

## *Responsibilities*

I give notice that in this closing chapter I am going to ignore what is generally regarded as ‘the proper thing’: I am going to write, not as the pundits of political correctness demand – in the third person – but in the first and second. Getting down to brass tacks, I am going to use ‘we’ and ‘us’ and ‘you’ – above all, ‘I’ and ‘me’ – and not confine myself to ‘them’ and ‘they’; I am not going to limit what I say to ‘believers’ in general, but talk about ‘us’; in particular, I intend to speak directly to ‘you’, the reader. In other words, I am going to assume that my readers are fellow-believers, and write accordingly, addressing ‘us’ and ‘you’; specifically, I am going to assume that *you* are a born-again believer. Let me say at once that if you are not, then I have but two things to say to you, both of them said by Christ himself: ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:7). ‘Unless you are converted... you will never enter the kingdom’ (Matt. 18:3).

Why am I kicking over the traces with regard to the recognised norms of publication? Because I want to drive home what I say – to myself, and to all who read what I write. I want to convince you, and thereby see action. I do not want my words to be left – as so many preachers do these days – in the easy-to-evade and general ‘they’.

So, there it is. That is the basis on which I proceed. All wrong, I dare say, but that’s how it’s going to be. So let’s get to it.

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After all that’s gone before, the title of this chapter is rather silly, isn’t it? After all, we know that God has determined the course of the world, that he is sovereign and unchanging, and that his eternal purpose is predetermined, unalterable and can never be thwarted; we have also come to terms with the sad truth that Christendom has marred the work of God, and will go on doing so until Christ returns; and, finally, despite the damage inflicted by Christendom, we have seen that this age –

## *Responsibilities*

the world, indeed – will end in Triumph, God’s Triumph. In light of all that, what possible responsibilities can accrue to us? What clout do we carry? What can we do about the future? *Que sera, Que sera* just about sums it up, doesn’t it?<sup>1</sup>

No it doesn’t! Of course it doesn’t! The premise is right – God is sovereign, but the conclusion is wrong – all wrong – men are still responsible and accountable. We are responsible. I am. You are. *Que sera, Que sera* amounts to nothing more than fatalism.<sup>2</sup> And fatalism and the biblical doctrine of God’s sovereignty are poles apart. Though God’s sovereignty and human responsibility defeat human wit to reconcile, both are revealed in Scripture.<sup>3</sup> And this is why believers throughout this age have countless responsibilities – very serious responsibilities, to boot. And that, of course, applies to us today. Believers today have responsibilities in these ‘times of difficulty’; that is, in these ‘terrible, perilous, troublesome, dangerous, grievous times, times which are hard to bear’ (2 Tim. 3:1).

In addition, as we have seen, Paul used Israel’s failure under their covenant to challenge believers under their covenant (1 Cor. 10:1-14). What is more, since, in making my case, I drew heavily on Israel’s poor track-record during their covenant – as a sad, foreshadowing parallel of the way the Christendom-church has treated the new covenant – it is only right and fair that we should examine the way the faithful remnant in Israel responded when they found themselves living in dark times.

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<sup>1</sup> At a ministerial meeting in 1787, William Carey argued that the churches had a responsibility to take the gospel to the heathen. Allegedly, he was rebuked by John Ryland Sr: ‘Sit down, young man! Sit down and be still. When God wants to convert the heathen, he will do it without consulting either you or me’. It is only fair to record that Ryland’s son (also John) would later deny that his father said any such thing.

<sup>2</sup> Hyper-Calvinism and fatalism are bed-fellows. See my *Offer: Sears; Eternal; Amyraut*.

<sup>3</sup> See my *Offer*.

## *Responsibilities*

How did they react? What did they do? The answers to those questions will give us guidance for our trying day.

There is no shortage of evidence – challenging evidence, I warn you. Scripture faithfully records how the remnant in Israel – those who stayed loyal to the covenant – reacted when they saw the professing people of God sinning against the Mosaic covenant and, consequently, suffering judgment for their disobedience. I said ‘faithfully records’, and I meant it: the faithful remnant did not pretend, they did not hide their mixed motives, but they freely vented their feelings. And the Spirit, in Scripture, honestly recorded the good as well as the bad. Yes, the best of men are men at best (and the same goes for the women, also). So why then, in the following, have I largely (but not entirely) omitted remarks made by the faithful which do not read well in the day of the new covenant? Why? Not to deceive, I assure you. Not to make out that these men and women were purer than pure.<sup>4</sup> Certainly not! Indeed, doing that would defeat my purpose. The people I quote were sinners no less than we are, as mixed as we are. Let me speak for myself: I do not claim to have unmixed motives in writing and preaching. I say that, not to brag, but to own it. I dare say that my readers will admit their own mixed motives, even as they read and listen. The fact is, I want to stress that while the godly, during the time of the old covenant, did not always react in their dark day as they should have done, nevertheless by their stance for the truth, and by their grief over the sins of the people, they pointedly challenge us today. And that is why I write.

And that leads me to speak about things which are painful to raise; I am talking personally again. I referred to the faithful remnant in the days of the old covenant, and the rebuke their

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<sup>4</sup> Those who follow Eusebius, and write hagiography rather than history, do their heroes no service. Nor does it help those who read. Giving the impression that a fellow-believer is faultless is little use to a believer who knows he (himself) or she (herself) to be anything but. Oliver Cromwell’s ‘warts and all’ is pertinent. The Spirit never disguises. Take the record of David, as but one example. Take Peter’s denial of Christ, and all the disciples’ desertion, as other sad cases.

## *Responsibilities*

behaviour presents to believers today. No one needs that rebuke more than I. Alas, I have to confess that is easy to write, argue and preach about the dire state of the *ekklēsia* during the reign of Christendom, and give the impression of being righteously indignant about it, but God's call is for me to feel – to feel – what I write about.

That's not all. I also fail – sin, compromise – under Christendom. I confess it. As before, I am not boasting about it, but admitting it. But how can I do any good to my fellow-believers unless I, to a certain extent, get involved in Christendom? That's the dilemma. It's a nut I don't know how to crack.

