

Question Time – Victoria Hall Camberley 25th January 2004

This question and answer session was chaired by Tim Gardiner, with a panel consisting of Ray Murden, David Anderson and Richard Johnston.

The questions were announced in advance of the meeting to allow the panellists to give carefully considered responses, and the panellists were nominally limited to two-minute answers. Provided here are Richard Johnston's answers, with some expansion and clarification. Ray and David provided other answers, which were usually complementary in character to these comments.

Q1. If you have just a couple of minutes to say what is the essence of the gospel, what would you say?

Most people start talking about sin and Jesus without establishing a proper foundation stating who God is first.

Basically I use the pattern of Paul's preaching to the Athenians in Acts 17, which was addressed to similar audience to that we face today.

1. The key starting point is that we are not talking about an imaginary god, but a REAL God, the God who created the Heavens and the Earth. We are therefore accountable to our maker. (Until that matter is resolved talking about anything else leads no where.)
2. God intended man to be in relationship with him, but men rebelled and followed other gods. Much of this was the result of ignorance, but now God commands all men to repent, change their attitude, otherwise they will be judged by Jesus Christ. God has proved this by raising Jesus Christ from the dead.
3. As the central fact of history God raised Jesus Christ, who have been scourged and crucified, literally from the dead, in the sense that his physical body was gone from the tomb, and his resurrection body was seen and touched, and could eat thereafter. It is a simple choice – you believe this in your heart, or you don't. If you do, you are a Christian, otherwise not.
4. Because Jesus is coming again as the final judge of all men, therefore repent of your lifelong attitude of ignoring God as God, believe these facts, and throw yourself on God's mercy, and do what He tells you. If you do God will forgive your rebellion against Him, and give you the Holy Spirit to live a life that pleases God, and He will spare you when the judgement comes.

Worth noting what I don't say at this stage, which is most of what many Christians think of as being the gospel.

Q2. What is the difference between the "good works/deeds" in Matthew 5:16 which are to be done in public and the charitable deeds/acts of righteousness in Matthew 6:1 which are to be done in secret?

Apparent contradictions in scripture usually stem from not reading the text carefully enough.

The key in this case is in the end of Matthew 5:16 "*that they may ... give glory to your Father who is in heaven*". If anyone does normal good deeds in a visible way, the person who gets the glory (that is the reward or thanks) is the person who does them (Matthew 6:2). We see this happening for another "good work", the woman who anointed Jesus' feet - she got the glory (Matthew 26:10-13), likewise Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41). So the Matthew 5:16 "good works" must be something completely different, because it is our "Father in heaven" who gets the glory, and not us.

Jesus says in John 10:32, in the context of controversy generated after he performed a miracle on the blind man, "*I have shown you many good works from the Father: for which of these do you stone me?*". When people saw the miracles Jesus did they gave glory to God (Matthew 15:31 etc.). These are the Matthew 5:16 "good works", the works which God the Father gives Jesus and us to do. So Matthew 5:16 is speaking about doing **miracles** that **cannot** have been by human power, but only achieved by God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peter clarifies this further, when speaking about the healing of the lame man who had praised God on being healed (Acts 3:8), "*why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk*" (Acts 3:12). Peter points to the power of the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:16). When in court concerning the same events in Acts 4, he says (v9) "*if we are being examined today because of a good deed done to a cripple...*".

The Matthew 6:1 actions are certainly needed but must be private – Jesus and his disciples did ordinary acts of charity and had a bag for helping the poor. No comment is made about this aspect of their work in the gospels, and we only know about that because Judas had the bag and stole from it.

Q3. I can't find the word "Trinity" in the Bible: from a Biblical perspective, how then do you understand the relationship of the Father Son and Holy Spirit?

This difficult question really needs a long answer, so this one is far from complete.

"The Trinity" is an idea imposed on scripture as a result of Greek philosophical influences, and is part of systematic theology. Unfortunately you can make a pretty much equally plausible Biblical case both in favour of the orthodox Trinity position, and for Arianism (the belief that Jesus is not fully divine). That should warn you that the wrong question is being asked, and the problem looked at the wrong way.

Some classic "proofs" of the Trinity look less convincing once they are compared with other relevant texts. For example, John 10:30 "*I and the Father are one*" is often used to establish that Jesus is equally as divine as the Father. But in John 17:21-2, Jesus prays about Christians to the Father that we may be part of the same unity that subsists between the Father and Son, showing we all must have a unity of purpose. But John 10:30 then clearly cannot be used to prove Christ's divinity, because we are not divine.

