, in agriculture, in industry, in education, in the home, in the street, in the neighbourhood – “go and make disciples” Jesus said. God’s kingdom will extend as we do so (Matthew 5:14-16; Matthew 11:12; Matthew 28:18-20).

Thinking it through.

- (a). What could the differences be between people responding to the evangelist and his or her message, and people actually responding to God?
- (b). How can we be reasonably sure the people we are witnessing to are genuinely responding to God?
- (c). Who is responsible for evangelising the lost? Support your answer from Scripture.

God

Lives

in

the

Church

48. The Old and New Testament Church

From Abraham onwards, God has been ‘calling out’ a people to be his own, from among the entire peoples of the world (Genesis 12:1-4). The word ‘assembly’ (Hebrew ‘qahal’) is linked to the name ‘Jehovah’ to mean the ‘assembly of the Lord God’; (Deuteronomy 23:1; 23:2; 23:3; 23:8; Genesis 2:4). To assemble in this way, means to gather as a company of people for a specific purpose, including the purpose of giving praise to God (Psalm 22:25; Psalm 35:18; Psalm 89:5; Psalm 149:1).

Groups of God’s people have been gathered together at crucial times in God’s dealings with his people: for example, following the call to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:16); following the Passover in Egypt (Exodus 12:16); delivering the Ten Commandments (Exodus 35:1); celebrating feasts in honour of the Lord (Leviticus 23:1-2); at the provision of water for a rebellious people in the desert (Numbers 20:8); when remembering the Law of God (Joshua 8:34-35; Nehemiah 8:1); and for the allocation of the promised land (Joshua 18:1). Sometimes the meeting is of leaders, while other times all of the eligible people attend.

There are many New Testament passages that understand the church as the new, or the continuing development of, the Jewish people of Israel (Romans 2:28-29; Romans 4:1-16; Romans 9:6-8; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 2:11-22; Hebrews 8:1-13).

The Old Testament key to understanding the New Testament church is to realise that God calls out a people and he instructs them, leads them, guides them, disciplines them, and works towards making them all that he wants them to be.

The word ‘assembly’ (Greek – ekklesia) is usually translated ‘church’ in the New Testament. Jesus used it twice. In Matthew 16:18, following Peter’s recognition of who he was, Jesus said, “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it”. Jesus speaks here of a worldwide, century-spanning, universal church. In Matthew 18:17, in dealing with discipline for an erring brother, Jesus said, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church”. This time, Jesus is referring to a local congregation of believers at a particular point of history. We must keep both these understandings of ‘church’ in our minds.

Paul uses the same word to refer to slightly different things. For example he writes “To the church (singular) of the Thessalonians”, (1 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1). He also refers to “the churches (plural) in Judea” and elsewhere, (1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). It seems there were city-wide congregations, there were more localised congregations, and there were even house congregations (Romans 16:3-5; Romans 16:16). The universal church is seen to exist in many different gatherings of Christian people.

The church is the community of people who have been born again to live under the rule of the King of kings, Jesus. As people come into this invisible kingdom, they choose to join the human expression of the kingdom, the locally organised church. The local church is people who are seen to witness to the existence of a kingdom of God, a kingdom that is *not* a territorial kingdom on this earth.

By Christ-like living under the rule of God, within the laws of Sudan, Sudanese Christians show they have been called out by God from among all the rest of the Sudanese population. Where there is a clash between the laws of God and the laws of the land, Sudanese Christians can choose to follow the New Testament church in embracing persecution and accepting the personal cost of it (Matthew 5:11-12; Acts 4:1-31; 1 Peter 3:13-18; 1 Peter 4:12-19). The recent unjust suffering of some Sudanese Christians has been inspirational to Christians in other parts of the world. But we all need to be careful not to lose eternal blessing merely for political and material gains in this passing earthly world (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The New Testament uses word pictures to describe the church.

We are ultimately “*the bride of Christ*” (Revelation 19:7-9; Revelation 21:2-4). We have an intimate and exclusive relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. We recognise his love, his care, his provision of purity for us, his self-sacrifice on our behalf (Ephesians 5:22-33).

In the church we are a *building of people* in which God lives by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the foundation of the building. Inspired by God the Holy Spirit, Paul and others have built on that foundation. We have a corporate and individual responsibility to live in a way that brings honour to God. We are the *household* of God. Although this building is built, it is also still under construction! Perhaps the

incredible building developments around the three cities can remind us that God is building his 'church of people'. Physical church buildings will come and will go, but the 'building of people' does not need any physical buildings in order to exist. (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Peter 2:4-8).

The church is also called "*the body of Christ*". There are many different parts of my human body working away as I write this. My eyes see, my fingers type, my mind thinks, my mouth and my stomach enjoy regular food and drink. All together these (and other) parts of me combine to make the complete body of 'me'. There are many parts in 'the body of Christ', but there is an organic unity, under the control of Jesus Christ, who is the undisputed head (Ephesians 1:22-23; Ephesians 4:15-16; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:18).

The Bible uses many other metaphors to help us see what the church is like. We are like a harvested crop, (John 4:35); like 'branches on a vine', (John 15:5); like a flock of sheep, (Acts 20:28); like a cultivated field, (1 Corinthians 3:9); like a pure virgin, (2 Corinthians 11:2); "the church of the firstborn", (Hebrews 12:23); and like a lamp stand set to channel the light of Jesus Christ into a dark world, (Revelation 1:12-24).

The New Testament does *not* know the church as an institution nor a physical building. It sees only 'the people of God', 'the community of the set apart', 'the gathering of called out believers'. The church is the whole community of all true believers throughout all of time.

We may look at the All Saints Episcopal Cathedral building in Street One, Khartoum 2. We may admire the St Matthew's Roman Catholic building, on the corner of El Meknimir street and Nile Avenue, or the fine 'Mar Girgis' (St George's) Coptic building near the Palace hotel in Khartoum North. We may worship ourselves in any of these, or in a mud-walled plastic/ bamboo/ zinc-roofed area of Soba Aradi, Shigla, Hillat Koko, Haj Yousef, Mayo or Zagalona. We may worship as a house church, with a few others in someone's home. It makes no difference. The real church in Sudan, as anywhere else in the world, is the invisible church. The invisible 'church of people' is the church as God sees it.

Thinking it through.

- (a). What are the differences between the 'universal church' and the 'local church'?
- (b). Which of these two is one hundred per cent made up of genuine, born-again believers?
- (c). What lessons can you learn from seeing the church as 'the household of God'? (Ephesians 2:19).

49. Christian worship

If you want to know what a group of people really believe, look at what, why, and how, they worship. The 'church' is the living community of believing people. They have all responded to God's call on their lives. 'Church' is not primarily any formal ecclesiastical, or denominational, structure of administration. 'Church' is not primarily any building or physical location. 'Church' as we are looking at it now, means "the local company of Christians visibly gathered together for worship and ministry". "A true church will be recognised by its unity in relationships, its holiness of life, its openness to all, its submission to the rule of the apostolic Scriptures, its preaching of Christ in rule and sacrament, and its commitment to mission".

There are five reasons for meeting together as a Christian congregation: for worship (Greek – *latreia*, and Greek – *proskynein*) ; for fellowship (Greek – *koinonia*); for teaching (Greek – *didache*); for ministry (Greek – *diakonia*); and for witness (Greek – *martyria*). All five are to be carried out for the glory of God through Jesus Christ, by the local church.

Worship is being totally absorbed by God. Meeting for worship is meeting to acknowledge God's worth in acts of praise. My main interest in joining for worship is God himself. I will meet other people, but if I do not meet God, then I have not worshipped. In worship, God occupies my complete attention. My heart is concerned only with the heart of God. In worship I show deep respect for God. I love him, and I say so. I am awestruck in God's presence, with none of the distractions that are usually around me in everyday life. I bow down to God in surrender of my own life to him. I recognise he is the Kingly presence and I am only his poor servant. Together with others in Christian worship, we praise and adore God, we confess our sins, we break bread, we enjoy fellowship, we listen to Bible readings and

teaching, we receive God's call and grace to progress in our Christian walk, we thank God, we bring him our world, ourselves and our needs, we call on God to intervene and we commit ourselves to be his helpers, we bring our offerings from what he has given us, and we proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christians *together* are those "who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus", (Philippians 3:3). Paul testified: "I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way", (Acts 24:14). ('The Way' was the name and the lifestyle followed by disciples of Jesus Christ). The Greek word 'worship' (above) is translated to 'serve' in Revelation 7:15; and Revelation 22:3. The word has the root meaning of 'a hired servant'. As the women folk in our families serve us up excellent aseeda, foule, or kissera to enjoy day by day, so in heaven we will serve up our worship to God! And in our weekly church services – until we get to heaven – we can already serve our corporate worship up to God!

The results of a New Testament survey of the church at worship show: they had daily – sometimes public and sometimes private – meetings (Acts 2:46; Acts 5:42); they had meetings on the first day of every week (Acts 20:7; Revelation 1:10); the apostles' teaching was listened to and learned from (Acts 2:42); at least some of their meetings involved sharing meals (Acts 2:42; Acts 2:46); they baptised new believers (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 10:48; 1 Corinthians 1:13-17); the scheduled prayer times of their background Jewish faith, were adopted and developed (Acts 3:1; Acts 16:13; Romans 1:9-10; Colossians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Colossians 3:17, 4:2); music was used in their worship, and the songs learned helped them in difficult situations (Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13; Revelation 5:9-14); in special circumstances some of their meetings were long (Acts 20:7); peoples' material needs were shared and were met from within the congregation (Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:32-35; Acts 6:1; Hebrews 13:15-16; James 2:1-6); they collected offerings to help others (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5); everyone's gifts were given opportunity to make a contribution to the overall church programme (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11); they exercised discipline over individuals where it became necessary (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5); the church celebrated the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-35); the believers were urged to treat every day as a sacred day, not just some days (Galatians 4:9-11); they were urged

to use *all* of their time carefully (Ephesians 5:15-16; Colossians 4:5); and even the secular was seen to be God-given and to be prayed for (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

As Christians we should always seek to *give to God* in worship. We give God our praise. We give God our love. We give God our church life – all of us as Christians together. It is in this giving that God reaches out to bless us. He builds us up together by his living and strengthening presence (Ephesians 2:19-22; Ephesians 4:11-15). We meet with God *together* in a way that is not possible on our own (Matthew 18:20; Matthew 28:18-20).

