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Checkmating the Human Drive for Life

A Biblical-Theological Examination of Genesis 5, Ecclesiastes 1, and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58[1]

by

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Abstract

The major premise of this essay is that since the dawn of time, the human drive for life has been checkmated by death. A Biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 indicates that despite the efforts of people both individually and collectively to extend the realms of human existence, their efforts are ultimately ambushed (in a manner of speaking) by the end of life. Moreover, while each generation appears to be making incremental strides—sometimes even laudable gains—the reality of death neutralizes these advances and in some cases entirely wipes them out. An examination of 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 informs people of faith that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling.

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[1] The idea for the present article came from Fishbane (1998:37), who said concerning the "overall teaching of the primeval cycle in Genesis" that the "unchecked expression of the drive for life is ultimately counterproductive and results in death, destruction, and isolation."

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1. Introduction

Chess is a game in which two players begin with 16 pieces strategically placed on a checkered board. Both of them follow precise rules to capture each other's pieces. The object of the game is to put the opponent's king under a direct attack from which escape is impossible. As a matter of fact, the term "checkmate," which is used to refer to this situation, comes from a Persian word that literally means "the king is left unable to escape." More generally, "checkmate" denotes a circumstance in which someone or something has been thwarted or completely countered.

The major premise of this essay is that since the dawn of time, the human drive for life has been checkmated by death. A biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 indicates that despite the efforts of people both individually and collectively to extend the realms of human existence, their efforts are ultimately ambushed (in a manner of speaking) by the end of life. Moreover, while each generation appears to be making incremental strides—sometimes even laudable gains—the reality of death neutralizes these advances and in some cases entirely wipes them out. An examination of 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 informs people of faith that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling.

2. Life and Death from the Perspective of Genesis 5

2.1 The Tôlēdôt Sections of Genesis

Extensive scholarly activity has focused on the Hebrew noun *tôlēdôt*, which is rendered "account" in the TNIV (Gen 5:1; cf. Hendel 1992:2:935-936; Turner 2003:350-351; Woudstra 1970:184-189). The noun is derived from a verb that means "to bear" or "to generate." Accordingly, the phrase "this is the written account of" is more literally rendered "this is the book of the generations (or descendants) of." However, in Genesis the noun introduces more than genealogies. *Tôlēdôt* can also point to biographical material as well as summarize a series of important events.

The literary importance of this Hebrew noun (which occurs 10 times in Genesis) should not be overlooked, for it's repetition throughout the book can help the reader discern how the author organized and arranged his information (cf. Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2). Particularly, *tôlēdôt* signals the beginning of a narrative sequence in which the history of an individual or entity is discussed, in some places briefly while in other places extensively. For instance, 5:1-6:8 contains the genealogy from Adam to Noah. This section also discusses how the presence of sin and death within the human race checkmated the efforts of each successive generation to fulfil the creation mandate.

As each *tôlēdôt* section unfolds, the focus of attention increasingly narrows. Genesis begins with God commanding the universe into existence and then zeros in on His creation of humankind. After the account of the worldwide Flood, the aperture closes in on the origins of the Hebrew race, giving particular attention to key events associated with the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This literary development makes sense, for God established His covenant with the patriarchs and their descendants.

2.2 Genesis 5 and the Human Drive for Life

Starting with Genesis 5:1, the question of what became of Adam's descendants is addressed (Ross 1988:171). Fretheim (1994:1:380) suggests that "after the murder perpetrated by Cain and the vengeful response of Lamech, Genesis 5 may represent a fresh start, building upon the reference to the worship of Yahweh at the end of chapter 4." Genesis 5:1-2 has clear thematic and linguistic links with the creation account recorded in 1:26-27 (Cassuto 1978:249-250; Hamilton 1990:255; Sailhamer 1990:2:70; Sailhamer 1992:117). Each set of verses reveals that God created both male and female genders of the human race in His image.

There is a longstanding debate concerning what this means, with the bulk of the views stressing either the nature or function of human life. Most likely, the biblical text affirms each emphasis. This implies the divine likeness is a special quality/character and a role/task entrusted to people (Lioy 2005:50-51). The ability of human beings to reason and make ethical decisions are

noteworthy ways in which people give creative expression to the "likeness of God" (5:1) within them. Moreover, the divine "mandate for people to govern the world as benevolent vice-regents of the true and living God is a reflection of His image in them." By doing so "in a responsible fashion," they "bear witness to the divine likeness placed within humanity" (Lioy 2005:51).

As 1:26 states, the jurisdiction of human beings extended to the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and animals on the land (whether small or large, wild or domesticated). Also, as 1:28 and 5:2 reveal, the blessing of God on humankind was the key to them being able to fulfil the creation mandate (Hamilton 1990:255; Roop 1987:60; Sailhamer 1990:2:70-71; Sailhamer 1992:117-118). The Hebrew term rendered "blessed" (5:2) "conveys the idea of endowing something with productivity or fruitfulness" (Lioy 2005:48). With respect to the human race, the extent to which they enjoyed the favour of God on their lives determined the degree of their success in being able to actualize God's will on earth.

The remainder of Genesis 5 records the efforts of humanity to "flourish and be successful in serving as [God's] vice-regents" (Lioy 2005:52). Despite the continued and vigorous attempts on the part of people to fulfil the creation mandate, each generation is checkmated by death. This is indicated by the sad refrain "and then he died," which appears throughout the chapter (vv. 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31; Keil and Delitzsch 1981:124; Kidner 1967:79-80; Leupold 1982:236). The "reign of death" contrasts sharply with the "desire of God" for human beings to flourish (Ross 1988:171). Von Rad (1972:69) encourages the reader to "understand man's slowly diminishing life span … as a gradual deterioration of his original, wonderful vitality, a deterioration corresponding to his increasing distance from his starting point at creation."

The pattern is only broken with the account of Enoch (Sailhamer 1990:2:73; Sailhamer 1992:118), in which the biblical text twice says he "walked faithfully with God" (vv. 22, 24). The idea is that throughout Enoch's 365 years on earth, he stood out as someone who lived in close fellowship with God (Helfmeyer 1978:3:394; Keil and Delitzsch 1981:125; Leupold 1982:241-242; Roop 1987:60; von Rad 1972:71). Because Enoch's life was one of superlative devotion and piety, he escaped the clutches of death (Fretheim 1994:1:380; Kidner 1967:80-81). Expressed differently, when God

removed Enoch from the face of the planet, death was overruled (Ross 1988:174; cf. Heb 11:5).

This oasis of grace is surrounded by a wasteland of death. There are 10 literary panels in Genesis 5, one for each generation of Adam's descendants through Seth. According to Brueggemann (1982:67), the "genealogy of ten generations is primarily for purposes of continuity, to show the linkage of humankind from its wholesome beginning to its shameful arrival at the flood." A new biological group of fallen human beings appears for a span of time and procreates sons and daughters in their own imperfect image (Keil and Delitzsch 1981:241; Leupold 1982:234-235). Moreover, the duration of life is remarkable—at least by today's standards (Cassuto 1978:252-253; Hamilton 1990:256). Among these antediluvian centenarians, Methuselah lived the longest—969 years; and yet, even he eventually succumbed to death.

Back in the Garden of Eden, God warned Adam of the sobering prospect of death. The first man learned that if he violated the divine prohibition against eating from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:17), he would "certainly die." Then, when he subsequently disobeyed the Creator, Adam's transgression resulted in sin entering the world. Moreover, death entered the realm of human experience and "came to all people" (Rom 5:12). Indeed, death became the payoff of sin (6:23).

The presence and reign of death extended beyond humankind to all of creation. In Genesis 3:17-19, God declared that because of Adam's transgression, the ground from which he was created would be cursed. This means it would no longer be as fruitful in its yield as it could have been before sin entered creation. Furthermore, the spectre of death would shunt the blessing of God on humankind.

In Romans 8:20, Paul said all of the creation was subjected to frustration. The Greek word rendered "frustration" carries the ideas of futility and decay. Adam had been assigned to a position of authority over creation as God's representative (cf. Gen 1:26-30; 2:8, 15). Hence, when God's judgment came against humanity in the Garden of Eden, all of creation was affected. Indeed, creation was subjected as a result of the Lord's judgment, "not by its own choice" (Rom. 8:20), but according to the righteous will of God.

Theologians generally believe that people would have been immortal if Adam had not eaten the forbidden fruit. This means that death was introduced as part of the judgment of sin. Physical death does not result in extinction; rather, the outcome is separation from the realm of the living. Likewise, spiritual death does not result in annihilation; instead, the consequence is eternal separation from the living God.

Along with Enoch, Noah is a ray of hope for the future against the dark backdrop of sin and death in Genesis 5. Verses 28 and 29 state that when Lamech was 182, he had a son, whom he named "Noah." Though the etymology of this name remains a matter of debate (cf. Hamilton 1990:258-259; Kraeling 1929:138-143), some think it is related the Hebrew verb *nuach*, which means "to rest." "Noah" is similar in sound to the Hebrew verb for "to comfort" and reflects Lamech's belief that his son would bring humankind relief from the struggle of having to eek out an existence from the ground, which the Lord placed under a curse (Keil and Delitzsch 1981:126-127; Leupold 1982:245-246; Roop 1987:60; Ross 1988:176). Sailhamer (1990:2:74) notes that when Genesis 8:21 is considered, the comfort Noah provided included the deliverance of humankind by means of the ark, along with "the reinstitution of the sacrifice after the Flood." In this way, Noah "averted any future destruction" of the human race (cf. Brueggemann 1982:69-70; Sailhamer 1992:119; von Rad 1972:72).

3. Life and Death from the Perspective of Ecclesiastes

3.1 The Inspired Perspective of Ecclesiastes

Like Genesis 5, Ecclesiastes 1 deals with the stark reality of death. On the surface, though, the frank, unvarnished perspective presented in latter can leave readers wondering why this book has been included in the canon of Scripture (Fuerst 1975:91). Moreover, some struggle to accept the author's verdict that apart from God everything in life is absolutely futile and absurd, a declaration that appears throughout the author's treatise (cf. 1:2, 14; 2:11, 17, 26; 12:8; Ranger 1989:2). As a result, they conjecture that the sentiments of the author represent an inferior perspective, one that allegedly is supplanted by

more inspired views, such as those found in the New Testament. This orientation is a grossly inaccurate misrepresentation of Ecclesiastes (Caneday 1994:85-86; Castellino 1994:31-32; Johnston 1994:134-135; Leupold 1983:28-31; Wright 1994a:19-20). As the research of de Jong affirms, the theology of the book is "located within the mainstream of the Old Testament" (1997:154).

Despite the brevity of Ecclesiastes, it explores a vast range of problems concerning human existence (Atkins 1991:5.21). The author examined the activities and ambitions of human beings, including wisdom, pleasure, work, progress, and wealth. One finds that among the writers of the Old Testament, the author of Ecclesiastes was the "least comfortable with conventional wisdom, and the most willing to challenge unexamined assumptions" (Towner 1997:5.267-268). He was also willing to hold in dynamic tension the unresolved paradoxes of life (Miller 2000:220, 233). In point of fact, the book presents the reflections of a man who boldly faced the complex questions of existence and who "understood the reality of the curse of God placed upon life" (Shank 1994:71; cf. Caneday 1994:90-91, 110-111; Parsons 2003b:296-297).

Based on the analysis of his findings, the author of Ecclesiastes reported that no matter what people strive to attain in life, they all meet the same destiny; in other words, all people die and are forgotten by others. In this way, the author did not try to hide the futility that people face. Indeed, he taught that all goals of human beings have limitations—even wisdom. Thus, it is useless for them to pretend as if they are the masters of their own destinies. At the end of the author's discourse, he concluded that true meaning and joy come solely from God. In response to the cry of despair found throughout the author's essay, the writer declared that meaning and wisdom in life can only be found in fearing God and keeping His commandments (12:13; Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen 2005:419-420; Keil and Delitzsch 1982:183; LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush 1996:501).

The writer's candid view of existence sets the stage for the underlying hope in Ecclesiastes. Although every human striving will eventually fail, God's purposes will never be thwarted. Based on the author's wide-ranging experiences and observations, he concluded that God has ordered life

according to His purposes. Thus, the best approach to existence on earth as human beings is for people of faith to accept and enjoy the life God has given them. When Ecclesiastes is approached in this way, the book is seen to have the canon of Scripture as its theological mooring (Hubbard 1991:29). It truly is a brilliant and inspired discourse that should encourage believers to work diligently toward a God-centred view of life (Hill and Walton 2000:369; Wright 1994b:169, 172).

3.2 Ecclesiastes 1 and the Human Drive for Life

Ecclesiastes 1 can be divided into two main sections. In verses 1-2, the Teacher introduced himself and stated his main theme in the form of a preamble (Keil and Delitzsch 1982:218). Then, in verses 3-18, he described the limitations of work and wisdom. This second section can be further divided as follows: verses 3 through 11 deal with the repetitive cycles of creation, while verses 12 through 18 discuss the futility of human labour and understanding. This introductory chapter of the book discloses that there is some value to human endeavours, including enjoyment, satisfaction, and security. In the end, however, the gains represented by such achievements are checkmated by death. This view is a theological affirmation of the mournful refrain "and then he died" that appears throughout Genesis 5 (Forman 1960:261-262).

"Teacher" (v. 1) in the TNIV renders the Hebrew participle *qōhelet*. The corresponding verb *qāhal* means "to assemble" or "to summon" and is derived from the noun *qāhal*, which means "assembly." This suggests such meanings for *qōhelet* as "member of the assembly," "convener of the assembly," or "leader of the assembly." This might imply that the teachings recorded in Ecclesiastes were to be delivered publicly, perhaps in an outer court of the temple or a palace (Kaiser 1979:24-25; Leupold 1983:7, 38). In other portions of Ecclesiastes where *qōhelet* appears, the author identified himself as Israel's king (v. 12), attested to his status as a verbal and written source of wisdom (12:9-10), and made pronouncements about the meaning of life (1:2; 7:27; 12:8). Perhaps "sage" best captures the range of meanings for *qōhelet*, implying that the writer was a profoundly wise philosopher, thinker, and

scholar (Caneday 1994:113; Castellino 1994:40; Garrett 1993:264; Rankin 1991:5:3-4; Towner 1997:5:269, 272).

King Solomon, who reigned over Israel for 40 years (about 970-930 B.C.), traditionally has been identified as the author of Ecclesiastes. The strongest evidence is that the writer referred to himself as the "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). Again, after a poetic interlude about the futility of life, he made the same reference, this time adding that he was the reigning monarch over Israel (v. 12). This person would seem to be no other than Solomon (Kaiser 1979:26-29).

Others, however, argue that any king of Judah might have identified himself in this way. Supposedly, there is evidence that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes comes from a later time period than the tenth century B.C. Also, it is claimed that many of the opinions in the book could not have come from Solomon. Moreover, some experts conjecture that the book had as many as three authors: a pessimist who wrote an impious draft of the book; an orthodox Jewish believer, who added more religiously proper views to the writings of the first author; and a sage who added a series of proverbs to the final draft of the document (Kaiser 1979:11-12; Wright 1991, 5:1138; Wright 1994a:18-19; 1994b:160).

Despite the innovativeness of these theories, there are too many factors—such as the book's unity of style, theme, and purpose—which indicate that Ecclesiastes had a single author who wrestled with various approaches to life. This person was a king and unparalleled in wisdom. Indeed, the bulk of the evidence conclusively points to Solomon as the sole author of the book and the person referred to in verse 1. It is also possible that a secretary wrote down the words of the Teacher as he presented to an assembly his philosophical treatise on the futility of life without God.

The Teacher apparently intended for his pronouncements to be read, not just by those people who were devoted to the Lord, but by a more general, secular audience as well. This would explain why Ecclesiastes is sometimes seen as more worldly than the other books in the Bible (Rankin 1991:5:10). It was meant to step outside of the place of worship and meet common people as they lived out their earthly existence. In many respects, this book is addressed to

people who live selfishly for the moment, as if all that mattered in life were amassing possessions and mimicking the behaviour and customs of the world (Hubbard 1991:46; Kaiser 1979:32-37; Wright 1994b:172).

Ecclesiastes begins by presenting the problem that will be addressed throughout the remainder of the book, namely, the issue of human existence in this fallen world. According to Fuerst (1975:91), the Teacher "poses harder questions, raises graver doubts, and arrives at more despairing conclusions than any other book" of the Old Testament. The trajectory of the sage's essay shows how a life without God at its centre is chaotic, meaningless, and discontented. Because existence detached from the Creator is absolutely futile, all forms of human arrogance are inappropriate (de Jong 1997:167). Accordingly, the Teacher commended his hearers to a God-cantered life by critiquing various lifestyles and life pursuits in which the Lord is left out (Parsons 2003a:166; 2003b:301). The grimness connected with this latter alternative is vividly spelled out in verses 3 through 11.

Verse 2 serves as the gateway to the rest of the book and conveys the central premise of the author's treatise (Gordis 1994:177; Hubbard 1991:43; Towner 1997:5:290; Wright 1994b:168). He lamented that life for the godless "lacked profit and therefore was totally absurd" (Crenshaw 1992:2:273; cf. Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen 2005:420; Fox 1986:409). The Hebrew noun *hebel*, which the TNIV renders as "meaningless," is pivotal to the author's thesis. In more literal contexts, *hebel* is used to refer to the wind, a person's breath, and vapour, all of which are fleeting in nature (cf. Psa 144:4; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13). Metaphorically, *hebel* can refer to whatever is temporary, incongruous, without substance, or utterly fruitless (Caneday 1994:95-96; Farmer 1994:224-225; Fox 1986:411-414; Leupold 1983:40-41; Longman 1998:62-64; Ogden 1994:227-228; Shank 1994:74-75).

The Teacher argued in Ecclesiastes that the human drive for life apart from God is filled with anxiety and frustration and "amounts to a huge zero" (Crenshaw 1992:2:272). They have no hope beyond this earthly existence because they have divorced themselves from their Creator. All they have is what they work for now, and soon every aspect of it will pass away. It would be incorrect to conclude from this declaration that absolutely everything in life is futile (Seow 2001:243). As the "haunting and melancholy poem" (Towner

1997:5:292) recorded in verses 3-11 indicates, the focus is on profane human endeavour. This contrasts with the eternal value of revering God and appreciating the temporal blessings of life He gives (2:24-26; 11:9-10; 12:13-14; Hubbard 1991:21; Zuck 1994:215, 217).

The sage illustrated his point by observing how nature works. In fact, as Fox (1987:137) notes, the Teacher adopted an "empirical methodology" in which he sought "both to derive knowledge from experience and to validate ideas experientially" (cf. Parsons 2003b:285). The author framed his remarks in terms of the "gain" (1:3) people obtain from all their "hard physical labour" (Garrett 1993:284). This is the language of profit and loss, which ironically is how many people typically see life (Hubbard 1991:45; Johnston 1994:143; Leupold 1983:43-44). They strive for earthly attainments, often inconsiderate of whom they have to push aside to get it; but in the end, their decisions result in complete frustration and failure, all because they have not taken into consideration obedience to God.

