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Table of Contents

1. The Future of the Somali Church: A Perspective Joseph Bach	3
2. Fasting in Christ Owen Mudford	9
3. One Church in Christ Pastor Si Fry	22
4. The Father Heart of God Simon Holley	35
5. The Lord Jesus Our Example Stephen Thompson	43
6. The Impact of Persecution on the Generational Movement of the Gospel: A Missional Reflection of the Somali Church Abdikamil Mahmoud “Abdi Walalo”	50
7. The Gospel Revealed to the Apostle Paul Romans 1:1-7. First Part. Paul’s Qualifications Russell Cross	55
8. A Call for Papers (CFP)	62
9. Advertise in the SBS Journal	63

The Future of the Somali Church: A Perspective

Joseph Bach

Introduction

Recently I was asked where the Somali church might be in 5 years or 10 years. Not usually thinking in those terms, I spontaneously commented as best I could. That response follows, for what benefit it might have for Somali Christians, or those working with them. The questioner also acknowledged my very long-term interest and historical contact with Somali Christians, which hopefully lends itself to a credible response here. By “Somali church” it is assumed to mean first the church in Somalia and Somaliland proper, but also in “greater” Somalia (including Djibouti, the Somali Region of eastern Ethiopia and Kenya’s Northeastern Province), and to a lesser degree the Somali diaspora (worldwide, where the driving influences are more varied and nuanced). Instead of responding with particular benchmarks which Somali Christians might in time attain (such as the number of Christians or congregations, or where regional bulwarks might emerge), my response was to redefine the question and then identify what the driving forces might be going into the future.

The “Body of Christ,” vs. the “Church”

While the question stands on its own merit, I find it much more valuable, even necessary, to change its terms: “Where will the Somali *Body of Christ* be in 5 or 10 years?” Yes, the “Church” is seen as the corporate body of Believers, but quickly if not unwittingly implies identified infrastructure, defined leadership, and to some degree at least suggests a somewhat non-personal corporate entity. Whether by explicit construct or from passive perception, in normal usage “church” implies structure and its supports. The “Body of Christ” is also seen as the collection of Believers, but the essence of who they are as people and the sum of their story is primary, including whatever is directly and organically growing out of that. There may be structure or defined leadership, but it is very secondary in prominence and overt influence; the people and their identity are paramount. These two identifiers, “church” and “body of Christ,” certainly overlap and both have validity, but comment here is specifically within the sense of the Body of Christ, with Church being a non-issue until much later in the chain of events, when it naturally presents itself.¹ It seems

¹ Of note here are the Lord’s words, that

a) “*I will build my church*; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18, emphasis added), and

b) “Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20, emphasis added).

“Body of Christ” more aptly describes the corpus of Somali Believers, and more readily facilitates purpose, advancement, and an understanding of constructive future direction among them.²

Persecution

It seems one of the most potent, active and prominent determinants of the future of Somali Christians is the role of persecution. In the monolithically Islamic Somali context, what will the Muslim disposition to domestic Christianity be, and what will the role of the various aggressive actors be, whether “traditional” Islamic sources (i.e. mosque or theology based) or the more political and militarized Islam (i.e. al-Shabaab)? Will these continue as the virulent scourges they have been, or will there be moderation or acceptance? As for the traditional Somali/Muslim orientation to Christians, that Islam has had such a universally prevailing dominance across Somali life, culture and people, and that it has been so firmly embedded over centuries, is a stronghold not quickly weakened. Because the overlap of “Somali” and “Muslim” has essentially been synonymous - to be a Somali is to be Muslim - anything outside this is not only foreign, but an outright threat; not just to Islam as a religion, but to the very core of Somali identity itself. Though some have been individually moderate toward family members who have become Christians, that death is Islam’s and the traditional culture’s remedy for conversion to Christianity makes a very austere environment for Christians to function in. Secrecy and relating to a few other known or accidentally discovered Christians may, by the grace of God, be the *modus operandi* for Christians for a very long time to come.

With martyrdom being common, there has been a purging of the Body of Christ as well as a conditioning of society: people know the high cost of becoming a Christian, so will not cross that line without carefully counting the cost. Somali society is seeing the price Christians are willing to pay, and must be in admiration of and subsequently reckoning with the stands being taken. In the lives of those who have died there is something not just worth living for, but worth dying for; it *is* the pearl of great price.³ There will certainly be people drawn to follow the Lord, who will have the strength of

conviction to cross that line on the merits of what they have seen, and to stand firm in those commitments (the cost will already have been counted).

Though the authenticity of these verses would never be questioned, there seems to be a practical reversal in the perception of what they are saying, that *we* are authorized and directed to build the church, leaving the work of making disciples to the Lord (the Lord’s words are that *we* are to make the disciples, and *He* will build the church, not the other way around). By referring here to Somali Christians as the “Body of Christ,” hopefully this tendency is not only put in check, but righted. It also gives the possibility of hope and the validation of being legitimate Christians, as there is no other way they could ever catch up, organizationally, with centuries-old church systems.

² How this relates to the notion of “Insider Movements” is left for another discussion, save that any explicit or open identification as a Christian, in the austerity of this context, will in all likelihood necessitate an eventual relocation for the sake of one’s own life. Living as an “Insider” will result in either a recapitulation to Islam (the “insider’s” acceding to conflict), an eventual escape (the “insider’s” escape from conflict), or death (the Muslim’s overpowering conflict, i.e. to remove the “offender”).

³ Matthew 13:46.

Enough lives have been lost and blood shed that temporally speaking, more loss is not needed. However, if ongoing martyrdom is the price to further purify the Somali church and to bring more Somalis to the Lord Jesus, may it continue until the full measure of fruit is reached. Might there be cycles of reprieve and intensification? Quite possibly. Only the Lord knows when the full measure will be fulfilled; the rest of us can only stand at a distance and pray for our own souls and theirs, giving glory to God, until this tribulation has run its course and is complete.⁴

The “Somali Matrix”

The second factor determining the future of the Somali Body of Christ is what might be referred to as the “Somali matrix” – those factors, individually or in combination, which will be formative, unique elements tempering any genuine, indigenously rooted Christian growth in the Somali setting. Some of these factors are cultural, some are spiritual, and some are temporal. The inherent nomadism, the Somali spirit of radical independence, the pervasive resistance to systematization or institutionalization (as understood by classical Western standards) are factors of note which are internal to Somali society (even among Somalis in the West, these traits are lessened but are still usually present). As Somalis look beyond their society, there is also the categorical rejection of Christianity, which is seen as a Western, non-natural “import” (not to mention the offensiveness of its liberal and often permissive failures).⁵ As if the hurdles were not sufficiently high, Somali Christians personally have the resulting complications of looking for Christian spouses, as well as for a durable, public, and indigenously Somali Christian presence in Somali society. In the face of such an onslaught of societal issues, where does this leave the Somali Body of Christ? Can a person be Somali *and* Christian, or are the Somali and Islamic identities so united and the line between them so nonexistent that to accept Christ is to deny one’s Somali-ness?⁶ Barring divine intervention, it seems the innate cultural issues alone put Somali Christians in a position *far* behind their contemporaries elsewhere, that without divine provision there is little capacity to corporately galvanize or move forward.

⁴ See Rev. 6:10-11; 21:2-4, and other references. Comments here are in reference to God-honoring persecution. Where reports of persecution have been exaggerated or Somali Christians have not been “wise as serpents and gentle as doves” while in the presence of “wolves” (Matthew 10:16), may those things first be brought to heel.

⁵ In contrast, the allure of the West’s freedoms and opportunities for educational and economic advancement puts Somalis at conflict with themselves over how to relate to the West, knowing that Christendom is an inherent part of the West’s legacy.

⁶ The issue is not just Somalis vs. the West, but even Somalis vs. other Africans. Somalis wonder, if they become Christians, when worshipping will it be necessary to do so with Ethiopians? With Kenyans? Etc.

Leadership

Third, there is the issue of leadership, which must be established in any emerging entity to be more than the sum of its parts or individual players.⁷ Even if capable leadership emerges (a challenge in itself), leadership is moot if there are no followers. Even if (or when) an ordering begins to emerge, the inherent distrust and infighting on which Somali culture is built may likely tear down what might otherwise develop. Somalis are not naturally given to working together, barring a move of God's grace Christians linking together in corporate functionality and under leadership is a major hurdle that is not likely to be quickly overcome.⁸

Looking & Moving Forward

Against such formidable odds, what are the hopes going forward and the possible scenarios which might develop? The Lord is supreme over his Body – He will move. It will not be in ways that fit the molds He has used elsewhere to build His Body, and will likely be in ways that are not recognized or anticipated by the temporal mind, however well-intentioned.

Persecution is often the Lord's loving tool to uniquely confirm and set apart those who are His, and to bring people to Him. Who can tell the future of the two-pronged persecution (traditional and militant) which is such an inherent part of the Somali environment? Only God knows the times and the seasons, of when this severe affliction will accomplish the purposes for which He has sent it. Temporally though, and barring a major shift, it looks like this will be a severe fixture for at least the foreseeable future. Its intensity may fluctuate, but at this point, it is hard to fathom a permanent "thawing" or removal of this dimension. May the purging and purifying of Somali's love for the Lord come to completeness, and of His expression of love for them. Until the affliction of persecution passes, may His children be faithful, even unto death! Its future is unknown, and the larger Body of Christ can only respond in support of those escaping its throes.

The Somali matrix, if not as troubling, seems even more deeply entrenched. How will the Lord build His Body in light of these impenetrable, unyielding factors? It seems there will be a unique outpouring unlike anything anywhere else, something particularly and unusually unique to the Somali lifestyle and dynamic; something an outsider's comprehension may not quickly grasp, and one which at this point only the Lord can foresee and execute. The account of Ibrahim Farah bears this out.⁹

⁷ Issues would be sufficient natural gifting and interest, sufficient Christian knowledge or appropriate training, the wisdom and respect needed to effectively govern, and the security to publicly exist as an emerging corporate body.

⁸ Though from an instance where Christian grace is not professed, an example would be the difficulty of recent and current Somali governments to galvanize and clearly extricate themselves from the "failed state" status. However, and most gratefully, between when this was written and its going to press, news has come on good authority of an instance within "greater Somalia" where Somali Christian leaders have been pulling together, with the recognition of other Somali Christians.

⁹ This is a pseudonym, for this brother's protection. This account is recent, and was received directly from Ibrahim (through a translator).

Ibrahim lived in greater Somalia and was living a traditional Somali life. In searching the hadith as an observant Muslim, he kept noticing it spoke of Isa (Jesus) and felt he needed to learn more about this prophet. Eventually getting a cell phone, he used it to read the Bible and learn more about Christ, eventually reading the Bible and becoming quite conversant with its content. With Christ also appearing to him in dreams, he became a Christian over the course of several years. Ibrahim eventually asked himself why he wasn't sharing this greatest treasure that he now had, and so shared it with his wife. She rejected his new faith and reported him to her family; he was eventually cut off from her, his children and his community, and fled to another country. At that point, he even more resolutely and single-heartedly purposed to fervently study God's word and live for Christ the rest of his days.

What is the future of the Somali Body of Christ in light of the "Somali matrix"? With God all things are possible,¹⁰ but Ibrahim's story is an excellent spring board for understanding God's ways. Though he eventually did have contact with a Somali ministry, he otherwise had no contact with other Christians in the process of becoming a believer. If the Lord can bring an individual so fully into his fold without any direct Christian contact, is He not able to bring a whole host of others as fully to Him? And if He is able to bring them in, is He not able to shepherd them, to feed them, and to bring them to others (both Christians and serious "seekers")? As Ibrahim's story shows, it seems He is able ... very able ... to do this! Where will this type of supreme, sovereign initiative lead? Only the Lord himself knows, but it is clear that He has a highly vested interest and capability, and is uniquely moving to engage the Somali situation and its adversities on His terms, in His time, and in His ways. It seems human initiatives, however well intended, need to "step aside" and "defer" to the Lord's sovereign role, to "allow" the Lord to have that forefront engagement, and then to fill in afterwards in supporting roles, as appropriate.¹¹ Where there are insurmountable difficulties inherent in the Somali situation, it seems the Lord's will is to give "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise (for their previous rejection of Christ); that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD (instead of their previous radical independence and individualism), that he might be glorified."¹² There will be the sovereign marks of the Lord's doing, His timing, and His victory in overcoming and transforming these cultural drivers into agents for His purposes and callings!

Christian leadership by Somalis? Certainly, this is another unknown. Given the obstacles inherent in the Somali matrix, it seems such will emerge in somewhat asymmetrical, para-church types of ways, with the Lord granting prominence and respect to those whom He will, and sufficient oversight through these leaders to

¹⁰ Mark 10:27.

¹¹ This is not to say that human initiatives should not be taken; only that they be very circumspect of the greater initiatives which the Lord may be sovereignly exercising and which can only function by His grace and provision. Nor is it to diminish past efforts – however small the scale of their fruit, these have been sincere and have borne fruit which has set stepping stones into the future.

¹² Isaiah 61:3.

sufficiently protect and guide those who are truly seeking Him. It seems that over time He will bring these leaders to recognition and positions of governance, and though lacking the institutional positions or power seen as needed through much of the rest of the Body of Christ, as a collective whole they will affect the building of the Somali Body of Christ.

Conclusion

As already stated, the Lord is supreme over his Body – He will move and hasten the day of His fulfilling all He has purposed. How that happens, though, may be very unique and is expected to be far from the paradigms He has used elsewhere. It is likely to be in ways that cannot be recognized or anticipated by the temporal mind or by those measuring His work against what has already happened elsewhere (recently or in the more distant past).

The Somali Body of Christ, under the hand of its guiding Lord, will display growth and development which in its process will be unlike anything seen before. God in His sovereign knowledge and wisdom will establish an emergent part of His Body that is unique to this people, unique to this setting, and unique in His timing. It will be something of His doing and will not fit the molds projected from or attempted to be used from elsewhere – they will not work and will only be cast off in failure. But His work will last and be established!

He will not let the Somali Body of Christ be abandoned, isolated, or without the grace and divine power to grow and overcome. He will not overlook it. That there will be fully redeemed people from every nation, kindred and tribe is more than a commitment to inclusiveness on the Lord's part - it is *ownership* in and over all He has created. He will personally own the outcome of the Somali Body of Christ and nurture and feed it with care, as surely as He has done for every other kindred, every tribe and every nation.

“Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:19.

About the Author

Joseph Bach (pseudonym) has had a long history of contact, awareness, and/or involvement with Somali Christians, the Somali church, missions to Somalis, and the Somali environment. These have come and gone over the years, but the length of his interest and involvement has given him a long-range perspective, and it is from this vantage point that he speaks. Currently based in the Horn of Africa region, he has made relating to Somali Christians and their world a priority and has active relationships with various Somali Christians who are engaged in ministry to Somalis. The author can be reached at JosephZBach@gmail.com.

Fasting in Christ

Owen Mudford

Introduction & Encouragement

“When the British Isles stood on the brink of a French invasion in the run-up to the Seven Years War, King George II did something rather remarkable. He proclaimed a solemn day of prayer and fasting in which he called his nation to petition God for deliverance. John Wesley records in his Journal for Friday 6th February 1756 that “The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarcely seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquillity.” John Wesley was right. The French invasion was averted, and Britain would go on to win the war.” Phil Moore

Fasting has been a part of the culture of the Abrahamic religions since the time of their key figures. In Judaism, in the Hebrew Bible, we see God’s people fast and cry out to Him; we see Jesus fast and remove Himself from the crowds to seek the Lord, and of course, *Sawm* is one of the five pillars of Islam and is most widely seen through the month of Ramadan.

I believe that Fasting is a tradition that the western charismatic evangelical branch of the church has fallen out of love with. It is something we read of but only sometimes practice. Unlike worship and prayer, we do not hurry to fast, we do not have evenings dedicated to fasting, and I think that in this we are missing out on something beautiful that God has given to us.

My heart cry is that this trend does not develop in the emerging church that we see in the Horn of Africa and in so many other world areas. That in fact we see the opposite as the church dedicates itself to prayer and fasting in faith.

The Horn of Africa could be said to have an unusual and specific aspect to fasting, which surfaces from the fact that Christian converts from Islam have a background philosophy that is markedly different to the Bible’s teaching. Within this article, I will address this difference as well as the practical outworking that exists from Christian and Islamic understanding of fasting.

What is Fasting?

In its most basic definition, fasting is the abstaining from all or some kinds of food or drink. The abstinence from food and drink can be held for many reasons: we see in the powerful way in which the Suffragettes in British prisons refused to eat, and often to drink, threatening to starve themselves to force a response from the authorities. These days, the word *fast* has dominated within the fitness world as people use practices such as *intermittent fasting* (encouraging the body its natural

'fast' metabolic state). Within Christian practices, however, fasting comes with a different motivation and a different purpose:

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:16-18

In the quoted passage above, Jesus has just introduced his disciples to the Lord's prayer. He begins this by stating "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites...." (Matthew 6:5). Jesus assumes that prayer is an essential, normal part of existence of one who walks in step with God; as I am sure you have heard in many sermons Jesus does not say 'if you pray' but "and when you pray." He then instructs his disciples how they should approach the Father in prayer, even giving them a structure. Hopefully, in the last couple of sentences you have noticed the grammatical similarities between how Jesus approaches prayer and fasting – "and when you fast...". Just as with prayer, there is an untold assumption from Jesus that fasting was a part of the lives of his disciples. Now this was in part due to the *ta'anith* (fasting) Jewish traditions of the time, full days of fasting would have taken place in certain parts of the calendar, such as the Day of Atonement, and more minor fasts would have been carried out in accordance to the Old Testament traditions. But there is more to Jesus' words than that; fasting is not simply a tradition for the Jewish believers that was not encouraged to Gentiles such as circumcision; it is an act of submission and trust as I will bring out further in later sections of this article.

Fasting within Islamic Contexts

"O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may develop God-consciousness." Qur'an 2:183.

As previously mentioned, fasting is a key part of Islamic life and has been since it was made *fard* in Madinah, one and a half years after the *Hijra*.¹³ *Sawm*, one of the five pillars of Islam, traditionally entails abstaining from food, drink, sexual relations and displeasing speech for significant periods of time.¹⁴ *Sawm* can be kept at any time of the year as a form of worship or to make up for lost fasts, but the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, *Ramadan*, is where fasting is most explicitly commanded within the Qur'an as it is within that month that the Qur'an was revealed from Allah to Muhammed (Qur'an 2:185).¹⁵ The Qur'an is given as guidance for mankind, to remove practices that were not righteous in the sight of Allah; and fasting is given as an opportunity for Muslims to abstain from their needs and base desires, acquire

¹³ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 112-114.

¹⁴ Rippin, *Muslims...*, 113.

¹⁵ Yahya Michot, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 183.

control over themselves which then gives room for a heightened sense of introspection and a greater opportunity to worship Allah.¹⁶

In the Hadith, Allah says to the Prophet, “All the deeds of Adam’s sons (people) are for them, except fasting which is for Me, and I will give the reward for it.”¹⁷ The meaning behind this is that all other deeds and acts of worship are in part related to outward significance, but fasting is different, it is pure and from the heart. Therefore, its reward will be greater. The only ones who know whether a fast has truly been taken is Allah and the individual. Fasting is also bodily worship, as it keeps people away from the evils – “Allah’s Messenger said, “Fasting is a shield.”¹⁸ This is taken to mean that during the time of fasting, where your abstinence is first on your mind, your dedication and self-control will limit any ungodly thoughts, behaviors, and actions. When this is seen within the context of a community, a net loss of immoral behaviors should be seen within this time leading to greater harmony and unity amongst the ummah.

The key purpose of fasting within Islam however, is submission. Submission to Allah is the main purpose of the life of a Muslim. It is the very thing by which they are called – Muslim means ‘one who submits’; the root of the word ‘Islam’ is described literally as ‘surrender,’ ‘submission,’ and ‘peace.’ The five pillars of Islam stand as correct conduct by which the believer may submit and appease Allah in the hope of salvation. Through prayers, supplication and holy living in times of fasting, the hope is that of enlightenment, peace and eternal reward. To balance the scales of areas of their lives where Allah may not be pleased. But there is a further aspect to fasting within Muslim communities that surpasses the doctrinal.

Within the very first issue of the Somali Bible Society Journal, our brother *Ibrahim Abdur-Rahman* wrote into the topic of Ramadan and the relationship that Somali believers have with fasting during that month. I therefore will not speak on any length about Muslim practice in Ramadan, but rather will point you towards his article.¹⁹ There are, however, points of interest that were highlighted to me from his article that I believe impact my own article. Firstly, the difference between Islamic orthopraxy and Christian orthodoxy. When approaching Christian fasting, we look solely to the theology and doctrinal implications of what scripture says around fasting and how this impacts our relationship with God as shown through Jesus in faith. Within Islam however, we need to look at how correct conduct, or the appearance of correct conduct is more important. Ibrahim writes that “the degree to which one practices *salah* and *sawm* are social markers to determine the strength of one’s connection to Islam and to society.”²⁰ It is because of this that I have headed this section “Fasting

¹⁶ Fazlur Rahman and Ebrahim Moosa, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 44.

¹⁷ Hadith Qudsi, Bukhari, Sawm 9; Muslim, Siyam 163.

¹⁸ Sahih al-Bukhari 1894: Book 30, Hadith 4

¹⁹ Ibrahim Abdur-Rahman, “Ramadan and Somali Believers,” *Somali Bible Society Journal*, Vol. I, Issue 1, (December 2020), 26-31.

²⁰ Ibrahim Abdur-Rahman, “Ramadan and Somali Believers,” 26

within Islamic Contexts” rather than “Fasting in the Qur’an” or “Fasting according to the Prophet” (to include Sunnah and Hadith).

For some who read this article, fasting is not a religious obligation or worship but a cultural norm that they still hold to, or a societally enforced command for those who live within Somalia, or a strong diaspora. Through this article, I hope to remind you of the joy that fasting in Christ can bring, but also possibly a way that when fasting as part of the Somali societal norm you can “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Colossians 3:2.

Fasting in the Bible

It is very clear throughout scripture that fasting is a spiritual discipline that is given from God to His people. In Joel we see God bring instruction for His people to turn to him and fast themselves. We will be looking at the motivations behind fasting in the next section, but below are some key times that we see God’s people fasting in the Bible:

Moses fasted before he received the Ten Commandments:

“So (Moses) was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.” Exodus 34:28.

The Israelites fasted before a miraculous victory:

“Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar” (that is, Engedi). Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.” 2 Chronicles 20:2-3.

Daniel fasted in order to receive guidance from God:

“Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. Daniel 9:3.

“While I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, “O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding.” Daniel 9:21-22.

Nehemiah fasted before beginning a major building project:

“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” Nehemiah 1:4.

Jesus fasted during His victory over temptation:

“...for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.” Luke 4:2.

The first Christians fasted during-decision making times:

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” Acts 13:2-3.

Motivations for Biblical Fasting

It is clear from the biblical narrative that fasting is given and commanded by God, for His people. This is true for the Patriarchs, the people of Israel and for the New Testament church, of which we are a part. Fasting makes up a key part of the worship of the people of God, but what are the motivations of this? Why does fasting hold a position of reverence in the disciplines of Christian worship?

As previously mentioned, Islamic practices are seen by many as mutually exclusive with the Somali identity. To practice *sawm* and *salah* are a measurement of societal inclusion as much as a measure of belief. For the Muslim background believer, or the Somali Christian living under strict societal pressure, to reflect on these motivations to fast may bring comfort as you continue to publicly reflect that social norm. For others who have decided to publicly make a stand, I pray that these motivations remind you of the joy that can come from fasting when it is in love and service of our King Jesus and not as command from theocratic oppression.

Humility – Less of Us

In Psalm 69:10, King David states: “I wept and humbled my soul with fasting.”

In an article for the Think Theology blog, Phil Moore states “It isn’t hard for Christians in the West to trace their nation’s rejection of God’s Word back to its relative prosperity.”²¹ Since the end of the Second World War, we have seen an increasing rise in secular consumerism within the UK and other western nations; with this has come a decrease in the impact that Christianity has had on culture and in the lives of most of the nation. The place and potency of the church has dwindled in the hearts and minds of people leading to regressing moral standards. This is not so for the rest of the world, however. When we look at nations for whom this comfortable situation is not the status quo, this is not the case. The church rapidly grows under persecution, injustice and poverty but seems to lose its potency upon complacency. Over the past two years we have seen many studies that show the increased desire

²¹ Phil Moore, “Is God Calling Us to Fast? (Part 2)”

https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/is_god_calling_us_to_fast_part_2 (accessed 22 November 2022).

of the UK population to look for something beyond themselves.²² The COVID pandemic removed the comfortable and prosperous veneer for a period, leaving people to question what their lives mean without these niceties. We, as the church, must be attentive to this in both our own lives and the lives of our friends and family. The removal of comfort often leaves a space where God loves to move, and if we want to grow closer to Him, we need to seek this. One of these ways is fasting.

When we fast, we make an active decision to create discomfort in our lives, emptying our earthly stomachs to increase the hunger that we have for all God is doing. We embrace the path of poverty, in order to be nourished by the promises of Jesus:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”
Matthew 5:6.

Fasting should never be in service of ourselves, as Jesus states in the passage in Matthew 6, it should to the detriment of ourselves as we humble our earthly desires and state that God provides all that we need.²³ It reminds us that we never wish to be seen as Israel in Hosea 13:6, where God reminds His people of the warning he gave in Deuteronomy 8 and shows through Hosea how far their sin has reached:²⁴

“When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me.”

It is also worth noting when looking at the topic of fasting as submission, that within the Old Testament, fasting was synonymous with mourning and repentance. In the aforementioned Psalm, David weeps because of past transgressions. Commentator’s question whether this is a personal lament, or a lament on behalf of a sinful people being seen as personal due to David’s intercessional role. Either way, the humbling of David to fasting is in repentance and mourning of sin (Psalm 69:11). One of the motivational reasons behind fasting can be in the revilement of sin in our lives or mourn for the sin of the world. In each of these times we humble ourselves before the holiness of God and seek his Spirit, in intercession or in repentance. The difference between ourselves and David, however, is the role of Christ in our lives. When we fast, we also come before our Father in heaven but, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, we come before a throne of grace, fully clean because of what Christ did on the cross (Hebrews 4:16).

²² Nehal Sahgal and Aidan Connaughton, January 27, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/> (accessed 12 October 2022).

²³ Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 237.

²⁴ Jerry Hwang, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 299.

Worship – More of Him

Something that has struck me whilst looking at this topic has been the importance of fasting not motivated by “what can I get out of this practice” but that it is something that Jesus assumes of us. As mentioned earlier, the wording of Matthew 6 is not “if you fast”, but “when you fast.” Fasting should also be motivated by choosing God’s way; it is an act of worship and ministry to God (Isaiah 58:5-6). A question posed in Zechariah 7:5 should be fundamental as we look at our motivations:

Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: Say to all the people of the land and the priests, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?”

The question may too be asked of us “was it for me that you fasted?” When we fast, our primary motivation should be the glorification of God in our lives just as we humble our own desires. Luke 2:37 tells us that Anna “worshipped night and day with fasting and prayer.” As an act of worship, fasting should be a sign of the delight we have in God and also a reflection of the praise He so deserves. When we fast, it is supposed to show that we prize him more than all the earthly comforts that we rely on so much in our lives and reflect both the words of Jesus in the desert during his temptation (John 4:4) and his words to his disciples on the bread that they do not understand (John 4:32). It is only at this point that we will then “benefit” from the time of fasting, once we have centered our hearts to the one who means more than treats snacks, fruits or even the ‘essentials.’ Maslow’s hierarchy of needs places “Physiological needs” such as warmth, rest, water and food at the base of the pyramid. It is seen as the basis of all basic rights. When we fast, we reflect on the truth that below that level is an even more basic human need – to rely fully on and reflect on our creator.²⁵

Spiritual Warfare

John Piper, in his book *Hunger for God*, speaks about one of the Old Testament’s most famous passages about the subject of fasting, Isaiah 58. In this section of his book, Piper uses an amazing phrase in explaining the act of spiritual warfare that takes place when we fast “Fasting Is Meant to Starve Sin, Not Us.”²⁶ It is clear from reading Isaiah 58 that God sees fasting as deeply practical but also deeply spiritual; the breaking of spiritual chains and cords of slavery are both linked and important. We have partly touched on this in the first motivation of humility, but I want to make it explicit, that when we fast, we confront the flesh in our lives and our hearts. When we fast, we declare war on our own sinful nature in the name of Jesus.