Singing and music has played a significant part in the history of the church down the centuries. Where not everyone can read, or where not everyone *does* read, the repetition of good theology in words set to memorable tunes is a valuable method of influencing the worship of the church and the understanding of Christians. In the early church, many people were suspicious of using music associated with pagan entertainment. It was St Basil, A.D. 330-387, who said “God blended the delight of melody with doctrines, in order that through the pleasantness and softness of the sound, we might unawares receive what was useful in the words ... for this purpose these harmonious melodies of the psalms have been prepared for us”. All singing is not necessarily worship. Good worship-singing centres on the value, worth and actions of God. It enables us to express our love, honour and respect to him.

In our church worship services it is right to be confident in who God is, to be fascinated into knowing God better, to be thankful and appreciative of all that God does, and to express a growing love for God. True worship is offered to God from our hearts, by the Holy Spirit, in honour of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Beware of two dangerous extremes in worship. *Chaos* is to be avoided. God the Holy Spirit creates an ‘order’ in the local body of Christ, just as there is a life-sustaining order of activity in our own human bodies. To have ‘order’ (Greek – taxis) means to make arrangements, to plan, to be tidy and to be systematic in our preparation for, and in our holding of actual, worship services (1 Corinthians 14:33,40; Colossians 3:15-17; 1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

Ritual repetition in *cold, unattractive formality* is also to be avoided.

We do not want to be unfeeling or to seem unattractive in our worship! Since worship is an overflow of our hearts' feelings towards God, then there needs to be emotion expressed. God is so great! Salvation is so marvellous! Knowing God's purpose in life is so exciting! (Mark 7:6-8; John 4:23-24; 2 Corinthians 3:2-11; Revelation 3:14-22). The brand new church at Antioch displayed visible *evidence* of the grace of God when a visitor came to see them (Acts 11:21-23). *Encouragement* built up the people. *Evangelism* added people to the congregation. *Education* developed their discipleship of Jesus Christ. The local believers tried to *eliminate* the needs of other believers far away, by their own generous sharing (Acts 11:21-30).

To worship God is to give him the worth he is due, to express his value in your life. To worship is to think, to say, or to sing, how much God himself means to you. Real worship is a heart feeling about the Lord our God, expressed in an appropriate way. Such "spiritual sacrifices (are) acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

As we know the presence of God in our church worship on Sundays, it will help us live in the presence of God throughout the rest of the working week (Romans 12:1-2). God is present everywhere all of the time. When I leave the church building, or the church service, I do not leave God's presence. I can continue to worship God by holy living. I worship God by outwardly whistling or inwardly humming songs of praise to him, wherever I am and whatever else I am doing (Ephesians 5:19). We are not physically together as Christians all day every day. We may be scattered as individuals throughout Khartoum's work, school, and home communities. But we are still close together spiritually, in the church universal, and we live as citizens of a different kingdom – the kingdom of God – within the Republic of Sudan. Our Sunday or Friday worship together, should help us individually reveal the Lord Jesus Christ to the people among whom we live (1 Peter 2:9-12).

Thinking it through.

- (a). How are the 'five reasons Christian congregations exist' expressed in your local church or fellowship?
- (b). If one or two are weak, how can they be strengthened?
- (c). Describe, in one sentence, 'a group of Christians worshipping God'.
- (d). Which is the worst trap for a local church to fall into: being 'chaotic' in worship, or being 'too rigidly structured' in

worship? Why?

50. Christian Ministry

What do you think your church exists for? Take a moment and think about this before you read on. What are the reasons and purposes for which you meet as Christians together?

My suggested answers would include the following:

God has provided me with a local congregation to facilitate good preaching, application and practical teaching of the Bible. This promotes godliness and ethical righteousness. I can worship corporately with like-minded people and I can receive the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the church gatherings, God enables me to enrich the fellowship of believers. This expresses unity and solidarity. There is some opportunity for me to take part in the nurture and training of new converts towards maturity as Christian disciples. This adds to the quality of Christian lives. There is some opportunity for me to take part in corporate evangelism and mission enterprise. This adds to the number of Christian people. There is also some opportunity for me to take part in corporate social service towards those who are disadvantaged within our church community, and within our wider community. This visibly demonstrates the compassionate love of Jesus Christ towards all people and *can* lay a receptive foundation for our personal witness to Christ. In my church there is also a procedure for resolving disputes between any of the believers *before* they become divisive to the testimony. This shows our submission in love to one another (1 Corinthians 6:4-6; Galatians 5:13-14; Ephesians 5:21).

You will notice I have made a deliberate emphasis on the fact that I can play a part – may be several parts – in the ministry of my local church. Please understand, this is *not* because I am an ordained minister! Even if I had not been specifically ordained in a London, England, church in A.D. 1973, and even if I had not successfully completed Bible College near Sydney, Australia, four years earlier, and even without my recently gained Master of Arts degree from Sheffield University, England, I can still minister in the local church. Neither ordination nor degrees are *necessary* for ministry. Every Christian can minister! Every Christian *should* minister!!

Every Christian is a priest in the spiritual house of the church (Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Peter 2:5; 1 Peter 2:9). The New Testament emphasises that the coming of Jesus Christ has put an end to the need of anyone to 'go between' us and God himself. We all have direct access to God. It is our own responsibility to have "clean hands and a pure heart", (Psalm 24:4), and these are available to us through Jesus Christ alone (1 John 1:8-9). All Christians have a priestly ministry. A 'priest' (Greek – hierous) is 'one who prepares and offers a sacrifice'. We are all to give God *ourselves* as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). A 'ministry' (Greek – diakonia) is 'a service, something that is done for others'. When you give yourself, you give everything. When you serve, you are not the person in control. My role in Christian ministry is to give myself totally to ministering to the needs of others, as God directs. Every Christian has this privilege and responsibility.

I have always been uneasy when visiting churches in Sudan, seeing people stand to their feet when I come in, accepting an offered special soft chair on the platform when the congregation is seated on hard backless benches, and having a bottle of coke or pepsi to drink while others are given only a communal cup of water. I understand that Sudanese respect for people and their wonderful hospitality toward strangers are to be commended, and I gladly do so. But it feels uncomfortable to me as a servant minister of God to be given these special honours. I am only doing my duty. I am obediently following my orders. I am a servant who does not want to be treated as special. Anyone who seeks personal privileges or position, has missed the point of a servant ministry.

In the wonderful Sudanese culture, many people quietly serve others without wanting to be noticed. The lady teaching the delightful, if noisy, children in Sunday School, is serving in her ministry. The people bringing water around to the congregation an hour into the meeting on a very hot day, are serving in their ministry. The man who sweeps away any litter and all the dust, and who locks up the door when everyone else has gone home, he is serving in his ministry. When we culturally recognise the very obvious public ministries of some, we must be careful not to overlook the essential, but virtually hidden, ministries of the majority. And as Christians, we must never seek ministry, just to be especially recognised (1 Timothy 5:17-18; 1 Corinthians 12:21-25).

Every Christian can serve by helping other people. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10). “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position” (Romans 12:16). “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8). “Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put a stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (Romans 14:13). “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus” (Romans 15:5). “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7). “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14).

It is an interesting study to look at the words ‘help’, ‘helped’, ‘helper(s)’, and ‘helping’, from a Bible concordance. To ‘help’ means to assist. It means to lift the burden from another. It means to contribute to the cause. A helper improves the situation. A helper serves someone else. You may not feel able to be ‘a minister’ in your church, but if you can ‘help’ in your church, *you are being a minister* in the New Testament understanding of that word. (As a start to this study, see Acts 9:36; Acts 11:29; Acts 13:5; Acts 18:27; Acts 19:22; Acts 20:35; Romans 16:2; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 2 Corinthians 1:11; 2 Corinthians 9:2; Philippians 4:3; 1 Timothy 5:9-10; 1 Timothy 5:16; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon verse 13).

All Christians have gifts and abilities given to them by God that they can use for the benefit of the local church (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-10; 1 Corinthians 12:27-30; Colossians 3:15-17; Hebrews 3:13; 1 Peter 4:11). God gives a whole variety of people so that they can make a wide range of contribution. Every gift is an ability God knows will be useful to the congregation as a whole. Every talent submitted to the Lord becomes a spiritual ministry. *Encouragement* puts strength into everyone. *Advice*, (admonition) given and received, may prevent disasters. Properly submitted and tested *prophecies* may guide or warn the church (1 Corinthians 14:29). Clear explanation and application of the Bible’s *teaching* to every day life in Sudan builds up

the character qualities and lifestyles of Christians. In answer to believing prayer God powerfully and *miraculously* intervenes in events surrounding the life of the church and the individuals who make it up. God's *healing* may be similarly given, either using common medicines, sensible therapies, or with no human treatment at all.

The ability of some of my Sudanese friends to get their tongues to pronounce many languages Dinka, Nuer, Moro, Mabaan, and so on, as well as Arabic and English, puts me to shame. I'm glad God understands English! Prayer and praise spoken to God in an unknown *tongue*, privately, and publicly if interpreted, is another gift God gives to some (1 Corinthians 12:30; 1 Corinthians 14:2). People can share the *knowledge and wisdom* gained from their experiences, and others can find this helpful to them. *Discerning* counterfeit spirituality, at events which are not Christian even though they may seem as if they are, is a valuable gift from God too. *Administration* is the ability to organise well and make sure everything happens as it should. It includes accountability to others. *Faith* is the ability to stimulate reasonable trust in God from the congregation. *Showing mercy* means to be able to put one's own 'rights' to one side and to concentrate on the future more than the past. These are all examples of ways in which believers may be used by God to serve their local congregation.

Comparatively few Christians are called to serve by taking local church leadership responsibility (Ephesians 4:11-12). To be a faithful 'servant of the servants' of Jesus Christ is a blessed ministry (John 13:12-17). Pride has no place in the heart of a pastor. The essence of Jesus' command, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you", is "a humility and helpfulness towards brothers and sisters in Christ". Foot-washing the congregation is *not* necessary for the pastor, but the recognition that the pastor's role is that of a servant – and not of a master – is definitely necessary.