"Toil" sums up an approach to life that is self-centred and shortsighted. Though the impious labour tirelessly "under the sun" (that is, on earth; Longman 1998:66), such efforts prove exhausting. From the perspective of eternity, nothing of lasting value or ultimate good results from this endless labour. The curse of sin is at the heart of why the endeavours of life can feel so wearisome (Gen. 3:17-19). People of faith recognize that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling (Dillard and Longman 1994:255). This truth will be explored further in the concluding section of this essay dealing with 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

Ecclesiastes 1:4 begins the sombre look at human existence and nature (Atkins 1991:26-27). By highlighting the basic elements of the created order, the Teacher sought to depict in lyrical fashion the seemingly endless cycle of humanity's futile pursuits (Crenshaw 1994:241-242, 248; Whybray 1994:234, 236). First, he noted the continual, uninterrupted succession of generations that parade across the stage of history. Like the created realm itself, each new wave of humanity is a beehive of activity; yet despite their ceaseless striving and accomplishments, nothing of real or lasting change results.

Moreover, just as the cycle of human life continues unabated on its seemingly meaningless course, so does the earth. This truth points out the relative shortness of a person's life, especially when compared to the apparent permanence of the earth. As Leupold (1983:45) observes, there is "something tragic about having man, the noble creature derived from the earth, continually pass away while the 'earth,' the crude material from which he is made, continues." According to von Ehrenkrook (2002:16), the theme of "death has long been recognized as an important, perhaps even controlling principle in the perplexing message of Ecclesiastes" (cf. Burkes 1999:45-80; Clemens 1994:5-8; Crenshaw 1978:206-211; Machinist 1995:159, 165-175; Parsons 2003b:297; Schoors 1985:295-303).

Second, the Teacher addressed the cycle of the sun. This celestial object seems to follow an endless pattern of rising, setting, and hastening back to where it first arose (v. 5). Here the author may have implied that the sun actually grew weary of its incessant journey across the sky. If so, the sun is a fitting reminder of how the day-to-day aspects of life soon become tiresome. People grind through an ever-repeating, monotonous cycle of life. Sadly, despite all their efforts, nothing really changes and nothing of lasting value results.

Third, the sage observed that the wind blows to the south, circles around to the north, and then repeats this vicious cycle of swirling motion (v. 6). Like the individual lives of people, the wind seems to churn ceaselessly in every direction without ever veering from its determined course; and yet nothing radical, new, or different is accomplished. The implication for humanity is that we live and die without any power to break the endless cycle.

Fourth, the Teacher described the constant flow of water from rivers into the sea, and yet the sea is never full (v. 7). Consider the Dead Sea, which receives waters from the Jordan River to the north; and even though no river exits from the Dead Sea, the depth of the water it contains never seems to increase (Longman 1998:70). While verse 7 is not specifically talking about the evaporation cycle or the return of water to underground streams (Whybray 1994:237-238; Garrett 1993:285), these two recurring phenomena in nature parallel what the author described. Like the earth, the sun, and the wind, the constant movement of water seems to produce nothing new or lasting.

Understandably, it is vain to look to nature for a "fixed point of reference" for one's "own meaning" (Kaiser 1979:50).

It bears repeating that in this portion of Ecclesiastes, the sage adopted a counterintuitive view of nature, one that would have felt jarring to his peers. The community of faith recognized that everything in the world is a testimony to the Creator. The Teacher, however, intentionally described how nature appeared to those who think there is no God (Dillard and Longman 1994:255). For the impious, there is no loving Creator behind nature, and thus life becomes one long humdrum repetition. Indeed, as verse 8 states, all this monotony is so wearisome that it exceeds human ability to describe, fathom, and bear.

While the human mind keeps searching for meaning and striving for understanding, it will never find it in nature alone. Moreover, as long as people determinedly reject or deny God, they cannot break through the cycle of time and repetition to discover the One who is permanent and absolute—God Himself. Hebrews 11:6 reveals that those who come to God must believe that He exists. People of faith also understand that the universe was "formed at God's command" (v. 3). In contrast, the irreligious foolishly assert "there is no God" (Psa 14:1) and end their lives in frustration and futility.

As long as the profane hold to an agnostic or atheistic mindset, the only conclusion they can draw is that history repeats itself. Indeed, for them what has been done before on earth will be done again. This implies there is nothing truly new under the sun (Eccl 1:9). Longman (1998:72) offers this assessment: "History, like the earth, appears to change, but in actuality it stays the same. Nothing new ever happens." From this perspective, nothing people do really matters, for it has been done before. Moreover, it has no more meaning now than it did in the past or when it will be repeated in the future. Clearly, when God is left out of the equation, the human drive for life is checkmated.

In verses 10 and 11, the Teacher restated his main premise about the utter futility of life, though this time he looked ahead to the future. He asked whether people can genuinely claim that something is distinctive or novel. The answer is no, for it existed in some form or fashion in the distant past. The author's statement does not deny that people can be creative and innovative,

just that what they attain finds parallels with what others have achieved in previous generations. For instance, while the Apollo 11 landing on the moon was a stellar feat, it did not necessarily trump similar events, such as the discovery of the Americas. In both cases, while the circumstances were vastly different, the results of their exploits were comparable.

Furthermore, the Teacher noted that as generations of people come and go, neither they nor their achievements are remembered. He stated that people of old have already been forgotten. Even more sobering is the realization that in future generations, those living then will not remember what people are doing now (v. 11). Indeed, what each generation regards as being radical or revolutionary has its counterpart in the actions and accomplishments of those from the past. As a result, each new group of humanity that comes on the scene has to "confront its own present without historically liberating legacies and, in turn, face the prospect of committing the same errors as past generations" (Tamez 2001:252).

Regrettably, many today become so preoccupied with themselves or with the pursuit of wealth, fame, and pleasure that they fail to stop and consider what their life is all about. Though some people deceive themselves into living as if their earthly existence will never end, they cannot escape the inevitability of death (cf. Heb 9:27). The sombre repetition in Genesis 5 of the phrase "and then he died" serves as a reminder that the efforts of mortals to extend the realms of existence are checkmated by death. Put another way, "death cancels all human achievements" (Crenshaw 1992:2:277). Indeed, as Forman noted (1960:262), the "loss of immortality is the blighting fact of existence."

Accordingly, it is best for people of faith to maintain a heavenly, eternal perspective, rather than a limited, earthly one. With the Teacher, they must face the fact that the life the Creator has given to people on earth sooner or later ends. Like sandcastles on a stretch of beach, each person's life is eventually washed away by the incoming waves of time. This sombre truth should prompt believers to consider how to best invest the fleeting existence God gives them (Farmer 1994:226; Zuck 1994:220-221).

After his opening statements about the meaninglessness of life without God, the Teacher told about his own personal experiences in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.

He explained how he had tried to find meaning in various ways—through the pursuit of wisdom, pleasure, work, success, and wealth (to name a few examples). As the king of Israel (v. 12), he had the ability and resources to use wisdom to examine in a careful and thorough manner all that people have accomplished on earth (v. 13). While his investigation could never be exhaustive, this did not undermine the legitimacy of his empirical observations, analysis, and conclusions. What mattered most was for him to be comprehensive and objective.

As a result of the author's inquiry, he reached two conclusions. First, he learned that God had given people a burdensome task, one that kept them preoccupied. The Hebrew of verse 13 literally reads "the sons of the man" and may be an allusion to "Adam and the effects of the Fall" (Kaiser 1979:53; cf. Caneday 1994:90-91, 101-102, 110-111; Garrett 1994:157; Kidner 1994:250; Shank 1994:71, 73). In fact, Clemens (1994:5) thinks that Ecclesiastes is "best understood as an arresting but thoroughly orthodox exposition of Genesis 1-3." He notes that "in both texts, the painful consequences of the fall are central."

The nature of fallen humanity's onerous, heavy burden in Ecclesiastes 1:13 is unclear. Some suggest the "task is evil because no solution can be found after much hard work" (Longman 1998:78). Another possibility is that the Teacher was referring to the higher awareness God gave human beings, namely, intelligence that distinguishes people from animals. The idea is that, because humans are created in the image of God, they sense there is more to life than simple physical existence and survival. They realize there must be meaning for their lives, that there needs to be an ideal for which to strive. Put another way, God has given people the unpleasant business of living with their conscience. This then is what drives humans to find significance and purpose in life (Wright 1991, 5:1154-1155).

The second conclusion the Teacher reached as a result of his study is that all the toil and activity to which people devoted themselves proved futile. In fact, their accomplishments were as senseless as chasing after the wind (v. 14). The attainments of the unrighteous, no matter how commendable they might seem, were pointless because they had no lasting impact on the world. Moreover, all

earthbound goals, regardless of the effort expended to attain them, ended up being as transient as the momentary presence of a swirling gust of air.

Even the Teacher's exhaustive efforts to fathom the mysteries of life were ultimately crushed by the sheer enormity of the task. It is reasonable to suppose that he worked long and hard to conquer knowledge and wisdom on his own. In the end, though, he was unable to explain the enigmas of life, right its wrongs, and remedy its deficiencies. Furthermore, just when the sage thought he had pondered every contingency, something else came along to make him realize people lack ultimate meaning (v. 15). As Garrett (1993:290) fittingly notes, the "implication behind this is that God's ways are inscrutable" (cf. Isa. 40:12-14; Rom. 11:33-36; Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen 2005:416; Brueggemann 1997:395; Seow 2001:248).

The Teacher claimed that none of his predecessors who ruled over Jerusalem excelled him in wisdom. He was in a unique position as Israel's monarch, for unlike those who came before him, he had access to people and records that were previously unavailable (v. 16). Moreover, the king spared no effort to discern the value of wisdom and knowledge over foolhardy ideas and actions; yet despite his efforts, the Teacher concluded that even this endeavour eluded his grasp. Indeed, regardless of how hard he tried to achieve his lofty objective, it proved to be as futile as chasing the wind (v. 17).

It must have been humbling for the wisest, most knowledgeable person of the day to admit that not even he could "resolve the riddle of human existence" (Ranger 1989:11; cf. 277-278). Indeed, the more discerning and aware the sage became, the more grief and frustration he experienced. Generally speaking, those who grew in their comprehension of life were vexed by increased heartache (v. 18). All such efforts to place the attainment of understanding as the supreme end of life—without the love of a caring God—simply brought more sorrow. In turn, the enormity of this grief stymied ongoing attempts to advance the frontiers of human understanding (Keil and Delitzsch 1982:231-232).

4. Conclusion and Afterword

A biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 has shown that the reality of death hangs like a funeral pall over the coffin of life. Moreover, these two chapters jointly indicate that for the unsaved, the end of life checkmates all they have sought to attain. Even their most noteworthy achievements are neutralized by death and washed away by the ocean waves of time. Regrettably, generations in the distant future will not even remember the individual and collective efforts of their predecessors to extend the realms of human existence.

For believers, the sting of death is overcome by the hope of the Resurrection, a truth made clear in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (Sampley 1997:10.988-989). In this "lyrical passage," Morris (2001:227) notes, "the apostle exults in the triumph Christ has won over death itself." Paul repeated in plain terms that natural, earthly bodies are not suited to a spiritual, heavenly existence. Indeed, that which is subject to death and decomposition could never receive as an inheritance that which is eternal and glorious in nature (v. 50; Fee 1987:797-799). The good news is that living as well as deceased believers will have their bodies transformed at the Messiah's return (v. 51; Bruce 1986:154).

Not all will "sleep" (that is, die), for some Christians will be alive at the Saviour's return (Prior 1985:275). These along with deceased believers will be "changed" (v. 52), meaning they all will have their bodies glorified (Thiselton 2000:1295). This will happen instantaneously—"in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye"—when the consummation of history occurs (Mare 1976:10:291). In Old Testament times, the people of God would sound trumpets to signal the start of great feasts and other significant religious events (Barrett 1968:381; cf. Num. 10:10). The sounding of the last trumpet mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52 will signal the occurrence of the resurrection (Fee 1987:801-802).

Because perishable, mortal bodies are unfit to inhabit heaven, they need to be transformed into imperishable, immortal ones (v. 53; Grosheide 1984:393). This does not mean that the earthly and heavenly bodies are completely different (Godet 1977:869), for there is a "fundamental continuity of identity" between the old and new (Furnish 2003:116). It is like a person's putting on a new robe (v. 54; Morris 2001:229). When that happens, the long-anticipated

defeat of death will occur. Paul quoted Isaiah 25:8 to indicate that the sovereign Lord will completely checkmate death. In 1 Corinthians 15:55, the apostle quoted Hosea 13:14 as if to taunt death, which is a loser and does not have ultimate power to inflict harm on God's people (Thiselton 2000:1298-1299).

Death is like a poisonous hornet or scorpion whose stinger has been pulled (Prior 1985:276). By Jesus' own atoning sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the grave, He dealt a fatal blow to death. As this essay has maintained, all people must die; but when the Messiah returns, He will raise all who have trusted in Him for eternal life, and they will be rescued from death forever. In this way, the arch-adversary of all humanity is "destined to be completely overwhelmed by God's invincible power" (Furnish 2003:116).

In 1 Corinthians 15:56, Paul told his readers that it was through the presence of sin that death received its power to hurt believers (Grosheide 1984:394). After Adam disobeyed God's command, death invaded his life and the life of all his descendants (Bruce 1986:156; cf. Rom. 5:12). Sin gains its power from the law by using God's commands to produce all sorts of wrong desires in people and to seduce them into disobeying the Creator (Barrett 1968:383-384; cf. 7:7-11). As is clear from Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1, people who reject the Lord are powerless to resist sin or overcome death. Paul gave thanks to the Father for the triumph available through faith in the Son (1 Cor 15:57).

The apostle exhorted his dear friends to remain steadfast in his teaching and resolute in the faith, for they had ultimate victory in the Redeemer (v. 58; Mare 1976:10:291). The hope of the Resurrection was meant to spur them on to serve the Lord diligently and wholeheartedly (Sampley 1997, 10:990). Their efforts would never be wasted, since in Christ they would bear eternal fruit and reap a heavenly reward. From this it is clear that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling for people of faith.

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Let the People Sing:

A BLUEPRINT for Hymn Singing[1]

by

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Abstract

Using the acronym BLUEPRINT, the authors offer practical guidance for selecting and presenting hymns in a way that maximises the power of Christian worship as both an expression of praise to God and a vehicle of instruction for His people.

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[1] This article emanates from Dr McElwain's MTh Thesis completed through the South African Theological Seminary under the supervision of Dr Woodbridge. The title was *Singing the Word: The Role of the Old Testament in Selected Hymns of Charles Wesley and some implications for the Twenty-first Century Church*.

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1. Introduction

For 2000 years, hymns have played an important role in the theological and Biblical teaching of the Christian church. From early Christian hymns such as Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20 and Ephesians 5:14, to Ambrose's Trinitarian hymns, theologically sound hymns were part of the worship of the early church.

The Medieval era saw a decline in congregational participation in hymn singing as choral singers trained in the *Schola Cantorum* performed service music without the involvement of the lay worshipper. Reflecting their belief in the priesthood of believers and in the value of hymns as tools for teaching theology, the Reformers returned hymn singing to the people.

Unfortunately, for many Christians, hymns no longer provide a primary tool for learning the Bible or theology. In a reversal of the Reformation, the art of song has been returned to professionals as the assumptions of our performance-oriented society have infiltrated the church. Whether replaced by trained choirs, soloists or praise teams, congregational song is at risk in many churches today.

Hymn-writer Brian Wren laments the loss of congregational song: "'Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God,' said Isaac Watts. Many people know God quite well and refuse to sing. Some say they cannot; others cannot see why they should" (Wren 2000:47) With the loss of congregational song, the church loses a vehicle for teaching the Bible and theology to laymen.

This article examines the role of the worship leader in encouraging the congregation to sing hymns (whether traditional or contemporary) that teach Biblical truths in a memorable manner. This article suggests a BLUEPRINT for more effective hymn singing. The BLUEPRINT model can be divided into two sections. Part I provides principles for the careful *selection* of hymns, while Part II offers principles for the careful *presentation* of these hymns to the congregation. Each of these aspects can contribute to a more effective use in hymns in today's church.

2. The BLUEPRINT Model, Part I: The Selection of Hymns

One of the most important tasks of the worship leader is the selection of hymns that express sound theology in the language of the congregation. By choosing hymns that are theologically sound and Biblically based, the worship leader can contribute to the education of the entire church.

Unfortunately, many worshippers have seen leaders who choose hymns in a careless manner. Whether the choice is based on the popularity of "old favourites" or simply at random, little thought is given to this part of the service. Just as a church deserves a pastor who gives prayerful thought to the sermon, the church deserves a worship leader who gives prayer thought to the selection of music.

Charles Wesley provides a model for effective communication through poetic language. In his hymns, he communicated Biblical themes in the language of the worshippers of his day. Wesley used Biblical language, but he was careful to relate his text to the understanding of his audience. He composed songs for miners, fishermen, and prisoners, tailoring his vocabulary for each audience.

For iron workers, he wrote:

> See how great a flame aspires
> Kindled by a spark of grace (Wesley 1983:#29)

For fisherman, Wesley (in Brailsford 1954:147) used fishing imagery:

> Teach me to cast my net aright
> The Gospel net of general grace.

Wesley communicated theology in the language of the people, the language of "Everyman." He possessed a genius for making Scripture and theology comprehensible to the layperson. Because of his effectiveness in communicating theology in the language of the common person, this article will use Wesley's hymns as a model. This is not to suggest that today's worship leaders should use only hymns that are 200 years old; rather, Wesley's hymns serve as a model for the selection of hymns from our day. Many hymns by such contemporary composers as Timothy Dudley-Smith,

Stuart Townend, Matt Redman and others communicate Biblical themes in today's language.

The BLUEPRINT model encourages the worship leader to choose hymns that use:

2.1 Biblical Language

Even a brief survey of Wesley's hymns demonstrates his preference for Biblical language. In his analysis of more than fifty Wesley hymns, Lawson (1987) found few lines that do not use the words of Scripture. Charles Wesley was so attuned to the language of Scripture that his poetry speaks that language with ease.

Wesley spoke the language of the Bible as fluently as he spoke the English of the street. Wesley "had only one language, the language of Zion. The scriptures were his native tongue" (Kalas 1984:25). Wesley communicated in a language that he knew fluently, the language of the Bible.

Some of the most popular contemporary praise music is based entirely on the words of Scripture, particularly the Psalms. These are often metrical adaptations of the Psalms with few or no textual changes. "Be Exalted, O God" (Fettke 1997:#32), "Thy Loving Kindness" (#706), "I Will Sing of the Mercies" (#161), and "Let the Redeemed" (#208) are all adaptations of Psalm texts.

The Psalms are not the only scriptures suitable for singing. Jimmy Owens and Claire Cloninger both paraphrased 2 Chronicles 7:14 in memorable prayer hymns (Fettke 1997:#803 and #805). Michael O'Shields combined the words of Psalm 18:3 ("I will call upon the LORD who is worthy to be praised") with the proclamation of 2 Samuel 22:47 ("The LORD liveth; and blessed be my rock") to create a powerful song of confidence in God's sufficiency (#530). These songs allow the worshipper to sing the words of Scripture, making the Bible memorable for today's Christians.

