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What will happen to God?

GERALD BRAY

Introduction to the Series

I would like to begin this series of three papers¹ by giving you a brief outline of the overall theme, *What will happen to God?* I confess that I have borrowed the title from a book recently published by the Librarian of Pusey House, Oxford, not because I am doing no more than crib his ideas, but because I believe that his title encapsulates in a memorable way what must surely be one of the great questions facing us in the Church today.

The Christian knows God in Three Persons, the blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From New Testament times until today, our worshipping life has been shaped by three reference points, and even a sizeable proportion of our hymnology has a trinitarian framework behind it. It is true that spiritual and theological tendencies have often diverged from the trinitarian pattern, and emphasised one Person at the expense of the other, or perhaps two Persons at the expense of the third. But in the end, the Church has always retreated from such distortions and reaffirmed its faith in the Triune God of the New Testament Scriptures.

Today, if we are to consider what will happen to this faith, it is only fitting that we should take each Person in turn and consider *both* who he is and what he does, *and* the various issues which these raise for us as believers in the Church today. I have retained the traditional order of the Persons, partly because I believe it is the one most faithful to the underlying structure of the Biblical revelation, and partly because it represents the order of priorities most consistent with the actual experience of the Christian believer.

Part I: When you pray, say, 'Our Father . . .'

The Teaching of Jesus

I begin with the teaching of Jesus himself, the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. This prayer is so well known that we are apt to forget what it says, and to forget too, that it forms one of the most basic elements in Jesus' teaching. It will no doubt seem obvious to state that its familiarity is the direct result of its importance, but the obvious is not always immediately or consciously understood.

The purpose of the Lord's Prayer, which in this respect is an epitome of the Gospel message, is to teach the disciples of Jesus that

¹ Originally given at a ministers' conference at St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, London in June 1985

as Christians we have a new and unique relationship with God. 'As Jesus taught us, so we pray "Our Father . . ."', words which immediately establish a relationship which caused scandal among the Jews and was dismissed as absurd by the Greeks. It is a relationship whose unique character can only be fully appreciated when we realise that it is primarily a sharing by us in the relationship which Jesus has with *his* Father. As Christians, we have the privilege of entering by adoption into the relationship which is his by right, and it is this apparently simple fact which provides us with the logic and the dynamic of the entire Gospel.

If we pause for a minute to compare this teaching of Jesus with the beliefs or unbelief of other religions and ideologies, what do we find in the Christian position which makes it unique? On the one hand, we know God as Father, which as the Jews were quick to realise, puts us, in some sense, at least, on a level of equality with God. On the other hand, as the Greeks were acutely aware, such a belief implies a link between Heaven and earth which a philosophy rooted in natural science cannot accommodate. Monotheistic Jews and atheistic philosophers may appear to have little in common with each other, but from the Christian point of view they are united in their denial of the central claim which Christianity makes, viz. that it is possible and necessary for human beings to have a personal relationship with God. The stream of history has moved on, creating forms of monotheism and of atheism unknown in New Testament times, and even producing within the visible Church a form of monotheistic philosophy in which traditional beliefs in a Supreme Being are wedded to the more important practical consideration, which is that this Being can in no way interfere with us. But the heart of the Christian message is that God not only can interfere with us, but that He has done so in Jesus Christ, with the result that the barrier which formerly existed between Him and His creation has been broken down—not to allow Him to step *out* of His divinity but to enable us to step *in*, to be seated, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:6, in Heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

This then, is the principle of the Gospel—not that God has ceased to be God and become like us, not that God, or the idea of God, has died as a functioning reality in our religious life, but rather that we have become like God in a way which makes it possible for us to have fellowship with Him. The framework in which this principle operates is that of the Covenant which God established with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when He made them both in His own image and likeness. We cannot here examine the fascinating history of this doctrine in any detail, but certain points have to be made if we are to make any sense of the various New Testament passages in which the image of God, as well as our relationship to Adam and to Eve, are invoked.