Thinking it though.

- (a). Define: 'the Christian ministry'.
- (b). What does 'the priesthood of all believers' mean?
(1 Peter 2:5).
- (c). How can a 'servant of the church' be its leader?

51. Church Ordinances

The word 'ordinance' means an authoritative regulation or practice. (It should not be confused with a very similar English word 'ordnance', which means artillery and military ammunition supplies!). Our Lord Jesus Christ commanded two ordinances, one to signify joining the Body of Christ, and the other to continually look back to the cross of Christ and forward to his coming again (Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:15-20; Galatians 1:11-12; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

All the church denominations that regularly use liturgy in their weekly services, and most of the 'Free Churches' which do not, have 'set forms' of service for 'Baptism' and for 'the Lord's Supper'. A 'set form' may be a pattern to be followed, or it may be the precise words and actions to be carried out. The 'set form' may be prescribed words to be said – for example, a written order of service to be followed. The 'set form' may give regulation concerning who can (and who cannot) perform certain parts of the service – for example, only an ordained minister or licensed lay reader can give communion or preach. The 'set form' may lay down rules on what materials should or should not be used – for example, enough water to immerse the whole person in baptism, or real bread rather than wafers at communion. All of these 'set forms' are human interpretations of *how* the ordinances should be practised.

Another word used for these local church 'ordinances' is 'sacraments'. This word includes the Latin word 'sacer' meaning 'sacred, exclusively devoted to a holy God'. A 'sacrament' is "an outward sign combined with a prescribed form of words and regarded as conferring some special grace upon those who receive it". Sacraments are acts of obedience to God. By observing them, Christians demonstrate they are part of the worldwide Body of the Lord Jesus Christ. While they observe them, God meets with them in a very special way through the Holy Spirit.

A careful distinction must be drawn at this point. The *act of being* baptised as a Christian does *not* save the person. Neither does the *act of receiving* bread and wine in communion save anyone. Some people are 'sacramentalists', *believing the mere act of receiving these sacraments* from the church, and usually in a right spirit, changes a person into being a Christian. Our studies on 'the Mystery of Salvation' (chapters 43-47) have shown this is *not* the case. I do not trust in the church's symbols of Jesus Christ to save me, I trust in the

person of Jesus Christ as my Saviour. His offering of himself on the cross made atonement for my sin once and for all.

However, both Baptism and the Lord's Supper are nonetheless special events. They are ceremonies (formal acts, usually in observation of something), customs (usual habits or practices), traditions (long standing, handed down practices) and rituals (prescribed forms of religious orders and patterns). They are important in the life of every Christian within the gathered community of the local church.

(a). The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is also known as Holy Communion, Breaking of Bread, Eucharist (with the root meaning of 'thankfulness') and the Lord's Table. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). It is an occasion for self examination, "a man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). It is an occasion for remembering the salvation significance of the cross events, "the Lord Jesus said: do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23-25). It is an occasion for expressing unity between Christians, "Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:14-17). And it is an occasion for anticipating the Lord's return, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

God wants his people to remember constantly that it is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that brings them salvation from their sin. There is no other mediator between God and people. Jesus is the only one (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Denominational rules that restrict to ordained ministers the privilege of giving bread and wine to the congregation, must be seen as different interpretations of 'how' the Lord's Supper is offered. I can find no evidence of that practice in the New Testament. It is much more concerned with the attitude of heart and actions in life of the people who participate in the Lord's Supper by taking the representative bread and wine into themselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-29; "Examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith", 2 Corinthians 13:5).

How Jesus is present in the bread and wine of communion has been understood in different ways over the centuries. 'Transubstantiation' is

the Roman Catholic view that the bread and wine, consecrated by prayer and a said form of words by an ordained Catholic priest, are actually changed into the physical body and blood of Jesus. The 'Mass' so offered to God is seen as one continuing sacrifice of Jesus. This disagrees with our view of salvation through the *finished* work of Jesus on the cross.

'Consubstantiation' is the Lutheran view (Martin Luther, A.D. 1483-1546) that the *real* body and blood of Jesus are present 'in' and 'under' the received bread and wine. There is no physical change in substance of the bread and wine, but as they are eaten and drunk the believer receives the present *glorified* body and life of Christ in a special way. This raises for me, an awkward question of how Christ's physical body or nature, can actually be in more than one place at one time?

The 'Real Presence' view of John Calvin (A.D. 1509-1564) is the traditional Reformed churches view. There is a real, *but spiritual*, presence of Christ in the communion bread and wine. There is not any physical presence of his body and blood. A believer receiving bread and wine can feed on the real spiritual presence of Jesus. This leaves the bread and wine as only representative symbols of the actual body and blood of the Lord Jesus.

For a more detailed study of these issues the student is referred to the writings of others. For me, when I receive the bread and the wine in whatever form, I am able to be thankful to God for the Lord Jesus Christ, and I experience with others God's blessing on our obedience.

There are other practical issues surrounding 'how' communion should be celebrated. Concerning the frequency of celebrating communion, the New Testament only *implies* a weekly service, it does not command it. The word "whenever" means both 'every time' and 'any time' (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:26). I enjoy a weekly communion service. It helps me to keep the death and resurrection of Christ central to my life, and it provides me with a discipline of self-examination. The New Testament favours people disciplining themselves over who can and cannot participate in communion (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). It is not the job of the church leadership to decide on people's fitness to receive bread and wine. But there are certain serious times when church discipline *with a view to forgiveness and restoration of the offender* should be exercised, as a

warning to everyone else (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). The New Testament is silent over at what age young children can participate in communion. Some denominations have devised extra traditions around this, generally to fit in with their practice of infant baptism as we shall see in a moment. It seems most appropriate to me that parents should decide on this as part of their responsibility in bringing up their own children from the earliest age “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4; 2 Timothy 3:15). Proper respect should be given to others in your local congregation who adopt different practices (Romans 14:1; Romans 15:1-2; Hebrews 13:17). This is always one of God’s ways of using the local church fellowship to make us more and more like Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Philippians 4:4-5).

(b). **Believers’ Baptism**

The Greek word ‘baptisma’ means to dip or to plunge, to overwhelm, to go into, be submerged under, and to emerge from, water. John the Baptist baptised (John 3:23). Jesus commanded his disciples to baptise people who became disciples during their evangelism, early on during their teaching of ‘the Jesus way of life’. (Matthew 28:19-20). While the Bible gives us no clear indication of *how* this baptism took place, it does emphasise *why* and *when*.

The word ‘baptisma’ was also used of the submersion of cloth into coloured dyes to change it’s appearance. Tie-dyeing businesses like those of Zagalona and elsewhere, illustrate the meaning of baptism – except I don’t think the practice of making sure a person is fully under the water by pushing them with a stick is a good idea! The ladies who tie-dye will know what I mean!!

Another use of the word was in the immersion of a small cup into a larger container of water, enabling a person to draw some water out and have a drink. Outside my neighbour’s house on Shambat Road he had built a place where three ‘ziirs’ could be kept in the shade. They were regularly filled with water from a hosepipe, and provided for passers by to drink. I expect it was part of his family’s Islamic ‘zakat’ or ‘sadaqa’, legal almsgiving or freewill offerings. Taxi drivers and many others used the two or three cups left there regularly to help quench their thirst. The way these cups are used offers another picture of baptism.

Examples of baptism in the early church are the three thousand people who responded to Peter's preaching of Jesus on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41); the men and women who were baptised in Samaria after they believed Philip's preaching of Jesus (Acts 8:12); the finance official from the Upper Nile, who was baptised after he understood about Jesus (Acts 8:34-38); Saul (Paul) was baptised a few days after meeting, and choosing to surrender to, the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:18); Cornelius' relatives and close friends, after they had been drawn to Jesus Christ by the activities of God in their lives (Acts 10:48); Lydia 's household were baptised after "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" and Paul considered her a believer (Acts 16:14-15); the prison officer from Philippi was baptised with all his family, probably in the ruins of a prison, definitely after midnight, and certainly after he was awakened to his need of salvation and was challenged over a saving belief personally in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31-33); Crispus, the synagogue ruler in Corinth, was baptised with his believing household, and along with other believing Corinthians (Acts 18:8); some of John's disciples at Ephesus were baptised when they had a clear understanding of who Jesus actually was (Acts 19:4-5). Christian baptism is for believers, those who have been persuaded of the truth of Jesus Christ and have therefore placed their trust and confidence in him. Christian baptism is an opportunity for public testimony of being born again. The method is not as important as the meaning.

In general terms, the Roman Catholic understanding of baptism is 'the sacrament *giving regeneration* and new birth into the church'. Many Roman Catholics believe that baptism *itself* delivers a person from the guilt of original and past sins. I am unable to accept this. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross is the means of my salvation, not the work of Jesus *plus* any act of the church.

Most Protestants believe baptism is 'a sacrament that *symbolises* regeneration and *strengthens* the already existing faith of the new believer'. The major difference *within* Protestant churches over baptism is between those who baptise infants and those who do not. I have good friends who baptise infants, though I myself would never be able to do so.

Infant baptism is based on the covenantal relationship between God and his people. In the Old Testament God deals with families more

than individuals. Abraham's children are sealed into God's covenant by the outward sign of circumcision (Genesis 17; Colossians 2:11-12). In the New Testament at Pentecost, Peter links both children and Gentiles into the new promise from God (Acts 2:38-39). It is *possible*, though not clearly stated, that infants were involved in household baptisms (Acts 16:15; Acts 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 16:15). Today, infant baptism is seen as a covenant sign of God's choice. For those who do not accept Catholic 'baptismal regeneration', it is viewed as an opportunity for believing parents, and the believing church which gives infant baptism, to welcome the baby into the family of the visible church. The parents and the local church hope ultimately in the saving work of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and they pray that the child will in due time trust in Christ as his or her personal Saviour and Lord. Interestingly, most 'infant-baptising' churches have found it necessary to introduce a service of 'confirmation', some time later in the adult life of the grown up infant. At this, the teenager or adult 'confirms' for him or herself, that the baptism they were given in their infancy has now become their own, believing, testimony. The churches cannot call *this* later, testimony-confirmation service 'believers baptism', because baptism – as they understand it – has already been given.