2.2 Literal Interpretation

Though Charles Wesley occasionally used allegorical interpretation, he rarely ignored the historical meaning of the Scripture. Instead, the literal meaning became his text for a hymnic sermon. Wesley did not discount the historical sense of Scripture; he began from the text and then responded from the perspective of the New Testament. Rattenbury (1941:93) evaluated this use of allegory:

> With very few exceptions, the allegorical interpretations of Charles Wesley are convincing…. His evangelized Old Testament is a great devotional commentary on Scriptures, written by a man who was both a poet and in the strictest sense a Biblical scholar….

Contemporary composers such as Fred Pratt Green have composed hymns that are faithful to the principle of literal interpretation. In Green's hymns, Scripture is interpreted literally, and then applied to contemporary life. In "Seek the Lord," based on Isaiah 55, Green emphasizes the call to repentance central to this passage. Faithful to the Isaiah text, Green offers a universal invitation to all humankind:

> Seek the Lord who now is present,
> Pray to One who is at hand.
> Let the wicked cease from sinning,
> Evildoers change their mind.
> On the sinful God has pity;
> Those returning God forgives.
> This is what the Lord is saying
> To a world that disbelieves
> (United Methodist Hymnal 1989: #124).

Worship leaders in today's church have access to a wealth of hymn literature that is faithful to Scripture. In order to use hymns to teach Scripture, the worship leader should utilise hymns that reflect the principle of literal interpretation.

2.3 Unambiguous Theology

Methodist historian Albert Outler noted that "…the Methodist people learned at least as much doctrine from Charles' hymns as they did from John's preaching. What is crucial is that it was the same basic doctrine" (Whaling 1981)! Early Methodists learned theology from the sermons they heard and from the hymns they sang. An analysis of Charles Wesley's hymnody shows that his hymns addressed every major theological theme of early Methodism in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Referring to the Pentecost hymns of 1746, Timothy Smith (1983:1012) wrote, "Clearly John and Charles Wesley meant these hymns … to teach Biblical theology and to do it more effectively because the people sang in joy what they were being taught." Like Ambrose and Luther before them, the Wesleys knew that hymnody is an effective tool for teaching theology to the unlearned layman.

Finding contemporary hymns that teach unambiguous theology may be one of the greatest challenges to worship leaders. While many theologically based hymns survive from earlier eras, the ecumenical trend of contemporary worship has fostered hymns that avoid controversial doctrinal issues. Much of contemporary hymnody addresses only areas of near-universal agreement in the church. While the irenic aim of many hymn-writers is admirable, churches should sing hymns that reflect their doctrinal identity. Today's church should not be afraid of pastors who will unashamedly preach doctrine; it should not be afraid of hymnody that unequivocally teaches that same doctrine.

2.4 Experiential Tone

Charles Wesley often related theology and Biblical interpretation to personal experience. His hymns existentially related Biblical narratives and themes to the life of the contemporary believer. Wainwright (1980:204) sees this as a primary strength of the 1780 Hymnbook.

Wesley was not satisfied with any reading of Scripture that failed to relate the ancient text to contemporary experience. In hymns such as "Wrestling Jacob,"

Charles related the Biblical text to the daily experience of the worshipper. Rogal (1991:92) observed that Wesley's hymns "reflect and then universalize the experiences of thousands of believers and an equal number of souls struggling to believe."

Many contemporary choruses place the worshipper in the role of the psalmist, achieving an experiential interpretation of the Psalms. These choruses modify the Biblical text to encourage the singer's existential understanding of Scripture. In Nystrom's popular "As the Deer," the worshipper seeks a relationship with God:

> As the deer panteth for the water,
> So my soul longeth after Thee.
> You alone are my heart's desire,
> And I long to worship Thee
>
> (Fettke 1997:#548).

Such experiential readings are common in contemporary choruses. In a creative blending of Old Testament imagery and New Testament theology, Steve Fry identifies the believer with the Temple. Using the testimony of 2 Chronicles 5:14 ("The glory of the Lord filled the temple of God," NIV) and Solomon's invocation ("Now arise, O LORD God, and come to your resting place," 2 Chr 6:41, NIV), the worshipper, God's "temple," invites His presence:

> Oh, the glory of Your presence,
> We, Your temple, give You reverence.
> Come and rise to Your rest and be blest by our praise
> As we glory in your embrace;
> As Your presence now fills this place
>
> (Fettke 1997:#226)

Eddie Espinosa's "Change My Heart, O God" combines Biblical terminology with an experiential interpretation to create a powerful prayer for personal cleansing. In singing this chorus, the worshipper becomes the pray-er who seeks cleansing. Espinosa blends the spirit of Psalm 51 with Jeremiah's image of God as the potter:

Change my heart, O God,
Make it ever true.
Change my heart, O God,
May I be like You.
You are the Potter,
I am the clay;
Mold me and make me,
This is what I pray

(Fettke 1997:#654)

Through the use of hymns that are experiential in language and style, the worship leader can encourage worshippers to visualize their personal participation in the promises and commands of Scripture. Rather than reading the Bible as an onlooker, the worshipper can apply the text to their daily Christian life.

3. The BLUEPRINT Model, PART II: the presentation of hymns

The second part of the BLUEPRINT model relates to the presentation of hymns to the congregation. Gourmet cooks know that it is not enough to select delicious ingredients for a meal; an important part of the dining experience is the presentation of the meal in an attractive way. Effective pastors understand that a sermon's impact is based only partly on the preparation of a sound exegetical message; the sermon's impact depends on an effective presentation to the congregation.

After the worship leader has selected hymns that speak the language of the Bible, that interpret the Bible literally, that are unambiguous in their theology and that relate to the experience of worshippers, care should be given to the presentation of the hymns. An effective presentation of the hymns can spell the difference between enthusiastic involvement by worshippers and apathetic participation in a weekly ritual. The second part of the BLUEPRINT model is concerned with the careful presentation of hymns to the congregation.

The BLUEPRINT model encourages the worship leader to:

3.1 Plan Services Carefully

Planning of the musical portion of the service is essential to the effective use of hymns. John Wesley (in Jackson 1996:217) described music planning for early Methodist services:

> What they sing is therefore a proper continuation of the spiritual and reasonable service; being selected for that end (not by a poor humdrum wretch who can scarce read what he drones out with such an air of importance, but) by one who knows what he is about, and how to connect the preceding with the following part of the service.

Without careful planning, the congregational singing can devolve into a mere formality rather than a meaningful part of worship. Effective planning of congregational songs will include consideration of the number and length of hymns as well as consideration of the message of the hymns.

In an age of "sound-bites" and quickly changing visual images, worship leaders may have to omit stanzas of longer hymns, in order to avoid exceeding the congregation's attention span. When stanzas must be omitted, the leader should retain those stanzas integral to the meaning of the hymn. Hymns that devote a stanza to each person of the Trinity, such as "Come, Thou Almighty King," cannot be shortened without destroying the Trinitarian message. Similarly, hymns that paraphrase familiar Scripture passages, such as "The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want," cannot be shortened without disrupting the original text (Sydnor 1982:89). This danger is particularly real in free worship traditions that combine hymns and praise songs into "worship medleys" or "worship sequences." Such medleys must not distort the meaning of the songs by careless selection of stanzas.

One of the worship leader's most important tasks is the thoughtful planning of congregational singing. Inattention to this task results in perfunctory singing that adds little or nothing to worship; conversely, thoughtful planning can

encourage meaningful singing that encourages the active worship of each singer.

3.2 Research Hymns Thoroughly

A challenge to the use of Biblically based hymns in worship is the distance between the Biblical knowledge of the hymn-writer and that of today's worshipper. Charles Wesley could assume a broad Biblical knowledge among eighteenth-century worshippers who sang his hymns. This is not often the case among today's Christians who have not grown up with the regular exposure to Scripture that previous generations enjoyed.

Because of this, many Biblically based hymns are omitted from modern hymnals. In other instances, hymns are altered to avoid unfamiliar references. *The Celebration Hymnal* (Fettke 1997#11) includes the eighteenth century "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" but omits its Biblical allusion to "Ebenezer." The stanza is changed from:

> Here I raise mine Ebenezer;
> Hither by thy help I'm come…

To a less obscure, but perhaps less evocative:

> Hitherto Thy love has blest me;
> Thou has brought me to this place…

Worship leaders should find ways to educate congregations to the meaning of hymns. Through research of the Biblical texts underlying hymns, worship leaders can assist congregations in better understanding the message of the hymns.

Brian Wren suggests "recontexting" hymns by alternating stanzas of the hymn with readings from the original Biblical context (Wren 2000:214). Thus, the chorus "Bless the Lord, O my Soul" (Fettke 1997:#58) can be interspersed with verses of Psalm 103 from which the chorus is drawn. This draws the congregation's attention to the Biblical source for the hymn and shows the historical context for praise, a context that is often lost in the singing of

choruses. By restoring the Biblical and historical context of a Scripture chorus, the church grounds praise in the Biblical narrative of God's creative and redemptive acts.

Collections of hymn stories provide Biblical and historical information about hymns that can assist worship leaders in introducing hymns. Robert Morgan's *Then Sings My Soul* (2003) gives biographical and historical background to hymns ranging from the Old Testament blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 through a new hymn from 2002. William Reynolds' *Songs of Glory* (1990) gives the background for 300 hymns and gospel songs. Kenneth Osbeck has written numerous volumes of hymn stories, including *Amazing Grace* (1990) that includes devotional readings on 365 hymns. With the help of these and similar resources, worship leaders can show the Biblical basis for hymns through notes in the bulletin or verbal comments.

Very few hymns need to be omitted entirely from today's worship due to the difficulties of their Biblical reference. Well-chosen comments from the worship leader can greatly improve the congregation's understanding of difficult hymns. By researching the Biblical background of hymn texts, a worship leader can gain a better understanding of the message of the hymns. In turn, the leader can educate the congregation regarding the deep truths contained in hymn literature.

3.3 Involve the Congregation Fully

Congregational hymn singing is valuable for its inclusiveness, providing an opportunity for the entire church to join in a collective offering to God. It is the responsibility of each member to participate fully in this offering. "Hymn singing requires the work of the pastor, the musicians, and above all, the congregation" (Johannson 1992:139).

John Wesley encouraged the involvement of all believers with his "Directions for Singing" that introduced the *Select Hymns* of 1761:

> Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness

> hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing (The United Methodist Hymnal 1989:vii).

Similarly, Charles encouraged every believer to join in songs of praise:

> Meet and right it is to sing,
> In every time and place,
> Glory to our heavenly King,
> The God of truth and grace;
> Join we then with sweet accord,
> All in one thanksgiving join,
> Holy, holy, holy Lord,
> Eternal praise be thine!
>
> (Wesley 1983:#212)

More recently, hymn-writer Fred Pratt Green challenged believers:

> Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
> Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise
>
> (The United Methodist Hymnal 1989:#68)!

Congregational song is at risk in an age that values soloistic music over participatory music making. "Although singing can be a joyful experience, it is fast becoming a spectator sport…. Music has become something that is listened to, not something people participate in" (Stevenson 1992:295).

This spectator approach to music has changed the role of music in the church; in many churches, only those with special talents participate in the musical portion of the service. However, congregational song should be seen as the responsibility of every worshipper, regardless of talent.

One key to congregational involvement is recognition of the importance of hymn singing. When singing is perceived as unimportant, "worship is diminished and congregational participation undermined. People won't fully participate—heartfully. soulfully—if they see the leaders treat music as an appendage to worship" (Stevenson 1992:295). Hustad (1993:476) places some of the blame for a spectator attitude at the feet of musicians when he charges

that many church musicians have an improper sense of values in which "they would rather lead choirs than congregations."

The worship leadership should do everything possible to create a "comfort zone" for congregational singing in which untrained singers can sing without undue pressure (Stevenson 1992:298). If the church has a choir or praise team, this group should realize that their primary role is to help the congregation sing better (Dawn 1995:203). This, not the beauty of the anthem, is the major test of the choir's effectiveness in assisting worship. Music directors can use materials such as Hal Hopson's *The Creative Use of Choirs in Worship* (1999) to develop the choir's ability to lead congregational singing.

Congregational involvement in the portion of the worship service that most clearly belongs to the people is essential if the church is to maintain the Reformation principle of the priesthood of believers. Worship leaders should never allow congregational hymn singing to take second place to choirs, worship teams, soloists, or other groups. Instead, the congregation must be fully involved in hymn singing.

3.4 Introduce New Hymns Judiciously

To maintain a freshness in the congregational worship, leaders should encourage congregations to learn new hymns. Whether they are contemporary hymns or unfamiliar hymns from an earlier day, the introduction of new hymns can be a difficult challenge.

Many factors are involved in the successful introduction of a new hymn. The music leadership should learn the hymn before teaching it to the congregation. The leaders should know the new hymn well enough to lead with confidence.

It is important that the first introduction of a hymn be positive. New songs must be introduced "with enthusiasm; never with an apology" (Wren 2000:117). The leader should be patient and encouraging, not scolding (Stevenson 1992:297).

Wise worship leaders will pay attention to the "pre-learning" stage by preparing the congregation for a new hymn. A brief historical background may

pique the interest of the congregation in the new hymn. The use of the hymn tune in instrumental preludes can reinforce the melody for the congregation and improve the worshippers' ability to learn the new hymn. Similarly, the use of the hymn as a solo or anthem may serve as a good introduction for a hymn. Since many worshippers learn tunes by rote, such opportunities will prepare the congregation for learning the new song quickly and enjoyably. After the hymn has been learned, it should be repeated regularly until it becomes a familiar part of the congregation's repertoire.

While serving as a missionary in Taiwan, I observed a practice that may be useful for introducing new hymns. Taiwanese churches often have a congregational rehearsal prior to the service. This allows worshippers to learn unfamiliar hymns in an informal setting. By learning hymns in this rehearsal, worshippers can join enthusiastically in congregational singing without the awkwardness of learning a new hymn during worship.

Regardless of the particular approach used, the introduction of new hymns enriches worship. Whether informally or through a regular process, such as a "Hymn of the Month" plan by which one new hymn is taught each month, worship leaders should make the effort to expand the congregation's hymn repertoire.

3.5 Choose Themes prayerfully

Thematic services encourage a better understanding of the role of hymnody in worship and involve the entire congregation in musical worship. Such services offer an opportunity to focus attention on the wide range of Biblically based hymn literature available. Although this recommendation is not drawn from Wesley's own practice, the availability of multiple Wesley hymns on selected Biblical topics suggests the feasibility of thematic services using Wesley's hymns. In addition, John's practice of appending hymns to his sermons reflects his awareness of the value of selecting music that supports the theme of the preached message.

Thematic hymn services allow the choir and congregation to join together in a festival of praise. Many contemporary composers write arrangements that

incorporate the choir and congregation in joint performance of familiar hymns. In addition, the use of instruments beyond the normal piano or organ accompaniment can add to the festivity of a hymn service (Hopson 2002:15).

For the ordinary service, pastors and worship leaders can coordinate the hymns and the sermon in a way that reflects a common theme and allows the hymns to contribute to the central message of the service. Although little information exists regarding the hymns that were sung in early Methodist worship, John Wesley's published sermons include many quotations from hymns by Charles, suggesting his concern for the thematic unity between the hymn and the sermon.

In his study of the use of hymns for "preaching" doctrine, DeLaurier (2003:61) shows that eighteenth century hymn-writers wrote hymns "to accompany the sermon in the process of instruction, growth of faith, godliness of lifestyle, and soundness of world view." The practice of the Wesleys was consistent with others who saw the opportunity to "preach" through hymns that shared a theme with the sermon.

Thematic hymn services encourage a deeper awareness of the meaning of hymns. In addition, they encourage a realisation that the congregation is the church's most important choir. As these services reveal the value of congregational singing, weekly hymn singing may improve as members gain a better understanding of their responsibility, and privilege, as worshippers.

4. Conclusion

Corporate hymn singing is a vital part of worship. The Reformation returned the gift of song to the people; today's church must not squander this gift.

Both as an expression of praise to God and as a vehicle of instruction about God, hymns can and should play a central role. Because of the importance of hymn singing to Christian worship, worship leaders should take congregational singing seriously. Both the preparation and the presentation of theologically and Biblically sound hymnody should be done carefully and prayerfully. This BLUEPRINT provides a model for fulfilling this responsibility.

As worship leaders take seriously their role in this important part of worship, hymnody can recover its place in theological and Biblical education in the church. In the twenty-first century as in the Reformation, "Let the people sing!"

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Same-Sex Marriage:

A Current South African Christian Perspective

by

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Abstract

This article deals with same-sex marriage from a Biblical Christian perspective. It is not a treatise on homosexuality from either a Biblical or sociological point of view. The article deals with homosexuality, per se, only in as much as is necessary to examine the question of the Biblical Christian stance concerning same-sex marriage.

The article starts with a brief overview of the South African civil legal history of same-sex 'marriage' partnerships leading up to the current ruling by the Constitutional Court. The debate then starts with the Biblical definition of marriage before mining down to the two main arguments in favour of same-sex marriage and the homosexuality that underpins it – the appeal to the concepts of justice and love. Only then does the focus turn to the Biblical prohibitions concerning homosexual activity.

The second part of the article deals briefly with implications for church life, firstly from the perspective of how the church approaches same-sex marriage in general society, and then from the perspective of those within, or seeking to join, the church.

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1. Introduction

In December 2004, the South African Supreme Court of Appeal ruled that the definition of marriage be extended to include same-sex partners. The government took this on appeal to the Constitutional Court, which rejected the appeal in December 2005 and gave parliament one year to amend the Marriage Act. The issue of same-sex marriage is now a matter of both civic and religious importance.

In this article, I am addressing the issue of same-sex marriage, and not homosexuality *per se*. However, I cannot discuss the subject of same-sex marriage without some form of analysis of homosexuality. Moreover, I am focusing the discussion almost exclusively on the current South African situation. My perspective is that of a Christian minister and theologian and so I will not be focusing on purely psychological or sociological issues. Furthermore, my Christian perspective is that of one who is committed to the authority of the Bible and the effective lordship of Jesus Christ.

My objective in writing this paper is to explore the issue of same-sex marriage from a Biblical point of view and to present suggestions to Christians, and ministers in particular, as to a biblically sound position on this issue concerning both civil society and the church.