Nevertheless, this kind of dilemma is not unique. Let me illustrate. During the Second World War, while the Nazis did all they could to keep their industrial slaughter of millions of Jews and countless others under wraps, the news seeped out. Added to which, towards the end of the war, the Americans liberated airfields which would enable them to fly bombers to places such as Auschwitz, discharge their load, and fly back. Appeals were made to the powers-that-be that the Americans should do this very thing, and put an end to the genocide. Harrowing debates were held in high places. The leaders weighed the pros and cons. Some changed their mind. The pros included the end of the slaughter (at least at the camp that had been bombed), and, supremely, it would let the Nazi High Command know that, despite their elaborate attempts to avoid detection, their diabolical secret was out, and that those responsible would be held to account. The cons included the inaccuracy of bombing in those days, the deliberate slaughter of thousands of Jewish and other victims, the certainty that the Nazis would force the survivors to footslog their way out of reach and to their death, and the certain, virulent reaction of the vocal anti-Semite lobby in the USA at the inevitable death of American servicemen in carrying out the bombing. The decision was taken: not to bomb. But immediately many of those involved had serious doubts: Were we right not to bomb? But they knew that if the decision had gone the other way, they

## *Responsibilities*

would have been harrowed by another question. Were we right to bomb?

While not claiming that my decision – I say ‘my decision’, but I know I am not alone, far from it – is in that class, it amounts to the same for me, personally. Do I compromise somewhat with Christendom so that I might do some good to those within it? Or do I cut myself off altogether? Not that it is possible to do the latter – and herein lies a major part of the problem. Whatever I do – or don’t do – I am enmeshed in Christendom from the cradle to the grave. *Catch-22* doesn’t get near it!<sup>5</sup>

Here is the dilemma.

Paul was adamant about the duty of believers to try to edify fellow-believers:

Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building (Rom. 14:19).

...for their up-building and encouragement and consolation... [builds] up the *ekklēsia*... so that the *ekklēsia* may be built up... Strive to excel in building up the *ekklēsia*... built up... Let all things be done for building up (1 Cor. 14:3-5,12,17,26).

It might be tempting, therefore, to try to get out of the system, stop doing anything to bolster the system, avoid the institutional altogether, and stop preaching and writing through Christendom means, and so stop compromising, But I am then immediately faced with wondering how I can obey the biblical command, meet with fellow-believers, and engage in mutual edification? And that duty is expressly stated by the writer of Hebrews:

Exhort one another every day...

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another,

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<sup>5</sup> *Catch-22*, a 1961 novel by Joseph Heller, gave rise to the phrase. It has come to mean that whichever of two possibilities you choose, you will be wrong.

## *Responsibilities*

and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 3:13; 10:23-25).

Nor does it solve my problem saying that in my experience there is precious little mutual edification in Christendom-churches: if I don't ever meet fellow-believers, or engage with them, how can I do them any good, or receive from them?

In any case, opting-out is impossible. I don't have the choice. As long as I live, I live in Christendom. Escapism, isolationism, living in a bubble, though it looks inviting, is not actually on the table.

However, there is a sterling example of encouragement: Paul, and his desire to preach Christ to his fellow-Jews. I will return to this – to speak of the apostle's love for sinners – but at this point I concentrate on his willingness to use the synagogue to address Jews. While he knew that Christ had fulfilled the old covenant and rendered it obsolete, that Judaism was a thing of the past, even so, it was his usual practice – if necessary – to attend the synagogue on the sabbath so that he might address Jews with the gospel (Acts 13:14,42-44; 14:1; 17:1-2,10,16-17; 18:4,19; 19:8). In Philippi, where (in all probability) there was no synagogue, the apostle sought out a gathering of Jewish women on the sabbath (Acts 16:13), sitting down with them so that he could speak to them.

Moreover, I am confronted by the way the faithful in Israel comported themselves under the nation's desertion from the Mosaic covenant. They got stuck in. Rather like certain characters we meet in the Gospels – the lad with his picnic lunch (John 6:9), the poor widow with her two mites (Mark 12:42), and the woman with her ointment (Mark 14:8) – they did what they could, when they could, where they could; they gave what they had. And, of course, as I have said, it's not just me: I want to encourage other like-minded believers to emulate all that was best in the faithful remnant under the old covenant. And what about the many believers that have never thought about the issue? Can't I say something which might provoke them, even awaken them? That is the spirit in which I write.

## *Responsibilities*

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Let me start with what, speaking for myself, is the most painful of all the painful lessons we can draw from the behaviour of the old-covenant faithful.

### ***In times of apostasy, faithful believers must show a brokenness of spirit***

We know that while the unfaithful prophets were encouraging Israel to play fast and loose with the Mosaic covenant and its law, assuring them of God's blessing in their sinful behaviour (Isa. 9:15-16; Jer. 37:19; Ezek. 13:1-7; 22:25,28, for instance), the faithful prophets were continually calling Israel and Judah back to obedience to the old covenant. And nearly always their labours – or so it seemed to them – met a brick wall; they felt themselves to be utter failures; the professing people of God grew hardened in their disobedience, closing their ears, minds and hearts to God's call. How did the prophets react? In addition to my earlier caveat about their mixed motives, I have to say that it is not always easy to unravel what the prophets said, and so determine their own personal feelings. The prophets' words had a threefold application: to the nation, supremely to the Messiah, but also to what the prophets themselves were feeling. Hence the difficulty. Even so, as for the latter, certain things stand out.

Let me start with Moses. How did he react when, having received the law, he came down from Sinai only to be confronted by the people's blatant idolatry? It goes without saying that he rebuked the people. He certainly did that! He told them:

You have sinned a great sin (Ex. 32:30).

But, having rebuked his fellow-Jews, he did not stop at that:

You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin (Ex. 32:30).

## *Responsibilities*

He re-climbed the mountain and prayed for the people! And we know the burden of his prayer when he reached the top of Sinai:

Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written (Ex. 32:31-32).

What an attitude! What a challenge!

To move on: how honest is Scripture concerning Elijah! Having just been used in a great spiritual victory over Ahab and the prophets of Baal, how he must have been congratulating himself, counting the number of ‘likes’ on social media! Not a bit of it:

He was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life... And he asked that he might die, saying: ‘It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers’ (1 Kings 19:3-4).

Now there’s a reaction and a half! I am not saying that present-day believers who are grieved about the state of the *ekklēsia* should go to such extremes. No! But it is clear that Elijah was far from smug, that he had no sense of patting himself on the back and puffing out his chest. He knew nothing of the spirit of the Pharisee (Luke 18:11),<sup>6</sup> if I may accommodate that man’s words:

God, I thank you that I am not like these Jews, tangled in paganism.