Sadly, a divisive tension sometimes develops between 'infant, covenantal-baptising' Christians, and 'adult, believer-baptising' Christians. This is especially over 're-baptism', or 'a second baptism'. Those who practise this have been known historically as 'Anabaptists'. ('Anabaptist' is actually an incorrect name, because infant baptism does not involve faith on behalf of any baby. Their being baptised as an adult believer later in life, is therefore not a re-baptism, but a *first* believers' baptism). Many churches that only baptise believing adults, also have services of 'dedication' to welcome new babies into a local church family. This enables parents and congregations to dedicate themselves to praying, teaching and living towards the time when the growing person trusts in Christ for their own personal salvation. The word 'baptism' is deliberately not used in these services, to avoid any possible confusion with later public testimony.

I respect as fellow believers in Christ, those with a different view to my own on this issue. But having examined baptism in depth in my own study, I could never 'baptise' a baby for two reasons. First, I would be afraid of giving the wrong impression – that this child is now,

in some way, saved by their baptism. Second, I would not want to take away from the adult in later life, the privilege of giving personal and public testimony by believers baptism. Just like new recruits in the police force are given unmistakable uniforms to wear, showing and saying they are *now* working in the police, so believers baptism gives the new believer a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate and to declare that he or she is now living for the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no doubt people clearly did this in the book of Acts (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:34-38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:14-15; 16:31-33; 18:8; and 19:4-5).

Teaching in the New Testament uses baptism as picture language. It describes dying to the old life and rising to the new life (Romans 6:1-7; Colossians 2:11-12); it is used of people joining the church of Christ for the first time (1 Corinthians 1:13-17); it describes people dressed in uniform with the new appearance of Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:26-28); baptism is quoted as a mark of the existing unity of Christians within a local church (Ephesians 4:1-13); and baptism draws on the Old Testament story of Noah's ark to explain a divide between the saved and the lost (1 Peter 3:20-22). Baptism is called one of "the elementary teachings", (Hebrews 6:1,2). 'Elementary' means a simple, first principle.

On many visits I have enjoyed the privilege of ministering within several different church denominations in Sudan as well as at interdenominational conferences. These churches hold different views to each other on the ordinances we have been examining. The Evangelical Presbyterians, the Episcopal Anglicans, the Sudanese Church of Christ and the Sudan Interior Church have all been gracious enough to overcome some differences of view and to ask me to preach and teach on many occasions. I have always tried to respect their views when I minister at their invitation, because I am responsible to respect my host church leadership (Hebrews 13:17). I have often privately discussed with them our differing views, and in doing so I have learned to appreciate our unity in diversity.

As a pastor, I served Khartoum International Church. Along with four to six other elders there, I tried to serve a multinational congregation of about two hundred people, who came from many different church denominations in their home countries. This was more difficult, because integrating their different views into one congregation and one set of practices, was not without problems. Not all issues allow for a democratic compromise, with a little bit of 'give and take' on both

sides. And in any case, such democratic compromise is not always the right thing to do! While seeking to remain true to my Lord Jesus, I also tried to see things from the understanding of others (Romans 14:19-15:2). I did my best to honour every individual (Romans 12:10); to honour every member of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:26); to serve in a way that enabled others to honour and respect me (1 Timothy 3:2 & 8; 1 Timothy 5:17); and to show the meaning of what I taught by the way that I lived (1 Timothy 4:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:1; Titus 2:6-8). I thank God for the gracious and loving understanding given to me by those who held different views to mine. I pray that the churches in Sudan will reaffirm their honour and respect for each other, perhaps learning from the *best* examples of some people who have worked among them over many years, whether the people have worshipped at KIC (where I served) or worshipped elsewhere.

Thinking it through.

- (a). What is the general purpose of the two church ordinances: Baptism and the Lord's Supper?
- (b). Describe how Jesus is 'present' with believers at communion. How is this different from his presence with us anywhere else?
- (c). What is the purpose of Believers' Baptism?
- (d). What is the purpose of Infant Baptism?
- (e). How does Romans 14:19-15:2 challenge our attitudes towards those of different Christian practice?

52. Leadership and Membership of the local Church

The supreme head of the Christian Church throughout all ages is the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; Ephesians 4:15; Ephesians 5:23). The word 'head' (Greek – kephale) means the one who has authority, responsibility and gives direction. It is sadly possible for 'Christian' people to lose their connection to the 'head' by becoming obsessed with the external things of religion, or even with personal visions and revelations (Colossians 2:18-19). The first and most essential qualification for church leadership is that a person is constantly linked and securely fastened to Jesus Christ. Church leadership flows from the gifts Jesus gives to the Church (Ephesians 4:1-16).

The words "grace" (Ephesians 4:7; Greek – charis) and "gifts"

(Ephesians 4:8; Greek – *doma*) indicate that leadership is a definite spiritual gift that God freely gives to some people. God gives other gifts to people who are not given leadership. God is the donor, by his own sovereign will and choice. His will must be respected.

It is important to observe here that it is not the church or the theological college that makes Christian leaders. Recommendation by a family member or friend from the same tribe, sponsorship from a donor, an outgoing human personality, and even a good degree from a university somewhere in the world away from Sudan, are *not in themselves* evidences of a God-given call and gifting for the Christian ministry. It is the organised church that has put an emphasis on higher education being essential for the ordained ministry. I can find no evidence to support that in the Bible. It appears that Jesus had no higher education. He received his knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures simply from attendance at his local synagogue school (Luke 2:41-47).

Timothy was a young pastor at Ephesus, and Paul, a senior man in ministry, urged him to be “a workman who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). He was to “present himself to God” as a hard working student of the Scriptures, *while he was already carrying out his ministry*. I believe the key to church leadership is here. Look for those God is putting his hand on as Christian leaders, and encourage experienced people God has used for a while, to get alongside them in their ministries. Let them pray together regularly. Let them seek advice and counsel about the situations they face, from the Scriptures, together. Let the Holy Spirit teach them. Let them write to encourage one another when they are apart. I do see this pattern of leadership training in the New Testament (Acts 11:25-26; Acts 16:1-5; Acts 18:24-28; Acts 20:17-36; Colossians 1:3-10; Colossians 4:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-8; 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10; 1 Timothy 1:3; 1 Timothy 1:18-19; 1 Timothy 4:11-16; Titus 1:4-5; Titus 3:12).

From Ephesians 4:11-16, we learn that the gifts God gives to the church are people. Their purpose is to equip all believers for ministry and into Christian maturity.

Apostles are messengers, delegates, people sent out with orders to fulfil. Jesus is the unique apostle (Hebrews 3:1). He named twelve apostles from among his followers (Mark 3:14; Matthew 10:2-4). Paul

spoke of his 'seeing the Lord' as one qualifying point for being an apostle, and his seeing 'signs, wonders and miracles' during his ministry as another (1 Corinthians 9:1; 2 Corinthians 12:11-12). Mention is also made of Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Andronicus and Junias as apostles (Acts 14:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:1 & 2:6-7; Romans 16:7). It seems that apostles break new ground for the church on its mission to take the gospel around the world (Romans 1:5). Apostles train others for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:12). The message of the original apostles is in our New Testament (2 Timothy 1:11-14; 2 Peter 3:15-18).

Prophets are people who speak out for God to themselves and everyone else. They may predict the future. They will express God's will in a given situation. It differs from preaching because it is more spontaneous. Listeners sense that God is in these words. New Testament examples are Agabus (Acts 11:27-30); some among Antioch's church leadership (Acts 13:1-3); Judas and Silas (Acts 15:22,32). Prophecy is a highly valued gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:1). In a local congregation, it is the responsibility of everyone to test prophecy given. Not everything that claims to be from God is from God! (1 Corinthians 14:29-33; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). Prophecy given and received in this way should result in encouragement for the congregation. Prophets train other people in speaking out for God (Ephesians 4:12).

Evangelists are people who focus on taking the central message of salvation through Jesus Christ to lost people. They are messengers of the good news of Jesus. They train other people to witness evangelistically (Ephesians 4:12). Only Philip is called an evangelist in the New Testament (Acts 21:8). Pastor Timothy is told by Paul to "do the work of an evangelist", (2 Timothy 4:5).

Pastors are people who shepherd God's people as a shepherd cares for his sheep. A pastor tends his flock, feeding, leading, protecting, encouraging, healing, strengthening and discerning. He treats different aged people in different ways, giving special attention to the young and the weak. The apostle Peter calls himself an elder in appealing to other elders: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (1 Peter 5:1-4). There must not be any financial motives for this service, nor any thoughts of having a high status and being able to order others about. Pastors train other Christians in caring for each other.

Teachers are people who can explain the Christian faith and apply it to practical everyday life. Christian teachers help others to learn and to live. Their aim is not just to take a class, but to change people's lives outside of the classroom. The word 'teach' implies a systematic and prepared form of instruction. The New Testament says a lot about teaching and teachers – both good and bad. There are false teachers with false teaching that Christians must discern and discipline. There are good teachers with good teaching that Christians must respect and reward (1 Timothy 1:3-4; 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 4:1-6; 1 Timothy 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Timothy 3:10; 2 Timothy 4:3-5). Teachers train other believers to serve the congregation by explaining and applying God's truth to modern life.

The Lord Jesus Christ gave clear *principles for leadership* (Mark 10:41-45). A christian leader *gives* his or her own life away in the *service* of the congregation. Jesus saw potential in people like Peter the fisherman and Matthew the tax collector. He *accepted* imperfection and inexperience as his starting points. He *called* the people individually to spend *time with him*, to live their whole lives with him. He *promised* to change them. He *committed himself* to them (Matthew 4:18-20). It was a *gradual process*. He began where his followers were and he slowly *dealt with them as individuals*. He led them to realise who he actually was (Matthew 16:13-20). He gently *kept his patience* when they let him down (Matthew 16:21-28). He *prayed for* them as they went through tough tests on their own (Matthew 26:31-35; Luke 22:31-34). He *made good* their mistakes (Luke 22:49-51). He *trusted* them to complete the work he had begun and he *equipped* them for the task (Luke 24:45-49).