2. South African: Legal History and Current Situation

The current legal and parliamentary debate is the product of an evolutionary process dating back to 1999 when the Constitutional Court recognised the legitimacy of same-sex partnerships between immigrants. In 2002, the court granted same-sex couples the same financial status as that enjoyed by heterosexual partners. Also in 2002, the court allowed adoption by same-sex couples. In 2003, the court entitled same-sex couples to the same financial benefits as unmarried cohabiting heterosexual couples. In the same year, it granted legitimacy to children born to same-sex couples as a result of artificial insemination. In 2004, the Supreme Court of Appeal ordered that the government extend full civil marriage status to same-sex couples. They declared that under the Constitution, the common law concept of marriage

must be changed to include partners of the same gender. In his ruling, Judge Edwin Cameron stated that the definition of marriage should be altered to read, "Marriage is the union of two persons to the exclusion of all others for life" (www.365Gay.com, 2004-11-30). In 2005, the Constitutional Court rejected an appeal made by the Department of Home Affairs and gave Parliament until the end of November 2006 to amend the Marriage Act. If Parliament does not amend the Marriage Act appropriately by the end of November 2006 then the court ruling instructs that the Act be automatically amended by the addition of the words "or spouse" to the question that the marriage officer is required to put to each party to the marriage, as prescribed by section 30(1) of the Act.

The Marriage Alliance of South Africa, which claims to represent some twenty-four million South Africans, is currently making submissions to the Portfolio Committee of Home Affairs. It is also urging concerned Christians to lobby local and national members of Parliament (press release, 2005-12-02). However, my own understanding of the current situation is that representations to Parliament can merely influence the subtlety of the wording of any proposed changes to the Marriage Act. The Constitutional Court is the highest judicial authority in the land and it has ruled that Parliament must amend the Marriage Act to grant same-sex couples access to the status of full civil marriage. Parliament can only make changes to the wording that have the same import as the default addition of the words "or spouse." Theoretically, Parliament could be persuaded to change the Constitution and by so doing render the Constitutional Court ruling of no effect. This is extremely unlikely to happen.

3. Legal, Civil and Religious Distinctions

The leaders of the Marriage Alliance of South Africa state that they "endorse and support the Courts referral of the matter to Parliament and thereby placing the final responsibility for the outcome on civil society and the people of South Africa" (press release, 2005-12-02). The Constitution of South Africa governs Parliament and the Constitutional Court is therefore the highest authority in the land in matters of civil liberties. As I have already observed, Parliament may well use different wording, but it must comply with the

intention of the court ruling that civil marriage be extended to same-sex couples. It seems to me to be just a matter of semantics. The Constitution enshrines the concept of 'secular state' and politicians and courts alike will inevitably give precedence to civil liberties over religious objections. A concern of the Constitutional Court is to ensure that all citizens be entitled to the rights afforded them under the Constitution. Marriage, from a purely secular perspective, confers a set of specific legal, economic and social rights. On this basis, the Constitutional Court holds that all qualifying citizens, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender, be entitled to the rights conferred by civil marriage.

The Constitution separates Church and State and the same Constitution that provides the basis for same-sex marriage also provides the basis for religious freedom. The church, through the able offices of groups such as the Marriage Alliance of South Africa, has attempted to influence the government and the courts to uphold the traditional definition of marriage, but have so far failed in this endeavour. The real issue now before us, as Christians, centres on how the church should view same-sex marriages within its own membership.

4. A Biblical Definition of Marriage

Those within the Christian church who are in favour of same-sex marriage usually start the debate by attempting to reinterpret the Biblical texts dealing with homosexuality. The approach seems to be that if homosexuality can be Scripturally justified, then same-sex marriage is a given. I do not think this constitutes sound reasoning. Marriage is more than just a means of legitimising sexual activity. I do not believe that the Scriptures provide grounds for practicing homosexuality, but even if they did, this would not mean that same-sex marriage would automatically be Biblically acceptable. Therefore, I will start the debate proper with the Biblical definition of marriage rather than with a discussion on the issue of homosexuality.

The Scriptural basis for marriage is rooted in the Genesis 2 creation account. God saw that it was not good for man to be alone and so He created a female companion for him. John Stott (1999:392) makes the point that men and women are complementary in many ways and that these complementary

differences constitute the basis for heterosexual marriage. Genesis 2:24 presents the concept that when a man and a woman are united in covenant relationship, it constitutes a bringing together of the two complementary parts. Adam's response to God's creation of Eve presents an even deeper level of meaning. He cried out, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh…" (Gen 2:23). The covenant union of a man and a woman is more than a uniting of complementary components; it is a reuniting. God created in such a way that the two genders need each other in order to be all that He intended humanity to be. Dr Peet Botha singles out reproductive physiology as a prime indicator of this complementary interdependence and comments that "this design feature indicates that heterosexual union is that which is intended" (Botha 2005:220). However, the complementary nature of the two genders extends beyond the physical to the emotional and even spiritual dimensions of the human makeup.

Genesis 2:24 contains the elements of marriage: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." A man will be united to his wife—one man and one woman. He will leave his parents home and will establish a new family unit. The husband and wife will become "one flesh," not only in terms of sexual union, but also with respect to the other complementary gender differences. The Lord Jesus confirmed this understanding of marriage by referring to the Genesis account when He said that "… at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:4-6). John Stott (1999:395) identifies three truths from this passage: (1) that heterosexual gender is the product of divine will; (2) that heterosexual marriage is a divinely ordained institution; and (3) that heterosexual fidelity is the divine intention. He then states that "a homosexual liaison is a break of all three of these divine purposes."

Conservative scholars often argue that a prime purpose of marriage is procreation and that marriage should never be divorced from its procreative potential (e.g., Wilson 2005). The Scriptures sanction sexual activity only within the bounds of marriage, natural reproduction results from sexual

intercourse, and so we can argue that because same-sex marriage cannot issue in natural reproduction, it is biblically illegitimate.

Pro same-sex marriage protagonists argue that the Biblical authors were addressing questions which were relevant then but not now. For instance, they might argue that the attempted male gang rape of Genesis 19 is not relevant to today's gay rights debate. This argument is something of a smokescreen. God, not culture, established heterosexual monogamy, and so it is both permanently and universally valid. The Marriage Alliance of South Africa argues forcibly that the historic understanding of exclusively heterosexual marriage is recognised from creation and time immemorial and that it is therefore prior to both Law and State (Marriage Alliance, 2005). They argue that because marriage is God-given, it cannot be legislated by either Law or Government. This is a tenuous argument. The commandment concerning adultery also precedes modern law and society, yet it is not legislated against. However, Christians should hold themselves accountable to a higher law. The Law of South Africa does not prohibit adultery, but we as Christians know that we "shall not commit adultery" (Deut 5:18). In the same way, the Law does not prohibit consenting sodomy, yet we, as Christians, ought to honour the higher law which states that a man must not "lie with a man as one lies with a woman" (Lev 18:22). Concerning same-sex marriages, state legislation may well allow the legal marriage of homosexual partners, but Christians ought to honour the God-given definition and purpose of marriage.

How we understand the authoritative role of the Bible and how we interpret the Scriptures lies at the root of the same-sex marriage debate. For those who believe that the Bible is, at best, a description of how the people who wrote it understood things, the argument for or against same-sex marriage is more one of social analysis than exegesis. Scholars who hold to what is customarily called a 'liberal' view of Scripture reason from two poles. Firstly, what are the norms of society as it has evolved? Secondly, what overriding Biblical values govern the issue at hand? These scholars have identified justice and love as the two major principles that they believe should inform the same-sex marriage debate.

5. The Appeal to the Concept of Justice

The second main line of argument in favour of same-sex marriage, from a liberal Christian perspective, is the appeal to the pre-eminence of justice in the Scriptural revelation. In South Africa, the liberation struggle and the theology that underpinned it, has paved the way for homosexual theology based on the concept of justice. According to John Stott, Bishop Desmond Tutu holds the view that just as we may not discriminate on the basis of gender or colour, so we may not discriminate because of sexual orientation (Stott 1999:495). "Gay liberation" then becomes an issue of human rights. A counter argument to this is that we may not claim as a right that which God has not given us in the first place. Of course, those who do not believe that human rights derive from the inherent dignity of humanity's creation in the image of God rather than from practical expediency or democratic opinion will not accept this refutation.

Marvin Ellison (2004) explores this line of thought in his "Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis," and concludes that justice requires what he refers to as "de-centering" heterosexual marriage and extending social and theological legitimacy to same-sex relationships. He argues that the form and function of marriage is largely dependant on historical and cultural factors. He claims that the concept of marriage is "evolving" and that, as a result, the concept of justice is the only standard by which we may judge the moral appropriateness of sexual unions. He acknowledges that marriage and family serve as building blocks of society and should, for this reason, be regulated not by Scriptural prohibitions, but rather by the concept of justice. He holds that justice demands the empowerment of same-sex unions as legitimate family forms.

Justice, as I understand it, is a word that describes what is fair and reasonable in terms of established law. I would go further to assert that true justice reflects God's character and is therefore eternal and not subject to cultural redefinition. Herein is the crux of the issue. South African civil constitutional law has certainly determined that it is unjust not to extend the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples. However, the Law of God determines that same-sex marriage is not acceptable. What takes precedence, the Law of God or the Law of man? As Christians we can, and should, attempt to influence civil law to conform to God's law, precisely because we believe that

divine concepts of justice take precedence over civic formulations. If the courts of our land rule in opposition to the dictates of Scripture then we should choose to hold ourselves accountable to the higher law, the Law of the Kingdom of God.

A variation on the "justice" argument is expressed in the question, "How could God make a person homosexual and then deny him, or her, the right to sexual expression and marital fulfilment?" This argument assumes two things. Firstly, that God specifically and immediately creates every human soul at the moment of conception and, secondly, that this individual genetic creation determines cross-gender sexual orientation. Firstly, I believe that the doctrine of immediate human creation flounders in the face of the doctrine of universal sin. Secondly, the Scriptures present homosexuality as a sin. This emotional and behaviour trait is, like all other sinful patterns of behaviour, a product of humanity's alienation from God. The Bible teaches that sin is a universal condition passed down through the generations of humankind since the days of Adam and Eve. Homosexual orientation is, in this sense, no different from any other condition resulting from alienation from the creator. Protagonists of the "God made me gay" theory claim that modern genetic researchers have discovered what has popularly been labelled "the gay gene." However, scientists completed the Human Genome Project in 2003 and have not published evidence of any genetic disposition towards homosexuality. Dr Peet Botha, in his book *The Bible and Homosex,* cites from a secondary source, the genetic researcher Dr Hamer as stating that "we have not found the gene—which we don't think exists—for sexual orientation." He also cites, from another secondary source, Dr LeVay as stating that "I did not prove that homosexuality is genetic, or find a genetic cause for being gay" (Botha 2005:234).

In their book, *What God Has Joined Together,* Letha Scanzoni and David Myers take the argument concerning justice one step further and argue that marriage is a fundamental human good and that, as such, it must be available to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. Marriage is indeed good but it is prescribed, Scripturally, as pertaining to one man in covenant relationship with one woman.

The appeal to justice is one of the two major platforms from which many liberal theologians argue the case in favour of same-sex marriage. The other platform is the appeal to love.

6. The Appeal to the Concept of Love

The essence of this appeal is that God is love and because love is the highest good, all issues, including same-sex marriage, ought to be judged in terms of this concept.

Some conservative scholars attempt to refute this argument by asserting that research indicates the temporary and tenuous nature of the vast majority of same-sex unions. This form of reasoning is flawed in two ways. Firstly, it is true that research indicates that the majority of same-sex unions are far less stable than heterosexual unions. However, to compare same-sex unions with heterosexual unions in our day is like comparing apples and pears. Same-sex unions are subject to stress factors not experienced in most heterosexual unions—stresses imposed by such things as religious taboos, social sanctions, personal prejudice and feelings of unworthiness. Secondly, I believe that we should not argue from current culture back to the Bible (eisegesis), but from the Bible to current culture (exegesis).

Scripturally, love is a cardinal value but it is not, in isolation, the highest value. John 14:15 records Jesus as saying, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." Love and obedience to God's injunctions are inseparably linked. 1 John 5:3 puts the matter this way: "this is love for God: to obey his commands." The Bible also joins love with truth. 1 Corinthians 13:6 declares, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth," and 1 Peter 1:22 states, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart."

An important point to note in the Scriptures quoted is that both obedience to God's commandments and truth partially define the concept of love. Those who hold that love has primacy must then adequately define what they mean by love. Any loose definition of love, uncoupled from the concepts of obedience and truth, opens the door to almost any "loving" relationship. Is it

acceptable to have a loving and perhaps sexual, simultaneous relationship with a number of partners? If so, and following the 'primacy of love' argument put forward, why shouldn't polygamy be legalised? If a man has a loving relationship with his dog, should it then be acceptable for them to marry?

A secondary argument that flows from the primacy of love debate has to do with sexual expression. The point here is that it is neither just nor loving to prevent people from expressing their love sexually according to their orientation. Sex is seen as an integral component of marriage and so the argument extends from homosexual activity to same-sex marriage. Certainly, the Bible only gives legitimacy to sexual expression within the covenant of marriage but it does not indicate that sex is essential to human fulfilment. On the contrary, the Bible does not present singleness and abstinence as regrettable human conditions (see 1 Cor 7:8). If this were the case then the Scriptures would not teach against premarital sex.

Underlying the same-sex marriage debate is the attempt to legitimise homosexual activity, so I must now deal briefly with this issue.

7. Homosexual Activity

Those who argue in favour of same-sex marriage invariably start their argument with an attempt to show that the Scriptures do not prohibit homosexual activity. Other than the odd fatuous attempt to insinuate that David and Jonathan, Jesus and John, or Paul and Timothy were homosexual partners, they customary attempt to make their case by seeking to refute the texts that purport to prohibit homosexuality.

Genesis 19:1-3 records the story of how the men of Sodom wanted to have sex with Lot's angelic visitors. Derrick Bailey (1955) was probably the first modern Christian theologian to attempt a reinterpretation of the Genesis 19 account. The main argument is that the Hebrew word יָדַע (*yada*ʿ, v. 5), translated as "know" in the King James Version, does not mean "to have sex with." The argument is that Lot had violated an important social custom by taking strangers into his home without the permission of the city elders and that the men of Sodom felt threatened and insisted on interrogating the

strangers to ascertain whether or not they constituted a threat. However, verse 8 records how Lot responded with, "Behold now, I have two daughters which have not *known* man…" (KJV). Here the Hebrew world is also יָדַע. In addition, Jude 7 states that, "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion." I believe the only way pro-homosexual theologians can argue against this kind of evidence is to hold that the Jude text is not inspired and should not be in the Bible. This takes the argument into the realm of the inspiration of Scripture debate. One of my underlying assumptions as I come to the task of evaluating the same-sex marriage debate is that the Bible as we have it is inspired and authoritative. Nevertheless, the context of the Genesis passage gives strong evidence of the meaning of verse 5 without appealing to the meaning of the word *yada* or to the Jude endorsement of the traditional interpretation. In a time of war or political unrest it could be that the men of Sodom were concerned by the appearance of strangers in their midst. Why though would Lot regard it as a 'wicked thing' for them to speak with the visitors? In addition, why would Lot even think of offering his virgin daughters in place of the visitors? The argument presented by pro-homosexual exegetes in this regard defies common sense and simple contextual analysis.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 set out clear prohibitions against homosexual behaviour. The whole of Leviticus 18 deals with unlawful sexual relationships, yet the pro-homosexual theologians attempt to connect Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 with Deuteronomy 23:17 in an attempt to show that the Levitical prohibitions only apply to temple prostitution. Once again, the exegesis defies simple logic. Leviticus 18:22 simple says, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable."

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul portrays Roman society as decadent and promiscuous and within this context states that "even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Rom 1:26-27). Pro-homosexual scholars make the claim that Paul did not have committed homosexual relations in mind when he wrote those words. I am sure he did not. Commitment or lack of commitment is clearly not the issue here. Paul, under the inspiration of the

Holy Spirit, is simply portraying homosexual acts as "unnatural" and "indecent."

Pro-homosexual scholars also try to write off 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11 as references to idolatrous pagan religious practices. It is hard to believe, however, that Paul had the specific issue of temple prostitution in mind when he included in his list of offences the very general sins of theft, greed and drunkenness. In addition, why then differentiate as he does between four types of sexual sin, namely, sexual immorality, adultery, male prostitution, and homosexuality? Yet again, the interpretation offered by the pro-homosexual theologians just does not make sense.

My considered opinion is that there are no reasonable Biblical grounds for homosexual activity. I find all attempts to interpret away the passages of Scripture prohibiting homosexual activity to be fanciful and unconvincing. In order to give even reasonable credence to the explanations given, one would have to abandon belief in the authority of a divinely inspired Bible. I do not therefore believe that homosexual activity is a godly option for any Christian who respects Biblical authority. Same-sex marriage stands on even flimsier foundations. Not only is the homosexual underpinning Biblically insupportable, but the Scriptural definition and purpose of marriage also rule it out.

It is from this theological position that I now address the implications of the current debate for church life.

8. Implications for Church Life

Two challenges face Christian leaders: how to address same-sex marriage in the general South African society, and how to address the concept of same-sex marriage within the church.

8.1 An approach to same-sex marriage in general society

Separation of church and state is a time-honoured distinction. The church has a prophetic role in informing and challenging the state, but ultimately it must

submit to the legitimate decrees of a legitimately appointed government (Rom 13:1). I am not going to attempt, in this article, to argue what constitute legitimate decrees and legitimate government. My point is simply that the church, having objected to and warned concerning the Biblical illegitimacy of same-sex marriage, needs to position itself within the rulings of state and civic law. This positioning might be one of conscientious objection or it may simply consist of a clear call on its members to live according to the higher law of the Word of God.

I believe that the church should continue to warn the government, and society at large, of the negative implications of same-sex marriage. I think however that it is too much of a stretch of the imagination to equate the introduction of same-sex marriage with the affect that apartheid had on the marriage and families of migrant workers and the like (Marriage Alliance, 2005). However, healthy marriages are a glue that holds society together (Wilson 2005). Anything that threatens the creation and maintenance of healthy marriages is therefore counterproductive to the good of society. Most conservative scholars argue that same-sex marriage threatens the institution of marriage in general, but there is a counter view to this. Rosemary Radford Ruether, writing in the National Catholic Reporter, asks why it is that we assume that same-sex marriage is a threat to marriage in general. She writes, "Ms. Scanzoni and Dr Meyers argue that accepting gay marriage, far from threatening marriage, will confirm and strengthen the ideal of marriage itself for all of us, heterosexuals and homosexuals" (Ruether 2005). For me, the jury is still out on both positions. What seems clearer to me at this time is the devastating effect that divorce and extramarital sex and childbearing is having on the status of marriage in general. Research has shown that children flourish in a family parented by a heterosexual couple (Wilson 2005), but the same research indicates that children are adversely affected by single parenting and by marital conflict. Same-sex marriages are certainly not the only cause of less than optimal child rearing.

There is a distinct possibility that by normalising same-sex marriage the Biblical Christian's position on heterosexual marriage may be marginalised. A new constitutional norm is currently being established. This will not mean that heterosexual marriage will not be viewed as normal, but it will mean that rejection of same-sex marriage will be considered abnormal and even

unconstitutional. Before, there was no conflict between a Christian minister's refusal to marry a gay couple and their constitutional rights. In future, there will be a conflict between the rights of gay couples under the Constitution, and the Christian minister's right to religious freedom of choice and expression. This could put pressure on the church in two areas. Firstly, it has the potential of positioning the church as anti-societal and against constitutional rights and, secondly, it might result in the withdrawal of marriage licences from Christian ministers. Christian leaders will need to give careful though to this perceptual issue. My belief is that the best approach is to present the positive case for exclusively heterosexual marriage rather than attempting to defend against accusations of discrimination and bigotry. The Biblical position is, after all, a prescription for the best common and individual good and not an attempt to prejudice anyone's real welfare.