²⁵ Saul Mcleod, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Simply Psychology, First Published in 2007, updated on 04 April, 2022.
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html> (accessed 21 November 2022).

²⁶ John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 124.

“By submitting the earthly, fleshly desires which the enemy so loves us to become ensnared with, to the self-control that we can have through the power of the Holy Spirit we put to death the power of Satan in our lives. We state the mastery of God in Triune perfection over our body, as we follow the Father, living in the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.”²⁷

Putting our faith into action through fasting is a powerful way of shouting in the spiritual realm that our faith is in God, not in the world.

It is also worth noting that when we fast, we promote our hunger for the spiritual reality that is to come – the second coming of the bridegroom:

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. Matthew 9:14-15.

Arthur Wallis in his book, *God’s Chosen Fast*, titles his sixth chapter “The Time Is Now.”²⁸ The time in which Jesus’ disciples will fast is this present age. In this Jesus says “Now while I am here in your midst as the bridegroom you cannot fast, but I am not going to remain with you. There will come a time when I return to my Father in heaven. And during that time you will fast.” “In this age there is an ache inside every Christian that Jesus is not here as fully and intimately and as powerfully and as gloriously as we want him to be.”²⁹ We hunger for so much more. That is why we fast.

Some of the books and journals I read in preparation for this article make a very good point on this subject though – we do not believe in gnostic teachings around the body and soul. We do not believe that the soul and the spiritual are good and that the physical is bad. We neither believe we can bear spiritual fruit by putting our bodies through harsh treatment (asceticism). Both lines of thought lead to the harm of the body that God has created us in, either through neglect, physical harm, or debauchery. They are counterfeits of biblical fasting that Satan has manifested in culture as he is fearful of a church that has control over their earthly desires and recognize that we have the authority and instruction to put our body into glad submission to the Holy Spirit.

It is important, however, that we do not mistake the mere removal of food with holiness. In the same book as mentioned earlier, Piper speaks about the danger of the “self-indulgent fast” where a fast is taken through hypocrisy or a sense of duty for religiosity:

²⁷ Piper, *A Hunger for God...*, 124.

²⁸ Arthur Wallis, *God’s Chosen Fast: A Spiritual and Practical Guide to Fasting* (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1987), 29.

²⁹ Piper, *A Hunger for God...*, 40.

So here we have another test of whether fasting is authentic or not. Jesus said, If you are fasting to be seen by others you have your reward. Isaiah says, If your fasting leaves you self-indulgent in other areas, harsh toward your employees, irritable and contentious, then your fasting is not acceptable to God. So, God is mercifully warning us against the danger of substituting religious disciplines for righteous living.” John Piper

Difficulties of Fasting

When writing this article, I realize that its readership will be broad. For my brothers from a Muslim background and may still live in areas of Islamic control, the difficulties will be different to those who live in a free area or a westernized location. Within this section, however, I hope there is something that will resonate with you. I do not want anyone reading this article to think that I am unaware of the challenges behind fasting. Within all spiritual disciplines, there is a level of sacrifice and submission but fasting can present different challenges and dangers. These can be cultural and subject to our modern world making meaningful fasting difficult. Still, they also can be personal difficulties such as the removal of food that can cause issues.

Within the western church, the nature of mealtimes has shifted in the past few decades with fewer family members sitting together and conversing over food. This is not to say that this shift is entirely a negative one, I have often found the relaxation of formal meal etiquette an enjoyable experience. However, with this shift, we lose certain communication and life-experience moments especially when young children are learning what family values are. On the topic of fasting, however, it means that practically teaching this practice as a family when you often do not see other members of the family unit eat, is challenging.

Regarding the Somali church, however, the difficulties around fasting are different. Paul says that we are to cast off our old self and put on our new self which is Christ; that which was true before is true no longer (Ephesians 4:22-24). For the Somali Christian, fasting should no longer be due to societal pressure or submission to the mercy of Allah. However, as with all areas of life for the persecuted church, what this looks like is a complex discussion. As previously mentioned, our brother *Ibrahim* spoke about this in terms of Ramadan – that some Christians will not fast during Ramadan as they do not see it as helpful practice, but this is not always the case when living with family members or when their faith is not publicly known for security reasons. The question is the same for fasting outside of this month, and I believe that the answer is also similar. It must come down to the discretion of the believer, and the house church.

Paul told the Thessalonian church that he desires them to live quietly and mind their own affairs so that “[they] may walk properly before outsiders” (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12). It may be that in times of Islamic fasting you decide as believers to not publicly eat during this time; this may be the way in which you model Paul’s instructions.

Through this you will limit friction between your Muslim friends and family and show them Christ's love. This may be especially true when wisdom is needed for security and this also protects you and your loved ones. Jesus said to his disciples that he was sending them out "as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues" (Matthew 10:16-17). It is not unbiblical to be wise and cunning as you bring the gospel, as long as you are loving, peaceful joyful and hold all the fruit of the spirit.

Jesus was aware that men and women in the Jewish community were looking to unjustly bring violence to his disciples, and so he warned them not to be foolish. On the other hand, we are told to expect persecution (Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-4, Matthew 5:10-12) and I know that there are brothers and sisters who read this who openly worship our risen Lord Jesus even through the most terrible oppression and persecution. If you believe that God has called you in this season to publicly oppose the societal norms that Islam places on you and be known as servants of Christ and the Gospel, then receive this quote from the wonderful vision that John saw: "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." (Revelation 3:11).

Finally, there are barriers to fasting that are not limited by people group; personal challenges that we face individually. By this, I do not mean the standard mental struggle to deprive oneself of physical nourishment to grasp the spiritual, I mean the personal struggles that go beyond this. 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year in England, between 1.5-3.5 million people in the UK are affected by an eating disorder.³⁰ We also have seen a rise in conditions such as diabetes across East Africa in the past decade, with brothers and sisters we hold dear dealing with this difficult condition. These circumstances can make fasting a difficult, and even dangerous discipline to commit to.

When approaching any discipline of Christian living, one must be wise about how that shall impact their life. For most disciplines such as prayer, worship, confession etc. this impact will be limited unless you commit to extended periods of prayer/worship and in doing so neglect, for a time, other areas of your life or duties. For others, however, it is not so simple. Submission, for example, can look different depending on your circumstance: submission to authority figures who are teaching immoral behavior or forcing you to partake in such behavior; submission to family members who do not love Jesus but you know the importance of evangelism; even within churches, there can be times when decisions have to be made about the actions or teachings of leaders, or you need to take a time of respite from serving due to personal difficulties. Other examples include evangelism. Somali Christians understand powerfully that though the discipline of evangelism is important and essential to the spread of the gospel, the public declaration of Jesus should not be

³⁰ McManus, S., Meltzer, H., Brugha, T. S., Bebbington, P. E., & Jenkins, R. (2009). Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: results of a household survey. <https://www.priorygroup.com/eating-disorders/eating-disorder-statistics> (accessed 11 October 2022).

done in naivety when the safety of you and your family is in question. There is wise discernment that must take place. So too, there must be wisdom when approaching the discipline of fasting.

I have neither the lived nor professional experience to begin to suggest that I have the answer to this topic. The purpose of this article is not to tell you how you should fast if this is your experience with food - that is a personal walk, which must be taken carefully and with accountability to those who know you. For some, fasting is not a good idea. I do not read anything biblically to suggest that a lack of fasting from food and drink will be spiritually damaging or affect your relationship with your heavenly Father, or limit what he can do in your life. It may be that your equivalent of fasting looks different and does not relate to food but to another section of your life. All I can say is, be wise and remember that disciplines of the Christian walk are not 'points on the board', but the natural outworking of a soul that belongs to Christ.

Conclusion

The position that fasting holds in the life of a believer is, as with all spiritual disciplines, a complex nature. I believe that it is of great benefit to the church, the spiritual realm and the believers themselves if fasting is a common practice in the lives of believers. I also understand that when this conversation is extended to Muslim Background Believers, specifically here looking at the lives of Somali Christians, public fasting comes with different restrictions and stigma. Societal pressures to fast in a certain way, or even not to for those who have moved from Islam to Christianity can cause confusion and pressure which I hope this article can diffuse. The main point you should take out of this article is that it is about your heart, not your soul.

The critical difference between Islamic and Christian fasting cuts to the heart of the two religions. Islamic life is one of submission, longing for acceptance through demonstrations of reverence. *Salah, Zakat, Shahada, Hajj* and *Sawm* are all imitations of the law given to Israel. But Paul makes it clear that it is by faith we are saved (Ephesians 2:8). To fast as a believer of Christ, however, is a different story. Christian fasting is solely rooted in the work that Jesus achieved on the cross, it cannot add anything to our salvation or the position of our soul before God. It can only express our heart's cry of gratitude to improve the relationship that is already assured in Christ. Christian fasting represents not a longing for acceptance but a longing for the one who has already purchased our acceptance through submitting himself to death (Philippians 2:8).

To the believer reading this article I encourage you to fast; I think that it is healthy, a good discipline and helps us as we wage war in the spiritual realms. However, it must come from a heart of worship and thanks, not a heart to earn our salvation. For Muslim background believers who fall into this trap you are living in your old self, succumbing to the societal pressures that Islamic culture attributes to people groups such as the Somali.

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Let us therefore enjoy the gift of fasting that Christ has won for us in His victory on the cross and worship our wonderful God together for eternity.

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About the Author



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One Church in Christ

Pastor Si Fry

Somali Clan-based Context

It has been said by several of my Somali brothers that there are three critical priorities for the Somali people at large and they are:

- Creed (i.e, Islam)
- Clan
- Currency (i.e. money – this is much less self-focused than in Western thinking because how wealthy you are will directly impact how much you can help your clan).

In Somalia, one's clan is of major importance in society, one has to identify and be accepted by his clan. There has *always* been since history evidence of clan animosity. Divisions are defined by clan and sub-clan lines.... Clan divisions have been a source of conflict used to divide Somalis, fuel endemic clashes over resources and power, mobilize militia, and make broad-based reconciliation very difficult to achieve. Most Somali conflicts have been fought in the name of clans, often due to political leaders manipulating clannism for their own benefits.³¹

“Separating state violence from clan violence reveals why armed conflicts have become unstoppable in post-Siad Barre Somalia. A closer examination—one that moves from the ground up shows that beneath the politics of violence in Somalia lies underlying clan competition.”³²

One must not minimize the devastating impact of the European Colonial period. Using the well-recognized and sadly very effective strategy of ‘Divide and Conquer,’ arbitrary state lines were drawn on a map separating people groups into five different nations.³³ That said, much of the violence suffered by the Somali people since independence has been based on Creed and Clan.

Sadly, Islam (the creed of the majority) has not only failed to bring peace between the clans but at times has added to the fighting due to differing interpretations. “Somalia has seen high levels of violence *in* the past two decades with a persistent radical-Islamist movement carrying out multiple violent attacks.... Religious

³¹ “The Root Causes of the Conflict in Somalia History Essay. UK Essays, 01 January 2015. <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/history/the-root-causes-of-the-conflict-in-somalia-history-essay.php> (accessed 21 October 2022).

³² Mohamed Haji Ingiriis. *State and Clan Violence in Somalia*, Africa Conflict and Peace Building Review, Vol 8, Number 1, 2018, 76.

³³ Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa*, Free Press, 2006, 464-465.

extremism and violence are visible in Africa in the past two decades, evolved from historical domestic sources and inspired by new Islamist models from the Middle East and Asia.”³⁴

With this broader context in mind, particularly that of the clan, and recognizing as Frank-Ole Thoresen’s work notes, “Differing clan identities thus remains a considerable challenge for the Somali Christian communities;”³⁵ I want to look at what the Bible has to say about how Christ makes his people one and how his Spirit is working in Christians to encourage peace between people groups, clans and families.

Am I my Brother’s Keeper? Conflict in Bible Due to Sin

Right from the 4th chapter of the Bible, the first chapter after sin enters the world, it records how sin so corrupts the heart of humanity that within one generation from Adam and Eve jealousy causes a brother to kill his own brother!

In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.”³⁶

If sin can cause mankind’s heart to become so wicked that Cain would kill his own brother, the son of his mother and father (not even a half-brother – the son of a rival woman); then no wonder people will more easily justify violence towards another person who is outside their family, clan, tribe or people! Indeed, Lamech who was just seven generations from Adam, kills a man and then boasts about it.³⁷

God brings his judgement on man’s continued disobedience after the flood by dividing the languages in Genesis 11:1-9; which only gives sin within humanity even more reasons to justify disliking another person. Thus, the Bible clearly records how

³⁴ “Religion and Violence in the Horn of Africa: Trajectories of Mimetic Rivalry and Escalation between ‘Political Islam’ and the State”, 22 Apr 2020.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21567689.2020.1754206> (accessed 19 October 2022),

³⁵ Frank-Ole Thoresen, *A Reconciled Community of Suffering Disciples*, Peter Lang, 2014, 83.

³⁶ Genesis 4:3-10.

³⁷ Genesis 4:23-24.

due to man's depravity,³⁸ and Satan's unseen influence,³⁹ that hatred, conflict and violence can arise between nations, peoples, clans and even families.⁴⁰

God's solution to dealing with our sinful nature within and free us from Satan's power is found through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴¹ (For more on this see Somali Bible Society Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1 article – "By Grace You Have Been Saved.")⁴² Martin Luther wrote, "Without faith in *Jesus*, the Jew will not be saved through the law, nor the Greek by his wisdom, nor the magistrate or master by his upright governing, nor the servant by his obedience."⁴³ One is saved by grace through faith in Jesus, not our efforts.⁴⁴ However, it is worth noting that whilst one lives in this body the sinful nature will constantly have to be put to death through the power of the Spirit at work in those in Christ Jesus.⁴⁵ Whilst one is saved on an individual basis through putting their faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, they are saved into a community – the Church.⁴⁶ This new life in Christ is lived by the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God.⁴⁷

The Church of Jesus Christ

Church simply means gathering or assembly of people.⁴⁸ In the New Testament it is used to refer to the gathering of "a group of people who have turned from their sins to place their full trust in Jesus Christ."⁴⁹ Church refers to the people not the place or building they gather in. In the New Testament the Church gathered in people's houses, the temple courts in Jerusalem, in the open and in buildings that they hired,⁵⁰ (or in later times buildings they owned).