In a local church elders and deacons are the functional leadership. Paul and Barnabas soon appointed them in churches they had started (Acts 14:23). The church in Jerusalem had apostles and elders to resolve contentious issues. The church at Ephesus had elders to oversee the work and shepherd the people (Acts 15:2; Acts 20:17, 28).

Elders (Greek – presbuteros and episkopos) are Christians of mature spiritual experience who, together, watch over, direct and supervise the church. They take responsibility for the witness and wellbeing of the congregation. The New Testament emphasis is placed upon what

kind of people are elders, not so much on what they actually do. Christian character and calling by God are more important than any job title or position (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-11; 1 Peter 5:1-7; James 5:14). God places elders with one another to be a corporate example of what the whole congregation ought to be; “being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). A good test for any eldership is for them to ask themselves: ‘Are we a representative sample of what we would like the whole church to become?’

Deacons (Greek – diakonos) are those with servant hearts in the practical areas of church life. The first ones were willing to release the apostles for preaching and teaching by taking administrative responsibility away from them (Acts 6:1-7). God uses them just as much as he uses the apostles to enable the church to quickly grow in numbers and spread in influence. This is ‘every part of the body’ being used by Jesus Christ, the head (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). If the elders are the servant leaders, the deacons are the servant managers. All need to be spiritually suitable people, who have the respect of the congregation and the outsiders (“full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” Acts 6:3; “above reproach” 1 Timothy 3:2; “having “a good reputation with outsiders” 1 Timothy 3:7; and “worthy of respect” 1 Timothy 3:8).

The Christian church is the reverse of the world. The world measures our importance by the number of people we have working under us, or working for us. “In God’s eyes, greatness consists not in the number of people who serve us, but in the number of people we serve”. (Mark 10:43-44).

God planned the church. God places people in their local congregations. God uses teams of people to serve the congregation by accepting certain responsibilities. God joins everyone together into a Christian community where his life is in and among them.

Considering the question of how the ‘elders and deacons’ can lead their congregation and – at the same time – be submitted to their congregation, I suggest something similar to the pattern we have used in Khartoum International Church. I was chosen and invited by the congregation members to be their pastor. I had an agreement with them to serve for a five year term, with an option of a second five year term if both parties wanted it. I served by leading the church, with the other elders, during the years I was pastor. I was accountable to the

elders at monthly meetings and I was accountable to an annual meeting of members of the congregation. Just before the end of five years, I would have submitted myself to the congregation membership for reappointment if they wanted me to continue. As it happened, I was ill and had to leave Sudan before this procedure happened.

The elders were elected individually from the congregation members. Each one agreed to serve for a three year period, after which they submitted themselves to the church membership for reappointment. Some came due for review in this way every year, so there was some annual opportunity for one or two changes in leadership. The members submitted to our leadership during the everyday life of the church. The pastor and elders submitted to the congregation members every three or five years. God gave unity and harmony to KIC as we tried to serve the needs, largely, of the expatriate community in Khartoum.

The *unity of the church* is the gift and continuing work of God the Holy Spirit. God has given us a variety of churches that we can celebrate and enjoy. Love and respect between denominations or congregations helps to show this unity is real. It is not necessary to come together as one single structured church! Imagine if there was a group of people who decided that all the different football teams in Sudan gave the impression that football was divided. Imagine they started a movement to make all the first division league football teams become one team. You would correctly think: 'These people have misunderstood football. You need at least two teams to have a proper football match, and the more teams there are the better the competition and the attraction of the game will be'.

People should not seek to impose one single church denomination. Man can never produce that kind of unity. It would only ever be a counterfeit of the New Testament church unity anyway. We are all called to "make every effort to *keep* the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). This implies that there will be issues arising to threaten the unity that we have already been given by God. For many years I have worked alongside Christians with whom I disagree on some issues. Elders with me at Khartoum International Church came from home churches and backgrounds as different as Canadian Baptist, Swedish-Canadian Mennonite, German Lutheran, Indian Evangelical, Australian Independent, American Presbyterian,

and English Charismatic. Yet we worked together in unity. Love, respect and communication are the keys to this (1 Peter 1:22-23; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Matthew 5:23-24; Acts 15:1-35; Galatians 2:6-10).

Christian unity is maintained through a common dedication to the glory of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:12-13). Christian unity is maintained through the regular expression of sincere love (Ephesians 4:29-5:1). Christian unity is maintained by a mutual submission to one another (Ephesians 5:21). Christian unity is maintained by carefully nurturing a Christlike heart (Philippians 2:1-5). Christian unity is maintained by respecting the truth of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 John verses 1-12). "The unity of the church is its degree of freedom from divisions among true Christians". I have found that it is not the differences that divide Christians from one another. It is the attitudes in which those differences are held. I retain respect and love for a Muslim with whom I disagree, because I hope to be able to win him to Christ as we meet from time to time, and as our relationship grows. I should definitely be able to do something similar with any other Christian brother or sister.

Local church membership is an administrative issue which denominations express in various ways. It appears that there was some way of 'numbering' the early church (Acts 2:41; Acts 2:47; Acts 4:4; Acts 6:7). The New Testament letters were sent to recognised groups of professing believers, though they are each described a little bit differently to the others (Romans 1:6-7; Galatians 1:1-2; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1-2).

Church discipline implies that there is some type of membership that can be brought to an end for a persistent offender (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:2; 1 John 2:18-19) and perhaps be reinstated after repentance and restitution (2 Corinthians 2:5-8; Galatians 6:1-5). Church discipline teaches that church membership is both a privilege and a responsibility.

There are degrees of discipline God has given which are suitable for different offences against the church community. There is a visitation procedure to help the person who "sins against" another (Matthew 18:15-17). Lazy people can be privately warned. A small group should challenge them face to face with Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15). Divisive teaching and divisive teachers

should be spotted, warned on two occasions, and then avoided (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-10). Expulsion is the solemn discipline for a persistent and unrepentant offender (1 Corinthians 5:11-13).

We must always remember that the object of discipline is the restoration of the fallen brother or sister, into full fellowship with God and with his people. Discipline must be administered by several people, not just one. Charges should only be considered if they are brought by two or three witnesses who are prepared to publicly testify (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Thinking it through.

- (a). How are leaders – and other peoples gifts – to be recognised and encouraged by the local church?
- (b). What kind of example did Jesus himself set, as a leader of his disciples?
- (c). How can a local church maintain unity between a variety of people? What principles should guide it?
- (d). How can many different local churches, from a variety of denominations, show unity in Christ? Is meeting together necessary?

Conclusion:

Our Need

to

put Theology

into Practice

53. What God wants his people to be and to do

Theology provides us with ways of thinking about God. The words we use and their meanings must be carefully defined to ensure they lead us towards a correct understanding and appreciation of God.

When I travelled around the three cities of the Nile confluence, Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North, I was happier if I had someone with me as a guide – someone who knew the way, or who could at least speak the language well enough to ask for directions. I hope that this book has been, and will prove to be, a helpful guide to you. Thank you for (unknowingly) providing me with a reason to write it during my health recovery.

Sometimes I journeyed in the cities by large Tata buses, occasionally by bashed up yellow taxis, but more often than not in my own Toyota car. When I drove my own car, my guides used to say to me: “Don’t take this upcoming road on the left. Keep straight ahead until the next turn. The next left has a paved surface. It will be better for your car”. Paved roads were, usually at least, a little less bumpy and pot-holed than dirt roads.

I soon discovered that under the layers of dirt on *some* ‘dirt roads’ there was in fact a paved surface. Because nothing had been done about the wind-blown sand and grit over many years, the smooth paved way had become lost, buried under dirt upon dirt. The way around the cities had become more difficult as a result.

Since good theology is giving us right ways of thinking about God, we must be careful not to let our good thoughts become buried under months and years of bad thinking. Bad theology is as destructive to the Christian life as bad morality (Colossians 3:1-10; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Philippians 4:8-9). Good theology, well applied in life, is always the basis for excellent Christian living, even in a largely non-Christian environment. In turn, attractive Christian living will revolutionise the witness from all of the Sudanese churches that encourage it.

God wants us to be wary of false teachers and false teaching. He also, and perhaps primarily, wants us to be very careful that our own teaching is always helpfully pointing others along their way to maturity in Jesus Christ.

The groups of people who are employed sweeping the major roads of our cities may give us a helpful reminder of this point. Most days along by Al Moradah's El Nil mosque towards the parliament building, or on the divided Shambat road that goes in front of the Syrian House sweet pastry shop in Bahri, or on the Burri bridge next to the electricity generating company opposite Kober, gangs of men in green-blue uniforms, with brushes, spades and wheeled barrows, work very hard to keep the nicely paved roads clear of the persistent and encroaching desert dust. I suggest that like these men, Sudanese Christians must work hard every day to keep good Christian theology in Sudan clear from the polluting rubbish that is always trying to invade it.

God wants us to study his word. God wants us to always apply it to our lives in the way that gives most honour and glory to Jesus Christ, no matter how difficult that may be.

“Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:12-13).

“If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 4:11).

Thinking it through.

- (a). Why must 'good thinking about God' lead to changes in our individual and corporate (church) behaviour?
- (b). Is studying the Bible enough? What more is there to successful Christian discipleship?