Bringing it home to believers today, he did not say:

God, I thank you that I am not like other men, tangled in Christendom.

Indeed, Elijah had a far-too gloomy a view of himself and what was really going on in the nation. When God probed him about why he was depressed, the prophet replied:

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<sup>6</sup> Original ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector’.

## *Responsibilities*

I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away (1 Kings 19:10).

How wrong could he have been! Far too pessimistic, as God told him:

I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him (1 Kings 19:18).

Paul made sure that believers – though living in the day of the new covenant – got the significance of these words for their own time:

Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life’. But what is God’s reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal’. So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace (Rom. 11:2-6).

And so, despite his former depression, Elijah pressed on, anointing Elisha, and so on (1 Kings 19:19-21). Now there’s a lesson!

Take Isaiah’s heartfelt complaint. As his entire prophecy makes clear, he had pulled no punches over Judah’s defection.<sup>7</sup> Can anyone doubt that he himself was one of ‘those who mourn in Zion’ (Isa. 61:3)? And we know about his frustration, and why he had a dark sense of disappointment: he had preached, preached faithfully; he had prophesied, he had warned, he had pleaded, but all in vain; nothing moved the people; he had been talking to the deliberately deaf:

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<sup>7</sup> See my *Evangelicals*.

## *Responsibilities*

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (Isa. 53:1).<sup>8</sup>

That doesn't need much unpacking. The prophet was convinced of God's sovereignty, but struggled under a sense of his own failure to influence the people. And the following extract, while the nation is in view, surely gives us a glimpse into Isaiah's own desperate experience:

Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me: 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified'. But I said: 'I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God' (Isa. 49:1-4).

Jeremiah also:

My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me. Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: 'Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?' 'Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?' 'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved'. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? (Jer. 8:18-22).

And the prophet's grief is palpable here:

Hear, O women, the word of the LORD, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a lament, and each to her neighbour a dirge. For death has come up into our windows; it has entered our palaces, cutting off the

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<sup>8</sup> This passage plays into the way the Jews rejected Christ (John 12:38-43) and sinners reject the gospel (Rom. 10:16), but it also shows us how Isaiah himself felt. At this time, of course, I am concerned with what we can learn about the way believers react to the new covenant.

## *Responsibilities*

children from the streets and the young men from the squares (Jer. 9:20-21).

Furthermore, seeing what was coming, the prophet tried yet again to call the people back to God and the covenant, warning them of the dreadful consequence of refusal:

Hear and give ear; be not proud, for the LORD has spoken. Give glory to the LORD your God before he brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains, and while you look for light he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness. But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the LORD's flock has been taken captive (Jer. 13:15-17).

God was determined to punish Judah, as he had punished Israel, and this would be unspeakably grievous for the people (Jer. 15:1-9). The nation would be virtually friendless. Jeremiah, knowing this, did all he could to awaken the people:

Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem, or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? (Jer. 15:5).

Jeremiah had done all he could to bring the people back to obedience to God. And how had they reacted to all the prophet's pleadings, warnings and encouragements? Like this:

Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me (Jer. 15:10).

Jeremiah honestly recorded his reaction:

O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revellers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?

## *Responsibilities*

Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?  
(Jer. 15:15-18; see also, Jer. 20:1-18).

God reassured the prophet (Jer. 15:19-21; 31:16). But still the poor man felt he had to write an entire book entitled Lamentations, in the opening of which he poured out a cataract of Jerusalem's sorrows. In recording this, he did not gloat with a cheery 'I told you so!' (*cf.* Jas. 1:5), but declared:

For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed (Lam. 1:16).

That extract speaks of the weeping of the city, the city personified. But I can also hear Jeremiah's own spirit in the words. He saw the trouble coming; he knew it was deserved; but still he grieved. And certainly his feelings are made plain in this:

My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city.

They cry to their mothers: 'Where is bread and wine?' as they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom.

What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is vast as the sea; who can heal you?

Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles that are false and misleading (Lam. 2:11-14).

Look, O LORD, and see! With whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?

In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old; my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity (Lam. 2:20-21).

## *Responsibilities*

The agony Jeremiah endured cost him: it had made him ill, both physically and emotionally (Lam. 3:1-20). Uncontrollable weeping had overtaken him:

All our enemies open their mouths against us; panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction; my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees; my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city (Lam. 3:46-51).

Now there's a challenge, if ever there was one!

And when, after Judah had been taken into captivity, and its capital utterly wasted, Nehemiah, on hearing grim news about Jerusalem – even before he had made a personal inspection of the city ruins – was heart-stricken at the thought of the dreadful state of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-4). It had robbed him of sleep, no doubt, and taken away his appetite for food. This is not mere speculation: King Artaxerxes could see the anguish plainly etched on Nehemiah's face, and raised the issue with his servant (Neh. 2:1-8). Whatever may be said about Nehemiah, nobody could ever accuse him of living in an ivory tower.

Even after Judah's return from exile, the Jews were intermarrying with pagans. Ezra, when he heard of this, recorded his reaction:

As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled (Ezra 9:3).

He confessed his sense of shame in prayer to God, and led the people in weeping before the LORD (Ezra 9:4 – 10:1).

That is just a sample of how the faithful reacted in dark days during the old covenant. If such examples do not challenge us, nothing will. But there is more to come.

Let us think about Christ. We know that 'he came to his own [that is, the Jews], and his own people did not receive him' (John 1:11), that he 'endured the hostility of sinners against

## *Responsibilities*

himself' (Heb. 12:3), that he was 'reproached' (Rom. 15:3).<sup>9</sup> How did he react? He could have called upon 'more than twelve legions of angels' (Matt. 26:53) to deliver him, wreaking vengeance on his enemies. But he refused. Again, when the Samaritans would not welcome him, and he was confronted by James and John who want to call fire down from heaven, yet again he refused, rebuking his disciples in the process (Luke 9:51-55). The Lord Jesus showed his forgiving spirit in these remarkable words:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 23:37-39).

When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying: 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation' (Luke 19:41-44).

And we have his prayer in his dying moments:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say: 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains: 'Fall on us', and to the hills: 'Cover us'. For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?... Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:28-34).