The Church of God is elsewhere referred to in Scripture as the body of Christ.⁵¹ So united with Christ are his people that to persecute them is to persecute Jesus.⁵² The New Testament frequently describes Christians as being in Christ,⁵³ just as it is also true that Christ is in them.⁵⁴ It is because God dwells in his people, that the Church

³⁸ Genesis 6:5, Ephesians 2:1-3.

³⁹ Ephesians 2:2, 1 John 5:19, John 8:44, John 10:10, Luke 22:3-4.

⁴⁰ Judges 9 gives a brutal account of this.

⁴¹ Romans 10:9-13; Ephesians 2:1-10, Colossians 1:13-14,

⁴² Si Fry, "By Grace You Have Been Saved," Somali Bible Society Journal, olume III, Issue 1, June 2022, 16-29. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/SBS-Journal-Vol.-III-Issue-1-June-2022-.pdf> (accessed 11 September 2022).

⁴³ Martin Luther, *Galatians*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries, 1998, 192.

⁴⁴ Ephesians 2:8-10.

⁴⁵ Galatians 5:16-26, Colossians 3:5-10.

⁴⁶ Acts 2:47.

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossian 3:17.

⁴⁸ W. Elwell, *The Marshall Pickering Encyclopaedia of the Bible Volume 1 A-I*, Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1988, 458.

⁴⁹ Brock p19.

⁵⁰ Acts 2:46, Acts 16:13-15, Acts 18:6-7, Acts 19:9-10.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

⁵² Acts 9:4.

⁵³ Colossians 3:3, Ephesians 1:1-14.

⁵⁴ Colossians 1:27.

is also amazingly referred to as the temple of God both at an individual level,⁵⁵ and corporately.⁵⁶ The Church is also referred to as the bride of Christ, pure, radiant and devoted exclusively to her husband.⁵⁷

Scripture uses these pictures of body, temple, and bride to make various points (which for brevity I will not go into), but these images all help emphasize that the Church is one in Christ. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many are one body, so it is with Christ.”⁵⁸ (See also 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). There was one legitimate temple for worship under the Old Covenant,⁵⁹ and now the Church is that temple.⁶⁰ The Bible encourages monogamy,⁶¹ and the Church is the bride of Christ.⁶²

So, when someone becomes a Christian although this is an individual choice for them, they are choosing to enter a community, the Church of God. The Church is not a club or a business but a family, the household and family of God.⁶³ Mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters relating to one another in love and purity.⁶⁴ One family even though people come from every nation, tribe, people and language,⁶⁵ through Jesus we have been adopted as beloved children into God’s family,⁶⁶ with Christ as our elder brother.⁶⁷ The Apostle Peter writes, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”⁶⁸

The Church Inherits the Blessing Given to Abraham

The Church then according to Peter is God’s chosen people made up from those who have decided to make Jesus their Lord and Savior from every people group. This is the fulfilment to the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 “in you all families on the earth will be blessed,” is made available through Jesus Christ to all.⁶⁹ “God’s plan for a diverse community was in his heart from the beginning.”⁷⁰

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19-20.

⁵⁶ 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-22.

⁵⁷ 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-32, Revelation 19:7-8, 21:9.

⁵⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 12:1-28.

⁶⁰ Ephesians 2:19-22.

⁶¹ Matthew 19:5-6, 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6.

⁶² Ephesians 5:25-32, Revelation 21:2.

⁶³ Matthew 12:46-50, Galatians 6:10, 1 Timothy 3:15.

⁶⁴ Mark 3:31-35, 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

⁶⁵ Revelation 7:9.

⁶⁶ 2 Corinthians 6:18, Ephesians 1:5, Romans 8:15-17.

⁶⁷ John 20:17, Romans 8:29; Hebrews 2:11-12.

⁶⁸ 1 Peter 2:9-10.

⁶⁹ Galatians 3:14.

⁷⁰ Owen Hyton, *Crossing the Divide*, IVP, 2009, 149.

What was once focused primarily on the physical descendants of Abraham through the people of Israel and the promised land⁷¹ (although not exclusively⁷²), now in Christ, includes all people and is global in its focus.⁷³ The Apostle Paul puts it like this in Galatians 3:14, “So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Holy Spirit.” This meant that the Church’s focus was now on reaching every tribe worldwide. As one historian noted about the early Church, “Christians gloried in the fact, “Any country can be their homeland – and yet their homeland, wheresoever it may be is to them a foreign place.”⁷⁴ For they are living for the age to come and their eternal homeland.⁷⁵

Whilst Israel due to God’s election still has a special purpose⁷⁶ in his plans and it would appear there will be an end of time revival among the Jews with them turning to Christ;⁷⁷ it is now all about Jesus.⁷⁸ Whether a physical descendant of Abraham or not, getting grafted in or out of God’s family depends on what they do with Christ.⁷⁹ John’s gospel puts it like this, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”⁸⁰ John Stott writes, “It is through faith we are in Christ, and through being in Christ we are sons of God.”⁸¹

The Old Testament had hinted at God’s plan to bring in the nations; take Psalm 87:4-6 as an example “Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush— “This one was born there,” they say. And of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her;” for the Most High himself will establish her. The Lord records as he registers the peoples, “This one was born there.” However, it is only in the New Testament that what is concealed is clearly revealed.⁸²

Jesus himself who was only sent to preach to Israel⁸³ prepares his disciples for the bringing in of the nations alongside the Israelites who follow him. With the inevitable exclusion of the Israelites and other people groups who don’t.⁸⁴ In John 10:14-16 Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

⁷¹ Deuteronomy 7:6-10, 11:11-12.

⁷² Exodus 12:38, Matthew 1:5-6; Jonah 1-4.

⁷³ Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8, Romans 16:25-27.

⁷⁴ Tom Holland, *In the shadow of the sword*, Abacus, 2012, 173.

⁷⁵ Hebrews 11:14-16.

⁷⁶ Romans 11:28.

⁷⁷ Romans 11:12,15.

⁷⁸ Philippians 3:3-11, 2 Corinthians 1:20, Ephesians 1:9-10, Colossians 2:16-17.

⁷⁹ Romans 11:11-24.

⁸⁰ John 1:11-13.

⁸¹ John Stott, *The message of Galatians*, IVP, 2012, 99.

⁸² Ephesians 3:4-6.

⁸³ Matthew 15:24.

⁸⁴ Matthew 25:31-46.

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” However, this will only happen once Christ has died, risen and ascended into heaven.⁸⁵ So dramatic was this shift in thinking from Israel to all people who accept Christ and from the promised land to the world, that it took some time and divine intervention for the early Church to adjust.

The disciples were still Israel-focused when speaking to Jesus before he ascended into heaven which he had to correct.⁸⁶ At the coming of the Holy Spirit and the subsequent speaking in tongues at Pentecost where each person hears the disciples speak in their own language, Hylton says, “Whereas God had once scattered the nations over the earth and confused their languages, he now began the process of restoring them to himself and to one another. . .they represented the nations.”⁸⁷ It was a prophetic statement of God calling the nations to himself. However, it is not until we get to God’s revelation to Peter in Acts 10, thought to be around 37AD,⁸⁸ that God’s heart to reach the Gentiles is recognized by the Church; “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”⁸⁹ Acts 11 finishes with the key church at Antioch being established, with a significant number of Greek-speaking people being reached, Barnabas and Paul helping to lead the work there, and the first account of the disciples being called Christians. It is from Antioch the gospel spreads across the Greek-speaking world, with Paul and Barnabas being instrumental in this process. Finally, in Acts 15 there is the council in Jerusalem in AD 48 endorsing the work and teaching of Paul and Barnabas.⁹⁰

It is interesting to note that in the early Church even the Apostles who had seen the risen Lord and heard his instructions, took time to adjust to the truly global and multicultural scope of the Church that God was building. For even a casual reading of the book of Acts reveals that the Apostles were often just playing catch up with what God was doing!

So, it is no wonder when people become a Christian by surrendering their lives to Jesus Christ, they come with their cultural world view and family/clan value systems which take time to allow the Spirit to change their thinking as they are transformed by God’s word. Like the early Church who arguably had the biggest transition to make as they traversed the Old and New Covenant, where the differences imposed by God were being transformed through the Spirit’s outworking of the completed work of Christ; disciples now must reassess and realign their world view and family/clan value system in the light of what Scripture says and encourages. Whilst there are many areas in any culture or value system that the Bible will not speak into, these

⁸⁵ John 12:20-24, 32.

⁸⁶ Acts 1:6-8.

⁸⁷ Owen Hylton, 37.

⁸⁸ Acts: Bible Timeline, Biblehub.com, n.d., <https://biblehub.com/timeline/acts/1.htm> (accessed 19 October 2022).

⁸⁹ Acts 11:18.

⁹⁰ Acts: Bible Timeline, Biblehub.com, n.d.

need to be seen in the light of what they are cultural/personal preferences that can be celebrated and add rich color to the body of Christ. However, there are always areas in any culture where it values things that are contrary to the Bible's teaching. In these cases, God's kingdom culture and values trump our own,⁹¹ and our loyalty to our fellow brother and sister in Christ supersedes our own family and clan.⁹²

Celebrated Diversity & Equality within the Body of Christ

Since every Christian is saved by grace through faith and this is not of works so no one can boast,⁹³ for regardless of their cultural background everyone has sinned and comes under the judgment of God,⁹⁴ we all enter the Church of Jesus Christ equally and on the same foundation. Stott writes, "We are equal, equal in our need of salvation, equal in our inability to earn or deserve it, and equal to the fact that God offers it to us freely in Christ."⁹⁵

In Christ regardless of race, tribe or clan, gender, or social status when one becomes a Christian, they are equal, heirs of the promises of God. As the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:26-29, "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Despite different backgrounds, the unity in Christ, and promised future blessing over God's people unite his people much more than anything should ever divide them. I use the word "should" as sadly due to the sinful nature sometimes Christians do let things divide them, but that must be seen in the light revealed by Scripture as going against what God commands. Stott writes on Galatians 3:28,

Literally, 'you are all one person in Christ Jesus. In Christ we belong not only to God (as his sons) but to each other (as brothers and sisters). And we belong to each other in such a way as to render of no account the things which normally distinguish us, namely race, rank and sex. . . . When we say that Christ has abolished these distinctions, we mean not that they do not exist, but they do not matter. They are still there but they no longer create any barriers to fellowship.'⁹⁶

A genuine love for the Church (those like us and those different) is one of the signs of a true work of grace in God's people.⁹⁷ Malawian Academic Harvey Kwiyani writes:

⁹¹ Galatians 2:11-14.

⁹² Luke 8:19-21.

⁹³ Ephesians 2:8-10.

⁹⁴ Romans 3:9-18.

⁹⁵ John Stott 2012, 100.

⁹⁶ John Stott 2012, 99-100.

⁹⁷ 1 John 3:10-16, 4:20-5:2.

Essentially, God is building a kingdom in which people of many national, tribal, or linguistic identities belong together. It is not a monocultural kingdom: all cultures are invited and all cultures are needed. It is not a monoracial kingdom: all races are welcome. It is not a color-blind kingdom. It does not see one human race but sees us all as who we really are: Africans, Asians, Europeans, everybody. It expects us all to bring our unique gifts to make the kingdom what it is meant to be – the kingdom of Jesus, the Lord of the nations.⁹⁸

Kwiyani continues to say:

I am convinced that wherever communities are made up of people of different cultures, Christian churches must reflect that diversity in their gatherings. I say this for two reasons. First, Scripture seems to suggest that Christianity right from its beginning has been a multicultural religion. Second, following the first, Christianity needs diversity both if it is to reflect the true image of the Son of God (who is revealed in diverse ways among his people) and the communion of the Trinitarian God who has called us into the divine fellowship. Essentially, the blessing of cultural diversity that God has given us is a terrible thing to waste.⁹⁹

Jesus knowing this tension would arise, prays on the night before he is crucified prays, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may be one, just as you, Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us.. that they may be one even as we are one.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore it is incumbent on the Church to strive for unity despite its different cultures, backgrounds, clans and social standing wherever it gathers.

In Christ, the Christian must put off the old self linked to the sinful nature where the differences from others are often used as an excuse to dislike/mistreat, and put on our new self being renewed in the knowledge of our creator as revealed in the Bible.¹⁰¹ With this in mind the Apostle Paul then instructs us in Colossians 3:11 that in Christ, “There is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

One has to bear in mind it was not just the Jews who felt superior to the rest of the world as they had been chosen by God, the Greeks and Romans felt superior to everyone else in their day too.¹⁰² In fact most cultures and subcultures (even when they are the underdogs) feel their culture is better. In the Church this prejudice must

⁹⁸ Harvey Kwiyani, 5.

⁹⁹ Harvey Kwiyani, 78-79.

¹⁰⁰ John 17:20-22.

¹⁰¹ Colossians 3:9-10.

¹⁰² J. B. Lightfoot, *Colossians & Philemon*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries, 1997, 110.

not exist, in fact Scripture exalts us to copy the Apostle Paul's example and be prepared to be all things to all people to point everyone to Christ.¹⁰³

There are those who through human efforts (the law) thought they are better than others. The barbarians is a term for non-Greeks/Romans and was partly used as an insult to others whose speech was deemed uneducated and unintelligent.¹⁰⁴ Whilst the Scythians were a despised people, viewed as the lowest of the low racially speaking in the Roman world.¹⁰⁵ Socially speaking in Christ it does not matter if a person is a slave, the poorest of the poor with no rights at all, or free (some of whom like Lydia¹⁰⁶ were very wealthy).

N.T. Wright comments on this verse, "These intermingled distinctions of race, ancestral religion, class and caste provide the best soil for mutual suspicion and distrust."¹⁰⁷ Thus, despite the differences that exist the Church of Jesus Christ is called to love one another and work together in unity for the glory of God.¹⁰⁸ In reality if it had been right for the early Church to silo off into its sub-sections many of the issues that the New Testament writers wrote about would not have been there! However, bearing with one another and maintaining the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace is much more important to God. As his people gathered around the truth that there is, one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, even the underground churches (due to persecution) that the Somalis build, if they want to follow the Biblical teaching and example, must seek to follow this path of unity despite differences and difficulties that will arise. Of course, for the season whilst they are hidden, those who attend will (outside of Somali Muslim Background Believers) be limited, but the heart for this Biblical truth should be there. Indeed, there are plenty of differences amongst Somali clans themselves to be working out these principles in practice. Sadly, there are many examples where wealth causes big divisions and jealousy. The Somali Christian community is not exempt from this rather than seeing God's material favor on another believer as a source of blessing and praise to God for his generosity on another. Leadership too (which every church needs),¹¹⁰ sometimes causes clan-related problems and loyalties, which should be replaced with God-honoring behavior and loyalties to Christ and his people above anything else, including clan. Otherwise, there is a tendency to work in a silo with narrower and narrower parameters of acceptability which is not Biblical. Kwiyani writes, "Homogeneity, whatever form it takes, is slow death. A community that builds walls to keep strangers out only

¹⁰³ 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Galatians 4:12.