I therefore much prefer Biblical theology, where you let scripture, understood within its own original "frame of meaning", determine your terminology and beliefs, even if that means they cannot be tidily or clearly expressed.

The early church did not have a well worked out understanding of the nature of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. While they clearly recognised divinity attaching to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they did not, in my view, take a definite view about precisely what that "divinity" meant, except for the Father, who alone is unequivocally said to be God.

Thus the common NT description of Jesus (the Christ or Messiah) is as being our "Lord", rather than "God", and so I prefer generally to stick to that terminology. A clear precedence is expressed, with the Father taking the leading and initiating role, the Son being sent into the world by the Father and the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.

Nevertheless there is plenty of evidence that all three "persons" act together, and this is clearly seen in passages such as Ephesians 1, 1 Thessalonians 1, and in many other places.

In summary, I see the relationship of the Father Son and Spirit as being rather that they are all "divine" but that they differ in person, just as all people are

"human" but are persons having differing personalities, and (bearing in mind the analogy of the two different human sexes) different functions. This view was condemned as unorthodox, as too weak in expressing co-equality of divinity, at the time when the Trinity was a controversial topic, but I think it does better justice to the biblical evidence than the alternatives.

Remember all our thinking on issues like this is our human way of making sense of something beyond our normal experience, and hence always a form of picture language. We cannot expect to understand God.

Greeks seek to define, but Hebrews seek to be righteousness, and that is more important.

Q4. Jesus says that if my brother sins and he repents I must forgive him even if he repeats this 70x7 times. But does scripture therefore demand that I forgive someone even if they haven't repented of their sin against me? Or are there other issues I need to think about?

Any consideration of this topic needs to start with how and on what conditions God forgives. Clearly God does not forgive some people, since they will be condemned to hell (sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven (Matthew 12:31)). So divine forgiveness is at least sometimes conditional on those who have offended repenting. I say sometimes, because the last 27 chapters of Isaiah hint at the possibility that after suitable punishment it may be possible for God to relent (e.g. Isaiah 40:2). Moreover the story of Jeremiah at the potter's house (Jeremiah 18:1-6) shows a willingness by God to make a new start with people when things have gone very badly wrong. This becomes important when we come to consider forgiving in the human situation, because we don't always know the true facts or their moral significance.

The text quoted in the question (Matthew 18:22) deals with the situation where someone sins and repents. There is no question that we have to do this. Otherwise we ourselves will not be forgiven our sins (Matthew 6:14-15; Matthew 18:23-35). This can be a tough one to work out in practice, but the rest of Matthew 18 provides the basis for achieving it, in the recognition of how much we have ourselves been forgiven by God.

God can deal rightly with every situation because he is not touched by sin and self-interest. For us, however, the situation is more complex, because we are affected by sin ourselves, and because we do not know everything. When someone has offended us, we desire to be proved to have been "in the right" about the situation, as the expense of the other side having been "in the wrong".

The two sides invariably have different perceptions of the situation, and both may feel themselves "in the right". Until we die to self in respect of such attitudes, resolution of offences is difficult, if not impossible. Where there is offence, especially severe offence, we have a situation of enmity.

But Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who hate us (Luke 6:27). When we try, we often start out by praying that the other side will repent of their sins and change their attitude towards us. God does not generally answer such self-centred prayer. Instead we have to pray for the genuine good of the other party, for what is best for them irrespective of how that impacts us. Luke 6:27 is a severe text: humanly it seems out of the question. But it is essential, because this is redemptive, both for our enemies and ourselves.

Thus Jesus prayed on the cross "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34), and likewise Stephen, being stoned to death, said, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (Acts 7:60). These two texts open up a whole new realm, of a **love** that transcends law. Both Jesus and Stephen are intercessors, appealing for God's mercy to triumph over the judgement (James 2:12-13) that will otherwise descend upon these sinners.

In both cases they are seeking God that the sinning parties might be **released** from the captivity of their sin. Jesus came to release the captives and liberate those that are bound (Luke 4:18). This is obviously the whole purpose of Christ's death on the cross: in Stephen's case, the beneficiary is Saul, who consequently became Paul, the apostle to the gentiles.

Very often people do things against us that **cannot** be undone, as indeed in the above cases of Jesus and Stephen, and sometimes there is no way they could express their repentance in a way that would satisfy us in terms of resolving our injury. Unfaithfulness in marriage, especially in the case where a man divorces his wife and marries another, so creating a situation that **cannot** be undone, is another such example. This man is locked into what the offended wife, at least, regards as a continuing state of sin. On the basis of law, there would seem no solution.