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Matt. 11:19; 26:25; 27:39; John 8:48.

## *Responsibilities*

It is precisely at this point that believers need to take full account of Peter's uncompromising words:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps (1 Pet. 2:21).

I acknowledge that 'suffering' is Peter's point, but Christ's forgiving attitude surely cannot be excluded. Believers are called 'to follow' Christ (Matt. 11:29; 16:24), not least in having a forgiving spirit.

And so to Paul. Even though he had met many disappointments (Acts 9:16), and although he knew that believers would always have to face such (Acts 14:22; 20:29-30), as he told Timothy he had remained steadfast (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Moreover, he said this in the context of urging all other believers to do the same (2 Tim. 4:1-8). But there was no bitterness in the apostle. As he explained to the Ephesian elders when he called them together at Miletus:

Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:31).

And he felt, and felt deeply, what he was saying:

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:1-5).

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:1-4).

## *Responsibilities*

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Ever the preacher, the apostle made application wherever he could:

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things (Phil. 3:17-19).

‘Even with tears’. Yes, he confronted apostates. Yes, he challenged rebels. But he did it with tears streaming down his cheeks. I’ll say it again: if such examples do not move us, nothing will.

### ***Believers must continue to work for God, stirred by the thought of God’s sovereignty***

Really? Yes, indeed! Contrary to what might be considered the logical stance, those who are most persuaded of God’s sovereignty are often among the most workish. The Bible is replete with accounts of the lives of men and women who, while they were fully persuaded that God is sovereign and that he has predetermined and controls all events – and rejoice in it – nevertheless have been determined and resolute in being sacrificially active for God. Persuasion of God’s sovereignty never put any damper on their efforts. Quite the reverse. God’s sovereignty was not a soporific sending them to sleep, or a cushion to lie their head on; it was a stimulus. So much so, they were living proofs of the biblical maxim:

## *Responsibilities*

The people who know their God shall stand firm and take action (Dan. 11:32).

Or, as the KJV puts it:

The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.

Notice that. Be firm, be strong. But that's not all: get on with the work!

We may take this further.

### ***Believers must continue to work for God despite difficulty***

Scripture records the lives of men and women who, although they realised the task they faced was, to put it mildly, going to be difficult, nevertheless pressed on, persevering despite many obstacles, setbacks and disappointments.

Take Abraham:

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told: 'So shall your offspring be'. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised (Rom. 4:18-21).

Yes, he had God's promise, but it was far from plain sailing all the way for him. He faced the acid test – and came through with colours flying – when God called him to sacrifice Isaac:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said: 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named'. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb. 11:17-19).

As Hebrews 12 goes on to say, such examples are recorded to stimulate us to labour on despite all difficulties:

## *Responsibilities*

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Heb. 12:1).

Do not miss the ‘therefore’. And do not mistake the ‘let us’; it is not a good idea, a gentle suggestion; it is a command!

What is more, the writer of Hebrews immediately went on to raise the bar to the highest level:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ***looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame***, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:1-2).

Take Ezra and Nehemiah, and the prophets Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi. They knew they were facing an uphill task, a mammoth task – one might say, a well-nigh impossible task. For God had called upon them, after the return of the Jews from the seventy-years’ exile in Babylon, to stir the people to roll up their sleeves, get down to the back-breaking task of removing the heaps of rubble in Jerusalem – both materially and spiritually – rubble that had accumulated as a result of the people’s sin over many years, and brought about by the devastation of the Babylonian invasion, and the years of neglect which had followed, and put in place positive scriptural reforms. Their aim – and what an aim it was! – to rebuild, not only Jerusalem in a physical sense, but Judaism in its entirety – not just the temple. One would have thought the temple would have been enough; it would have been more than enough for most men! But did these stalwarts gasp and gape at the enormity of the task, wring their hands, and gripe? They were grieved by what they saw, yes. As they uncovered the full extent of Judah’s ruin, and the degradation that Jerusalem and Judaism had suffered, they were deeply distressed. As we have already seen, Nehemiah, even before he had made a personal inspection of the disaster area, was heart-stricken on hearing of the dreadful state of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-4). So much so, King

## *Responsibilities*

Artaxerxes could see the anguish plainly etched on Nehemiah's face, and raised the issue with his servant (Neh. 2:1-8). Oh, yes, he was grieved, but not reduced to inaction.

Moreover, as we have already noted, the devastation went much further and cut much deeper than stones and timber; the people – even after return from exile – were intermarrying with pagans. Ezra, when he heard of this return to apostasy recorded his reaction:

As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled (Ezra 9:3).

He confessed his sense of shame in prayer to God, and led the people in weeping before the LORD (Ezra 9:4 – 10:1).

But these two men did not stop at grief; they went further, much further. Did they pray? Of course they did (Neh. 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:9, and so on). But, above all, when they were given the chance to begin the work of reform – both negative and positive – these men grabbed it with both hands.

Despite the harrowing pain involved for all concerned, Ezra immediately set about reversing the marriages with pagans (Ezra 10:2-44).

And, when he reached the city, Nehemiah lost no time in making a through, personal inspection of the ruins (Neh. 2:11-15).

He was mortified – but not petrified.<sup>10</sup> He called the people together, and was blunt with them:

‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision’. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said: ‘Let

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, ‘turned to stone’; so badly affected that he could do nothing.

## *Responsibilities*

us rise up and build'. So they strengthened their hands for the good work (Neh. 2:17-18).

No doubt Nehemiah, along with Ezra and the three prophets, Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi, recalled God's opening words to Jeremiah when he had been commissioned to God's work, spoken by the LORD more than seventy years before, words spoken in light of the appalling judgment God was about to unleash on his people because of their betrayal of the covenant:

I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (Jer. 1:10).

Moreover, Jeremiah had known that he was going to suffer for his preaching:

I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the LORD, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you (Jer. 1:15-19).

Hosea, likewise had known what Israel thought about him and others like him:

The prophet is a fool; the man of the spirit is mad [is a maniac], because of your [that is, Israel's] great iniquity and great hatred (Hos. 9:7).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Christ met the same (Mark 3:21; John 10:20), as did Paul (Acts 26:24).