¹⁰⁴ Lightfoot p110.

¹⁰⁵ Lightfoot, 110.

¹⁰⁶ Acts: 16:14-15.

¹⁰⁷ N. T. Wright. *Tyndale NT Commentaries Colossians and Philemon*, IVP, 1986, 139.

¹⁰⁸ Romans 15:5-7.

¹⁰⁹ Ephesians 4:2-6.

¹¹⁰ Titus 1:5, Acts 14:23.

imprisons itself within its own walls in the end.”¹¹¹ Edwards writes, “Our lasting unity will depend on our ability to love and serve each other, not because we are the same in all respects but because we belong to the same Lord.”¹¹²

Homogeneity also does not do justice to the fact that in Christ the walls that divide us have been given the death blow at the cross. Jenkin’s notes, “The beginning of faith must contain some universally valid and relevant factor which can erase religious, cultural and political demarcations. Otherwise, how could a gentile woman come to Jesus Christ an Israelite.”¹¹³ If these barriers are overcome in the New Testament era how much more should his Church overcome any barriers it faces today. I know of a beautiful story that illustrates where this has happened: there is a Somali Christian leader whose clan status meant he should culturally not marry a woman from certain other clans. However, knowing all people in Christ are equal and that the only prohibition on Christian marriage is that they marry another Christian, when he met a lady from an “inferior” clan who was a believer and he loved her; he decided to adopt the Biblical teaching on this and married her. Their marriage is a living testimony of the equality and unity we have in Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:13-18:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Arguably the biggest difference between peoples ever was between Jews and Gentiles under the old covenant and these boundaries for a season were fixed by God.¹¹⁴

Stott writes on this passage in Ephesians:

Although all human beings are alienated from God because of sin, the Gentiles were also alienated from the people of God. And worse even than this double alienation (of which the temple wall was a symbol) was active enmity or hostility.... Alongside his destruction of these two entities Jesus has succeeded in creating a new society, in fact a new humanity, in which

¹¹¹ Harvey Kwiyani, 76.

¹¹² Edwards, 155.

¹¹³ Jenkins, 177.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, 150.

alienation has given way to reconciliation, and hostility to peace.”¹¹⁵

If then these boundaries have in Christ been overcome, then the Church in whatever setting it finds itself today needs to strive to overcome its differences to express something of the oneness of Christ.

That is why the New Testament is full of encouragements to allow the work of Christ to flow out through his people towards his Church in unity and love, and then the world will know that we are Jesus’ disciples.¹¹⁶

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. . . as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all¹¹⁷

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.”¹¹⁸

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.¹¹⁹

Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.¹²⁰

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interest, but the interest of others.”¹²¹

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.¹²²

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.¹²³

¹¹⁵ Stott 1999 p92-93.

¹¹⁶ John 13:34-35.

¹¹⁷ Romans 12:10+18.

¹¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:4-5.

¹¹⁹ Galatians 6:9-10.

¹²⁰ Ephesians 4:1-3.

¹²¹ Philippians 2:1-4.

¹²² James 3:17-18.

¹²³ Matthew 5:9.

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.¹²⁴

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.... And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.¹²⁵

The New Testament is full of these encouragements not only because they are important to God and help us to become more Christ-like, but also because our sinful nature causes us to struggle to do them and sometimes makes us want to do the opposite.

Conclusion

God in his sovereignty is adding many Somali people from across the Horn of Africa into his Church. So, as God builds his Church in the Horn let her strive to rise above any clannism to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. For the Church is being built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, in which all people are welcomed and treated equally because in Christ we are all one family.

In this current season when due to persecution the Church to some extent remains hidden how this oneness in Christ will be mostly worked out between Somalis of differing clans, but the heart for unity in diversity and diversity in unity should be worked out in this context; preparing them for the gloriously beautiful Church that God will make manifest across the whole Horn of Africa in the years to come. To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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The Father Heart of God

Simon Holley

Introduction

Christianity is centered on the good news of Jesus. It concerns his death on the cross and his resurrection. It tells us how our sins can be forgiven. However, this message of the cross is different from a destination. It is a gateway. As we pass through that entrance point, Jesus reveals God the Father to us. Jesus said: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3 ESV).

Through the cross, our relationship with the Heavenly Father is restored. We were separated from God by our sins. Through the Lord Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are able to come to God as our Father. Yet so many Christians have never understood or experienced this.

I would like to give you a radical vision of the Heavenly Father’s love for you.

How We Miss the Father Heart of God

I was once driving with my wife when she remarked, “Wow! It’s a stunning sunset over there! So beautiful!” I glanced over and wondered why she thought it was remarkable. But I didn’t contradict her because she was enjoying it. A minute later, she took off her sunglasses and said, “Oh, it’s not really that great after all, is it?” The sunglasses had distorted her perception of reality and made her think that it was more beautiful than it really was.

We are all wearing sunglasses when we look at God. But the glasses that we wear make us see God as less beautiful than He really is. Many different things can put a filter over our eyes and distort our idea of the Heavenly Father. For instance, errors can come from the way that we were raised, or from teachers and authority figures, or simply from ourselves.

If only we could take the “sunglasses” off and see clearly! I don’t think we can remove them permanently in this world. But we can take them down, clean them up and change the lenses! As we do so, we will see more and be able to reflect God to the world. The more we, as his Church, can display Him, the more the world around us will be transformed.

So what are these filters that corrupt our vision of God the Father?

The first filter is a belief that God’s Fatherly love is dependent on our performance. Many Christians wrestle with this. My own moment of breakthrough came when I was late for a meeting at Church. As I sat down, I noticed a very disabled boy in the row behind. He was probably about 13 years old and had cerebral palsy. He was in a special chair because he couldn’t hold his head up. During worship, I glanced around

and saw that the disabled boy was being held in the arms of his grandfather. He was a big lad, but the man was holding him and resting the boy's head in the crook of his arm. The grandfather looked into the boy's eyes and said, "God loves you and I love you. You're a really special boy. God loves you and I love you. You're a really special boy."

The lad couldn't respond in words, but he had a beaming smile on his face, as his grandfather kept repeating the simple message. I was transfixed and something broke inside me. I started to weep in the deepest part of my being. I realized that on the world's terms this kid would achieve nothing in his life. But he was loved and would be cared for his entire life. He was loved by God even more than he was loved by his grandfather! He could not earn that love. It was unconditional. I realized how much of my Christian life had been about achievement. I wanted to *do* stuff to please other people. I wanted to *act* in a particular way to try to make God more favorable towards me. It was as though I believed I could earn God's love through my works. At that moment I realized the truth: God loved me when I was incapable of doing anything at all for Him.

We read in Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Picture your worst moment. Remember your greatest shame. Think of the thing that you did, which would humiliate you if other people knew about it. That's the moment when God chose you. You were not at your best. You were not caring for the poor. You were not enjoying quiet time. You were an utter failure. But at that moment God loved you and wanted you as His own. He wanted to call you home to Him. That's how much He loves you. While you were still a sinner, Christ died for you and called you home to the Father. That is His love.

The second filter common amongst Christians is a belief that God is poor at communicating. I would like one dollar for every Christian who has complained that God is not speaking to them! It is impossible for you to be a follower of Jesus and not hear his voice because Jesus declared: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27 ESV).

Once we remove the misconception that God does not communicate with us, then we hear the Word of God! You might not hear God's voice like a great prophet. But it is dangerous to believe that God loves you less if you do not hear his voice speaking to you like Moses on the mountain. The further you go down that road, the more you will become locked in a destructive spiral, which ends in you becoming incapable of hearing the Word of God because you believe that you *cannot*. Once you are delivered from the belief that God is a silent, absent Father, then you will no longer act like an orphan left out in the cold! No, we have to remove the filter that God doesn't speak to us and believe that he does. Then the only question is how do we hear the voice of the Spirit? Firstly, it is through the scriptures - which are a sure test of every voice. If we feel like God is saying something that contradicts his holy word

then we have got it wrong. He never contradicts himself! But given that foundation, we can believe to listen to the voice of our Father in many ways. Sometimes through a dream, sometimes through a prophecy given by a friend, sometimes through a preacher, and sometimes through the words of a child. He is always speaking! He is a good Father who loves to communicate. Once we have this belief, life becomes an adventure of hearing his incredible voice.

The third filter is a belief that God is indifferent to our problems. Some feel that he is far away; others that he is near but just waiting for us to make mistakes. Both positions show a false understanding of God as our Father. I remember praying for a young man who could never call God his Father, even though he had been a Christian for many years. When I asked him why, he replied, "Because I don't even know my own father's name." His father had left before he was born and his mother had refused to reveal his father's name. The young man had extrapolated from his personal experiences to the transcendent God. He had to learn that God is neither an absent nor an unnamed Father. Psalm 103.13-14 says: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust."

Consider whether you are wearing any of these filters and if they are obstructing your understanding of the Heavenly Father.

When we Live as Orphans

When the Lord Jesus Christ taught his disciples to pray, he started with these words: "Our Father." We have heard them so many times that perhaps we no longer realize how revolutionary it was. It was completely radical! In the Old Testament, God is called "Father" 15 times. But in the New Testament, God is called "Father" 245 times. So, it wasn't unknown before Jesus came, but he opened the door for us:

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."
Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14.8-9).

We become sons and daughters of God by adoption. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in Galatians 4:5 when he says that "we receive the full rights of sons." Some might argue that an adopted child is never accepted the same as a natural born heir. But in doing so, they miss the full benevolence of God's grace in adopting us into His family.

In Paul's day, adoption was under Roman law. Once you were adopted, you had exactly the same rights as a legitimate child in the family. Your adoption could not be reversed. You became an heir of your father's estate. If other sons and daughters came into the family - whether born or adopted - you could not be written out of the will. If wealthy Romans could not have children of their own, they would adopt slaves and make them their heirs. When they did so, any debts of the slave were wiped

away because he had been transformed into the son of his new father and his status was permanently changed.

One of the early Church fathers, a pillar of the Christian faith, said that there were two ways of knowing God: you can either know him as master or you could know him as father. The first way he called *servitude* and the second he called *sonship*.

If we do not become adopted sons and daughters of God, then we are not just slaves: we are orphans.

In one sense we're all orphans. We may have had natural parents, but we're orphans because we all need to be adopted into the loving relationship of our Heavenly Father.

But what happens if we stay believing we are orphans?

We will not turn to God as our loving Heavenly Father. We will not trust Him. We might try to obey Him as a master, but we will do so in a cold and servile manner. The orphan from God is not living in dependence on Him and therefore must try to become self-reliant. Other things then intrude and become substitutes for God the Father's love.

For instance, I had a friend who would assess the educational standard of a group, whenever he entered a room. If he believed that he was more highly educated than most people in the room, he felt peaceful. But if he believed that he was less educated than the group, then he immediately felt insecure. He had invented a standard and put himself at the mercy of other people. This is unstable.

If we stay as orphans then we will seek approval from anyone and everything in life. We will crave affirmation and praise. This may take place within the Church or outside of it.

Consider, do you know why you are serving in your Church? Are you doing it to the Lord or so that others will approve of you?

If you are serving in order to gain the approval of church leaders, then your service will prove toxic. Whatever you do will not be enough. Their praise will not be sufficient. When they are too busy to praise you and you are not thanked for putting out the chairs, you will then feel spurned and rejected! It is not the leaders' fault. No failure in courtesy can explain the betrayal that you feel, followed by crashing inadequacy because your efforts have not been validated. Such an experience should show you that your service is to be seen of men and not for the glory of God!

We may continue to be orphans in other ways, propped up by the illusion of comfort we can find temporarily in sex, drugs, alcohol and food.

In England, where I live, one of the very special treats that I like is chocolate. It's not very popular in hotter climates but in our climate, it is perfect! One time I came home

after a hard week and looked in the basket that we had for the kids. There were three really nice chocolate bars in the basket. I thought to myself, "I've had such a hard week." I had a nagging thought about the children as I wondered if the fact that we had three bars and I had three children was a coincidence. But I pushed that thought away and looked again and said, "These are lovely chocolate bars." The nagging feeling returned. "But no," I thought, "I've had a hard week. I deserve this." So, I ate one. The next day I remembered the chocolate bars. Three chocolate bars and three children. I thought, "I've had one. In for a penny, in for a pound." So, I ate the second bar.

The third day was tough. People were unkind. It was so difficult being a church leader. I went home and thought, "Well, I've done it now. I may as well eat the last one." So, I had the third chocolate bar. Friday came. Three disappointed faces asked, "Where are our chocolate bars?" An angry wife said, "I've been telling them no all week. All week! All week I've said they couldn't have those chocolate bars until Friday. Where have they gone?" The chocolate bars had not solved my problem, any more than praise for moving chairs in the church would bring fulfillment! But it shows that if we are not seeking comfort from the Heavenly Father, then we act like an orphan, who has to find comfort for himself.

God wants to build families. He wants His Church to be a family. The only way that that can happen is if we are sons and daughters. So, the more we come into the revelation of the love of God the Father, the more we will see the importance and vitality of the Church as a family under the headship of God the Father.

My own determination to be self-reliant came from an argument that I had with my dad when I was 15. I stormed out of the lounge and said to myself, "I'll never take anyone's advice ever again. I'm on my own!" In the years that followed, I read about pride, but I did not see the pride I took in being a master of my own domain, self-reliant and independent.

I was living with the heart of an orphan. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:17). I was a defiant orphan, cut off from all the blessings and inheritance of being a child of God. As an orphan, I felt I had to deal with everything; but as an adopted son, I could acknowledge my needs, live in God's debt and trust in His strength.