For our present purposes, there are four main errors which have dominated Christian thinking about the image of God, and exercised a distorting influence on Christian theology as a result. The first is the ancient belief that man was created in the image of Christ. It is true, of course, that Christ is the image of the eternal God, but to say that we are created in Christ's image puts us at one remove from God and not on the *same* level as Christ, which is the privilege implied by our adoption as sons. The second error is that of Augustine, revived by some psychological theologians in our own time, which says that man was created in the image of the *Trinity* so that the Persons of the Trinity represent different aspects or modes of being which find their parallels in the human mind. The end result of this is to identify the restoration of the image of God in man with the *integration of his personality*, a process in which the pulpit gives way to the couch and repentance is replaced by self-discovery.

The third error is to believe that the image and likeness are *different* things, and that only the latter was lost at the Fall. When this error is combined with the Augustinian one, as it was in the Middle Ages, the result is a doctrine of *salvation by works*, since the image of God in man is part of his nature which, though it must be sanctified by the infusion of the grace of God's likeness, is nevertheless capable of making correct, rational judgments *on its own account*.

The fourth error, which emerged as an attempt to repudiate the third, is to believe that the image of God was lost at the Fall, or if not completely lost, at least seriously corrupted. This leads to the belief that mankind is cut off from God and spiritually dead in the sense of being inert, a kind of vacuum waiting to be filled. With this belief, it is possible to offer salvation as a *new experience*, the recognition of a relationship with God to fill up the empty desires of a pleasure-seeking, or sensation-seeking life. Christianity becomes one more thrill designed to take the boredom out of life—a kind of thinking which, we must confess, lies near the surface of much modern evangelism.

The truth about the image of God is that the image of God in man is not a copy of Christ nor of the Trinity, but is the *personal character* given by God to every human being. This is analogous to the personal character of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and is clearly expressed in our relationship with the Persons of the Trinity. This relationship is not *voluntary*, which is why an Arminian doctrine of free-will has no place in Christian theology; it is *compulsory*. We have a relationship with God because we are created in His image; our problem is that this is now the *wrong* relationship—it is a relationship of rebellion against the covenant law of God. To be spiritually dead is not to be in a *vacuum*, but to be in *rebellion* against God.

It is precisely because this principle is no longer properly understood that as Christians we have by-and-large lost our grasp of

the Old Testament and developed a completely distorted picture of the Law of God. We are never short of people ready to decry the evils of legalism, and who point to Paul's Epistle to the Romans for their justification in doing so. But what these people forget—or find hard to understand—is that Paul *upheld* the Law as holy and sacred in its own right. It was not the Law which he opposed, but the belief that it was possible to earn salvation by keeping the Law. His whole purpose was to point out that a true understanding of God's Law would lead not to legalism but to repentance, because the full offer of grace in Christ was the only hope for sinful man.

Today, however, few people have any real sense of conviction of sin, and instead we find that when legalism is rejected it is replaced by Antinomianism which masquerades as spiritual freedom. The concept of law and order in a spiritual context has been abandoned in favour of a do-it-yourself freedom of expression which is entirely self-centred and based on the worst excesses of Pelagius and Arminius—not on God's grace at all. The law of God has given way to the experiences of men which are *attributed* to the workings of the Holy Spirit, but more obviously reflect the temperament and desires of those involved. This is not to say that many people have not experienced a valuable (and even necessary) psychological release from tensions and inhibitions of various kinds—it is to deny that such things are what is meant by the relationship with God which is taught in the New Testament. This relationship is not only different from anything which is purely or mainly psychological; it is also far deeper because it penetrates beyond the physical to the spiritual roots which lie at the heart of every man and woman created in God's image.