## *Responsibilities*

The subsequent history of Judah recorded in the *post-exile* books never glosses over the personal abuse men such as Ezra and Nehemiah had to endure from their fellow-Jews, the enemies (with their diabolical schemes) they had to counter, the disappointments they had to swallow, the inward and outward cost they had to meet, the terrifying decisions they had to take, and the excruciating personal reforms they had to impose on the people. But – nothing daunted – they threw themselves into the work, and, moreover, they saw it through. As Nehemiah could justly say: ‘Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service’ (Neh. 13:14; see also Neh. 5:19; 13:22,31).

The three aforesaid prophets, likewise, despite repeated backsliding by the people, went on preaching with vehemence and passion – rebuking, encouraging, stirring the people to turn from their carnality and get the work done. I am reminded of Paul’s encouragement to Archippus:

See that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord (Col. 4:17).

And the work was done! They did ‘fulfil their ministry’. Although the rebuilt temple fell far short of the glory days of Solomon’s early years (Ezra 3:12-13), all the above-mentioned men devoted their lives to do what they could, as Zechariah put it, in ‘the day of small things’ (Zech. 4:10). They threw themselves – heart and soul – into the work of reform, and called others to do the same – even in a day of ruin.

The lesson is clear: if we really are living in the day of apostasy, then we must do what we can, even though it is in a day of small things, a day dark and difficult, a day which presents questions beyond solution.

The point can be taken even further.

***Believers must continue to work for God despite knowing that failure is certain***

Scripture tells us of people who faced an even more daunting prospect than knowing that the task before them was going to be difficult; they knew that disaster was coming; they knew that their labour was doomed to failure.<sup>12</sup> God had told them so. Nevertheless, remarkably,<sup>13</sup> they still did all they could for God. This, no doubt, sounds utterly illogical. It is! But human logic, human reason, is never to be the believer's guide. Scripture by the Spirit is.

Take Josiah, one-time king of Judah. We know that his grandfather, Manasseh, had sinned so grievously that the LORD had issued a dreadful judgment:

Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations [recorded in 2 Kings 21] and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their

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<sup>12</sup> In the days of the new covenant, believers, though they might strongly suspect it, cannot *know* that failure is certain. But take a similar example from the days of the old covenant – Jonah. He eventually went to Nineveh even though he strongly suspected that God would spare the Ninevites when they repented upon being told of their doom: ‘O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live’ (Jonah 4:2-3). Did Jonah want the Ninevites judged? Was he angry because God had thwarted him?

<sup>13</sup> ‘Remarkably’ or ‘surprisingly’, is too weak; it should be thought of as something which is staggering or astonishing.

## *Responsibilities*

enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day (2 Kings 21:10-15).

I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the LORD: the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem (Jer. 15:3-4).

It got worse! Manasseh's son (and Josiah's father), Amon:

...did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, as Manasseh his father had done. He walked in all the way in which his father walked and served the idols that his father served and worshipped them. He abandoned the LORD, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the LORD (2 Kings 21:20-22)...

...and he was assassinated in his own house (2 Kings 21:23). Nevertheless, even with such a calamitous upbringing, we know that Josiah himself – astonishingly – although he was only ‘eight years old when he began to reign’ (2 Kings 22:1), swam against the prevailing wind and tide, and:

...did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the way of David his father, and... did not turn aside to the right or to the left (2 Kings 22:2).

But there was even more to the young man (or, rather, to start with, boy) than that. We know that he was a consistent, fervent reformer. One event stands out. The men who were repairing the temple (2 Kings 22:3-7) came across the book of the law – which, evidently, had been lost. That shows how bad things had become in Judah at the time! The book of the law was brought to the king, and Shaphan read it to him (2 Kings 22:8-10). The king, deeply affected by the words he was hearing (2 Kings 22:11), issued a pressing command:

Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled

## *Responsibilities*

against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us (2 Kings 22:13).

God used Huldah the prophetess to reply to the king:

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'Tell the man who sent you to me: Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him: Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place' (2 Kings 22:15-20).

Clearly, God had determined that the kingdom of Judah, because of its betrayal of the covenant, was unavoidably heading for disaster, but he would spare Josiah himself. *And Josiah knew both these facts.* Both points must be stressed: Judah was doomed beyond recall, but Josiah himself was safe. If ever a man had cause – on both counts – to relax, ease up and coast all the way, that man was Josiah. He could breathe a huge sigh of relief on his own behalf, and excuse himself from further concern since God had determined to take Judah, because of their former sins, into exile – whatever Josiah, himself, might do. Sit back, sit tight, and wait!

But no! He did not take Hezekiah's line (2 Kings 20:16-19). Look at Josiah's response:

Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of

## *Responsibilities*

the LORD, and with him all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant (2 Kings 23:1-3).

Despite knowing the promise of personal safety and the prediction of inevitable disaster for the nation, the king acted as though the calamity could be averted: he started by making the people renew the covenant according to the book of the law.

And that's not all. The king gave orders to rid the temple of every last vestige of Baal and Asherah worship, along with all the rest of the idolatrous trash which had accumulated over the years. He abolished all the evil practices, all the corruptions, which had defiled Jerusalem. And so it went on. Josiah ensured that a root-and-branch reform of Judaism was put in hand; all the idolatrous priests and 'the male cult prostitutes' were got rid of; and he showed his contempt for all the evil of which the people of Judah had grown so fond. In a dramatic, widespread clean-sweep, he pushed hoary age and tradition aside; nothing stopped him. He accomplished a thorough-going reform according to the law of the covenant (2 Kings 23:4-20). Despite knowing that there was no hope, he did not let up before the reform was as complete as he could make it.

Positively, he showed respect for the interred remains of the faithful prophets who had denounced the altar of Jeroboam the son of Nebat (2 Kings 23:17-18), and he reinstated the Passover according to the law, commanding the people:

Keep the Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant (2 Kings 23:21).

So much so, God awarded Josiah this accolade:

## *Responsibilities*

No such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah. But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah this Passover was kept to the LORD in Jerusalem.

Moreover, Josiah put away the mediums and the necromancers and the household gods and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might establish the words of the law that were written in the book that Hilkiyah the priest found in the house of the LORD. Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him (2 Kings 23:22-25).

But, as the Scripture immediately goes on to state, despite all Josiah's sweeping reforms, God still did not turn from his stated intention to take Judah into captivity:

Still the LORD did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the LORD said: 'I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there' (2 Kings 23:26-27).