How we Enjoy the Father Heart of God

Some of my relatives adopted a little boy from China. It was the fulfillment of a heartfelt desire that they had held for many years. It's an amazing story. One day, they both woke up with the sense that the boy they would adopt had been born that night. But then the wife fell pregnant and they had to drop off the adoption register. They were not allowed to go back on it for five years. When those years had passed, they reapplied. They were given a book with pictures of all the little children in need of adoption. They went away to pray and looked at the pictures separately. Incredibly, they both chose the same child. When they met him, they discovered that he had been born five years earlier, on the very night that they had both woken up!

My relatives observed that children adopted into other cultures quickly shed their previous identity in an effort to fit in with their new family. When he was six - so he had been adopted for just one year - my wife asked him if he remembered any Chinese still. He looked at her fiercely and said, "How you know I China?" In spite of the fact that he had jet black hair and his adopted family were blond-haired Americans, he was appalled that anyone knew he was not part of the family! He felt so loved and accepted that he saw himself as a natural-born sibling. I thought that this was a beautiful picture for us to remember. If the seed of doubt is in our minds - "Are you really loved by God? Are you really a son? Do you really belong?" - we can assert like my nephew that we belong!

This is not just about us. Some might parody that this is selfish, as though we are only concerned with ourselves. But emphasizing our adoption is not self-indulgent - in fact, it is the propulsion to make us get up and do things! You have a firm foundation. You will experience stress and rejection in your life, but that foundation cannot be rocked or even touched by other people. God really is your refuge.

Children who enjoy being at home want to bring their friends around. Children who know home as an unstable and unsafe place do not. Once we are home and know the love of God as our Father, then we will invite others home too. It becomes a catalyst in Christian work!

John Egan was an ordinary schoolteacher. He said that we should define ourselves as *radically loved by God*. What if we could start each day with that thought? Everyone likes to define us. We can be defined by our work, our colleagues, our boss, our teachers, our spouse, our children - everyone defines us! But what if we take control and define ourselves as radically loved by God?

I wish I had known this when I was 10 years old. I was part of a really fantastic group of friends. One day we all went to a birthday party. Someone said to me, "Do you want to join the ASH Club?" I said, "Yeah! That sounds ... that sounds fun!" Everyone laughed. I thought it was a bit strange. From that moment, I was ostracized from the group. No one would spend any time with me. If I tried to spend time with them, they told me to leave and gave me no reason whatsoever. I spent two long weeks ostracized from them. Then another boy was kicked out too. He came to me and said me, "Do you know what the ASH Club stands for?" I said, "Well, no." He said, "It's the Anti Simon Holley Club." Looking back, it sounds like the sort of silly thing that kids do. But my desire to be accepted was heart-breaking. My security had been in my friendship group. I went from depending on their approval to fighting to be self-reliant - both are signs of an orphan existence and both hamper our Christian walk.

When the Lord Jesus promised to give us the Holy Spirit, He called Him the Comforter. Every son and daughter knows the importance of comfort! When we reject the poor substitutes for comfort - like peer relationships and food, approval and praise - we put behind us all the competition, rivalry and pettiness that can corrupt Churches. It ends those whispers in corners, which ask, "Why was *she* asked to lead in the worship band? Why wasn't *I* asked?" Such a thing no longer validates us. We

can celebrate one another's successes, rather than sinking into jealousy because we have the Comforter. We know the love of the Heavenly Father because we are the children of His household and respect His authority.

On his 93rd birthday, Clint Eastwood was asked, "What are you going to do tomorrow?" He said, "I'm starting a new movie!" The interviewer then asked him, "How do you stay so young?" He replied, "Every morning I get up and I decide to keep the old man outside." I thought that was profound. Every morning you get up and you decide to keep the orphan outside. You decide, "I'm going to live as a son or daughter of the King of kings, of my Heavenly Father. I'm going to live in my adoption! Christ has done it all for me and I'm going to live it until I feel it." Then, when those thoughts of competition come up and threaten to end our comfort, I can say, "No, I will celebrate my sister being invited to join the worship team; no, I'm going to put this chair out for the glory of God because I'm adopted by my Heavenly Father; no, I refuse to walk into this room feeling rejected if other people are more educated than I am, because the Heavenly Father accepts me! Whatever I face, I'm not an orphan. I'm a son of the living God." So you open the door boldly and you walk in as yourself.

Remind yourself. Write in on your mirror. Put it on your phone. Make it a task that pops up every day. Only consider it done when you can say from your heart that you are adopted into God's family.

As we reject the heart of the orphan, we come home to whom we truly are as sons and daughters of God. Romans 8:15 says: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, *Abba, Father.*"

How do we become adopted? We realize that we already are! Then, when these orphan thoughts come up, reject them!

Conclusion

We have a night shelter in Bedford, where we care for some of the most disadvantaged people in our town. Many of these people feel abandoned by their families. One night, my wife was talking to a particular man, who lives in the night shelter. He said to her, "Do you know I own Cavendish Street?" She was incredulous and replied, "You own Cavendish Street? What do you mean?" He said, "I own Cavendish Street. No one goes down there without my permission!" She said, "Well, I was there the other day and I didn't see you." The man answered, "But I knew you were there." My wife and I smiled ironically at the sadness of a man, pretending to be someone he was not. But it is infinitely sadder for Christians to act as though they are not the sons and daughters of the living God! Which is more tragic: a broken man trying to pretend that he's important or the children of God living as though they are not heirs of eternal life?

God comes to us today and says, "Will you receive my invitation to live as adopted sons and daughters in my family? Will you act as heirs of the promise?"

Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8.17).

About the Author



Simon Holley leads the Catalyst Strategy Team along with the eldership team at the King's Arms Church in Bedford, and supports and teaches at churches around the world. His passion is to see ordinary believers walk into an encounter with God's love for them and to then equip them to take that message out into the world with demonstrations of the power of God. Simon is married to Caroline, and they have three children.

The Lord Jesus Our Example

Stephen Thompson

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. – Saint Paul¹²⁶

In this paper, I will look at what we can learn from the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus. When Jesus was on Earth many followed him for a variety of reasons; a few people, even the disciples, understood who he was and the purpose of his mission until he had ascended and gone to Heaven. Many people were attracted to him and followed him. Some were just spectators, and others were influenced by his message. He clearly spoke as someone who knew the previous Scriptures and was speaking to those who also had them. The disciples recalled that Jesus was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). To the religious authorities, he did not mince words. He used parables and spoke of the high standards of the Kingdom of God (the Sermon on the Mount). He proclaimed himself as being divine and the source of spiritual light, nourishment and life. He was the ultimate servant as he died on the cross to redeem us. Today his presence in Heaven is a constant encouragement for us.

People were Attracted to Him

We have no reliable first century picture of what Jesus looked like. Michael Green in his book: *Who is this Jesus?* describes him this way:

He was a Palestinian Jew, and as such the color of His skin would be olive, His eyes brown, and His nose hooked. Palestinian Jews had black hair and usually wore it long and carefully groomed. They valued a full beard, and it appears on many of the coins of the day. His mother tongue was Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew, which He would have spoken with a northern accent common to Galilee where he was brought up. But He could speak Greek and probably some Latin and was thoroughly at home in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹²⁷ He wore a sleeveless undergarment with a girdle, the customary cloak and sandals, and carried a staff on journeys.¹²⁸

In the book of Isaiah chapter 53 we also have a prophetic picture of what he would look like “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (ESV verse 2a). There was nothing in his appearance that would attract people to him. Today there are pictures of various actors who have portrayed Jesus.¹²⁹ Some even have these pictures on their walls. Are they there to help them remember Jesus or as good luck charms? If good luck charms we should oppose such pictures. It was reported that when Muhammad and his followers

¹²⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:1.

¹²⁷ The Hebrew Scriptures were the Old Testament as we have today.

¹²⁸ Michael Green, *Who is this Jesus?*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992, 8.

¹²⁹ Such as Jim Caviezel, Robert Powell, Andrea Refuto and others.

cleansed the Ka'aba, they removed all the idols and pictures except those of Mary with the young Jesus on her lap.¹³⁰ Films on the life of Jesus are not perfect but they are invaluable in teaching us about his life and ministry. A picture is worth a thousand words or more.

People were attracted to Jesus; they walked miles to hear Him and be with Him. People from all sorts of backgrounds associated with Him. He mixed with the top people and the street people. He could be amongst the lowest castes of people (prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners) and also in the temple. Many men and women followed him although few understood who he was and his mission and at times his hard words caused many to leave him (John 6:66). He selected a motley band of 12 to be his closest disciples. Looking at the disciples, we wonder why he would choose them! It seems there was also a bigger group of at least 72 and maybe 120 including women.¹³¹ Once he sends the disciples out on a mission and another time 72 of his followers (Luke 10). It is nowhere recorded that he was a great orator or speaker but Matthew notes that: "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." (Matthew 7:28a, 29).

E Stanley Jones (a great pioneer missionary in India many years ago) writes:

"A friend of mine was talking to a Brahman gentleman when the Brahman turned to him and said, 'I don't like the Christ of your creeds and the Christ of your churches.' My friend quietly replied, 'Then how would you like the Christ of the Indian Road?' The Brahman thought a moment, mentally picturing the Christ of the Indian Road – He saw him dressed in Sadhus' garments, seated by the wayside with the crowds about him, healing blind men who felt their way to him, putting his hands on the heads of the poor, unclean lepers who fell at his feet, announcing the good tidings of the Kingdom to stricken folks, staggering up a lone hill with a broken heart and dying upon a wayside cross for men, but rising triumphantly and walking the road again. He suddenly turned to the friend and earnestly said, 'I could love and follow the Christ of the Indian Road.'" Jones goes on; - "How differs this Christ of the Indian Road from the Christ of the Galilean Road? Not at all."¹³²

He was Full of "Grace & Truth"

The disciples recalled Jesus as being full of "grace and truth" (John 1:14). Grace is all about kindness and mercy. There are many examples from Jesus' ministry where

¹³⁰Pictures of "Jesus Christ "(PBUH) inside of Kaaba not to be removed, is it true or not? The Masaf Institute, 03 January 2017.

<https://islampfr.com/pictures-jesus-christ-pbuh-inside-kaaba-not-removed-true-not/> (accessed 26 November 2022)

¹³¹ Acts of the Apostles 1 records there were 120 meeting together after he departed this Earth.

¹³² Stanley E. Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1927, 39. The Brahman was a higher caste educated person. The Sadhu was like a simple Sufi holy man.

he showed mercy without denying truth. When the Lord Jesus called Levi (Matthew) to follow him, Levi put on a feast for Jesus and his friends and the Bible says “there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them (Luke 5:29 ESV).” The religious leaders complained that he was socializing with such sinful people.¹³³ Jesus’ answer was “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”³² “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:31). Here Jesus associates with “sinners” but does not condone their sin nor does he praise the religious leaders for their righteousness. As we know in many places, he is very critical of them. In fact, his truth statements about them include, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24 ESV). Many of his truth statements about the religious people of his day could be applied to us!

In John 4 the Lord Jesus meets with a Samaritan woman. She came to draw water in the middle of the day so as not to be the subject of gossip by others in her town because of her sinful life. However, the Lord treats her with grace even while showing that he knows the truth about her. He gently leads her into more truth, the truth about himself as the Messiah. This leads many in her town to believe. With Nicodemus, a religious leader, he seems to approach him from the point of view of an alternative reality, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:2 ESV). Nicodemus does not seem to understand him. Truth was not just the legalism and physical world Nicodemus was familiar with but there is another world which is also true and that is the world of the Spirit. Eternal life is available in this alternative reality. People for whom religion is seeking to please an unknown God (like Allah) need to learn to operate in the world of the Spirit, this is the world of the born again believer.

He Spoke about the Kingdom of God

Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15). The Jewish expectation was that the Messiah would come and bring back the kingdom of David on earth.¹³⁴ At the time of Jesus they expected that he would overthrow the Roman oppressors and restore the kingdom, even after Jesus’ resurrection the disciples were still looking for this (Acts 1:6). However, for Jesus the kingdom of God was within. It is God’s rule in the hearts and lives of his followers (Luke 17:21). The law of this kingdom would be love (John 13:34, 35).¹³⁵ The kingdom of God was central to the teachings of Jesus. The parables were the parables of the kingdom. Jesus clearly says that his kingdom is not of this world.

¹³³ Tax collectors worked for the oppressing Roman government and often collected more taxes than they were meant to and so were despised.

¹³⁴ *Messiah* means anointed one, the anointed one was the king.

¹³⁵ Philip Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Marshall Pickering, London, 1995.

He Spoke in Parables

These days good cross-cultural communicators share the message through stories. The parables of Jesus are an example of how he shared through stories using the everyday experiences of the people of that time. He spoke about fig trees, sowing, lost animals, hiring workers, etc. Sometimes his parables were more complex and this we find in Luke's gospel and in such parables as that of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).¹³⁶ Here there seem to be two lost sons, the younger and the older (representing the religious establishment). Parables usually only have one message and we can miss the point by trying to read too much into them. However, it has been suggested that sometimes the meaning is not so straightforward as for some the truth was concealed. Sometimes Jesus later explains the meaning of the parable to the disciples (Mark 4:10-20). "Those whose minds are closed to the values and ideals of the coming kingdom cannot grasp the meaning of the parables about the kingdom."¹³⁷

His Teachings in the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 through 7 seem to be a selection of Jesus' teachings organized into one place in the gospel. The Sermon on the Mount begins with what is called "the Beatitudes." Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn Blessed are the meek Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.... etc." Those who sense their poverty in spiritual things will be blessed beginning now and in the afterlife. This is a reverse kingdom from how the world usually thinks; it is the rich and powerful that we normally associate with the blessed. Philip Yancy suggests that Jesus is saying "How lucky are the unlucky!"¹³⁸ They were not just nice phrases to cheer up the Jews who at that time were suffering oppression by the Romans. Something like saying "Cheer up things are going to get better!" No, they are central to Jesus' teaching and genuine promises.¹³⁹ The future promises for the believer are real.

The passage in Matthew 5 goes on to affirm the law and even suggests a higher standard. Matthew 5:17 ESV "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." For Matthew, Jesus was the second Moses and the fulfilment of the prophecy of a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18). Jesus would not abolish the law but fulfil it. From his teachings he is not talking about the details of the Law of Moses but the principles which are enshrined in the Ten Commandments. However, he suggests even a higher standard is required, breaking the law begins in the mind.... "looking at a woman lustfully." allowing anger to occupy the mind "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:22 ESV)." Yancy says, "He gave it to impart to us God's Ideal towards

¹³⁶ The New Lion Handbook Christian Belief, general editor Alistair McGrath, Lion Hudson 2006, 111.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 111.