This is fundamental to our understanding of the Fatherhood of God. Our relationship with Him is built firmly on a *legal* basis and can only be understood within that framework. It was by satisfying the demands of the Father's *justice*—note the legal term—that we have been *justified*—another legal term—and can now enter His presence as sons and daughters by *adoption*—yet another legal term! When we look at the matter more closely, we realise that our entire *redemption*—still another legal term—rests on provisions which have been made for us within the context of the Law of God, provisions which have been fulfilled by the atoning work of Jesus Christ the High Priest and Victim of the Paschal sacrifice. Its principles were first laid down in the Pentateuch.

Though familiar to us, we seldom put it within its proper framework. By means of adoption we have been established in a relationship with the Father which is comparable to that enjoyed by the Son, Jesus Christ. By the grace of God we have been admitted to the presence of the Father and granted the privileges of sonship—including a share in the government of the Kingdom and the inheritance promised to the Son. (It is this fact, which establishes the

value and purpose of intercessory prayer. People frequently ask how we can pray for things when God's mind is already made up, and the answer, it seems to me, lies precisely here—it is because we have entered the Father's presence as sons and been given a share in His Kingdom, that we have also been granted the privilege of participating in God's decision-making activities. Petitionary prayer only makes sense if we have access to the one who can grant our requests, and this access can only be had by our adoption in Christ).

Adoption is a relationship which entails very specific duties and responsibilities. These duties are not more onerous than those imposed on the natural Son, but they are at least equal to His. We can hardly claim to be in Christ, or to share His privileges, if we do not also assume His attitude and His responsibilities towards the Father. Here there are two principles which belong together and which form the substance of our relationship to the Father. The first of these is *honour*, the second is *obedience*. Without *honour*, obedience would not exist; without *obedience*, honour would be meaningless—a worship of the lips but not of the heart.

The meaning of the honour due to the Father can best be appreciated by returning to the opening lines of the Lord's Prayer, which speak of His transcendence, His holiness and His power. The transcendent character of the Father is something unique to Him, and is the very first quality of His which we are called to respect. As it happens it is also the most difficult. Pragmatists that we are, we are inclined to practise a code of 'seeing is believing', forgetting that it is the things which are unseen that are eternal. We can relate to Jesus and feel the presence of the Spirit—or at least we think we can—but we cannot fathom the transcendence of the Father. He has not come down to earth like the other persons of the Godhead; if we want to know Him, we must go to Him. We must step out of ourselves and learn to approach the Throne of Grace, learn what it means, in effect, to be seated in Heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This is the first and greatest of the Holy Spirit's works, and the one about which we characteristically hear the *least*.

In gaining this access to the Father, the New Testament neither encourages nor discourages mystical experience. Paul tells us that he knew a man who was caught up into the third heaven, and he told the Corinthians that he spoke in tongues more than them all, but these things were never permitted to govern his practice of the spiritual life. Still less were they allowed to deflect him from his main purpose, which was to preach the Gospel of Christ in obedience to the Father's command and in a way which would honour Him. As far as Paul was concerned, mystical experiences were fine if they served the main purpose; if not, they were to be avoided in the interests of more important principles. The value of such experiences, and the reason why they are recorded in the New Testament is that they point us to a

world beyond this one—to Heaven, where the Father dwells. This is the teaching which we must hold on to and the attitude which we must adopt—that the one whom we worship and adore dwells in a dimension beyond human knowledge and without human limitations. In a word, we have a relationship with a God who is all-powerful in our world, precisely because He dwells beyond it and can operate within it without the constraints imposed by it on us.

The second point made in the Lord's Prayer is that God is *holy*. Holiness is not an attribute of the divine nature, though many people assume that it is; in Heaven, strictly speaking, there is no holiness at all. The reason for this is that holiness is a *relational* term—it can only be defined in relation to something else. God, who fills all things and whose Being cannot be compared with any other, can hardly be said to be 'set apart', since there is nothing He can be set apart *from*. This is why the Lord's Prayer does not speak of holiness as an attribute of God's *Being*, but as a characteristic of God's *Name*. And God's Name brings us straight to the heart of His covenant revelation in the Bible. In heaven, God does not need a name, since everyone will know who He is and what He is like. But on earth, such a Name is an essential part of our relationship to Him, since it is by His Name that we have some conception of Him.