I underline my point. Josiah was exceedingly zealous in his obedience to God's word, even though he knew God's purpose was to deliver him, personally, while putting an end to Judah, at least for seventy years. The king did not allow the assurance of his own personal deliverance, nor the immensity of the task before him, nor the impossibility of long-term success – indeed, the absolute certainty of failure and disaster – to deter him. No wonder, then, as we have seen, God's epitaph for Josiah stands in Scripture:

He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left (2 Kings 22:2).

And the same goes for the days of the new covenant. As we saw earlier, Paul knew what would happen at Ephesus after his departure:

## *Responsibilities*

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:29-31).

Moreover, as we also saw, this was only one example of his dire predictions about the course of this age. My purpose in referring to this again is to argue that despite his conviction (rather, his certain knowledge) of impending apostasy, of the inevitable undoing of so much of his work, Paul did not throw in the towel; he pressed on, even in face of certain disappointment. He continued to spend his life travelling, writing and preaching, doing all he could to advance the gospel, rejoicing in that advance even when he was in prison, and others were seeing the success (Phil. 1:12-18). His final recorded-words were no idle boast:

I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure [that is, death] has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:6-7).

And, taking the point to the highest level, Christ himself saw no contradiction between his conviction – his certain knowledge – that absolute power was in God his Father’s hand, and knowing the impotence of men – the utter powerlessness of mere men to bring about God’s purpose – yet still he required his people to work for him. While asserting that he (alone) has ‘all power’, yet still he commanded mere mortals to labour for him,<sup>14</sup> even though the task is way beyond them:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

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<sup>14</sup> See ‘Our Privilege and Duty’ in my *The Glorious*.

## *Responsibilities*

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The task beyond them? I am thinking not merely (what a word!) of the size of the task – of reaching the world; the very nature of the task, in itself, is absolutely beyond human power. Only the sovereign Spirit can regenerate sinners; man is utterly impotent (Ezek. 36:26; John 1:11-13; 3:3-8; 2 Cor. 4:3-6; Eph. 2:1-5; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3; 1 John 5:11). Even so, Christ saw no paralysing dilemma here: God is sovereign; men are incapable; but weak men are to carry out the impossible; and in and through it all, God will accomplish his purpose. God delights – is ‘pleased’ – to use weakness to accomplish his sovereign will. As Paul put it:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach [or, the folly of preaching] to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

As he had already explained:

Christ [sent] me... to preach the gospel... not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1 Cor. 1:17).

## *Responsibilities*

And as he went on to tell the Corinthians:

I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided [determined] to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

But, of course, this spiritual wisdom is the only true wisdom; it is dismissed as nonsense by the world, but wisdom – true wisdom – it really is:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory (1 Cor. 2:6-7).

In short, the apostle experienced the reality of what the prophet had stated centuries before:

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts (Zech. 4:6).

And the same must go for us. God will not allow anyone to take the glory (Isa. 42:8; 48:11). As Paul told the Corinthians:

[The] base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, indeed, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence (1 Cor. 1:28-29).

Notwithstanding the calamitous rise of Christendom and the immense damage it is causing during ‘these latter days’, God is still gathering his elect. Nothing – nothing – can thwart God’s purpose in Christ. As he himself declared:

I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice (John 10:16; see also John 11:52).

## *Responsibilities*

Christ was declaring that the elect (both Jew and Gentile; here, particularly the latter) must be saved; they will be saved; that is, they will hear his call in the gospel, and hear it effectively; they will listen to it, they will be persuaded, they will turn from their sin, they will come to him, they will be brought to trust him, listen to all he has to say, and act upon it in obedience.

Of course, even the elect – who, by nature, as all men, are dead in sin (Eph. 2:13) – cannot believe unless, by God the Father’s grace and power, the Spirit regenerates them (John 1:11-13; 3:3-8):

You refuse to come to me that you may have life (John 5:40).

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets: ‘And they will all be taught by God’. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me (John 6:44-45).

Such is Christ’s verdict of man. But he was explicit in his assurance:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out (John 6:37).

The point once again: the task is beyond human ingenuity. Nevertheless, the believer must go on in obedience to his Master’s call.

But this does not exhaust the believer’s responsibilities.

### ***Believers must be careful to maintain their separation from the world***

That believers must be separate from the world, is, I assert, a biblical truism. It must be so: *ekklēsia*, called-out ones, called out from the world.

Let us start with the fundamental position. As John put it:

We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

## *Responsibilities*

That was true nearly 2000 years ago, and nothing has changed. ‘The whole world’ was utterly under Satan’s power, evil, in John’s day. Indeed, as he put it, the world, society, culture rested in – ‘lies in’ – being under Satan’s control. Note also the clear separation which John drew between – believers – the *ekklēsia* – and the rest. I talk of ‘separation’. What about distinction, demarcation, disconnection, division, detachment, disengagement, disentanglement? Why did God send his Son into this hostile world? As Paul explained, God sent his Son so that Christ might give:

...himself for our [that is, the elect’s] sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:4).

As Paul said – again, nearly 2000 years ago – Christ died to redeem the elect from – out of – this ‘present evil age’. Paul used *exaireō*, literally ‘to take out’.

The world, the culture, was evil two millennia ago; it has been evil since Adam’s fall; it was evil in Noah’s day; it was evil at Babel; it was evil in Christ’s day. In short, the world is always this ‘present evil age’. It can be nothing else.

I agree that when sufficient numbers are truly converted, a society will to a certain extent conform to some of the ethics of the gospel. (Do not miss the deliberate vagueness of that statement!) But in truth, conformity is a far cry from regeneration (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8), leading to conversion (Acts 2:38-39; 3:19; 16:31; 17:30-31; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), leading to transformation into Christ’s likeness (Rom. 8:28-30; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Eph. 4:12-16; Phil. 3:10; Col. 3:10; 1 John 2:6; 4:17)! All men and women are either in Adam or in Christ (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:22,45). Society is always – always – wicked. It may or may not become more or less religious, but it is always hostile to God (Rom. 8:7; Jas. 4:4). A religious culture is still a wicked culture. Christendom is a ‘Christianised’ culture, but it is evil. Christendom encourages conformity, but as for regeneration and progressive

## *Responsibilities*

sanctification leading to Christ's likeness, it is powerless, and worse.<sup>15</sup>

Scripture plainly teaches that the natural man is in the world, and he is of the world, whereas the believer, while he is still in the world, but most decidedly he is not of the world.