¹³⁸ Philip Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Marshall Pickering, 1995, 105.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 108.

which we should never stop striving, but also to show us that none of us will ever reach that Ideal. The Sermon on the Mount forces us to recognize the great distance between God and us, and any attempt to reduce that distance somehow moderating its demands misses the point altogether.”¹⁴⁰

The Sermon on the Mount is about the values of the kingdom, values centered on the heart and not outward appearances. In Matthew 6 it is clear that religious activities such as giving, fasting and praying are essential but not with the motive being to be seen by others. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day are criticized for doing their religious acts to be seen and praised by people. Those who sought the Kingdom and its values (righteousness) would not need to worry as God would provide for them (Matthew 6:33). Entering the Kingdom is not easy (Matthew 7:13, 14) but basing one’s life on the teachings of the Kingdom is essential (Matthew 7:24-27).

He Talked About his Return

In several specific passages he talks about things to come, Matthew 24, 25; Mark 13 and Luke 17. Matthew and Mark’s accounts are clearly related to a similar event while in Luke he is talking to the religious community, the Pharisees. In Matthew 24 the Lord tells the disciples that the temple would be destroyed and then the disciples ask Him about what would happen at the end. Some things are clear. The good news or Gospel would be preached to all nations. Jesus’ return would be clear. No one would be able to say that he had come back and was in such in such a town. We will all know. Before he comes there would be false prophets and messiahs. There would be wars and rumors of wars, pestilences (such as Covid19), famines and earthquakes. Many would grow cold in their faith. For many life would continue normally as it was when the flood came on Noah’s generation and then suddenly the end would come. The end would be a surprise just like a thief coming at night, unexpected. Some have suggested that when he talks about the fig tree becoming green it means that Israel would again be a nation. Whatever happens we should always be ready using the talents he has given us (Matthew 25).

He Wants us to Understand he is Divine

In most of our discussion so far, we have not used John’s gospel. John was the last gospel account to be written and it seems to assume the readers are familiar with the other gospel accounts. The importance of John is as an interpreter of what took place. The signs or miracles recorded are selective and mostly his speeches are said in or near Jerusalem. In John it is important that readers understand that Jesus is the Messiah and that he came from Heaven (the Son of God).¹⁴¹ Quite often in the gospel the Lord Jesus makes “I am” statements and this is not just the “I am” in normal conversation. There are eight “I am” statements we want to focus on here. These are:

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 142.

¹⁴¹ The Lion Handbook to the Bible, Lion Publishing, 1973, John, 533.

- John 6:35 I am the bread of Life
- John 8:12, 9:5 I am the Light of the World
- John 8:58 I am before Abraham (Describing Himself as Yahweh in the Old Testament).
- John 10:11 I am the Good Shepherd
- John 11:25 I am the Resurrection and the Life
- John 14:6 I am the Way, the Truth and the Life
- John 15:1,5 I am the True Vine

In these passages, the Lord Jesus is talking about spiritual provision and identifying with God or Yahweh in the Old Testament. He is not just the agent through whom these benefits or provisions are received he is the source of them.¹⁴² Jesus satisfies our hunger for meaning and purpose in life.¹⁴³ If we want to know what God is like we need to look at Jesus (John 1:18). E. Stanley Jones says (talking about being Christlike): “I know nothing higher for God. If God in character is like Jesus, he is a good God and trustable.”¹⁴⁴

Jesus' Miracles

The miracles also are not random but have a purpose. They are signs pointing to his being the expected Messiah. John the Baptist (*Nabi Yahye*) had doubts about Jesus being the Messiah they were expecting. He sends some of his disciples to Jesus. Jesus reminds them that the miracles are exactly what was expected from the Messiah (Matthew 11:1-6). They were also evidence supporting his claims to be divine. Consider Mark 2 when he heals the paraplegic and also forgives his sins. Consider also this verse in Acts 2:22 (GNB) “Listen to these words, fellow Israelites! Jesus of Nazareth was a man whose divine authority was clearly proven to you by all the miracles and wonders which God performed through him. You yourselves know this, for it happened here among you.” Yancy calls them “Snapshots of the Supernatural.” They give us a glimpse of what the world is meant to be like and give us hope that one day God will right all wrongs.¹⁴⁵

Jesus the Ultimate Servant

The Lord Jesus was a servant throughout his life. He served people through his healing miracles and even several times through the feeding of many thousands of them. At the Last Supper he gave an example of servanthood which the disciples were to imitate, he washed their feet. We have mentioned that we are separated from God because none of us can meet his standards. He is holy and we are sinners. Yet in Jesus Christ he draws near to us. He lived amongst us. Jesus showed us the character of God. He tells the disciples he does not want them to be just his submissive slaves but his friends (John 15:15). The Christian life is about relationship and not ritual. His ultimate act of servanthood was to die on the cross to cover our shortcoming and bridge the gap between God and sinful humanity. “For

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Nicky Gumbel, *Why Jesus*, Alpha International, 1997, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Jones, E. Stanley, 49.

¹⁴⁵ Yancey, 180.

even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people (Mark 10:45 ESV).” Now in Heaven, he is our High Priest and lives in Heaven interceding for us (Hebrews 4:14-16 and 7:25).

I hope this short paper has inspired you to reread the gospel accounts and meditate on imitating Christ in life and in word. Blessings!

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About the Author



Stephen Thompson grew up in East Africa until he was 13. Later as an adult he served with his wife (Rachel) as a global partner with SIM in NEP Kenya and Eastern Ethiopia where he helped the people with water and agricultural projects. Later they lived in Addis Ababa where he managed the *Codka Nolosha Cusub* radio program, ran a discipling program and was an elder at the International Evangelical Church. At present Stephen and Rachel live in a multicultural suburb in Auckland, New Zealand. Stephen has a bachelor degree in agricultural science, MA (English Bible) and a DipGrad (religious studies and social anthropology). The author can be reached at thomsjrj@gmail.com.

The Impact of Persecution on the Generational Movement of the Gospel: A Missional Reflection on the Somali Church

Abdikamil Mahmoud “Abdi Walalo”

“First-generation Somali church leaders do not need a retirement plan – because they mostly die on the job!”¹⁴⁶ (Somali church humor)

“I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”¹⁴⁷

Introduction

The World Atlas highlights what it calls interesting facts about Somalia.¹⁴⁸ They are listed as follows.

1. Most homogeneous country in Africa
2. Longest coastline in mainland Africa
3. One of the lowest life expectancies in the world – 53.5 and 56.6 years for males and females, respectively
4. Somali pirates
5. Ancient cave paintings in Laas Geel
6. One of the highest fertility rates in the world – an average of 6 children per woman
7. Lowest HIV infection rates in Africa

The list contains many fascinating facts. In this reflection, however, we will focus on two of these: life expectancy and fertility rates. People in Somalia die relatively young and an average home has many children. My mother gave birth to thirteen children, eight of them died. One of my sisters had twelve children, and three of them died. Infant death is a common occurrence in most homes and it is an unspoken factor in family planning. Mothers are encouraged to have as many children as they can because some of them will die young.

Mission Efforts

There have been tremendous efforts directed toward taking the gospel to the Somali people. These outreach efforts are well documented by Thoresen and Ali in their respective works. They have highlighted that laborers of the gospel have been sent to the Horn of Africa since the 1800s, their efforts bore fruit, and indigenous Somalis

¹⁴⁶ Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*, KENPRO Publications, Nairobi, Kenya, 2021, 66.

¹⁴⁷ 2Timothy 1:5.

¹⁴⁸ Oishimaya Sen Nag, 8 Interesting And Unique Facts About Somalia, World Atlas. 12 April 2019. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/8-interesting-and-unique-facts-about-somalia.html#:~:text=Located%20in%20the%20Horn%20of,cultures%2C%20and%20fascinating%20geographical%20facts.> (accessed 12 September 2022).

have consistently been coming to faith for over a century. They also highlighted how a century later Somalia is still considered one of the least reached nations with the gospel:

Despite more than a hundred years of Protestant missionary efforts, the growth of the church in this area has been slow and the present number of evangelical Christian Somalis in the Horn of Africa presumably does not exceed a few hundred. This little group of believers constitutes a culturally marginalized and persecuted minority, and the story of the Christian church among the Somalis represents a story of unnamed struggles and sufferings.¹⁴⁹

When Somali people factored in infant mortality rates and low life expectancy, they began having more children. When we factor in the impact of persecution on first-generation believers and the frequent killings of the leaders of the first-generation church, how should we respond? “The oppression Somali Christians endure necessitates theological, missional and ecclesiastical reflection.”¹⁵⁰ This is a missional reflection – the impact of persecution on the cross-generational movement of the gospel. Succinctly put, the impact of persecution on the children of believers in the Horn of Africa is a subject worth studying.

Persecution

The Somali church is among the world’s most persecuted churches.¹⁵¹ Persecution has been one of the major impediments to passing the gospel from one generation to the next. The Somali church, in many ways, has been a first-generation church in perpetuity. Is this caused by a bad combination of being numerically few and dying young?

Persecution does impact the movement of the gospel. A case has been made by Tertullian and others that, “the oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is a seed.”¹⁵² Persecution has not stopped evangelism and conversion in the Horn of Africa. Despite the existence of severe persecution, the gospel is bearing fruit – praise the Lord!

Has persecution been a catalyst for the movement of the Gospel in the Horn of Africa? When we examine the testimonies of BMBs (believers of Muslim background) from the Horn of Africa, could we trace persecution as a factor in their

¹⁴⁹ Frank-Ole Thoresen, “*Persecution of Christians in a Somali Context.*” Norsk Tidsskrift For Misjonsvitenskap 3-4/2012.

¹⁵⁰ Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*, 68.

¹⁵¹ Jayson Casper, “The 50 Countries Where It’s Hardest to Follow Jesus,” ChristianityToday.com, last modified January 15, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/top-christian-persecution-open-doors-2020-world-watch-list.html>

¹⁵² *The Apology of Tertullian*, translation and annotation by WM. Reeve, A.M, 50, s. 13, initially printed in London in 1709 and Reprinted in a second edition in 1716/1717. http://www.tertullian.org/articles/reeve_apology.htm (accessed 91 October 2022).

conversion? When Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were persecuted, their experiences in the fiery furnace impacted the king's perspective of Yahweh.¹⁵³ Persecution intensified the church's communal prayer,¹⁵⁴ strengthened the unity of believers,¹⁵⁵ increased evangelism,¹⁵⁶ and resulted in the numerical growth of the body of believers.¹⁵⁷ Is this the kind of impact persecution has had on the Somali church?

Are the leaders of extremist organizations, like al-Shabaab, encountering Jesus as they persecute believers?

Is prayer a hallmark of the Somali church?

Is the Somali church a close-knit family? A social safety net?

Is the Somali church evangelizing?

Is the church growing in numbers?

Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack, Abednego, and the first-generation church in Acts are exemplary in their responses to persecution. Their faith-filled responses to persecution are what we desire to see in the present-day persecuted church, the first-generation BMBs.

The Swahili people have a proverb that states, "*Ukiona vyaelea jua vimeundwa.*" Loosely translated as "If you see them (dhows) floating, know that they were skillfully made." We take note of the four Jewish men in Babylon and the first-generation church in Acts facing the stormy waters of persecution and remaining afloat, we desire to see BMBs in the Horn of Africa thriving and growing under persecution. To illustrate this, we will borrow a leaf from the 'Systems Approach' primarily used in manufacturing. In this system, the production process begins with the output and works backward to determine what is needed for production.¹⁵⁸ In the same way, when considering effective discipleship, it is prudent, to begin with, the desired outcomes of discipleship and work backward. "When we set out to disciple, we must know what it is that we are seeking to accomplish."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ Daniel 3:28-29

¹⁵⁴ Acts 4:23-31

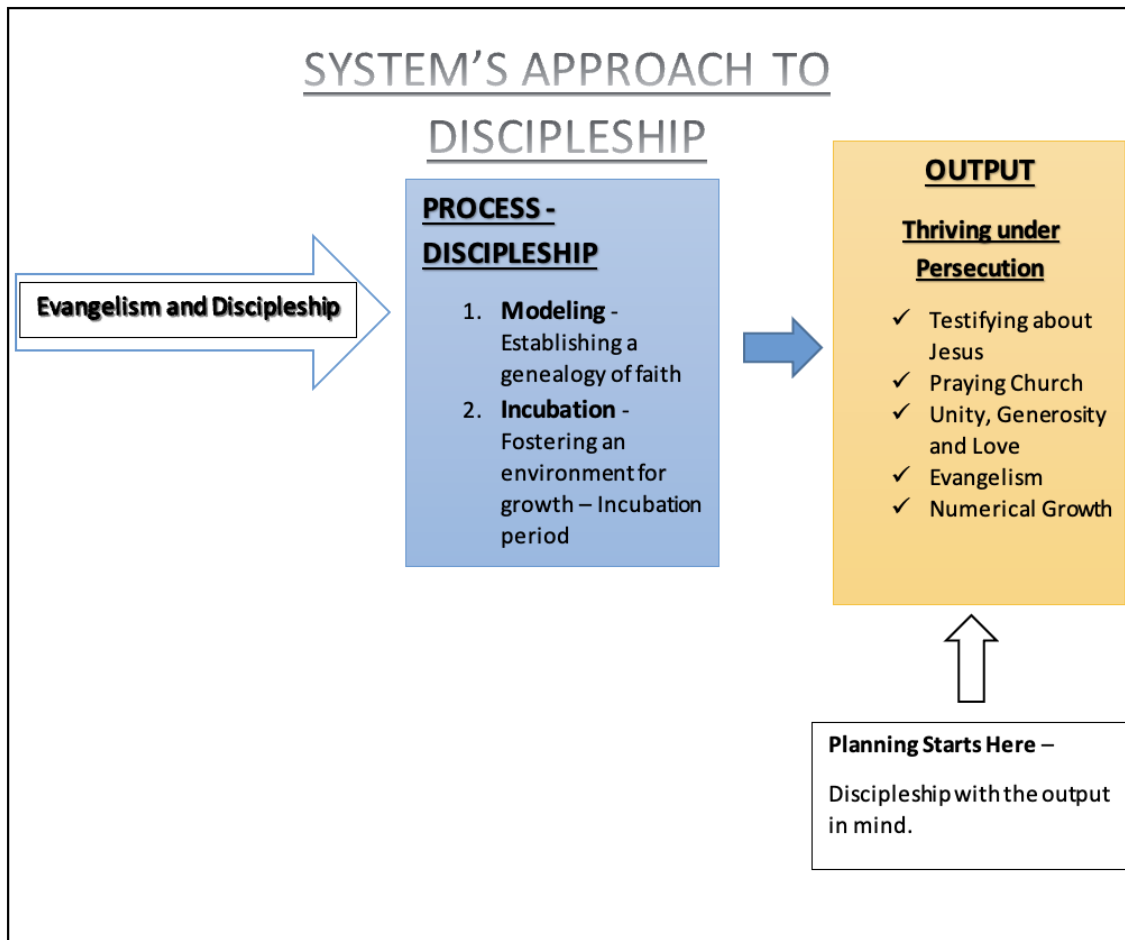
¹⁵⁵ Acts 4:32-37

¹⁵⁶ Acts 5:41-42

¹⁵⁷ Acts 6:1

¹⁵⁸ John Kayser, unpublished, 2003,14

¹⁵⁹ Don Little, *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities*, IVP Academic, 2015, 149.