In reality we are looking for the other party to express repentance or be punished, perhaps for vengeance, or at least that we be proved "in the right". But these must be left to God to deal with. "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written "vengeance is mine, I will repay", says the Lord*" (Romans 12:19). Romans 12:20 shows that our generosity towards our enemy then allows God to deal effectively with them, and hopefully the resulting "coals" will bring about their true repentance. If men have sinned, their sin is primarily against God and He will do with them what is necessary about that. We never know what another suffers as a consequence of their sin. Our generosity of spirit

also gives the other party the space to change. If instead they feel our personal hostility – and they certainly will if we have not released them - they will react against us, and we in effect lock them in, giving them no opportunity to repent towards God or resolve their relationship with us.

But unconditional release of our enemies in this way is also redemptive for us. Until there is a willingness to **love** this person who has become, in effect, our enemy, and release them in our own hearts, we cannot move on ourselves. In the meantime our resentment and bitterness will keep on growing, making resolution ever more difficult. Their sin, undoubtedly an evil thing, has become a cause of our own bondage. Hence we are no longer living in the freedom that Christ offers. We may be unable to say nothing to the person concerned about the issue that caused the offence, but letting go – being fully willing to release them **as if they had repented** - seems to be essential in order to "move on".

The father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) had released his son long before the son even left home – that is why he let him leave, and did not try to stop him. That was why the father could forgive so freely and generously immediately the son returned. Unlike the elder son (Luke 15:25-30), the father needed no time to change his attitudes. The father recognised and accepted the great loss and waste, and much that could not be undone, but the father ignored what his son said about becoming a hired servant and received him as if nothing had happened. Unlike the brother, he harbours no resentment, and holds nothing against him. He could do this only because he had long ago fully released his son, no resentment or bitterness had developed to hinder his spirit, and he could behave normally with him. The father receives the person of his son because the son now wants to relate to him, and the many secondary causes of offence – the waste - did not really matter to him. That is how God receives us too. Like God we have to deal with people as they are, and not as what we might like them to have been (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

Such forgiveness, which holds no grudges (see Mark 11:25), needs a work of God's grace in the one who forgives or releases like this, because forgiveness has to come from the heart, and cannot be faked.

If anyone feels they have problems in this area, then there is more they need to know, and they may need help to work things through, especially with problems of long standing. It starts with knowing the love of God in forgiving us, dying to self and our self-interest, and knowing that, very often, what is crooked cannot be made straight. An ideal resolution may be beyond possibility, and we may have to be content with relating to a different "pot" (Jeremiah 18:4), and a consequently different, but still open spirited, relationship with the other person. It helps to realise that sinful situations often arise out of the complex interactions

between people, and that the "falling short of the glory of God" has usually not just been on one side.

Allowing enmity to continue is itself sinful – "*let not the sun go down upon your wrath*" (Eph 4:26). "*Love your enemies, and pray for them that hate you*".

[**Footnote.** The above comments were made in the context of situations which had been allowed to continue in an unresolved state for an extended period. I did not address the issues of timing in dealing with new offences.

We must be honest. "Release" is not something that everyone can accomplish immediately after an event takes place. The emotions are often too raw, and misguided attempts to conquer them immediately might be unhelpful in the longer run. Ecclesiastes speaks of a "*time to love and a time to hate*". Because we have died to self, the New Covenant enables what was impossible under the Old Covenant.

Jesus's great command to us is to love God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves, and this provides the guiding principle. We need to be alive to the voice of Jesus (John 10) as he leads us in the situation. There are no fixed rules in dealing with broken relationships. We must not allow ourselves to be locked by legalistic attitudes, or a desire to be "consistent" in our behaviour. Changing circumstances require us to change with them. We have to deal as best as we can with the reality of the situation. Exactly what we do may be complicated by the need to handle the emotions of other people involved in the same events: they may need our help to see how their attitudes should change as time passes.

It would not be right to treat someone who has done you great harm as if nothing had taken place, because our objective is reconciliation and restoration. Pain shows that something is wrong, and there is a need for healing. At first, we may hope to restore the broken relationship fully to its previous condition. We hope that there will be full repentance, and full reconciliation, and this should be our initial objective. For such reconciliation to be effective, the offending party needs to know the extent of the impact of their actions had upon us, as we seek to help them towards repentance. In making clear how we feel, we are avoiding "*letting the sun go down upon our wrath*". Of course, we need to approach this with a recognition that we too may have fallen short, and have some need to repent ourselves. We must die to self-interest, and see the situation as God sees it.