Although they find themselves tangled in the web of Christendom, believers, as well as adhering to the new covenant, and doing what they can to advance the gospel in the world, must learn from Israel's dreadful failure, and, being determined not to be buddies with the world, refuse to copy the bad example Israel set. Indeed, believers must be careful to maintain their separation from the world. James could not have expressed himself more strongly:

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4).

Nor did John fail to make the point:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15-17).

Indeed, separation was Paul's major point in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14. The blunt fact is that when the covenant people – Israel in the old covenant, believers in the new – dabble with paganism, it is tantamount to idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14).<sup>16</sup> It is

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<sup>15</sup> See my 'To Be Transformed' on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page, and on YouTube. See also Rick Peterson: 'Transformed not just Reformed' on his [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Ellicott: 'These words show that through all the previous argument and warning, [Paul] had in view the particular dangers arising from their [that is, the Corinthians'] contact with the heathen world, and especially the partaking in the sacrificial feasts... Because

## *Responsibilities*

destructive of God's covenant – the Mosaic for Israel, the new for believers. Israel flouted God's repeated commands, they trampled on their own voluntary vow (Ex. 19:8). Remember, they had freely given their word that they would serve and obey God in all that he said to them. Even so, again and again they turned to pagans and paganism, playing fast and loose with the covenant (Hos. 8:1). Believers must not copy this disastrous example. Although it is well-nigh impossible to avoid Christendom altogether, believers must steer clear of its tentacles:

Jesus... suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (Heb. 13:12-14).

Where is Christ? 'Outside the camp'. Where must believers be? 'Outside the camp'.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

Come out of her [that is, Babylon], my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues (Rev. 18:4).

And there is yet another responsibility laid upon believers.

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they are [God's] "beloved" he had written thus to them. Because God is a faithful God – because he makes it possible for you to escape these dangers and sins – flee from idolatry! Do not be trying [to see] how near you can get to it, but rather how far you can get from it' (Charles Ellicott: *Commentary*, slightly edited linguistically).

***Believers must shine as warning lights in a dangerous darkness***

As Paul put it to the Philippians:

...that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life (Phil. 2:15-16).

Notice that Paul had no need to command his readers to ‘shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life’; nor did he do so; he simply assumed that they were doing it – he took it for granted, if you like. Apparently, every believer in those early days knew that being a believer meant that you would be one of those who ‘shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life’. We, today, need to recover this spirit, this assumption, this taken-for-granted.

After all, Christ could not have made it plainer:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:14-16).

Believers are to be known, as their Master was (John 8:12; 9:5), as lights, shining by word and deed. As he told them:

The light [Christ, himself] is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light (John 12:35-36).

A light, a lamp? What do you do with a light, a lamp? It may be obvious, but we need to hear the obvious. Christ twice made the point, and Luke recorded both occasions:

No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light (Luke 8:16; see also, Mark 4:21).

## *Responsibilities*

No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light (Luke 11:33).

Two thousand years ago, the light in question in Philippians 2:15-16 would have been the stars, or a flaming torch of some sort. Today, the illustration can be extended to warning lights familiar to us all – lighthouses, traffic signals, electronic equipment, warning indicators in cars, and such like. Here is the passage again:

...that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life (Phil. 2:15-16).

There are two connected issues here: believers are to be shining lights by holding to, and holding out, the word of God. They are to be both warning and guiding lights.

In other words, believers must, as lighthouses, warn of dangerous reefs and rocks, while at the same time, welcome threatened mariners into a safe haven. In short, believers have to confront those in a dangerous darkness,<sup>17</sup> doing what they can to stop them in their wild career',<sup>18</sup> and, at the same time, encourage them to come to safety.

Take confrontation. The prophets confronted. Christ confronted. The apostles confronted. Even though we are not in that class, nevertheless we have to shine; that is, we have to confront. Doing nothing is doing something.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See my *To Confront*.

<sup>18</sup> Borrowed from a hymn by John Newton (1725 – 1807): 'In evil long I took delight,/Unawed by shame or fear;/Till a new object struck my sight,/And stopped my wild career'.

<sup>19</sup> Take the Columbia Shuttle disaster in 2003; the capsule disintegrated on re-entering the earth's atmosphere, with the death of the seven astronauts. But all the ground-agencies knew that something had gone wrong right at the start of the mission: some heat-protecting foam had come loose on lift-off, and hit one of the wings of the re-entry craft. There was uncertainty about the damage – if any, how

## *Responsibilities*

Let me probe this. Note Paul's reference to 'a crooked and twisted generation'; believers have to be:

...blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish *in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.*

In choosing this phrase to make his point – 'in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation' – the apostle was not thinking primarily of the believer's witness in a hostile, pagan world of rank unbelievers; rather, he was going back to the time of Moses, who, towards the end of his life, when he was addressing Israel, declared that the Jews in their disobedience:

...have dealt corruptly with [God]; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation (Deut. 32:5).

'They are a crooked and twisted generation'. Who were the 'they'? Not pagans, not Moabites, not Egyptians, but Jews, the professing people of God under the old covenant. It was Israel that was 'the... crooked and twisted generation'.

And Peter used the same imagery when he appealed to his hearers on the day of Pentecost. He was addressing Jews (Acts 2:5,14,22,29,36), and his words were blunt, unvarnished: 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation' (Acts 2:40). 'This crooked generation'. Peter was thinking of the Jews. Gentiles did not come into the picture until Acts 10.

'This crooked generation' – as used by Moses and Peter – clearly referred to the mass of unbelieving Jews; as used by Paul it probably referred to the Jewish teachers, the *pseudadelphoi*, and their followers who were infiltrating themselves and their false gospel into the *ekklēsia*. The present

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much, how serious – this has caused. After much debate and analysis – but almost all done in the dark – the top management decided that all was well. Several in the lower ranks, however, were very disturbed. Even so, nobody said anything – management protocol, their own job security, making them keep silence. Hence the disaster, and all the conscience-racking which followed. Not to speak is not to do nothing.

application is patent: in ‘the last days’ faithful believers need to shine as lighthouses, beaming their warning light to Christendom, professors of Christ who, like the unfaithful Jews in Moses’ day, were disobedient to the old covenant, and, like the *pseudadelphoi* in Paul’s day, were disobedient to the new covenant, and tampering with it; in short, to ‘a crooked and twisted generation’. Of course believers have to confront pagans, rank unbelievers, but they are called especially to confront Christendom, professing believers who are drifting away from the new covenant;<sup>20</sup> in-house, as it were. That is where the buck starts!