8.2 An approach to same-sex marriage within the church

I make a distinction between the church's approach to same-sex marriage within its ranks, and its approach to the more general question of homosexuality. I have set out my conviction that same-sex marriage is not Biblically valid. I hold that churches should not accept same-sex "married" couples into either membership or the inner fellowship of the church family. The same should apply to unrepentant adulterers, drunkards and the like. The issue here is not same-sex marriage *per se* but a conscious and unrepentant violation of the teachings of Scripture.

Homosexuality is a somewhat different matter in that individuals can have homosexual inclinations, yet be committed to living according to Biblical values. We live in a sin-sick world and it is fairly common for individuals to develop homosexual inclinations as a result of their upbringing, formative experiences or traumatic events. It is even conceivable that pre-birth imprinting could result in homosexual propensities. Notwithstanding this, each individual has the ability to choose to live according to Biblical norms and values. Sexual expression is not an indispensable requirement for quality of life. Poverty, stress and sickness rank much higher as negative factors than does abstinence. As Paul pointed out, abstinence can be a positive and even desirable life choice even for marriageable adults (1 Cor 7:1).

We should view all people with compassion and humility, both heterosexual and homosexual. It is, however, not an expression of true love to withhold challenge and correction to anyone who violates the principles and commands of Scripture. We can and should pray for and minister to those who practice homosexuality. If they choose not to renounce that way of life, then we should deal with them on the same basis as those in a same-sex marriage. Again, I must stress that our approach to the issue of homosexuality should be no different to other unbiblical life-style issues such as adultery and drunkenness.

I believe that the church should avoid the deception of creating two orders of sin. One of the current arguments is that we should distinguish between first and second order Biblical issues. Acts 15 makes the distinction between idolatry and eating meat sacrificed to idols. Those who argue in this way regard the former as a first order issue and the later as a second order issue. The line of reasoning is that, because it is so seldom addressed in Scripture, we should regard homosexuality as a second order issue. As a result, we should regard sexual preference as a matter of individual conscience. Of course, we could say the same of adultery and drunkenness. Sin is sin and the Bible does not differentiate between degrees of offence.

In a pastoral context, we obviously need to treat couples within same-sex marriages with dignity and compassion. Some same-sex couples claim a relationship with the Lord Jesus and seek to express this relationship with other believers within the life of a local church. This constitutes a particular pastoral problem. On the one hand, by accepting them into membership or into the fellowshipping life of the church we ostensibly validate and ultimately legitimise their religious marital status. On the other hand, by denying them access to the inner life of the church we effectively preclude ourselves from ministering to them. John Stott comments that most homosexuals reject the concept of a possible "healing" because they regard their condition as innate and normal (Stott 1999). This resistance to receiving ministry will be particularly true of those who have been legally married and so I believe that the second consideration mentioned is not really a valid concern. We should, of course, welcome all people, in any condition, into the worship services of the church where they can be exposed to the preaching of the Word and where they can open themselves to interactions with God. I believe that we should apply this stance to all people who publicly violate the clearly stated moral

standards of Scripture. We should treat an unrepentant and recalcitrant drunkard in the same way. We should treat in the same way a married man or woman who wants to publicly integrate a lover into the life of the church. In all cases, we should behave with patience and compassion but we should stand our ground.

9. Conclusion

The pro-homosexual and same-sex lobby loves to portray conservative, Bible honouring Christians as archaic "mother Grundy's," opposed to social evolution and judgemental to a fault. My view is that God has established His laws in order to preserve and foster individual and societal wellbeing. God does not need our obedience to His decrees to satisfy a desire for status or self-worth. He prescribes the way in which we should live in order that we may have the freedom, both individually and as a part of society, to grow and prosper in righteousness. To compromise on issues such as homosexuality and its ultimate expression in same-sex marriage is to withhold the greatest good from individuals and society. Even if people and governments refuse to comply with the standards of the Word of God, we dare not allow ourselves, or our churches, to conform to a pattern that will ultimately weaken both society and individual faith and quality of life. My ultimate response to the question of same-sex marriage is … "No!"

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How Does Prayer Affect God's Plan?

An Enquiry into God's Providence with Special Reference to Prayer and Healing

by

Mark Pretorius[1]

Abstract

If God is sovereign and His plans fixed, why pray? Does prayer change what God has purposed to do? If not, what is the point in praying? One could take these questions even further and say: if prayer has any effect on what happens, then it would seem that God's plans are not fixed. On the other hand, if God has settled His plans and He will do what He is going to do, then does it matter whether we pray or not? Every committed Christian wants to believe that prayer makes a difference. Thus, this article has a twofold purpose. The first is to show that God's providential plans and His command for Christians to pray are consistent with His purpose to bring about His plans through prayer. The second is to answer the question: does God heal when one prays, and specifically when it comes to intercessory prayer? Bringing clarity to these questions is important as it has a direct bearing on how we will view miracles and God's willingness to answer prayer.

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1. Introduction

The first question one might ask in a debate about the providential hand of God on His creation is: how should one, in this context, define providence? According to Tupper (1985:579), providence means that God "sees ahead" and "watches after" creaturely existence generally and each individual specifically. Williams (1996:117) defines providence as "the overseeing care and guardianship of God for all His creation." As such, God is understood as one intimately concerned with His creation. In certain ways, God is central to the conduct of the Christian life, as it means Christians are able to live in the assurance that God is present and continuously active in their lives.

However, the role of prayer is a problem that has concerned thoughtful Christians when considering the *nature* of providence, and how it links up to miraculous events, and specifically, physical healing. Erickson (2001:430) states that the difficulty stems from the question, "What does prayer really accomplish?" On the one hand, if prayer has any effect on what happens, then it seems that God's plan was not fixed in the first place. On the other hand, if God has settled His plan and He will do what He is going to do, then does it matter whether one prays or not? Every committed Christian wants to believe that prayer makes a difference. According to Ware (2000:164): "What is the point in praying, if prayer itself turns out to be superfluous and ineffectual?"

2. Providence in Prayer and Healing

One should note from the start of this discussion that the above question is simply one particular form of the larger issue of the relationship between human effort and divine providence. Barth (1958:148) defines divine providence in terms of the sovereignty of God when he states that God …

> rules unconditionally and irresistibly in all affairs…. Nature is God's 'servant', the instrument of His purposes…. God controls, orders, and decides, for nothing can be done except the will of God…. God foreknows and predetermines and foreordains.

Although this statement is true, it does appear from Scripture that God often works in some sort of partnership with humans. One could, in a sense say that God does not act unless humans do play their part. Thus, when Jesus ministered in His hometown of Nazareth, He did not perform any major miracles; all He did was heal a few sick people. Scripture states that Jesus "was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mark 6:6), suggesting the people of Nazareth simply did not bring their needy ones to Him for healing. Often the act of faith was necessary for the Lord to act, but it seems that this was lacking in Nazareth. To see it from another perspective, Bloesch (1978:31, 57) explains:

> While God's ultimate purposes are unchangeable..., His immediate will is flexible and open to change through the prayers of His people. A personal God, who loves and cares, can be solicited in prayer. Prayer can work miracles because God makes Himself dependent on the requests of His children.

Erickson (2001:431) rightly adds that when God wills the end, He also wills the means. Therefore, prayer does not change what God has purposed to do; it is simply the means by which He carries out His final objective.

Although Thiessen (1979:129) states that some hold that prayer can have no real effect on God, since He has already decreed just what He will do in every instance, he does argue that this is an extreme position. One must not ignore James 4:2, "You do not have because you do not ask." One could say, God does some things only in answer to prayer, He does other things without anyone's praying, and He does some things contrary to the prayers offered. In His omniscience God has already taken all these things into account, and in His providence He sovereignly works out everything in accordance with His own purpose and plan. Thiessen further argues:

> If we do not pray for the things that we might get by prayer, we do not get them. If He wants something done for which no one prays, He will do them without anyone praying. If we pray for things contrary to His will, He refuses to grant them. Thus, there is a perfect harmony between His purpose and providence, and man's freedom.

In this regard, we need to consider the contentious issue concerning whether God heals when one prays.

The twentieth and early twenty-first century has seen a remarkable growth in interest in the subject of the spiritual healing of the body. This growth has arisen in three related but distinct stages of movements (see Erickson 2001:852-853). Firstly, the Pentecostal movement, which arose and grew in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, and stressed the return of certain of the more spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then, about the middle of the century, the Neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic movement began; it had many of the same emphases. In the 1980's and onwards the "Third Wave" arose. These movements put greater stress on the miracles of spiritual healing than does Christianity in general. Often they make no real attempt to give a theological explanation or basis for these healings. As such, when one raises the question, the answer often given is that healing, no less than forgiveness of sins and salvation, is to be found within the atonement. The argument is that Christ died to carry away not only sin, but sickness as well. Among the major advocates of this view was A. B. Simpson, founder of what is today known as the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

One of the striking features of the view that Christ's death brings healing for the body, according to Simpson (1880:30-31), is the idea that the presence of illness in the world is a result of the fall. When sin entered the human race, a curse (actually a series of curses) was pronounced on humanity; diseases were part of that curse. Since illness is a result of the fall, not simply of the natural constitution of things, it cannot be combated solely by natural means. Being of spiritual origin, it must be combated in the same way the rest of the effects of the fall are combated—by spiritual means, and specifically by Christ's work of atonement. Intended to counter the effects of the fall, His death covers not only guilt for humanity's sin, but also humanity's sickness. Healing of the body is therefore part of a Christian's great redemption right. And if that is the case, then when one prays for a healing, whatever the sickness might be, healing should take place.

However, the research that has been undertaken on the relationship between prayer and healing over several decades does not confirm the above contention. The following is a breakdown of these findings.

3. Historical Aspects of Prayer and Medicine

In various interviews and surveys undertaken over several decades by prominent scientists and medical doctors (see Meyers and Benson 1992; Angel 1985; Kleinman, Eisenberg and Good 1978; and Engel 1977), it was found that most people believe that not only does the mind affect the body (a view with which most scientists would agree), but there are also supernatural forces that have an intense effect on one's physical and emotional well-being (a view with which most scientists would disagree).

From a scientific perspective, the important question is: how should one deal with reports of miraculous healings and the belief that prayer can affect healing? Is there a special connection between belief in the supernatural and physical well-being? With the accelerating technical advances of Western medicine, there are increasing patient complaints against the medical community for their exclusionary focus on the biomedical model of disease. According to these surveys, it would seem that many patients, particularly if their disease is severe, want metaphysical as well as medical interventions; that is, they want a direct link from their medical care to God.

In a later study, and in response to these findings, McCullough (1995:15-29), in a review of the prayer literature, considered the following four areas of prayer research:

- prayer and subjective well being;
- prayer as a form of coping;
- prayer and psychiatric symptoms;
- intercessory prayer.

He reported that both the frequency of prayer and the presence of mystical and religious experience during prayer were predictive of subjective well being on many indexes. It was, however, stated that several confounds in the studies reviewed rendered the data interpretation problematic. Variables such as religious commitment and socio-demographics were not controlled. Thus, if one prays often but has little commitment to religious belief, the positive affects on subjective well being may be predicted to diminish.

McCullough further observed that prayer is used more often for symptoms that have been treated with medication, and have been discussed with a physician, than those that have not. One obvious problem found is that prayer as an effective coping response is confounded with medical treatment. Thus, as one experiences the effect of the medical treatment, there may be a tendency to credit change to prayer.

What about intercessory prayer, or the act of praying for another? Sir Francis Galton (1872:125-135) was the first to apply statistical analysis in trying to determine the effects of intercessory prayer. While his data collection method was flawed, he inferred that intercessory prayer was not a significant predictor of life span or social class. Since Galton's study in 1872, there have been six empirical studies looking into the effect of intercessory prayer. Collipp (1969:201-204), Elkins, Anchor and Sandler (1979:81-87), Joyce and Weldon (1965:367-377), O'Laoire (1997: 38-53), and Wirth and Barret (1994:61-67) all studied the effect of prayer on various medical conditions and found no statistically significant effect for intercessory prayer. Green (1993:2752), however, did find positive expectancy (the belief in the effectiveness of prayer) in relation to intercessory prayer to have a significant effect on patient anxiety levels. Thus, for those patients who had a high expectancy for the effectiveness of prayer to reduce anxiety, anxiety was reduced.

These studies do not validate or deny the effect of prayer. The question remains unanswered: does prayer work?

4. Does Prayer Work?

One might ask, should medical doctors or psychologists advise their patients to pray? According to Sloan, Bagiella and Powell (1999:664-667), "it is premature to promote faith and religion as adjunctive medical treatments." They state that the existing research on the effect of prayer is so flawed that it simply does not warrant belief in prayer for physical and emotional well being. However, in my view, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that expectancies for desired outcomes, social connectedness, and deep religious positive expectancies may be effective buffers for the stressors associated with

various medical conditions. As such, any intervention that improves patient well being is valuable.

It is unfortunate that many of the studies undertaken in the area of prayer and healing were based on empirical data that tended to disregard the omnipotence and omni-benevolence of God. It was also not indicated whether any of the subjects interviewed, or the scientists conducting the experiments, had a trusting faith in God, even though they did pray. To date, I have not found any major research undertaken by evangelicals to counter claim these findings. Sadly, many scholars, even those in the theological disciplines, are sceptical when it comes to anything related to healing or any miraculous events. Bultmann (1958:16), for example, asserted that miracles were "mythology." He wrote, "Modern men take it for granted that the course of nature and history … is nowhere interrupted by the intervention of supernatural powers."

The question remains as to why the Bible would instruct Christians to pray in all circumstances, if God were not going to answer any of their prayers, especially prayers for healing. It was stated that the data presented was flawed, and that much research is still needed in this area. However, the question arises: is that a good enough answer in the light of the negative statements made within these studies regarding the relationship between prayer and healing?

In all fairness, it must be said that science deals with facts. Facts, according to Barton (1999:17), are the instruments the natural scientist uses to build a coherent framework for understanding the world. The problem is that as this framework has developed, it has come into conflict with religion and will continue to be in conflict with religion in future studies that it undertakes until common ground is reached between the two disciplines. As science is exposed to new data, it is subject to change; therefore, it is continuously evolving. There are no absolutes at this time in the scientific world, especially in its understanding of prayer. No scientist quoted in this study can claim that his or her observations have acquired the status of ultimate truth. In this vein, the following letter sums up the general consensus regarding the limitations of science.

In a letter written to the scientific magazine *Nature*, Donald MacKay (1997:502) from the Department of Communications and Neuroscience at the University of Keele in the United Kingdom wrote:

> In scientific laws we describe, as best we can, the pattern of precedent we observe in the sequence of natural events. While our laws do not prescribe what must happen, they do prescribe what we ought to expect on the basis of precedent. If by a "miracle" we mean an unprecedented event …, then science says that miracles ought not be expected on the basis of precedent. What science does not (and cannot) say … is that the unprecedented does not (or cannot) occur …. We cannot dogmatically exclude the ever present possibility that the truth about our world is stranger than we have imagined.

Although science has achieved enormous success as a way of knowing the structures and processes of the material world, natural science, it appears, leaves no place for divine action. However, it must also be stated that it is a human moral trait to seek explanations. As such, scientists could claim that they are conducting research simply for the sake of understanding how nature operates, whether that is in the field of religion or any other discipline that deals with unexplainable events (e.g., quantum physics). Thus, those who study natural science need to understand that if breakthroughs are to be achieved in the dialogue between science and religion, scientific methods, as advanced as they are, hold no intrinsic guarantee that these methods can lead to ultimate truth. This is specifically so when it comes to unexpected happenings, such as when one prays and things happen.

To expand on this statement, Bloesch (1978:58) writes:

> Evangelical prayer is based on the view that a sovereign God can and does make himself dependent on the requests of His children. He chooses to realise His purposes in the world in collaboration with His people. To be sure, God knows our needs before we ask, but He desires that we discuss them with Him so that He might work with us as His covenant partners toward their solution. There is, of course, a time to submit as

> well as a time to strive and wrestle with God in prayer, but this should come always at the end of prayer and never at the beginning. Moreover, our submission is not a passive resignation to fate but a relinquishing of our desires and requests into the hands of a living God to answer as He wills.

As previously mentioned, some theologians are sceptical when it comes to the issue of praying for change. Moltmann, for example, broke with monotheism and embraced a Hegelian form of *panentheism* (see Heiler 1958). Panentheists believe the providential plan of God regarding prayer is more to change the one who prays than to change circumstances. Moltmann (2001:247-249) contends; one can no longer pray *to* God but only *in* God, that is, in the Spirit of God. Prayer, in many cases, has come to be reinterpreted as *soliloquy*, that is, reflection on life or meditation on the ground of being. In the same vein, others (e.g., Tillich 1957 and Schleiermacher 1963), believe that prayer should only take the form of gratitude, resignation, or meditation, rather than a petition to alter the ways of God. In some circles, prayer is understood as a consciousness-raising experience which brings one into tune with the infinite.

According to Hannah (1979:347), although prayer is a form of meditation and reflection, it is also a means of sanctifying grace. It results, in his view, in altering the person; that is, it affects the person's spiritual maturity. Calvin (1970:146-147) expands on this by eloquently arguing that prayer changes the one who prays.

> The necessity and utility of this exercise of prayer no words can sufficiently express. Assuredly it is not without cause our heavenly Father declares that our only safety is in calling upon His name, since by it we invoke the presence of His providence to watch over our interests, of His power to sustain us when weak and almost fainting, of His goodness to receive us into favour, though miserably loaded with sin, in fine, call upon Him to manifest himself to us in all His perfection. Hence, admirably peace and tranquillity are given to our conscience; for the straits by which we were pressed being laid before the Lord, we rest fully satisfied with the assurance that none of our

> evils are unknown to Him, and that He is able and willing to make the best provision for us.

Regarding this, Dabney (1972:716) simply writes, "Prayer is not intended to produce a change in God, but in us." To argue that prayer changes the one who prays is most likely not to be challenged. It is readily apparent that people change when they spend time with God.

This is very much in line with the findings undertaken by Green (1993:2752) and Sloan, Bagiella and Powell (1999:664-667), who stated that for those patients who had a high expectancy for the effectiveness of prayer to reduce anxiety, anxiety levels were indeed reduced and may also have been effective buffers for the stressors associated with various medical conditions.

In my view, what these scholars and researchers fail to recognise, is that prayer is an essential part of Christian living, especially intercessory prayer. Paul, writing to Timothy, states the following in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, "I urge that supplication, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions." While no sharp distinction can be drawn between "supplications" and "intercessions," petitionary prayers are to be offered on behalf of others. But this does not, unfortunately, answer the question—does God heal someone at his or her own request, or at the request of others, as in the case of intercessory prayer? To answer this question one would first need to determine how a miracle would or could take place, especially in the area of healing.