But at some point, though, if such repentance does not occur, we are usually eventually faced with a situation that becomes entrenched, so that

there is then no possibility (e.g. after remarriage of a divorced partner), or in other cases, little likelihood of the other party ever being fully restored and reconciled to us. They may no longer want the same relationship with us. It is at this point that our complete "release" of the situation becomes particularly important, and we have to accept that any relationship with the other party will be on a different footing from what it was before.

(RHJ 20 April 2004)]

Q5. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul wrote that "Women should keep silent in the churches". Is this the last word on the subject, or has this text been misinterpreted? So what, biblically, can women do?

Dealing first with the text 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, this admonition cannot be an absolute prohibition of women speaking in church. Firstly the admonitions to the "brethren" in 1 Corinthians 14:6,20 are clearly relevant to both sexes, and so whilst there can be gender connotations to this word, in this case, as is usual in the NT as regards the church, that is not the case here. (Where specific gender is intended that can be indicated by a form of words that is translated into English in the AV as "men and brethren" (Acts 1:16; 2:29,37).) Hence the instructions to the brethren for **every** person to bring something to the meeting (1 Corinthians 14:26-33) applies to everyone regardless of gender. Moreover, 1 Corinthians 11:5 presumes that women will pray and will prophesy, and the latter, at least, cannot be done silently. This seems to me to be quite sufficient in itself to overturn the idea that women should take no part in a church meeting. Moreover many of the leading Christians in the church in Rome were women (Romans 16:1,3,6,12,13,15), and some had meetings at their houses, for which they were apparently responsible.

So the 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 text demands to be understood differently. The word "speak" is the normal word for any kind of speaking. Women and men sat separately, and it would seem that some women were calling out to their husbands, asking them questions, during the meeting. This was disruptive and unhelpful. This "chattering" problem is certainly known to have afflicted synagogues. But the women can, indeed must, minister in prayer and prophesy without restraint, except Paul required they should have their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11:3-16).

Turning to what can women do, we must first understand what the gospel has done for women. Like the gentiles, they were excluded from effective participation under the old covenant, but in the temple the court of (Jewish) women was closer to the Holy of Holies than the court of gentiles. In Christ there

is now no distinction on the grounds of gender or race, all are of equal value and status in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Jesus held women in very high regard, outrageously so by the standards of the time (as is testified by the surprise of the woman at the well in John 4), and Mary Magdalene was entrusted by God with the first news of the Resurrection. Had women been silenced then, that news would have taken longer to reach the apostles.

As so often, we must return to Genesis for more understanding. The gospel secures a return to the originally intended situation in Genesis 1:27: God created humanity male and female. Only that way could God express his image. Man (males) alone cannot express the image or character of God. God is expressed in the *dynamic* of the relationship between men and women. Woman is intended to be completely complementary to man – that is the significance of being a "helpmeet". She was never intended to be man's slave.

But woman became a slave of man through the Fall and the curse that followed (Genesis 3:16). Redemption restores her position. This makes her free to do all things, but the NT shows this to be conditioned by those minimal restraints that are needed to avoid a repetition of the Fall. The Fall happened because Eve took authority over Adam, and sought to tell him what to do. Because of this, and the weakness of man in often preferring a woman to God, limitations are enjoined to avoid disrupting the creational, authority-precedence detailed in 1 Corinthians 11 – Father, Son, man, woman. This limitation on novel teaching and taking authority over men is explained fully in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, with the link to Genesis 3 is made explicitly.

We therefore find women in the NT playing all other roles – prophesying, praying, evangelising, and even, subject to oversight by their husbands, teaching. So to allow these things is definitely not a concession to modern feminism.

Brethren assembly attitudes have often been inconsistent, if not hypocritical, since they sent out many women missionaries, who took the lead in establishing churches in distant lands. They allowed women to sing hymns but not pray, and demanded they cover their heads but forbade them to pray with the authority their covering had permitted.

I believe that silencing women is a denial of the gospel, and that God won't fully bless a fellowship where half the Christians are held under a constraint which has been lifted in Christ Jesus – even in Judaism, in the Temple Jewish women had closer access to the Holy of Holies than Gentile men. Moreover in our war against the evil one we simply cannot afford not to use everyone as effectively as possible.

See also further comments in: women4_The_Gospel_of_Christ_liberates_woman_to_fulfil_her_creation_role_RH_Johnston.pdf

This paper supports ministry to Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship, Camberley on 25 January 2004. The elders of Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship do not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in this paper, which are entirely the responsibility of the author.

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk). (Edition dates: 26.1.2004, (footnote added to Q4: 20.4.2004); v2 3.9.2018)

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