Alongside that, believers must shine out to Christendom-believers, encouraging them to come into the safe harbour – that is, away from Christendom, and back to the new covenant.<sup>21</sup>

We live in an effeminate day; confrontation is not liked. C.H.Spurgeon, developing some words by Thomas Manton – ‘There is a time for the trumpet as well as the pipe’ – had something to say about this – and we would do well to listen to him:

We must sometimes sound an alarm; we should be traitors to men’s souls and to our Master if we always piped to dulcet music. He who is always comforting...<sup>22</sup> people will find no comfort when he is called to answer for it before his God another day. Many souls need Boanerges [sons of thunder, using Christ’s term (Mark 3:17)] more than Barnabas [son of encouragement (Acts 4:36)], thunder more than dew. By many who think themselves great judges, the trumpet-discourse is judged to be too harsh, and the piper is commended for his pleasant strains; and yet the Lord may distribute the praise and the blame very differently. My heart, do not be always craving for soft music. Be willing to be startled and stimulated. Life is

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<sup>20</sup> See also Matt. 17; Luke 9:41.

<sup>21</sup> A difficult paragraph. All believers are in some sort of Christendom, but most are unaware of it. It is impossible to escape Christendom altogether.

<sup>22</sup> I have omitted ‘his’.

## *Responsibilities*

a conflict, and you need battle music to keep you up to fighting pitch. Let those who dance with the world [for my purpose, I would add ‘Christendom’ – DG] pay the pipers who play to them [soothing notes regarding Christendom – DG]; as for you, give your ear to the King’s trumpeters.<sup>23</sup>

The challenge, the responsibility, the privilege laid on every believer is... what? To be one of ‘the King’s trumpeters’!

And, if I might so term it, what is our greatest responsibility?

***Believers must remain faithful to God and his truth in the midst of apostasy, even when apostasy is widespread and prolonged, and close at hand***

This follows directly from the previous point. Shining to ‘a crooked and twisted generation’, being a warning light, sending out a beacon to direct mariners into the right, the safe channel, means that believers need to be thoroughly reliable, faithful, trustworthy, and their witness needs to be such. They must ‘hold... fast to the word of life’ (Phil. 2:16). They have to be devoted to the new covenant, holding fast to Scripture. Mariners looking for a safe harbour need to be sure that the light which warns them of rocks, or shows them the way to safety, really is telling the truth, and that they can stake their life upon it. The apostle laid down the principle:

It is required of stewards that they be found faithful (1 Cor. 4:2).

Be watchful, stand firm in the faith (1 Cor. 16:13).

Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God (Phil. 1:27-28).

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<sup>23</sup> C.H.Spurgeon: *Flowers from a Puritan’s Garden*.

## *Responsibilities*

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved (Phil. 4:1).

‘Faithful’ and ‘stand firm’ are the key words. Believers have to be faithful, reliable, trustworthy, dependable, standing firm, persevering, standing upright; men and women of integrity. Faithful lights are needed on dark nights.

The lighthouse has to be a fixture. The position of the stars is absolutely reliable. If lighthouse-keepers move the light on a whim or according to local fashion, or if a traveller depends on a wandering meteor, disaster ensues. The whole notion is of sureness, reliability, fixity.<sup>24</sup> James spoke of God as:

...the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (Jas. 1:17).

The prophet had recorded God’s declaration about himself:

I the LORD do not change (Mal. 3:6).

And long before, Balaam had stated it:

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? (Num. 23:19).

As their Father, so believers must be – shining with ‘no variation or shadow due to change’, not being as the wicked, ‘double-minded... unstable in all [their] ways’ (Jas. 1:8; see also Jas. 4:8); they must never be ‘ignorant and unstable’ (2 Pet. 3:16; see also 2 Pet. 2:14), ‘wandering stars’ (Jude 13).

In short, believers have to be noted for their reliability, for their integrity, their stability, that they hold forth the truth and they stick to it, that they remain faithful. And never was faithfulness to the gospel more important than today. For this is a day marked, in general, by appallingly-weak doctrinal knowledge, and a signal lack of interest in doctrine, coupled with an

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<sup>24</sup> Cornish wrecking (as set out, say, in *Jamaica Inn* by Daphne du Maurier) is probably a myth, but the apocryphal image shows what happens when lights are false.

## *Responsibilities*

increasing tendency to regard sin as sin only when it becomes public, or when it results in blatantly-sinful acts.<sup>25</sup> Concern for doctrinal and practical detail counts far less than a sense of well-being. Today's lighthouse-keepers give the impression of being a well-meaning, happy bunch, but whether the light they beam out is accurate, reliable, trustworthy – that is the question. Mariners in the storm would be well-advised to bear it in mind!

Believers need to worry less about their enjoyment, and get to grips with obeying Peter's injunction (the KJV sticking literally to the Greek):

Gird up the loins of your mind (1 Pet. 1:13).

That's it! Good feelings are good, but only if the mind is awake and awake to the truth. Believers are living in a hostile world – paganism and Christendom – and adherence to truth is an essential; it is not an option, a luxury, an add-on for the few. Interest in doctrine – deliberately to understate it – is not a hobby for a few believing-nerds. Every believer is to be a shining light in a dark world. When all around gives way, gives ground, the believer must be faithful, and about his Master's business. As Christ declared:

But concerning that day and hour [that is, of his return] no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of

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<sup>25</sup> Louis Mazzini: 'These things only become wrong when people know about them' (talking to Sibella, in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*).

## *Responsibilities*

Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? (Matt. 24:36-45).

And:

For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying: 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more'. His master said to him: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master'. And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying: 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more'. His master said to him: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master'. He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying: 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours'. But his master answered him: 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25:14-30).

As the closing book of Scripture stresses:

## *Responsibilities*

[Christ's enemies] will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Rev. 17:14).

'Faithful' is the word.