5. Miracles of Healing

Nichols (2002:711) states that miracles usually occur within a context of faith and prayer, but one would not want to limit God's miraculous activity only to contexts of faith and prayer. For example, Erickson (2001:432) writes that some theorise that miracles recorded in the Bible were probably a suspension of natural laws. An example of this is the case of the axe head that floated (2 Kings 6:6). The theory suggests that for a brief period of time, in that cubic foot or so of water, the law of gravity was suspended. In effect, God turned off the law of gravity until the axe head was recovered. The problem with such examples is that the breaking of such laws of nature usually introduces

complications requiring a whole series of compensating miracles. For one thing, there is no hint in the narratives to explain the following question: if God suspended the laws of gravity to float the axe head, how would everything else connected to the miracle react?

From a theological perspective, one would rather say that when miracles occur (whether that is an answer to prayer for healing or any similar related requests), natural laws are countered by supernatural forces (see Lewis 1947:59-61). In this view, the laws of nature are not suspended, but continue to operate. In the process a supernatural law is introduced, negating the effect of the natural law (e.g., a sickness that has attacked the body because of the fallen state of humanity). There are two other possible ways of understanding how God may act in a miracle of healing. The first is the traditional way, namely, God responds to prayer, faith, and holiness. If a righteous person (or group of people) prays in faith to God for a healing, God may respond.

A second way is this: perhaps God's activity, or "energy," to use a modern analogy is always and everywhere available, like an extended field or supporting context. Pannenberg (1994:83), for example, argues that the Spirit of God may be viewed (analogically) as a dynamic field, a field that can be accessed only by those who open themselves to God in faith, holiness, and prayer.

The first model, in the view of Nichols (2002:712), envisages God's action in terms of personal response; the second represents it as a field or context phenomenon; the field is always present but only some access it. One could say that both of these models are necessary to understand miracles, just as both particle and wave models are necessary to understand subatomic particles or the nature of light. The models are complementary, and either one without the other is incomplete. The first model explains the fact that many miracles do seem to be responses to prayer, but by itself it is open to the objection: why God does not heal everyone who prays? The reason may be that to access the divine energy, a person must surrender to God in faith and prayer. If few people are doing this, it underlines the importance of my earlier question: "Did the people involved in the experiments have a trusting faith in God?" It is not that God plays favourites and rewards those who grovel. It is rather that those who are not deeply surrendered to God cannot access God's power because

they are not "tuned in." For God to act fully in one's life, one would need to be receptive.

If there is divine activity in miracles, however, can one explain how it influences physical processes?

Unfortunately, it is difficult at present to understand the mechanism of physical processes. According to Nichols (2002:712), it may be that God acts at the quantum level as the determiner of indeterminacies. Quantum states, which are indeterminate, are determined by divine activity to influence physical processes. Robert Russell (1998) has proposed this model of divine activity as a way of explaining theistic evolution and special providence. Although this might account for an accelerated healing, it is hard to see how it could account for more dramatic miracles like the resurrection.

One could answer this question in broad terms by saying that theologically, and even logically, God cannot be completely separate from the created order. If God were transcendent, He could not influence the world and the world could not influence Him. This is not the Christian idea of God; rather, it is the Deist idea, a result of viewing the universe as a self-enclosed mechanical system that leaves God on the outside. God's essence is to exist; God is the *act of existence* from which all other existent things draw their existence. There is therefore continuity as well as a discontinuity between God and creation. Rahner (1965:53–61) has advanced the notion that matter/energy and what theologians call *finite spirit* exist in a kind of continuity. If so, (finite) spirit (such as the soul), could influence matter directly, and God, in turn, could influence the soul. (This is how Aquinas explains the resurrection.) Nichols (2002:713), however, argues against this, and states that God never acts as one force alongside other physical forces. Rather, God acts in creation immediately, to empower nature to transcend itself. Therefore, according to Erickson (2001:434), there should really be no problem when one faces events that run contrary to what natural laws dictate. Twenty-first century science is more likely than was the twentieth century to recognise natural laws as merely statistical reports of what has happened. From a purely empirical standpoint, one has no logical grounds on which to base whether the course of nature is fixed, or whether it can be successfully opposed.

It was stated in the beginning of this paper that God, in His omniscience, has taken all these things into account, and in His providence, He sovereignly works them out in accordance with His own purpose and plan. Regarding this, Hodge (1976:91) aptly argues,

> The scriptures assure us, and all Christians believe, that prayer for material as well as for spiritual good is as real a means affecting the end sought as is sowing seed a means of getting a crop, or as is studying a means of getting learning, or as are praying and reading the Bible a means of sanctification. But it is a moral not a physical cause. Its efficiency consists in its power of affecting the mind of God and disposing Him to do for us what He would not do if we did not pray.

Furthermore, Packer (1997:29) clearly and rightly addresses this contentious area of God's providence and healing in the following way:

> Petitions for healing or anything else are not magic spells, nor do they have the effect by putting God under pressure and twisting His arm…. Non-Christian prayers for healing may surprise us by leading to healing; Christian prayers for healing may surprise us by not being answered that way. There are always surprises with God. But with God's children 'ask and you will receive' is always true, and what they receive when they ask is always God's best for them long-term, even when it is a short-term disappointment. Some things are certain, and that is one of them.

6. Conclusion

In concluding, one might again ask the question: how does prayer affect God's providential workings in creation—whether that is in the area of healing or any other suspension or alteration of natural laws? To a scientist and to a theologian, miraculous events might, of course, simply be illusions; events that are really fabrications, coincidences, or the results of some mysterious power of the mind or even an unknown law of nature and not of any divine activity. In other words, there are no miracles; theologically speaking, there

are only unusual events. This, of course, is a hypothesis that remains to be proven. But, if part of the cause of a miraculous event is divine providence, then to a scientist, a miracle, whether it is a supernatural causal event or a healing taking place within a person, will appear simply as an inexplicable event, a mystery that seems to go beyond what can be explained by natural causality.

If, on the other hand, divine providence is suggested as the main factor in Divine activity, then miracles should be of interest to all those who are trying to understand how God acts in the world. To the believer, then, the providence of God is not an abstract conception. It is the believer's conviction that he or she is in the hands of a wise and powerful God, who will accomplish His purposes in the world—whether it be through the answering or not answering of the prayer for healing or for any other need.

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Could David Have Written Psalm 5?

by

Dr Kevin Smith[1]

Abstract

Psalm 5 is one of a number of Davidic Psalms that allude to the Lord's "house" and "temple." Since Solomon's Temple was built after David's death, critical scholars consider these allusions to the temple as conclusive proof that David could not have authored these psalms. This article demonstrates that, prior to the construction of Solomon's Temple, the terms "house" (בַּיִת) and "temple" (הֵיכָל) were acceptable terms for alluding to the Tabernacle. Therefore, the conclusion that David could not have written Psalm 5 is unwarranted.

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1. Introduction

Is it plausible that David might of have written Psalm 5? Taken at face value, the Hebrew text attributes authorship of Psalm 5 to the pen of David by way of the inscription "of David" (לְדָוִד, hereafter *lědāwid*) in the heading. Nineteenth century critics claimed that David could not have written a psalm that alludes to worshipping in the Lord's "house" and at His "temple." In spite of able counters by evangelical scholars (e.g., Keil and Delitzsch 2002), the critics won the day. As a legacy of their influence, almost every major commentary on the Book of Psalms since 1900 has virtually presupposed that David could not have written Psalm 5 (and other *lědāwid* psalms that refer to the temple).[2]

However, the claim that David could not have written a psalm in which the author vows to worship at the Lord's "house" and "temple" proves unconvincing when we analyse the usage of those terms prior to the construction of Solomon's temple. In this article, I hope to show that it remains plausible for a modern student of Scripture to believe in the Davidic authorship of Psalm 5.

2. What does the inscription "of David" mean?

Although they seem to be early in origin, there is little doubt that the psalm headings are editorial additions to the text of certain psalms. As individual psalms were collected for corporate use, the editors of collections added superscriptions to indicate such things as the source, setting, genre, collection, tune and musical accompaniment.

Seventy-three psalms bear the heading "of David" *(lědāwid)* in the MT; the LXX raises the count to 85 (Greek, τῳ Δαυιδ).[3] Similar ascriptions to individuals are made to Jeduthun (לִידִיתוּן, Pss 39; cf. 62 and 77), Solomon (לִשְׁלֹמֹה, Pss 72 and 127), Heman (לְהֵימָן, Psa 88) and Moses (לְמֹשֶׁה, Psa 90). In

[2] For example, Briggs and Briggs 1906, Weiser 1962, Dahood 1966, Allen 1998, Craigie 1998, Tate 1998, Broyles 1999, Wilson 2002 and Terrien 2003.

[3] As compared with the MT, the LXX adds allusions to Davidic authorship to Psalms 33, 43, 71, 91, 93-99, 104 and 137, but omits the MT allusions to David in Psalms 122 and 124.

each case, the Hebrew inscription consists of the preposition לְ (hereafter, *lĕ*) plus the name of the person.

The first question we must consider is whether the preposition *lĕ,* when used with a person's name in the psalm headings, is intended to denote authorship. The preposition has a broad range of meanings. Usually the context indicates which meaning is intended, but in the psalm headings there are no contextual clues. Thus, *lĕdāwid* could denote: (a) authorship, "by David"; (b) dedication, "to David"; (c) ownership, "of David" or "belonging to the Davidic collection"; (d) subject, "about David"; or (e) user, "for David," meaning, "for [the use of] David."

Within the psalm headings, *lĕ* often denotes things other than authorship. For example, לַמְנַצֵּחַ (55 times in psalm headings) clearly means "for the director [of music]," denoting the user of the psalm. לְלַמֵּד denotes purpose, "for teaching" (Psa 60), though this is due force of the infinitive construct more than the preposition. לְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת (Psa 92) denotes occasion, "for [use on] the Sabbath day." לְתוֹדָה (Psa 100) states the purpose for which the psalm should be used, namely, "for giving thanks." The meaning of לִבְנֵי־קֹרַח, usually translated "of the sons of Korah," is unclear: authorship, ownership, usage—each is possible.

This range of usage has led many scholars to suggest that even when attached to a person's name, the preposition *lĕ* in psalm headings was not intended to denote authorship. For example, Craigie (1998) translates *lĕdāwid* in the headings of Psalms 27 and 32 as "for David." Weiser (1962:96) believes *lĕdāwid* always means "for the Davidic ruler … to recite in the festival cult of the Temple." Earlier, Briggs and Briggs (1906:lxi) argued that it "indicates, not authorship, but, with few exceptions, the first of the minor Psalters, gathered under the name of David in the late Persian period, from which these Psalms were taken by later editors."

Nevertheless, there are strong indications that the inscription *lĕdāwid* was intended to identify David as the author of the psalms to which it was appended. Let us consider three main arguments.

First, two psalms outside the Psalter use the construction *lĕ* + *name* to identify the author. In Isaiah 38:9, a poem by Hezekiah is introduced using the words "a writing of Hezekiah" (מִכְתָּב לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ). Similarly, the famous prayer of Habakkuk is titled "a prayer of Habakkuk" (תְּפִלָּה לַחֲבַקּוּק). In both cases, the name of the composer is prefixed with the preposition *lĕ,* suggesting that this was an established convention for identifying the author of a poem.

Second, thirteen psalms bearing the inscription *lĕdāwid* also contain descriptions of the historical circumstances in David's life.[4] In 11 of the 13, the inscription "of David" is immediately followed by a subordinate temporal clause "when …" (the Hebrew construction always consists of the preposition *bĕ* + *infinitive construct*), describing the occasion for the writing of the psalm. In each case, the temporal clause is closely connected to *lĕdāwid,* leaving little doubt that the intent is to indicate the circumstances under which David wrote the psalm.[5] The heading of Psalm 3, a typical example of this construction, could fittingly be translated, "A psalm *by* David *when* he fled from Absalom, his son." The remaining two psalms use an even clearer construction to describe the historical circumstances of writing. They both elaborate on *lĕdāwid* by means of a relative clause. The example in Psalm 18 leaves no doubt that the relative clause describes the circumstances under which David wrote the psalm:

> A *Psalm* of David the servant of the LORD, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song in the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul (Psalm 18:0, NASB).

Thus, in the thirteen *lĕdāwid* psalms that contain historical information, it is clear that *lĕdāwid* means "by David." If the same editors added both the

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[4] The thirteen psalms with historical details are Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142.

[5] In seven of the eleven instances, the temporal clause follows immediately after *lĕdāwid* (see Pss 3, 34, 51, 52, 54, 63 and 142). In the remaining four, the temporal clause is separated from *lĕdāwid* by a single word, מִכְתָּם ("a poem," see Swanson 1997:§4846) in Psalms 56, 57 and 59 and לְלַמֵּד ("for teaching") in Psalm 60.

ascription *lědāwid* and the historical information, then they clearly intended the former as an attribution of authorship. If the historical information was added after *lědāwid,* then the later editors interpreted *lědāwid* as a marker of authorship. If *lědāwid* was intended to mean "by David" in all thirteen psalms that bear historical descriptions, then its most likely meaning in the sixty where it stands alone is also "by David." I concur with James Limburg's (1992, 5:528) conclusion that "since the 13 psalms associated biographically with David point to David as an author, it would seem that authorship is the intent of the expression in many cases."[6]

The final line of evidence is that in ancient Jewish tradition David was universally considered the primary author of the Book of Psalms. The tendency of the Septuagint to attribute more psalms to David suggests that its translators considered him the author of the psalms that bear his name. "The Talmud thinks of him as the author of the psalms, just as Moses was author of the Pentateuch" (Limburg 1992, 5:528). Finally, Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament authors all regarded David as the author of the psalms that bear his name (and of some that bear no name).

These factors are so persuasive that even James Crenshaw, who rejects Davidic authorship of most psalms and considers occurrences of *lědāwid* in the headings as postexilic additions reflecting the trend of the period to identify Scriptural writings with major historical figures, concedes that its primary intent was to denote authorship. "Although the Hebrew *ledāwid* (pertaining to David) does not necessarily mean Davidic authorship, its intent does seem to have been that in many instances" (Crenshaw 2001:5).

While recognising that the preposition *lĕ* is ambiguous and that it is used with a variety of meanings in the psalm headings, overwhelming evidence suggests

[6] Limburg does not defend the Davidic authorship of the *lědāwid* psalms, but he does acknowledge that authorship was the intent of the inscription.

the phrase *lědāwid* it is intended to identify David as the author of the psalms to which it was added.[7]

3. Is Davidic authorship plausible?

If my argument thus far is valid, the superscription of Psalm 5 names David as its author. However, the psalmist speaks of worshipping at the temple, which was not built until after David's death. Therefore, either the superscription erred in naming David as the author or the references to the "temple" must refer to something other than Solomon's temple. Before we hastily conclude that the superscription is inaccurate, we should seriously consider the second possibility. We should give the text the benefit of the doubt, allowing it to be innocent until proven guilty. I shall now analyse the terminology in Psalm 5:7 to see if it could plausibly have referred to the tabernacle in Zion where the Ark of the Covenant was kept during much of David's reign.

3.1 The Problem

Psalm 5:7 reads, "But I, by your great mercy will come into *your house;* in reverence will I bow down toward *your holy temple*" (italics mine). If there were no superscription, the most natural interpretation of "your house" and "your holy temple" would be as references to the temple of Solomon or, if there were reason to date the psalm in the postexilic period, to the second temple.

If Psalm 5 predates the building of the first temple, then the references to Yahweh's "house" and "temple" would need to be acceptable terminology for referring to the tabernacle in Zion that served as Yahweh's dwelling place among his people and as the centre of Israel's worship before the construction of Solomon's temple. Is there any evidence to support this possibility? Is there

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[7] Psalm 39 is the only instance in the psalm headings in which the construction *lĕ + person's name* would not be consistent with an ascription of authorship. The reason in Psalm 39 is that we find both לִידִיתוּן, "for Jeduthun," and לְדָוִד, "of David." Presumably only one of them could have been the author.

any evidence to indicate that the terms "house" and "temple" could have been applied to such a tabernacle? Let us scrutinise each term.

3.2 "Your House"

The word translated "house" (בַּיִת: *bayit,* 2045 times in MT) primarily denotes a dwelling, a place of habitation (Goldberg 1999:105), "a building in which a family lives" (Baker and Carpenter 1993: s.v. בַּיִת). When referring to a physical house, it usually refers to solid construction, but does occasionally describe a tent or a hut (see BDB 2000: s.v. 1.a; e.g., Gen 27:15 and 33:17).

By extension, the place of Yahweh's dwelling amongst his people came to be known as "the house of God" (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים or בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים), "the house of the Lord" (בֵּית יְהוָה) or simply "your house" (בֵּיתֶךָ). After the construction of Solomon's temple, these terms referred to it. However, prior to the construction of the temple, they were used with reference to whatever facility housed the Ark of the Covenant, that is, whatever structure served as the habitation of Yahweh.

Jacob referred to the place at which the Lord appeared to him as "the house of God" (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, Gen 28:17) because he realised that "the Lord is in this place" (v. 16), even though it was out in the open with no structure. Before leaving the place, he set up a single stone as a memorial to his meeting with the Lord, declaring that "this stone … will be God's house" (v. 22).

Shortly before the construction of the tabernacle, God commanded the Israelites to "bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God" (Exod 23:19). This amounts to calling the tabernacle "the house of the Lord" (בֵּית יְהוָה). Similarly, Deuteronomy 23:18 prohibits bringing the earrings of a prostitute "into the house of the Lord your God to pay any vow."

The reference to "the treasury of the Lord's house" in Joshua 6:24 is problematic on both textual grounds (the LXX reads "the Lord's treasury") and historical grounds (we do not know of a treasury attached to the tabernacle at that time in the conquest), so it carries no weight. Butler (1998:68) believes it reflects a later editorial amendment to the Hebrew text.

There are several references to the house of the Lord in Shiloh. The first mentions "all the time the house of God was in Shiloh" (Jdg 18:31). In 1 Samuel 1, Hannah worshipped at "the house of the Lord in Shiloh" (v. 7, 24). This was where Eli ministered and where Samuel grew up. 1 Samuel 3:15 again refers to this place as "the house of the Lord." Since "the house of the Lord in Shiloh" had doors and doorposts (1 Sam 1:9 and 3:15), some believe it was a temple rather than the Mosaic tabernacle, but this is unlikely (see below).

Finally, 1 Chronicles calls the tabernacle David established in Zion "the house of the Lord." In reviewing how David set in order the worship of Yahweh, the chronicler reports …

> These are the men David put in charge of the music in the house of the LORD after the ark came to rest there. They ministered with music before the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, until Solomon built the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. (1 Chr 6:31-32).

Later, 1 Samuel 12:20 reports that David "went into the house of the LORD and worshipped." The chronicler also describes how David appointed the gatekeepers to guard the gates of the tabernacle in Zion.