Appendices

A one-line dictionary of English words and their usage for this book.

accounted for explained, to one in authority

adoption to bring a person into a specific relationship, to take over for one's own child

admonition advice against doing something; warning caution

advocate one who speaks in favour of another, one who defends the cause of another

affirmation a statement of truth positively put forward

albeit even though

allegiance loyalty to a person or a group

alleged stated before, or even without, proof

allusion a brief, indirect reference – not a direct quotation

almighty having all power

Almighty another name for God

anarchy lawlessness, disorder; absence of government when everyone pleases themselves

ancestral relating to family from the past

analogy comparison made to show likeness or similarity

apologetics intelligent defence of the Christian faith (Greek *apologia* – to defend)

NOT the similar English word, 'apology' meaning 'to express regret for a failure or fault'!

arrogancy (old English) pride and self-importance

aseeda (Arabic) a staple or main food, type of cooked cereal

atmosphere layer of air and gas surrounding the earth

atonement satisfaction given for an injury or wrong; reconciliation made

attested confirmed as true

attribute a quality belonging to a person, a typical character mark

attributing seen as belonging to

begotten fathered, caused, born of (the act of God in the birth of Jesus)

believe a trusting commitment to Jesus, being certain that he is God the Son and Saviour

benefit something that improves or brings advantage

bondage slavery to

catholic universal, relating to all people; **Catholic** the entire body of Christians

Roman Catholic the specific Church group over which the pope presides from the Vatican

chai (Arabic) tea – sometimes spelt as **shaay**

Christian a person who believes in, and follows, Jesus

clinicalness plainness, simplicity, directness, usually unattractive

coinherence joined together in a way not to be broken

communion sharing thoughts and emotions in a common bond

Communion the Lord's Supper service of bread and wine

condemned cell basic prison room in which a person waits for

execution

confession a stated admission of mistakes, sins, errors and faults

confession of faith a formal public statement of firm and specific religious beliefs

confirmation proving to be true

confluence merging, mixing and flowing together

contentious tending to argue or quarrel

contraction making smaller, shortening

contrition deeply felt regret for wrong doing

controversies disputes, debates – often in public, where there is strong disagreement

corporate from a joint or united group

council assembly of appointed people meeting for discussion

counsel advice or guidance on conduct, behaviour, choices

creed formal and concise statement of essential Christian (or other) beliefs and principles

cultural transposition understanding behaviour or ideas in another time and social setting

damnation eternal punishment by God

definitive serving to define, settle finally and conclusively

deification exalting to the position of a god

denomination group of churches with its own special way of believing and organising

derogatory insulting, offensive

dignity worth and honour

dimension aspect; effect to be considered

discerning being able to recognize good from bad, even when it is not easy

distortion twisting or pulling out of the right shape

diversity variety, many different ones

doctrine a belief or teaching from the Bible, in a specific area of theology

dogmatic forcefully claim to be the absolute authority on what is right

dukkan (Arabic) local shop

ecclesiastical relating to the organisation of the church or churches

effectual calling capable and successful in producing the intended result

elite the most powerful, rich, gifted or educated members of a group

elitism pride in being an elite, the belief that society should be governed by the elite

encroaching gradually taking over

erring making mistakes, turning from the right course

esoteric intended for a minority who know something others do not, difficult to understand

essential of vital importance; the fundamental nature or foundation of

eternal without beginning or end; lasting forever

eternity endless time; time with no limits

etymological source and development of words through history

evil morally wrong – sinful; naturally bad – harmful; always the opposite of God's best

exaltation raising up and praising highly

facilitate to make easier and help the progress of

faith strong belief in something; confident and practical trust in God

Fall Adam's sin of disobedience to God, and the resulting sinfulness of all humankind

fatur (Arabic) breakfast, breaking the fast

felicity happiness, joy and suitability

figurative a word picture that shows what something else is like

finite limited or restricted

forgiveness stopping blame; freeing from a penalty; not holding a person's sin against them

foule (Arabic) beans – sometimes spelt as **ful** and **fool**

generating station a place with special equipment for producing large amounts of electricity

guilt deserving punishment for doing wrong – especially breaking God's law

haboob (Arabic) dust storm

heresy a belief or teaching that is in error and is against usually accepted Christian truth

holy set apart; pure; one quality of God himself; person separated

from sin and to God

hovering remaining in one place while flying

humankind the human race, all people everywhere

hydroelectric electricity made by the power of falling water

idol often a physical object of wood or stone; any person or thing that takes the place of God

imam (Arabic) leader of congregational prayers in local mosque

immutable does not change, and is not changed by time or anything else

impiety lack of respect for God

imputed personal position legally transferred to someone else

incarnation showing or being in a bodily form – usually a human form

Incarnation the act of God the Son becoming a human being

incomprehensible not able to be fully understood

incredible beyond belief, amazing

indissoluble not able to be dissolved or broken

induce to persuade, to influence, to cause to happen

inerrancy the belief that something is free from mistakes and inaccuracies

infallibility the belief that something is totally reliable and will not fail in its purpose

infinite without limits or end; without boundaries

iniquity a wicked act, sin

initial the first, the beginning

instantaneous done in a moment, with no delay in time

irrevocable not able to be taken back, changed or undone

jellabiya (Arabic) usually white, traditional clothing often worn by Sudanese men

jihad (Arabic) holy war by Muslims against infidels (unbelievers)

jinn (Arabic) spirits in Muslim tradition, which can take on many forms

judgement (also **judgment**) the decision over a person being good or bad

just fair in the treatment of everyone

justification the act of being proven and seen to be right with God

ka'ba the holy shrine of Islam in Mecca; a cube-like black building in the centre of its mosque

kettle metal container with handle and spout for boiling water

khawaja (Arabic) foreigner, often, a white or western person

kisera (Arabic) a staple or main food, type of flat bread

literal limited to the exact first meaning of the word or text

logic clear patterns of reasoning and thinking to conclusions

manuscript original (often handwritten) documents, or later handwritten copies

martyr person who suffers death rather than give up his religious beliefs

Mass the celebration of the Eucharist (bread and wine), mainly by Roman Catholics

mercy giving someone more than, or something different from, what they deserve

metaphors word-pictures; figures of speech

merit worth or superior quality; spiritual credit

ministry the profession or duties of an ordained clergyman

morality customs of behaviour which guide our lives over good and bad, right and wrong

motivating powerful reason for action

NIV New International Version (of the Bible)

ordinance an authoritative regulation to be practiced

original the first, beginning and genuine one

orthodox usually accepted standards of behaviour or right belief

Orthodox the Eastern Churches in communion with the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople

overlap to partly cover another subject, to lay beside and partly over something else

paraclete a mediator or advocate

Paraclete God the Holy Spirit as strengthener and as one who works together with us

partakers people who take part in

perseverance continued steady belief and effort in spite of difficulty, keeping going

persistence holding on and keeping going against difficulty

pluralism theory that all separate groups should have equal rights, truth and power

poetic writing in verse, the rhythm or spirit of writing

polytheism the belief in more than one god

predestination the act of God determining every event from eternity past

progressive developing towards a goal or achievement

psychological way of thinking; affecting the mind

reconcile to make friends after being opposed; to bring back together

rector Episcopal clergyman in charge of a parish

redemption the act or process of being recovered, bought back, at a price

regeneration moral, spiritual, or physical renewal, a breathing in of new life

repentance so sorry for being or doing wrong a person turns away from it

repudiate reject the authority of; refuse to accept as valid

resume to begin again

revelation what God shows us about himself, usually in creation or in the Bible

righteous holy, good, upright and pure

ritual usually followed set form of a religious service or ceremony

Roman Catholic see 'catholic'

sacrifice the offering (usually killing) of something before God, for the sake of someone else

salvation the act of being kept from harm when in danger; God rescuing humans from sin

saviour one who rescues another from danger;

Saviour Jesus Christ, who rescues people from sin

sanctification made more holy, freed from sin, set apart for holy use

satisfaction (in the atonement) full payment of a debt that is owed

scripture a sacred, solemn or authoritative book

Scripture the Old and New Testaments of the Bible

secular things of daily life having nothing particularly to do with religion or church

sin breaking God's known will, an act or thought against what God wants

sinful nature the desire to sin, resulting from Adam's sin, in every human being

soteriology the doctrine of salvation

sovereign person exercising the top authority

spontaneous without being planned or prepared earlier

subjectively personally thinking and feeling; judging by my experience

substitutionary serving in the place of another

suk (Arabic) market – sometimes spelt **sook** and **souk**

supererogation the performance of work, prayers, devotions, in

excess of that required

superintended directed, kept a watchful eye on the event and its operation

surah (Arabic) chapter in the Qur'an

syncretism joining together many different beliefs and practices

systematic marked by the use of order and planning

territorial relating to any piece of land, or district, or country

transgression breaking the law, overstepping the limit set, sin

transliterate to use the sounds and letters of a word from a different language

tribal from a particular social grouping of people, with a common descent or culture

trustworthiness visible honesty and reliability

turbines machines in which the energy of a moving fluid is used to turn a hub and blades

ultimate highest and most important, last and deciding

unique the only one, without equal, without like

universal common to the whole of humankind

unpardonable cannot be excused or forgiven

worship to show deep love, devotion and respect towards; to give honour to God

wrath God's holy anger; his hatred and punishment of sin

wrought (old English) worked out, done

ziir (Arabic) large clay water pot

The following sources were used to develop these definitions:

Collins English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1995.

Dictionary of Theological Terms in Simplified English (Wheaton: Evangelism and Mission Information Service) 2003.

ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

A suggested Catechism providing basic instruction in the beliefs and practices of Christianity.

The purpose of a Catechism is to provide a basic outline of the doctrines of Christianity by means of questions and answers. Although it is important to learn the answers accurately, few, if any, include everything. The parent/child, teacher/church, and individual, should therefore enlarge the answers that have been given. It is at this precise point that the real value of a Catechism is discovered, in that it becomes a foundation from which to discuss and study the principal teachings of the Christian faith.

One important and useful feature of this Catechism is that it has been conveniently divided into 12 main sections (by the numbers 1, 2 etc.) and into 52 small units (by means of an asterisk*). This gives freedom to cover the contents of the Catechism in monthly, or weekly, intervals.

The reader's attention is drawn to the passages for study that follow the end of each section of questions and answers. We have deliberately avoided citing single texts of scripture on their own so as to escape the impression that the doctrines of Christianity rest upon unrelated statements of the Bible. The passages for study provide the basis for a thorough doctrinal study of the word of God.

A WORD OF EXPLANATION

In General:

It is suggested that the best way to use this Catechism is to read the questions and answers of each section followed by the selected passages from the Bible. Having done this it is important to re-read the questions and try to discover how the answers have been brought out from the Bible.

For use by Parents:

Parents may wish to break down each section into smaller units, depending upon the ages of their children. An asterisk (*) is given to show where this can be suitably done. It is still advised to encourage the children, if capable, to read the whole section through once, as described in the section above.