Nik Ripken is an authority on the subject of persecution as he has done considerable research on this and has interacted with first-generation (BMBs) from different regions. In his article “Recapturing the Role of Suffering,” he seizes the urgency of this seminal issue for first-generation BMBs. He makes two critical suggestions in the discipleship of first-generation BMBs – establishing a genealogy of faith, and fostering an environment that allows for the growth of BMBs.

Modeling - Establishing a Genealogy of Faith

Kingdom laborers who share the gospel with BMBs need to model to them how to live for Christ and how to endure suffering and death for Christ. Discipleship is critical and key to helping prepare believers to endure and persevere through persecution faithfully. This kind of discipleship will result in these BMBs modeling the same for their children.

For decades, believers in the former U.S.S.R. and neighboring China have lived victoriously amid persecution. They have done this by incarnating a genealogy of faith that models from one generation to the next how a follower of Christ lives and how a follower of Christ dies. When these believers are asked, “Where did you learn

to live like this? Where did you learn to die like this?” they answer, “I learned this from my mother and my father. I learned this from my grandfather and grandmother.”

Incubation - Establishing a Conducive Environment for Growth

Jesus was culturally astute and bold in his witness. Framing the gospel by words and deeds, he created a safe place for seekers and new followers to hear, understand, and believe within their social units. Before Pentecost, severe persecution was not visited upon those seeking and following Jesus. After Pentecost, believers were in the thousands and better equipped to endure and excel through their sufferings for Christ.

This is a significant observation; the first-generation believers of Jesus' day were allowed an environment to hear, believe, understand, grow numerically, and be better equipped to endure persecution before severe persecution was inflicted on them. Persecution was not absent in their day, but it fell on Jesus more than it did on them as followers. The implication of this, in my understanding, is that the Kingdom laborers are responsible for being the lightning arresters as they serve first-generation BMBs.¹⁶⁰ This is a bold submission.

Conclusion

As I look at the scriptures and examine the lives of Daniel and his three companions in Babylon, I can see that they were well equipped to look up – fix their eyes on God - in all circumstances. Their lives were characterized by unwavering faith that has been fostered by strong conviction and consistent discipline of prayer. We can trace their genealogy of faith as we look at the life modeled by Jeremiah. We can see they were accorded an environment to grow in influence and numerically before they were thrown into the hot furnace or the den of lions. Are BMBs in the Horn of Africa too quick to be thrown into the furnace?

About the Author



Abdi-K Mahmoud is married to Laura, his best friend and a fellow partner in the ministry; they have 3 children: Shamsa, Zeenat and Nabeel. Abdi is engaged in challenging but fruitful ministry in the East African Coast under Bethany Gateways. Abdi has a missional and a pastoral heart. The Lord uses him in a mighty way to advance the Kingdom of God in the Muslim World. Abdi is a chartered certified accountant with a BTh and an MA in Education. The author can be reached at walalodinho@gmail.com.

¹⁶⁰ Lightning arresters (also spelled as lightning arrestors) are also known as lightning isolators. This is a device, basically an air gap between an electric wire and ground; this system is installed on electric power transmission and telecommunication systems so they can be protected from the destructive effects of lightning. Lightning can damage an entire electric grid and home appliances without arresters.

The Gospel Revealed to the Apostle Paul

Romans 1:1-7. First Part. Paul's Qualifications

Russell Cross

Introduction

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, he set out to explain what the gospel is and why we need to accept it and why he was not ashamed of it. But first, he needed to explain the qualifications that authorized him to be an official spokesman for God to present and explain what the authentic gospel message is. He was an Apostle, a kind of ambassador, who had been sent by the risen Lord Jesus Christ with a message to present to the Christians in Rome and to the Church Universal in all ages.

In this first part I want to consider Romans 1:1, where Paul introduces himself to the Church in Rome that he has not yet visited and presents his qualifications:

Paul's Conversion and Commission

First of all, Paul tells us that he is a Servant (a slave) of Jesus Christ, called to be an Apostle and has been set apart for the gospel of God. The book of Acts gives us three accounts of the conversion of Paul.

1. Acts 9:1-19. Here we learn how the risen Lord Jesus appeared to Paul, who was then called Saul, on the road to Damascus, and turned him from being an enemy into a disciple. Saul was struck blind. The Lord appeared to Ananias in a vision and sent him to lay his hands on Saul so that he might regain his sight. Ananias protested, "But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'"
2. Acts 22:1-16. Here Paul is speaking to the mob in Jerusalem who had been trying to kill him. He gives his testimony, telling of his conversion on the Damascus Road. What is significant here is what Ananias says to Saul after he has recovered his sight: "The God of our fathers appointed you to know His will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from His mouth; for you will be a witness for Him to everyone of what you have seen and heard...."
3. Acts 26:1-23. Paul is giving his defence before King Agrippa. What we need to note here are Jesus words to Paul in verses 16-18: "But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen Me and to those in

which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”

The Qualification of Being an Apostle

One of the qualifications necessary to be an Apostle was having seen the risen Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1 & 1 Corinthians 15: 8-11). The Apostles had an essential place in the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:19-22). Through their ministry and through their writings they laid the foundations of the Church, building on the cornerstone of The Lord Jesus Christ.

In his letters, Paul emphasizes that he was appointed an Apostle by the risen Lord Jesus Christ Himself and that his gospel was communicated to him by Jesus Christ Himself: “Paul, an Apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead...” Galatians 1:1. “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Galatians 1: 11-12.

Paul is at pains to point out that there is no other gospel and goes as far as calling down a curse on anyone who preaches a different gospel in Galatians 1: 6-10.

It is worth noting that the Risen Lord Himself said to Paul in Acts 26:16, quoted above, that he was appointing him to be “a servant and a witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you....” implying that he would continue to appear to Paul. We have some records of this in Acts and in Paul’s letters:

In Acts 18: 9-10 The Lord appeared to Paul in a vision to reassure him that He was with him and he would protect him in Corinth; in Acts 22:17-21 Paul says that when he was praying in the Temple in Jerusalem, he fell into a trance and saw the Lord Jesus who told him to leave Jerusalem quickly. He appeared to him again in Acts 23:11, while in Acts 16: 6-10; 20:23; 27:23-24 we see the Spirit of Jesus, The Holy Spirit, or an Angel, communicating with Paul, usually to encourage him and assure him of God’s protection and help or to give guidance.

Further, in 1 Corinthians 7 ff Paul is answering questions put to him and he has apparently gone to the Lord for answers to some questions. In 1 Corinthians 7:10 Paul gives a command from the Lord, while in 7:25 he says that he has no command from the Lord, so he gives his own judgment. This shows that in Christianity some things are a command while in other things there is freedom. But some course of action may be better than another. E.g., A Christian should not marry a non-

Christian. But he is free to marry any single Christian girl, or not to marry at all. But

his choice could have negative consequences. So, Paul's judgment is not a command, but a recommendation in the circumstances. In 1 Corinthians 11: 23 he introduces his teaching on the Lord's Supper with the words: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...."

John Stott says:

"So, the Christian good news is the gospel of God. The apostles did not invent it; it was revealed and entrusted to them by God." Stott, 48.

So, we can see that the Lord Jesus commissioned Paul to be a witness and as an Apostle and he was mainly "entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised" (Galatians 2:7). He was given a message to proclaim and equipped by the Holy Spirit to open people's eyes and to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, etc. Paul was a great missionary, preacher, teacher and church planter. But it is through his letters that he has continued to carry out his commission down to the present day.

Paul and the Traditions

However, Paul is also careful to pass on the traditions that he has received from the other Apostles: 1 Corinthians 11:2: "Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you."

F.F. Bruce says that these traditions were probably passed on to Paul when he went up to Jerusalem to visit Peter and when he also saw James, the Lord's brother, three years after his conversion. (Galatians 1:18-19).

Paul went up to Jerusalem again after 14 years, this time with Barnabas and Titus in response to a revelation, to put the gospel as he preached it before the leaders of the church to verify that he had not misrepresented the true gospel. James, Peter, and John acknowledged Paul's gospel in giving the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas and confirmed their ministry to the Gentiles. (Galatians 2:1ff).

Peter acknowledged that Paul's letters were part of the Scriptures in 2 Peter 3:14-16. So, there was agreement between Paul and all the other Apostles. They accepted him and he recognized them and passed on the church's traditions.

Paul & All the other Apostles Had the Same Commission

The Apostles were all chosen to be witnesses to the resurrected Jesus and were the official spokespeople who were to give the true meaning of His life, death, and resurrection and ascension and enthronement. As Peter said to Cornelius:

...but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who had been chosen by God, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and

the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Acts 10:40 – 43.

When Jesus appeared to the two men on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, he showed them how the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to Him:

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27).

Then later in that same chapter:

“Then he said to the eleven, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”“

In Acts chapter 1 we read that the risen Lord Jesus presented himself alive to the Apostles who he had chosen during 40 days and gave them commands and spoke to them about the Kingdom of God and told them to wait for the coming of The Holy Spirit to empower them to be his witnesses to the end of the earth.

In John 16:13 Jesus had said to his disciples: “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the Truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Paul was not yet converted, but as he tells us in 1 Corinthians 15: 8ff, after listing the people to whom the risen Lord had appeared, he says:

“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.”

Paul’s Influence on the New Testament

Paul’s calling and appointment as an apostle is important because of the central place he had in the formation of the New Testament. He wrote 13 letters and his traveling companion, Luke, wrote 2 historical books, The Gospel of Luke, and Acts.

So between them they wrote over half of the New Testament. When Paul wrote his letters, the gospels had not yet been written. But Paul must have seen that there was a need for a historical account of Jesus' life and teaching and of his death and resurrection. So I think that he probably assigned Luke to interview people (like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who may have been staying with her nephew, the Apostle John, at Ephesus). The collection was intended to help produce a written account of the history of Jesus Christ's life, teaching, death and resurrection and his continued work through the Holy Spirit in the Missionary work of the early Christians. Some have suggested that Luke and Acts may have been prepared as part of Paul's defence for his trial in Rome. Paul could have given some of the information himself: e.g. How otherwise would Luke have known about Gamaliel's speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:34 - 39?

Paul's last letter was probably 2 Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4:11-13 Paul says:

"Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.... When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments."

Why would Paul have wanted Mark and the books and the parchments? Paul knew that he was writing his last letter. By that stage both Mark and Luke must have both been well on their way in collecting material for their gospels and writing them up. Perhaps Paul wanted Mark to help Luke fill out his history of the life of Jesus with the material that he had gathered from Peter and elsewhere?

What is important for us to understand is that Paul emphasizes that he is an apostle, like the disciples of Jesus, and that the gospel that he preached and wrote about in his letters was something that he had received by direct revelation from the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself. But that does not mean that it was dictated to him word for word. He also incorporated what he had received from the other apostles.

Paul the Pharisee

And as a former star pupil of Gamaliel, the leading Jewish teacher of his day, and as a Pharisee, he knew the content of the Old Testament thoroughly and was very familiar with the beliefs and customs and expectations about the Messiah of the Jewish people. Like Moses, "who was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and...was mighty in his words and deeds." (Acts 7:22). God was able to use that training in a new context: The Kingdom of God where all that expectation about the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Alfred Edersheim says that the Jews could understand partially the nature of the coming Messiah and coming Kingdom, but they could not put it all together. Even the OT prophets often did not understand fully what they were prophesying about according to Jesus (Matt 13:17) and Peter (1 Peter 1:10 - 12). It was a mystery until it was revealed. A mystery has been described as being like a statue or a monument that is covered with a sheet until the day of its unveiling. You can see something of the shape, but cannot know

what it is really like until the sheet is taken off. Paul often speaks about the “mystery of Christ that had been made known to him” (e.g. Ephesians 3 etc.).

Summary

I have spent some time on Romans 1:1 because we need to be sure about Paul’s apostolic credentials. We must know that he has been called and appointed as an official spokesman by the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself. He has been given a message to proclaim, the gospel. His gospel is the proper and only interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement and how we must respond to that message in faith to be delivered from the wrath of God and receive from God the gift of righteousness and life.

In another study, we will look at Paul’s gospel.

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About the Author



Russell Cross went to Kenya in 1983 with the Africa Inland Mission as a short term missionary for 4 years. He worked among the Turkana people in North East Kenya where he oversaw an irrigation scheme at Elelea. The scheme was under the Turkana Rehabilitation Project and the Kenyan Government. Russell also helped in planting a church in the new village of Elelea which came into being as people working on the scheme settled there.

In 1990 he went to Chad as a full term missionary, after 1 year of French study. Again with AIM. In Chad he worked with the Evangelical Church of Chad in various towns. In 1993 he married Mireille, a French nurse working in a Mission hospital. They were based at Kouno and Ba-lli along the south side of the Chari River and lastly at Koutou in the South of Chad between 2006 and 2008. At Koutou Russell taught part time in a French language Bible School and helped in a Print Shop.

Russell and Mireille now live in Auckland, New Zealand. He has been involved in a Rest Home Ministry and teaching an ESOL class for immigrants. Russell has a B Sc and a Bible College diploma and has done some other Biblical Studies. He likes reading books and collecting useful quotes. The author can be reached at rm.cross64@gmail.com

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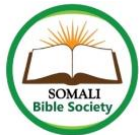
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