> The gatekeepers had been assigned to their positions of trust by David and Samuel the seer. They and their descendants were in charge of guarding the gates of the house of the LORD—the house called the Tent (1 Chr 9:22-23).

The evidence conclusively suggests that prior to the erection of Solomon's temple, whatever facility housed the Ark of the Covenant could be referred to as "the house of the Lord." The Mosaic tabernacle, the structure at Shiloh and the tent in Zion are all referred to as "the house of the Lord." Even after the construction of the temple, the chronicler used the word "house" to describe the tabernacle of David. Thus there is no reason why David himself could not have referred to the Zion tabernacle as "your house" (Psa 5:7).

But what about "your holy temple"? Is there any grounds for believing that the tabernacle of David could be labelled "your temple"? Let us examine the evidence.

3.3 "Your Temple"

The word translated "temple" (הֵיכָל: *hêkāl,* 80 times in MT) "essentially represents a king's dwelling quarters, i.e., a palace" (Coppes 1999:214). When denoting a royal palace, *hêkāl* could refer either the entire palace or a main room of the palace. By extension, in Israel it came to be a standard term for "a palace of God considered as King" (BDB 2000: s.v. 2), that is, the temple. Sometimes it denoted the entire temple, but it was often used to denote specifically "the holy place (as distinguished from the דְּבִיר *[dĕbîr]* the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies)" (BDB 2000: s.v. 2.b). When juxtaposed, the following three terms may denote differing parts of the temple:

בַּיִת	*bayit*	the entire temple
הֵיכָל	*hêkāl*	the holy place
דְּבִיר	*dĕbîr*	the holy of holies

These distinctions are evident in Psalm 5:7, for the psalmist declares that he will "enter your house," but he will only "bow down *toward* your holy temple." This is consistent with the psalm being written by a non-priest, such as David, who could enter the outer courts but not the inner sanctuaries.

The crucial question with reference to Psalm 5:7 is whether there is any precedent for using *hêkāl* to refer the tabernacle. Probably because it was only adopted into common usage in Hebrew after the coronation of the first king, *hêkāl* does not occur in the Old Testament until 1 Samuel (a book written after

Israel became a kingdom), for which reason it was never used of the Mosaic tabernacle prior to the period of the judges.[8]

The house of the Lord in Shiloh is called a "temple" (*hêkāl,* 1 Sam 1:9 and 3:3). On account of the fact that it had "doors" (1 Sam 3:15) and "doorposts" (1 Sam 1:9), many believe the "temple" in Shiloh in the days of Eli and Samuel was no longer a "tent" or a "tabernacle," but a proper "temple" (e.g., Cundall 1988:2019). Therefore, the reference to this structure as a *hêkāl* does not offer any precedent for calling a mere tent a *hêkāl*. However, this argument does not bear up under scrutiny.

2 Samuel 2:22 calls the Shiloh "temple" *(hêkāl)* "the Tent of Meeting" (Hebrew, אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד). "The Tent of Meeting"[9] is positively identified with the Mosaic tabernacle throughout the Old Testament.

> The tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the desert, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time on the high place at Gibeon (1 Chr 21:29).
>
> Solomon and the whole assembly went to the high place at Gibeon, for God's Tent of Meeting was there, which Moses the LORD's servant had made in the desert (2 Chr 1:3).

Although it moved from place to place throughout its lifespan, the Tent of Meeting was still in use until the time Solomon's temple was built.

> They ministered with music before the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, *until* Solomon built the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem (1 Chr 6:32, italics mine).

Since the *hêkāl* in Shiloh was equated "the Tent of Meeting," the claim that it was a permanent temple seems unlikely. The Mosaic tabernacle was first set

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[8] In the Pentateuch, the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, the holy place, was designated as either מָקוֹם קָדֹשׁ or הַקֹּדֶשׁ.

[9] This term occurs 146 times in the Old Testament (NASB), always with reference to the Mosaic Tabernacle.

up in Shiloh in the days of Joshua (see Josh 18:1 and 19:51; cf. Josh 22:19, 29 and Jdg 18:31). During the period of Eli and Samuel, it was semi-permanently erected in Shiloh and, it seems, somewhat reinforced with doors and doorposts. Later, after the destruction of Shiloh, it reappeared in Gibeon where it remained in active use until the completion of Solomon's temple.

If the preceding reconstruction is accurate, then it seems likely that the two allusions to the "temple" *(hêkāl)* in Shiloh were indeed allusions to the tabernacle, probably with special reference to its "holy place." Since we know David used the word *hêkāl* with respect to God's heavenly dwelling (see 2 Sam 22:7), it is not a far stretch to believe he might have used it with reference to God's earthly dwelling.

Psalm 27:4-6 corroborates the plausibility of David calling the tabernacle the Lord's "house" and "temple" (so Coppes 1999; cf. Kidner 1973). In one breath, the psalmist uses four synonyms for Yahweh's dwelling place: (a) "house" (בַּיִת), (b) "temple" (הֵיכָל), (c) "dwelling" (סֵךְ) and (d) "tabernacle" (אֹהֶל, "tent").

> One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in *the house of the Lord* all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in *his temple*. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in *his dwelling;* he will hide me in the shelter of *his tabernacle* and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at *his tabernacle* will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord (Psalm 27:4-6, italics mine).

At first glance, the allusions to "his dwelling" and "his tabernacle" (or "tent") in verse 5 appear to be purely metaphorical, not alluding to any earthly realities, but only to what such realities would represent. However, the pledge in verse 6, "at his tabernacle will I sacrifice," clearly refers to a physical, earthly sanctuary. This implies that all five references in Psalm 27:4-6 refer to the earthly sanctuary as the visible symbol of God's dwelling and presence among his people. Thus the terms "house" (v. 4), "temple" (v. 4) and "tabernacle" (v. 6) all denote *the same sanctuary*.

But which sanctuary—the tabernacle or the temple? Did the psalmist call the temple a "tent" (אֹהֶל, v. 6) or did he call the tabernacle a "temple" (הֵיכָל, v. 4)? Craigie[10] assumes the former, simply declaring without any corroborating argument that "the sacrifices about to be offered 'in his tent' [is] a poetic description of the temple, rather than an indication that the psalm was composed prior to the construction of the temple" (1998:233). This is a most unnatural interpretation of verse 6. The Old Testament never calls Solomon's temple a "tent"; there is no precedent for such a "poetic description of the temple." Furthermore, verse 6 is the fuller, clearer statement; sound exegesis should interpret the obscure in the light of the clear. Therefore, verse 6 should serve as the yardstick for interpreting verse 4. This is further supported by the fact that *hêkāl,* as a term denoting "the holy place," would be a perfectly natural choice to describe the tabernacle, whereas *ʾōhel* ("tent") is a most unsuitable term to describe the temple or any part of it. It is likelier that David would have called the tabernacle "his temple" than that a later liturgist would have referred to the temple as "his tent."

Before summarising my conclusions, I need to say a few words about why we need to defend the plausibility of David having authored Psalm 5.

4. Conclusion

Many modern scholars deem it implausible that a psalm in which the author vows to worship at the Lords "house" and "temple" could have emanated from the pen of King David. They reserve these terms, especially "temple," for reference to Solomon's temple. Therefore, they assume that such psalms must be dated after David's death and conclude that the editors who added *lědāwid* to the headings either (a) erred in naming David as the author or (b) did not intend it to indicate authorship.

However, close scrutiny of the Hebrew terms for "house" and "temple" indicates that it is plausible that David may have used these terms with reference to the Tabernacle. The term "house" has a long history of usage with

[10] So too Weiser (1962), Dahood (1966), Bratcher and Reyburn (1991), Terrien (2003) and, implicitly, Broyles (1999) and Wilson (2002).

reference to the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place. "Temple" *(hêkāl)* did not enter into common usage until the kingdom period, but its usage with reference to the house of the Lord at Shiloh suggests that it was used to refer to the Holy Place of the Tabernacle.

Therefore, it remains plausible that the editor who identified David as the author of Psalm 5 did not err. David could have referred to the Tabernacle as the Lord's "house" and "temple." We may never be able to prove whether or not David wrote Psalm 5, but to claim confidently that he could not have written it is to go beyond what the evidence will support. Such a bold conclusion is unsound.

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A Biblical Critique of the Two-fold Theory of Dispensationalism: The Distinction between Israel and the Church[1]

by

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Abstract

After a brief review of the historical development and essential characteristics of Dispensationalism, this article argues Dispensationalism's sharp distinction between Israel and the church represents a serious departure from sound exegetical theology resulting in a distortion of key Biblical doctrines.

[1] The views on Dispensationalism expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the standpoint of the South African Theological Seminary. In the spirit of healthy debate, *Conspectus* would welcome an academic response to the arguments set forth in this article.

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1. The Need for a Critique of Dispensationalism

Some might question the necessity for a Biblical evaluation of Dispensationalism, because a vast amount has already been written about this subject, or because of the seeming futility of continuing to challenge a system that is so widely accepted by believers today. However, I feel this critique is fully justified in the light of so much evidence that demonstrates that Dispensationalism rests on a questionable use of Scripture. In his book entitled, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism,* Gerstner (1991:150) emphasizes the seriousness of the theological error of Dispensationalism:

> What is indisputably, absolutely, and uncompromisingly essential to the Christian religion is its doctrine of salvation.... If Dispensationalism has actually departed from the only way of salvation which the Christian religion teaches, then we must say it has departed from Christianity. No matter how many other important truths it proclaims, it cannot be called Christian if it empties Christianity of its essential message.

Another factor, which has given urgency to a biblical evaluation of Dispensationalism, is the fact that during the course of the last four decades, many denominations and ecumenical groups have taken a position against Jewish evangelism as a result of the prevalent confusion amongst church leaders and Bible scholars regarding the Biblical relationship between Israel and the Church. This is evident from the following news items:

> In September 2002, the ecumenical Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations issued a statement condemning "missionary efforts at converting Jews." Joseph Tyson, chairman of the group, said that attempts to convert Jews to Christianity are "theologically invalid" (*Jews no longer objects of evangelism* 2001).

> In April 1998, representatives of 50 churches and Christian organizations in Israel said they would refrain from conducting missionary campaigns aimed at Jews. The statement was

> endorsed by a wide range of churches, including Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic (*Jews no longer objects of evangelism* 2001).

2. The Historical Development Dispensationalism: An American Perspective

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), after beginning in the field of law, became interested in the gospel. By 1825 he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. He later joined the "Plymouth Brethren," a group of believers who had also recently separated from the established church. In 1827 he developed and popularised the view that God had two different purposes for His people: an earthly purpose for Israel and a heavenly purpose for the church.

The question arises: why did this teaching appear at this time? Zens (1978:3) explains:

> It appears that there are two basic undercurrents that made the season ripe for a blossoming of prophetic and millennial interest. The first is the influence of the Jesuit thinking concerning Christ's second coming, and the second is the general outlook that certain recent political events had great implications for the fulfilment of prophecy.

During the period 1862-1877, as a result of several visits by Darby to America and Canada, Dispensationalism spread rapidly in these countries. If Dispensationalism had been confined to the Plymouth Brethren assemblies, its influence would have been negligible. However, it "came to have its proponents in virtually all Protestant denominations," and thus "it became a major factor in American evangelism" (Zens 1978:9).

Another factor in the spread of Dispensationalism in America was the printed page. In 1909 the Scofield Reference Bible appeared under the auspices of the Oxford University Press. This work "has probably done more to extend premillennialism in the last half century than any other volume" (Zens 1978:10).

Dispensationalism was also popularised as a result of the Bible School Movement. Zens (1978:11-12) elaborates:

> These institutions were founded primarily because the main-line denominational schools had departed from the evangelical position…. A host of Fundamental Bible schools sprang up all over America, the doctrinal foundation was "predominantly" Dispensational and premillennial "from the start." The Scofield Bible was, practically speaking, the accepted "doctrinal touchstone" of these schools.

Zens (2005a) summarises the position of Dispensationalism in America after it had spread for a hundred years (1827-1927):

> Within a century from when John Nelson Darby started the idea of God's two separate purposes in history (1827), it had arisen to a place of common acceptance among the Bible-believing movement in America, which then centered in Fundamentalism.

3. The Essential Characteristics of Dispensationalism

Dispensationlism revolves around the use of the Biblical concept *dispensation*. The term *dispensation* is derived from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which is used in the New Testament to describe the management of a household. Jones (2005) elaborates:

> Dispensational theology centers upon the concept of God's dealings with mankind being divided into (usually) seven distinct economies or "dispensations," in which man is tested as to his obedience to the will of God as revealed under each dispensation. (The Greek word *oikonomia,* which is translated in the scriptures as "dispensation," actually refers to a dwelling or house and means management of a household/stewardship in Luke 16:2-4).

Ryrie (1995:29) defines *Dispensationalism* in terms of various *economies* in the outworking of God's overall purpose:

> To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.

Grenz et al. (1999:39-40) define *Dispensationalism* as a system of theology with essential characteristics:

> God works with humans in distinct ways (dispensations) through history; that God has a distinct plan for Israel over against the church; that the Bible, especially predictive prophecy, needs to be interpreted literally; that the church will be secretly raptured from earth seven years prior to Christ's second coming; that Christ will rule with Israel during a literal thousand-year earthly reign.

Most traditional Dispensationalists recognise seven specific dispensations, divisions of time or ages throughout history, in which man responds to a specific revelation of the will of God. According to Smith (2005), the seven traditionally recognisable dispensations are:

l) Innocence – Adam
2) Conscience – after man sinned, the flood
3) Government – after the flood, man allowed to eat meat, death penalty instituted
4) Promise – Abraham up to Moses and the giving of the law
5) Law – Moses to the cross
6) Grace – the cross to the Millennium Kingdom

7) Millennial Kingdom – a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth centred in Jerusalem

It appears that there is a strong continuity of thought among Dispensationalists. It is *not* difficult to ascertain the guiding presuppositions of this system. Dr Charles Ryrie in Zens (2005a) has pointedly faced the question, "What is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism?" His answer has three parts.

1) "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct … a man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions."
2) Dispensationalists employ "a consistently literal principle of interpretation." This principle "is at the heart of dispensational eschatology."
3) Dispensationalists assert that God's purposes center in His glory, rather than in the "single purpose of salvation."

4. The two-fold theory of Dispensationalism: the distinction between Israel and the church

The two-fold theory of Dispensationalism is derived from their hermeneutical approach that emphasises a literal fulfilment of Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel. Although the issue of "literal interpretation" is heavily debated today, many Dispensationalists still claim that "a consistent literal interpretation" applied to all areas of the Bible, including the Old Testament promises to Israel, is a distinguishing mark of Dispensationalism (Vlach 2005).

In terms of the "consistently literal principles of interpretation," Dispensationalists argue that since the prophecies of Christ's birth, death and resurrection were literally fulfilled, what they consider to be promises to the Jews will also be literally fulfilled. Their reasoning is based on the presupposition that Israel and the church have *separate* destinies.

Dispensationalists, therefore, believe that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament (especially regarding physical blessings, such as land), apply

only to Israel unless God has stated otherwise. They believe that these promises were not intended as prophecies about what God would do spiritually for the church, but will literally be fulfilled by Israel itself (largely in the millennium). For example, the promise of the land is interpreted to mean that God will one day fully restore Israel to Palestine. Dispensationalists thus believe in a distinct future for national Israel—a future that includes the restoration of the nation with a distinct identity and function (Vlach 2005). This is confirmed by Feinberg (1988:83) when he says, "Only Dispensationalism clearly sees a distinctive future for ethnic Israel as a nation."

According to Dispensationalists, Jesus made an offer of a literal Kingdom to Israel. Since Israel rejected it, it was postponed. Gane (1997) explains the Dispensationalist's concept of *parenthesis* as follows:

> … when Jesus was on earth He offered the earthly kingdom to the Jews. Because they rejected it, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies in regard to their rulership of Palestine and predominance over the nations could not be immediately put into effect. Of necessity there came a gap of centuries during which the Christian Church has played a separate and distinctive role designed by God. But this role is not a spiritual fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel. The period of Christian Church history is a parenthesis, not foreseen by the Old Testament prophets and not designed to fulfill their forecasts. This period of the Church will come to an end when the Christian saints are secretly raptured seven years before the glorious appearing of Christ in the clouds of heaven.

Since Dispensational theology grows out of "a consistently literal principle of interpretation," applying this hermeneutical principle leads Dispensationalism "to distinguish God's program for Israel from his program for the church. Thus the church did not begin in the OT but on the day of Pentecost, and the church is not presently fulfilling promises made to Israel in the OT that have not yet been fulfilled" (Ryrie 1984:322).

Vlach (2005) summarises the position of the Dispensationalism as follows:

> The church does not replace or continue Israel, and is never referred to as Israel. According to dispensationalists, the church did not exist in the Old Testament and did not begin until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Old Testament promises to Israel, then, cannot be entirely fulfilled with the church.

In order to demonstrate the continuity of agreement among the proponents of Dispensationalism, Zens (2005a) provides a chronological list of quotations concerning the dual purposes theory is given below:

> J. N. Darby: "The Church is in relationship with the Father, and the Jews with Jehovah…. The Jewish nation is never to enter the Church…. The Church is … a kind of heavenly economy, during the rejection of the earthly people" (*The Hopes of the Church of God*, pp. 11, 106, 156).
>
> L. S. Chafer: "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages, God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved" (*Dispensationalism*, p. 448).
>
> Charles Ryrie: "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct…. The Church is a distinct body in this age having promises and a destiny different from Israel's" (*The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. l 2).
>
> John Walwoord: "Of prime importance to the premillennial interpretation of Scripture is the distinction provided in the New Testament between God's purpose for the Church and His purpose for the nation Israel" (*The Millennial Kingdom*, p. vii).

The dividing of redemptive history into several economies has been done throughout church history. However, the idea that God has "separate" purposes for Israel and the church is indeed novel, since it cannot to be found in the works of writers in the post-apostolic period. Yet this is the teaching on which Dispensationalism stands or falls. It is the presupposition that guides

their Biblical interpretation. If this presupposition proves to be false, then their whole theological system collapses.

5. A Biblical evaluation of the two-separate-purposes theory of Dispensationalism using key passages from the New Testament

In this section, the essential principles of Dispensationalism will be challenged in the light of clear statements from selected Scriptures, especially those principles relating to the two-fold theory: the distinction between Israel and the Church. Since this evaluation is by no means comprehensive, certain crucial representative passages will be selected in an attempt to expose the faulty foundations of Dispensationalism.

5.1 The kingdom of God has come and is given to a people who will produce its fruit (Matt 21:43)

> *Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit* (Matt 21:43, NIV).

Ryrie asserts that this passage "conclusively" demonstrates that Israel is to be restored. The word "nation," he says, "in its strict *interpretation*…refers to the nation of Israel when she shall turn to the Lord and be saved before entering the millennial kingdom" (Zens 2005a). However, Smith (1989:254) shows that in terms of the context, verse 43 describes a situation in which a privilege is taken from one group and given to another:

> The death and resurrection of Jesus lurk in the background of the parable (vv. 33-41) and the prophecy (v. 42), but the foreground is occupied by the drama of privilege taken from one group and given to another: *The kingdom of God* (v. 31) *will be taken away from you and given* to others, to new tenants, described as a *nation* (*ethnos*), and that nation is defined by a single phrase, *producing the fruits of it*.