For use in the Meetings of the Church:

A possible way of using this Catechism in the formal meetings of the church is to break down each section into smaller units as suggested for parents, and then give ten minutes to the Catechism at any suitable point in the meeting. It would be good to encourage all ages to participate - in learning the answers to the questions, in reading suitable passages from the Bible, and by asking and answering questions arising in their minds from the use of the Catechism. Care will be needed to adapt these questions and answers to the ages and abilities of the congregation.

For use with those who have recently become Christians and/or have applied for membership of the Church:

The Catechism should be used as described in the paragraph 'In General', and each section covered in one meeting a week for twelve weeks. Experience shows that such a meeting would probably need to be one and a half to two hours in length, particularly if a group of people are receiving instruction, rather than an individual.

1. INTRODUCTION: What is it all about?

*1.

Question: Why does the Bible begin by assuming that

God exists?

Answer: Because everyone knows it to be true.

2.

Q. How can we be sure that everyone knows that God exists?

A. All, without exception, are born with an awareness of God, which is confirmed by the witness God has given of himself, in the world in which we live.

*3.

Q. Why do men and women, with such evidence, deny God or live as if he does not exist?

A. Because they suppress and distort what they know to be true in order to live their own way.

*4.

Q. Has God given any other witness to himself?

A. Yes, in the Bible. Here God has revealed all that we need to know about himself and all that he requires of us.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Genesis chapter 1:1-2:3; Psalm 19; Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; Romans 1:14-32, 2:12-16; Acts 14:8-20, 17:16-34; 2 Timothy 3:10-17; 2 Peter 1:1-21.

2. GOD.

*1.

Question: Who is this God of whom the Bible speaks?

Answer: He is the one and only God, living and true; a personal spirit who is both eternal and unchangeable, demanding that everyone love and serve him.

2.

Q. What is God like?

A. He is holy and majestic, yet good and forgiving which should create both reverence and joy in the hearts of all people everywhere.

*3.

Q. Why do we declare God to be our Creator?

A. Because he made all things to display his glory, and especially mankind, whom he made in his own image.

4.

Q. Why do we declare God to be our Sustainer?

A. Because he is ceaselessly active in his control of all events, guiding every detail of life according to his plan.

*5.

Q. Why do we declare God to be our Saviour?

A. Because he has provided a salvation for the world, which is entirely his work.

*6.

Q. Why do we declare God to be our Judge?

A. Because at the end of time, he will give to each person according to what that person has done.

*7.

Q. In how many persons does this one God exist?

A. There are three eternal distinctions within the one God, of an intensely personal kind, such that we can speak of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; John 4:21-24; Numbers 23:18-24; Deuteronomy 33:26-29; John 14:8-14; Hebrews 11:1-3; Genesis 2:4-25; Acts 17:24-28; Daniel 4; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 3:16-18; Romans 2:5-16; Acts 17:29-31; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Matthew 3:13-17; John 14:15-23; Matthew 28:16-20; Galatians 1:1-3; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

3. THE BIBLE.

*1.

Question How has God made himself known to men?

Answer: In the created universe which reflects his glory, and in the Bible.

2.

Q. Has God made himself known to men in other ways in the past?

A. Yes, by his spoken word, through his prophets and apostles, and through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

3.

Q. Should anyone expect God to make himself known in these ways today?

A. No, because the Bible is God's sufficient and final word to all people.

4.

Q. Does God give us direction in any other way?

A. Yes, in ways consistent with the teachings of the Bible, he acts directly on our lives, since the Bible itself urges us to keep in step with the Spirit.

*5.

Q. Has the knowledge of God, which we can learn from the created universe, any value?

A. Yes, it leaves all without excuse for their unbelief.

6.

Q. Why do we need the Bible?

A. Because without it no one could know the Lord Jesus Christ as their only Saviour,

*7.

Q. What is the Bible?

A. God's written word, free from all error.

8.

Q. Who wrote the Bible?

A. Men who were guided by the Holy Spirit.

9.

Q. Whose words are we reading when we read the Bible?

A. The word of God through the words of men.

*10.

Q. What is one of the most important things we ought to know about the Bible?

A. It is our supreme guide and judge in all matters.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Psalm 19, Genesis 12:1-9; 1 Samuel 3:19-4:1a; Ephesians 2:19-3:6; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:1-4; John 16:12-15; Galatians 5:16-26; Acts 8:26-40; Romans 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Acts 4:23-31; Jude 1-4; Revelation 1:1-3, 22:18-21.

4. THE FALL OF MAN.

*1.

Question: In what condition did God make Adam and Eve?

Answer: They were created righteous and happy, enjoying God and everything he had made.

2.

Q. Did they remain in this condition?

A. No, encouraged by Satan, Adam rebelled against God, and so became sinful, and unhappy.

*3.

Q. What effect had the sin of Adam on all mankind?

A. All men and women are born into the world constantly breaking God's law in deed, word, and thought.

*4.

- Q. Does this mean that, since the fall of Adam, no one is made in the image of God?
- A. No, everyone still bears God's likeness, although it is marred by sin. This explains why all people, sinful in every part of their lives, are yet capable of actions which are outwardly good.

*5.

- Q. Does any man or woman, of their own desire, seek to love and obey God?
- A. No, all without exception are unwilling and unable to seek God as their highest good.

6.

- Q. What is so serious about our guilt and corruption?
- A. It brings unhappiness and exposes us all to God's anger.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Psalm 8; Genesis 3; Romans 5:12-21, 3:9-20; Genesis 9: 1-7; Matthew 15:1-20; Romans 8:1-8; Ephesians 2:1-10; Psalm 51.

5. THE PLAN OF SALVATION.

*1.

Question: When did God plan the salvation of sinful men and women?
Answer: It was in eternity that God determined to save sinners.

2.

- Q. Why did God plan the salvation of sinful men and women?
- A. The plan is entirely the result of his undeserved love.

*3.

Q. Who was involved in this plan to save sinful men and women?

A. The three Persons of the Trinity were all involved, in planning and carrying out the salvation of sinners.

4.

Q. What was God the Father's part in the plan of salvation?

A. He is the source of salvation, by setting his love upon sinners, and sending God the Son to be their Saviour.

*5.

Q. What was God the Son's part in the plan of salvation?

A. In obedience to the Father's will, the Son of God became flesh, in order that as the God-man he might take the place of sinners.

*6.

Q. Why did God the Son take the place of sinners?

A. So that he could bear the full penalty for their sin, and restore them to a loving friendship with himself.

7.

Q. How did God the Son pay the full penalty for sinners?

A. By giving full obedience to the holy law of God, and by his suffering and death on the cross at Calvary.

8.

Q. How do we know that God the Son was successful in his part of the plan of salvation?

A. Because although the Lord Jesus Christ died and was buried, he rose again on the third day, bringing everlasting life to all who believe.

*9.

Q. Where is the Lord Jesus Christ now?

A. In heaven, seated at the right hand of God.

10.

Q. What is he doing?

A. He is ruling over everything, for the good of all believers, and constantly praying for them.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Romans 8:28-39; 2 Timothy 1:3-12; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10a; Ephesians 1:3-10; Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Galatians 3:10-14; 1 Corinthians 15:1-20; Hebrews 1:1-4; Ephesians 1:15-23; Hebrews 7:23-27.

6. THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION.

*1.

Question: What is God the Holy Spirit's part in the plan of salvation?

Answer: He is to make the Lord Jesus Christ real and glorious to sinners, so that in enjoying fellowship with God the Son, they receive the salvation secured by his life, death, and resurrection.

2.

Q. What does God the Holy Spirit do for sinners?

A. He gives them new life, so they are able to repent of sin, and believe in Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

*3.

Q. What happens to sinners the moment they believe?

A. They are declared righteous in God's sight, remade after the likeness of Jesus Christ, and adopted into God's family.

*4.

Q. Can Christians ever lose their salvation?

A. No, but they can be so seriously overcome by temptation as to lose interest in the Christian life.

5.

Q. How are Christians overcome by temptation?

A. Although believers possess new life they are still sinners, and sometimes yield to Satan. He tempts them by using both the good and the bad in the world, in order that they might distrust and disobey the Saviour.

6.

Q. Why cannot Christians ever lose their salvation?

A. Because the new life that the believer receives cannot be destroyed. Thus all who are truly converted, despite times of intense struggle and failure, will certainly continue in their fellowship with Jesus Christ, and enter finally into the joys of heaven.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: John 16:5-16; Acts 16:11-15; Romans 3:21-31, 8:28-30; Galatians 3:26-4:7; Luke 22:31-34, 54-62; Psalm 32; Romans 7:14-25; Matthew 4:1-11; John 10:22-30; 2 Timothy 4:9-18.

7. THE HISTORY OF SALVATION.

*1.

Question: How did the world receive Christ's salvation?

Answer: Progressively, first by promise and sacrifice alone, in the days of Adam to Abraham, to which was added the laws given to the community of Israel, in the days of Moses, and then in the personal coming of God's Son to the earth, to die and rise again.

*2.

Q. What was the promise of salvation?

A. That God would provide a Saviour, who would rescue people from their sin and its awful effects.

*3.

Q. How were people saved before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ?

A. By believing in the Saviour to come.

4.

Q. How did they show their faith?

A. By offering sacrifices on God's altar.

5.

Q. What did these sacrifices represent?

A. Jesus dying in the place of sinners.

*6.

Q. What special promise did God give in the time of Noah?

A. God made a promise to the whole earth, that all general blessings would be secure, so that his plan of salvation could be carried out.

7.

Q. What are some of these blessings?

A. Human government, a sense of what is true, good and beautiful, as well as numerous gifts such as food, shelter, health, family and friends, which result in everyone being encouraged to do good, being restrained from sin, and being helped to perform cultural tasks.

*8.

Q. Who were the members of this community of God's people?

A. The descendants of Abraham, called Israelites, who professed faith, and their children.

9.

Q. What special ordinances did God give to the members of this community?

A. Circumcision in the days of Abraham, and the Passover in the days of Moses.

10.

Q. How was the life of this community governed?

A. By prophets, priests, and kings.

11.