Zens (2005b) elaborates on this view, when he describes the actual participants in the dramatic illustration:

> "Yet the context, especially in verse 41 at the conclusion of the parable, suggests that the householder (God) punishes the wicked husbandman (Israel), and gives out the vineyard (the kingdom) to *others* (Gentiles). This indeed occurred when the Jews killed their heir (v. 38). Thus after rejecting their Messiah who came first in lowliness, the gospel of their exalted Messiah goes to them first, and this also they reject."

Paul summarises the fulfilment of verse 43 where the Scripture says, "Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles'" (Acts 13:46, NIV).

The parable clearly a portrays the rejection of Jesus Christ by the Jews, only for Him to become the cornerstone of the Church by the act of God raising Him from the dead. Because of unbelief and disobedience, the Jews are rejected and their privileges of the kingdom of God given to *a people* (the Gentiles) *who will produce its fruit* (v. 43)(see also 1 Peter 2:4-10)(Atkinson 1963:798).

The parable also pictures the rejection of Jesus Christ (by the Jews) as the true temple of God. Jesus Himself declared, "One greater than the temple is here" (Mat 12:6). Since Christ is the *true* temple, one need not look elsewhere for the prophetic fulfillment of various Old Testament scriptures, such as Isaiah 66:21 and Zechariah 14:16-19, in the building of a new temple on the rock in Jerusalem at some future date. The New Testament Church (The kingdom of God) is also described in terms of a temple built with of living stones (including Jews and Gentiles). Strimple (1999:99) explains: "No other temple can be erected, in which all the saints of God, Jew and Gentile, are being built as living stones (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5)."

5.2 The hope of the Jews has already been accomplished in Christ's resurrection; they are called upon to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 13:32-34).

> *We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David"* (Acts 13:32-34, NIV).

According to their two-fold theory, Dispensationalists assert that Israel's real fulfilment lies in the future, when the alleged unfulfilled promises are confirmed in the millennium after the rapture of the Church. However, Zens (2005b) uses Acts 13:32 to show the futility their argument:

> But verse 32 points out that the "hope of Israel" has already been accomplished in the Resurrection. Further, the Resurrection is said to be a fulfillment of the "sure mercies of David." It is on the basis of this *recently accomplished promise* that the Jews are to repent and believe the gospel. God's dealings with Israel have not been "postponed." He has *at this time* fulfilled the promise "to the fathers for us their children.

The context of Acts 13:32-34 is Paul's address at Antioch is as follows: After giving a summary of the life of Christ (Acts 13:23-31), with an emphasis on His resurrection, Paul uses the Old Testament texts to prove that Jesus is indeed the Messiah (Acts 13:32-37). Paul thus argues that Christ's resurrection proves Him to be the Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. He then calls upon his audience (mainly Jews) to hear the message, to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 13:38-41).

Keddie (1993:156-157) argues that in terms of the context of Acts 13:32-34, the very *rejection* of Israel's promised Saviour was transformed by God into the actual *fulfilment* of various prophecies, and Jesus' *accomplishment* of salvation for His people:

> Jesus is Israel's promised Saviour (Psa. 2:7; Isa. 55:3; Psa. 16:10; Acts13: 32-37). But what had happened? Firstly, the people *rejected* the only one they ought to have recognized and received! (13:27;John 1: 11). Secondly, in doing so, they actually *fulfilled* the very prophecies read in their hearing every Sabbath day! (13:27). They killed Jesus on *'the tree'* (13:29; Deut. 21:23). God *'raised him from the dead'* and so transformed their very rejection of him into the occasion of Jesus' accomplishment of salvation for his people. This is the *'good news'* which God had promised the fathers of Israel and has now fulfilled *'for us'* – namely, *'raising up Jesus,'* not only from the dead, but as the Son, who is exalted a Prince and Saviour (13:32-33; 5:31).

It is only in utter disregard for a clear text like Acts 13:32 that Ironside, in Zens (2005b), blindly asserts: "The moment Messiah died on the cross, the prophetic clock stopped. There has not been a tick upon that clock for nineteen centuries. It will not begin again until the entire present age has come to an end" (*The Great Parenthesis*, p. 23).

5.3 The gospel is universal; both Jews and Gentiles are called upon to respond to the proclamation of the gospel (Rom 10:12-14).

> *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* (Rom 10:12-14, NIV).

According to Dispensationalists, God is pursuing *two* distinct purposes: *one* related to the Jews with earthly objectives and *the other* related to the Church with heavenly objectives. In this view, there is no continuity or connection

with what went before or comes after; all of Israel's future, including her future turning to the Lord, must be *separate* from the Church.

However, in contrast to the Dispensationalist's view of the Church as being *separate* from Israel, Paul uses the word *everyone* in Romans 10:13 to indicate that the way of salvation is open to all, Jew and Gentile alike. This universality of the gospel is emphasized by a quotation from Joel 2:32, which leads one to the inevitable conclusion that, if they do not "call on the name of the Lord" (v.13), the Jews are themselves responsible for their fate (Thomson and Davidson 1963:958).

Edwards (1992:255) elaborates as follows on Paul's use of the word "Everyone" in Romans 10:13 and its implications for the universality of the Gospel:

> By prefacing the quotation with *Everyone* emphasizes that salvation is available to Jews and Gentiles without distinction. He continues in verse 12, *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile*. Paul made this same assertion in 3:23 with reference to sins: "There is no difference, for all have sinned." But neither is there any difference with reference to grace (cf. 11:32)! Jesus is *the same Lord* to both Jews and Gentiles. *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"* (v. 13, see Joel 2:32). This gospel is not the possession of a privileged few – not even the chosen people. The Gospel is salvation without limits, a universal promise for everyone who believes.

Paul's argument in Romans 10:11-15 clearly indicates that, "The gospel is universal and its application demands a universal proclamation" (*Spirit Filled Life Bible* 1991:1704), including Jews and Gentiles. They are without excuse in their unbelief. Wiersbe (1991:124) summarises the meaning of Romans 10:14-17 as follows:

> The missionary heart of Paul comes out in verses 14-17. Salvation is by faith, and that faith comes "by hearing … the word of God" (v. 17). But unbelieving sinners (including

> Israel) cannot hear unless we tell them. God needs people with beautiful feet (Isa. 52:7) to carry the gospel to the lost.

Furthermore, in Romans 10:19, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:21 to indicate how Moses had issued a warning that Israel would reject God's message. *Life Application study Bible* (1997:2039) summarises the message of Romans 10:18-20 as follows:

> Many Jews who looked for the Messiah refused to believe in him when he came. God offered his salvation to the Gentiles ("those who are not a nation" and "a nation that has no understanding"); thus many Gentiles who didn't even know about a Messiah found and believed in him.

Finally, in Romans 11, Paul argues that there is an intense *unity* between the "times of the Gentiles" and both the Israel's past economy and her future "ingrafting." His analogy of the olive tree indicates "that there is but one people of God throughout redemptive history" (Fuller, in Zens 2005b).

Zens (2005b) concludes that the only hope for Israel, as portrayed in Romans 10-11, is the same gospel of salvation by faith in Christ proclaimed to both Jews and Gentiles:

> … there is no hope for Israel apart from the gospel of grace which is proclaimed by local churches, to whom alone, as the pillar and ground of the truth, Christ has entrusted "the faith" until the end of this present evil age. Thus there may well be an ingathering of Jews after "the times of the Gentiles." But when and if this happens, Israel will be "saved" and joined to the body of Christ by believing the same gospel as Paul preached to his brethren in the flesh.

5.4 God's never intended that the Jews should have a separate earthly purpose, but an intensely spiritual (heavenly) purpose (Heb 11:10, 13, 16).

> *For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God…. All these people … admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth…. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one"* (Heb 11:10, 13, 16, NIV).

Ever since Darby claimed that Israel had an "earthly religion," Dispensationalists have always maintained that Israel is an earthly people related to the earth and the Church is a heavenly people related to heaven. For example, Pickering claims that "God's main purpose with Abraham was not to take him to heaven," but to give him a land" (Zens 2005b).

However, is this actually true? From the above passage from Hebrews it will be become clear that the people themselves (the Old Testament heroes of Faith) are essentially related to heaven and not earth. From the very beginning, the Jewish religion was intensely *spiritual*. "In verse 10, we are told that Abraham's real goal was not a portion here on earth, but a (spiritual) 'city whose builder and maker is God'" (Zens 2005b). Guthrie (1983:232) agrees that the writer of Hebrews (11:10) emphasizes the spiritual nature of the future city:

> There is certainly a striking contrast between the tents in Canaan and *the city which has no foundations* to which the faith of Abraham looked forward… The writer thinks in spiritual terms of the city which God is building. We may compare this idea with the vision of the new Jerusalem which is described in Revelation 21 and 22, where again the spiritual aspects are without question the most important. Abraham had a wide and noble horizon which could look behind the immediate environment.

In verses 13-16, the writer of Hebrews indicates that Old Testament believers, in embracing God's promises, were *not* led to confess a hope in a great earthly

kingdom. On the contrary, they regarded themselves as pilgrims and strangers *on the earth* (Zens 2005b). Guthrie (1983:234) also points out that in verses 13 and 16 the writer emphasizes the importance of the *heavenly* things rather than the *earthly* things:

> 13. The patriarchs had *acknowledged* (*homologesantes*) their true status as *strangers and exiles*. Abraham used the same description of himself in Genesis 23:4. In 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11 a similar description is applied to Christians. In Hebrews the idea fits in with the earlier allusion to the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness (chapter 3) and the writer's aim is clearly to use this as a pattern. It is all of a piece with the underlying principle of the epistle that it is the heavenly and not the earthly things which are most important…. 16. The *better country* is at once identified as a heavenly one. The identification of the two adjectives (*kreittonos, epouraniou*) is particularly characteristic of this epistle. It places the emphasis on spiritual rather than material inheritance.

6. Conclusion

The author is convinced that the system of Dispensationalism is faulty. That does not mean that the contributions that Dispensationalists have made should be totally discounted. In fact, it is evident that throughout recent Church History many Dispensationalists have made a profound contribution towards extending the Kingdom of God. However, when making a Biblical evaluation of the system of Dispensationalism, all subjective feelings should be put aside, and one should be as objective as possible. In the light of Scripture, it is evident that Dispensationalism is faulty in the following areas of theology:

6.1 Dispensationalism has wrongly divided the word of truth

- **Dispensationalism has a distorted view of God's plan of salvation.**

A proper exegesis of Matthew 21:43 clarifies God's plan of salvation for all people, namely, that (1) the kingdom of God has already arrived in the Coming of Jesus Christ and that it is given to a people who will produce its fruit; and (2) those who reject Christ, and His plan of salvation - through unbelief and disobedience - are rejected by God.

God's plan of salvation has always been the same: salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Prior to the coming of Christ, those who trusted in the promise of Christ were saved by faith: "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6, NIV). Through faith in God alone - the One promised them redemption in Christ – Old Testament believers were assured of their salvation (Psalm 32:1, 2) (Gillespie 2001).

A fatal flaw of Dispensationalism is that it divides up salvation into more than one "plan of salvation." For example, it separates God's plan for Israel from His plan for the Church. Gillespie (2001) summarises the position of Dispensationalism regarding the nature of salvation as follows:

> The ages of dispensationalism are taught as temporary stages of salvation. Each dispensation offers a distinct plan or way of salvation. The nature of salvation in each varies according to that particular dispensation. Each dispensation concludes, and the following one is necessitated, by the failure of Mankind to follow its terms, arrangements, or conditions…This scheme of dispensationalism presents salvation as coming about in a progression. It is as though in each age God makes an improvement on the previous one. It teaches that God is working to get it right or find something that works while Humanity keeps defeating His attempts. God is seen as developing a plan until He finally succeeds (partially) through Jesus Christ.

- **Dispensationalism has a distorted view of Israel's destiny.**

It is clear from Acts 13:32 that the "hope of Israel" has already been accomplished in the Resurrection. Zens (1978:51) summarises the twisted exegesis of Dispensationalism regarding the nature of Israel's destiny as follows:

> …the central tenets of Dispensationalism are highly suspect in the light of the Word of God. This has come about because Dispensationalism has failed to see that Israel's hope *has come*. Therefore, much is made future that is already fulfilled. In this sense, they yet remain like the Jewish interpreters of the first century who await for something that was manifest in their midst.

According to Dispensationalists, Jesus' offer of a literal Kingdom to Israel was rejected and was, therefore, postponed. Ewing (1999) explains that, according to Scripture, the opposite is true:

> The idea behind the Dispensational view is that Christ came at his first advent to offer Israel an earthly kingdom but they refused, and it was postponed, creating the church as a "parenthesis" in history. Ironically, in John 6:15, we find the Jews trying to *make Him king by force*, but *Jesus* refuses! In contrast, Christ said, "My kingdom is *not of this world* (John 18:36 NIV)." They didn't reject Christ's earthly kingdom offer, He rejected *theirs*! They rejected His *spiritual* kingdom.

It is further claimed by Dispensationalists that the covenant promises yet to be fulfilled lie primarily in Israel's possession and rule of the land of Palestine. However, Ewing (1999) indicates that there is little evidence in the New Testament to support this claim:

> While it is recognized by all that the land promise is a continuous theme on seemingly every page of the Old Testament, it is rarely noticed that it virtually vanishes in the New. In fact, except for a couple of brief historical references, it is only even mentioned in *one book*! Furthermore, this single

> epistle, Hebrews, directly deals with the promise, *and spiritualizes it*.

2. Dispensationalism makes use of false presuppositions

- **Dispensationalism wrongly separates Israel and the Church**

The Bible clearly teaches that God's plan for Israel and the promises and prophecies spoken to Israel are fulfilled in the Church. For example, Paul uses the word *everyone* in Romans 10:13 to indicate that the way of salvation is open to all, Jew and Gentile alike. However, Dispensationalists deny this teaching. Gillespie (2001) identifies this as a fundamental mistake of dispensational teaching:

> They deny that these promises are fulfilled in the Church, but rather must be fulfilled in Israel, even if it necessitates rearranging the entire sequence of end time events. This is exactly what dispensational teachers do.

As a result of a *literal* interpretation of Biblical prophecy, one of the major characteristics of Dispensationalists is their false teaching that Israel (the Jewish nation) is distinct from the Church. They believe that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament (especially regarding physical blessings, such as land), apply only to Israel unless God has stated otherwise. They believe that these promises were not intended as prophecies about what God would do spiritually for the church, but will literally be fulfilled by Israel itself (largely in the millennium). For example, the promise of the land is interpreted to mean that God will one day fully restore Israel to Palestine (Staff 2005).

Using the *literal method of interpretation* of the biblical covenants and prophecy, Dispensationalists have compiled a specific set of core beliefs about God's kingdom programme, and what the future will hold for ethnic Israel and for the Church. They believe in a distinction between Israel and the Church, and a promised future earthly reign of Christ on the throne of David. (The Davidic Kingdom.) This has led Dispensationalists to some very specific conclusions about the end-times (*Dispensationalism* 2005).

A major problem with Dispensationalism can, therefore, be seen in their erroneous and unbiblical distinction between Israel and the Church:

> Dispensationalism sees Israel as an earthly people with earthly promises, and the church as a heavenly people with heavenly promises. Membership in Israel is by natural birth. One enters the church by supernatural birth. Dispensationalists view Israel and the church as having distinct eternal destinies. Israel will receive an eternal earthly Kingdom, and the church an eternal heavenly Kingdom (*Dispensationalism: A Return to Biblical Theology or Pseudo Christian Cult* 2005).

Staff (2005) summarises the this problem of Dispensationalism as follows:

> In many ways it is thus accurate to say that dispensationalism believes in "two peoples of God." Although both Jews and Gentiles are saved by Christ through faith, believing Israel will be the recipient of additional "earthly" promises (such as prosperity in the specific land of Palestine, to be fully realized in the millennium).

- **Dispensationalism promotes disunity between Israel and the Church**

The book of Hebrews clearly indicates a close unity between the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the Church. Hebrews makes it clear that the Old Covenant is fulfilled in the New. For example, Hebrews 11 shows that the Old Testament heroes of Faith are essentially related to heaven and not earth. Hence, from the very beginning, the Jewish religion was intensely *spiritual,* and thus God's purpose for Israel is fulfilled in the Church. In addition, in Hebrews 3:4-6, 11, the wilderness experience of Israel is used as an analogy for the Church. Zens (2005b) elaborates:

> The "rest" is entered by faith. Unbelief will keep a man out of heavenly glory and bring him to damnation, even as unbelief kept a generation of Israelites out of a land flowing with milk and honey.

While the New Testament writers see the focus of Old Testament prophecy as related to things present and accomplished, Dispensationalists state that prophecy centrally relates to the future glory of national Israel and *not* the Church age (Zens 2005b). In this way, Dispensationalists promote the disunity between Israel and the Church. This disunity is in sharp contrast to the Biblical position:

> In contrast, Christian theology has always maintained the essential continuity of Israel and the church. The elect of all the ages are seen as one people, with one Savior, one destiny. This continuity can be shown by examining a few Old Testament prophesies with their fulfillment. Dispensationalists admit that if the church can be shown to be fulfilling promises made to Israel their system is doomed (*Dispensationalism: A Return to Biblical Theology or Pseudo Christian Cult* 2005).

- **Dispensationalism mistakenly holds to a literal interpretation of all Biblical prophecy**

Dispensationalists argue that they hold to a literal interpretation of the Biblical prophecy, while claiming that their theological opponents have a tendency to *spiritualise* prophetic passages. For example, Charles Ryrie (1995:88) argues that since all prophecies concerning the first coming of Christ were fulfilled literally, it stands to reason that all prophecies concerning the second coming will also be literal. However, the problem with this argument is that it is simply not true. "A review of the prophecies concerning Christ, reveal that only 34 of the 97 (35%) were fulfilled literally" (Crenshaw and Grover 1989:9-13). The rest of the prophecies were analogical or typical fulfilments.

Furthermore, many contemporary authors tell their readers that they interpret the Bible literally. However, Schwertley (1996) shows that this is not always the case:

> But if you read their books, scenes with bows, arrows and horses become future battles with tanks, helicopters and airplanes. The mark of the beast becomes a computer chip or bar code. The locusts from the bottomless pit (Rev. 9)

> supposedly become attack helicopters, and so on. Are there any premillennial authors or commentators who believe that the beast from the sea with seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 13) is a literal creature?

The truth is that all Bible scholars believe that Scripture should be interpreted literally at times and symbolically at other times, *depending on the context of the passage and intent of the author*. Gane (1997) explains:

> All conservative interpreters of the Bible believe that the Scriptures should be interpreted literally. But a literal interpretation of Scripture involves recognition of the symbolic nature of some passages. Apocalyptic prophecy makes a considerable use of symbolism. Dispensationalists insist on giving a literal interpretation to passages that are clearly intended to be symbolic or allegorical.

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