Q. What special promise did God give the members of this community?

A. The land of Canaan, in which God lived, would be theirs if they were faithful to him. This guaranteed all material blessings such as plenty of food, good health, and victory over their enemies.

*12.

Q. What happened when the Lord Jesus Christ came, and the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost?

A. God created a new community - the local church - of which there are many.

13.

Q. Who are the members of this local church?

A. All those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and those alone.

14.

Q. What special ordinances have been given to the local church?

A. Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

15.

Q. Who manages the affairs of the local church?

A. Elders and deacons.

16.

Q. Has the local church, like Israel, been given a promise of any land?

A. No, the church and state are separate now, since the church is composed of people from every land. Believers, however, look forward to the day when they shall possess the whole earth made new.

*17.

- Q. What is the hope of the Christian, now that the Lord Jesus Christ has come and secured salvation for his people?
- A. The Christian's hope is in the certain return of the Lord Jesus Christ, to complete the salvation of believers. He will do this by freeing them from all personal sin, giving them new bodies, and providing a world cleansed from sin and its awful consequences.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Genesis 3:15-4:16; Exodus 19:1-24:18; Galatians 3:15-4:7; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 8:48-59; Hebrews 11:1-6; John 1:29-34; Genesis 8:20-9:17; Exodus 19:1-6; Genesis 17:1-14; Exodus 12:1-13; Deuteronomy 18:14-22; Numbers 3:1-10; Deuteronomy 17:14-20; Numbers 35:33-34; Exodus 23:20-33; Acts 2:1-14, 37-47; Hebrews 8:7-13; Matthew 28:16-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Philippians 1:1-2; 2 Peter 3:10-13; 1 Peter 1:3-12; 1 John 2:28-3:3; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 42-44, 50-58; Romans 8:18-27.

8. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

*1.

Question: What are the two great blessings of the Christian life?

Answer: The forgiveness of sins, and the possession of new life, which give the Christian a sense of God's love, joy and peace.

2.

Q. What does it mean to have new life?

A. It means God has broken the power of sin in the lives of Christians, and has given them a desire to glorify him in the whole of their lives.

3.

Q. How do we show our desire to please God in everything?

A. By dying daily to sin as we deny self and take up our cross; and as we live daily to righteousness by the Holy Spirit, strengthening our Christ-like life.

*4.

Q. How important are good works for the Christian?

A. They are sure to happen as marks of fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

5.

Q. What is the chief reason for the Christian seeking to please God in everything?

A. The Christian lives to please God, out of love for Jesus Christ, who is his Saviour and Lord.

6.

Q. What are some of the ways in which Christians show that they enjoy fellowship with the Saviour?

A. By daily prayer, study of the Bible, regular fellowship with other Christians and the sacrificial use of their gifts and possessions, including a home open for others.

*7.

Q. What should the Christians' relationship be to the world in which they live?

A. Christians must not withdraw into a life totally separated from non-Christians since they have a vital role to play in society. Christians must show how to use and enjoy the good gifts God has given to all people everywhere.

8.

Q. What is one important consequence of such loving contact with the world?

A. People everywhere will hear the Gospel message and have it given extra strength by seeing the Christian's good deeds, and perhaps come to love and trust the Saviour for themselves.

*9.

Q. How are we to know what kind of life God wants his children to live?

A. Christian behaviour is governed by God's unchanging laws - declared in the Ten Commandments, explained in the sermon on the Mount and the New Testament letters, and illustrated in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

10.

Q. Does God correct his children when they fall into sin?

A. Yes, the Bible teaches that God does not let his children's sin go unnoticed, but will discipline them if they do wrong.

11.

Q. Why does God discipline his children for their sin?

A. In order to show that sin in the believer is serious; also to help his children to grow and mature in the Christian life; and, above all, to show that they do not belong to the company of unbelievers, who often go unpunished in this life, but will certainly be condemned forever on the day of judgement.

12.

Q. Is God's discipline always related to the presence of sin?

A. No. Sometimes his discipline is given so as to prevent sin in his children, and to help them serve him better.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 5:1-5, 5:20-6:23; Colossians 3:1-17; Luke 9:18-26; Matthew 7:15-29; Ephesians 4:29-5:2; Matthew 6:5-15; 1 Peter 1:22-2:3; Hebrews 10:19-31; Philippians 4:10-20; Acts 16:11-15; Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 1 Peter 2:9-25; Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5-7; Romans 13; John 19:25-27; Hebrews 12:1-12; 1 Corinthians 11:23-34; Psalm 73; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

9. THE CHURCH.

*1.

Question: What is the church?

Answer: The Body of Christ, which comprises all people from every land, and from all ages, who have been given new life by the Holy Spirit, and brought to trust in the Saviour.

2.

Q. What is the local church?

A. The Body of Christ made visible in a particular place.

*3.

Q. What is the most necessary feature of the local church?

A. A community of believers who worship Christ as Saviour and Lord.

4.

Q. What are the vital marks of the local church?

A. Belief, baptism, life, leadership, teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and prayer.

*5.

Q. What special gifts has the Lord Jesus Christ given to manage the affairs of the local church?

A. Elders, who rule and teach, both in private and to the gathered church; deacons, who are responsible for all material needs; and evangelists, whose task it is to preach the Gospel in order to establish new churches.

*6.

Q. What are the important functions of the local church?

A. All Christians are to build each other up, so that the church may be strengthened in its faith; and all Christians are to share the Good News of Jesus, so that the Gospel may be spoken to all people everywhere.

7.

- Q. How is it possible for the local church to work out these important functions?
- A. It is made possible by the use of gifts, which God has given to each member through the Holy Spirit.

*8.

- Q. What duty does one local church have for another?
- A. Each local church must make the spiritual unity that exists between all local Gospel churches, as visible as possible.

9.

- Q. For what reasons should local churches confer?
- A. The definition of doctrine; the exercise of discipline; the fulfilment of evangelistic enterprise (by finance, prayer, and the use of suitably gifted people); the training of church leaders; and for social action in the community.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Ephesians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 16:19-24, 1:1-3; Acts 2:41-47; 1 Timothy 3:1-16; Philippians 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; 1 Corinthians 14:1-17; Acts 8:1b-8, 1 Peter 4:7-11; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11; Acts 15:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Philippians 4:14-20; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; Acts 16:1-5, 11:19-30.

10. THE SPECIAL ORDINANCES.

*1.

Question: What two special ordinances did the Lord Jesus Christ give to the local church?

Answer: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

2.

- Q. Why did the Lord Jesus Christ give these ordinances?
- A. To show that his disciples belong to him, and to remind them of what he has done for them.

3.

Q. How are these ordinances able to give spiritual blessings?

A. Only, as by faith, Christians receive the truths which these ordinances proclaim.

*4.

Q. What is baptism?

A. The dipping of believers into water, as a sign of being one with Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection.

5.

Q. What is the purpose of baptism?

A. To show believers that God has cleansed them from their sins through Jesus Christ.

*6.

Q. Who are to be baptised?

A. Only those who repent of their sins, and believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

*7.

Q. What is the Lord's Supper?

A. The eating of bread, and drinking of wine, to remember the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ.

8.

Q. What does the bread represent?

A. The body of Jesus, broken for sinners.

9.

Q. What does the wine represent?

A. The blood of Jesus, shed for the forgiveness of sins.

*10.

Q. How should the Lord's Supper be observed?

A. By using one loaf and one cup.

11.

Q. Why is it important to use one loaf and one cup?

A. To express the spiritual unity of the local church.

12.

Q. Who should take of the Lord's Supper?

A. Only those who are in fellowship with a local church.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Matthew 28:16-20; Corinthians 11:23-32, 10:1-5; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Hebrews 4:1-2; Romans 5:20-6:4; Acts 22:1-16, 2:32-41; Matthew 26:17-30; 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

11. THE LAST THINGS.

*1.

Question: What happens to people when they die?

Answer: Their bodies return to the dust, and their souls live on.

2.

Q. Where do the souls of believers go at death?

A. They immediately enter the presence of Christ.

*3.

Q. Where do the souls of unbelievers go at death?

A. They are cast into hell.

4.

Q. What is hell?

A. A place of dreadful and endless punishment.

*5.

Q. Will the Lord Jesus Christ come again?

A. Yes, in great power and glory. At the last day he will come personally and visibly, to judge the world.

*6.

Q. Will the bodies of the dead be raised to life again?

A. At the day of judgement there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of believers and unbelievers.

7.

Q. What will happen to the wicked in the day of judgement?

A. The body, with the soul, in being banished from the presence of God forever, shall be sentenced to the agonies of hell, with Satan and his demons.

*8.

Q. What will happen to the righteous in the day of judgement?

A. They shall be perfectly blessed, both in soul and body, and shall live with the Lord Jesus Christ forever, in a creation purged from all sin, and filled with divine glory.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Ecclesiastes 12:1-8; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Luke 16:19-31; Mark 9:42-48; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Titus 2:11-14; John 5:16-30; Revelation 20:11-15; 1Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Peter 3:1-13; Revelation 21:1-5.

12. POSTSCRIPT: A defence of the faith!

*1.

Question: Why do Christians believe in God?

Answer: Because God has given good and sufficient reasons for doing so.

2.

Q. What are some of the good and sufficient reasons for believing?

A. God's world - particularly the creation of man; God's speech and actions - especially his written word, the Bible; and God's Son - the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom God came down to earth as man.

*3.

Q. If God has provided good and sufficient reasons for believing, why do not all people trust and obey him?

A. Every person, in being born without God the Holy Spirit, is taken captive and blinded by Satan, and thus is not only unwilling to trust God, but also unable to appreciate the evidence God has given of himself.

4.

Q. What ought all men and women to do then?

A. They must repent, by ceasing to exclude God and his written word – the Bible, from their lives; and they must trust Jesus Christ, so that their sin of unbelief may be forgiven.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY: Luke 1:1-4; Romans 1:18-20, 2:14-15; Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 18:14-20; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; John 1:1-18; Romans 1:21-23, 28-32; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; 2 Timothy 2:22 -26; 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10, 2:13-16; John 16; 5-11; 1 John 5:1-12.

Asking and answering questions was written by
my pastor, Colin Richards, of Scorrier Chapel, Cornwall, England.
It is included here with his kind permission.

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