Of course we must be careful, as spiritual writers from the New Testament onwards have always reminded us, not to turn the Name of God into an idol. We do this whenever we project a human analogy into the Being of God in the vain hope of trying to understand Him. God is not our Father in the way that a man is our father; He is our Father in the way in which He is the Father of Jesus Christ, with the single difference that we are His children by *adoption*, not by nature.

Today we are faced with the accusation that Father-language, used about God, is sexist and inaccurate. The claim is made that it may be better, or at least cosier, to relate to God as Mother or even as Father/Mother—thereby having the best of both worlds. It may be unfair to say that such claims are no more than a projection of human ideas on to God, an attempt to create Him in our image, rather than the other way round, but it is quite clear that the Bible offers no grounds for this kind of statement. This particular problem did not arise in Biblical times, so there is no straightforward answer to the problem. But if we look at the structure of relationships which the Bible establishes, and compare this with what was customary in other ancient religions, we shall discover what the principle underlying Father-language is.

As we have already seen, our relationship with the Father is a legal one of adoption. Such adoption would also have been *possible*, no doubt, if God had been our Mother, but our adoption is based on the model of the *natural* Son, Jesus Christ. The validity of Mother-

language about God must therefore be tested not against what might be possible for us, but against what might be possible for Him. Now for God to have been the *mother* of Jesus Christ would not only imply that the Son of God had somehow emerged from His heavenly mother's womb, a statement which would imply that He was inferior in Being to the First Person of the Godhead; it would also imply that we, the adopted children, could not possibly share the character and rights which belonged to the natural Son who had been in the Mother's womb. The relationship of a father to his children lacks the intensely physical aspect which is so pronounced a feature of the mother's relationship to her children and therefore the analogy is more suited to the purposes of revelation. Moreover, a Mother God would raise serious questions about the Incarnation, since it was precisely because Jesus had the womb-experience that He was flesh of our flesh. If He had been the child of a human father or a divine mother, His birth would have been a blasphemy, since no human sperm could fertilise the divine. If with a divine mother a human father had been superfluous, the Son of God would not have been a *man*.

Another important consideration is the link between the figure of the goddess and the cult of fertility. It is not often properly understood that ancient fertility cults, like modern pornography, appealed more to the male than to the female. In some Babylonian practices, for example, it was considered to be a rite of passage for young males to have intercourse with priestesses who acted as sacred prostitutes in the temples. It is extremely naive of modern feminists to assume that a female God is part of the process of women's *liberation*. Furthermore, this ancient tendency to exalt the female though it has been modified and contained, has certainly not disappeared from Christianity. Among Mediterranean peoples especially, the cult of *machismo*, or virility, is closely bound up with the exaggerated respect paid to the mother—and by extension, to the Virgin Mary, the mother of God. Roman Catholic apologists are often at pains to insist that this is not condoned in Catholic doctrine, but even if we admit that they are right up to a point, it still does not take away the fact that popular piety has moved in a direction which corresponds to the distorted sense of maleness which is prevalent in secular society.

A mother God would almost certainly provoke an upsurge of filial and possibly even erotic, piety among men which would do little to further the cause of the human female. At the same time the divinisation of motherhood would probably put an intolerable pressure on women to imitate God by becoming mothers themselves—indeed, one might even suppose that their spirituality would be measured by their fecundity! This problem does not arise with the Father-Son analogy, because the genital element is

completely excluded. It might be possible to argue that such an exclusion could operate with a mother God as well, but it would be much more difficult. It would almost certainly involve changing the divine son into a divine daughter, if the principle of 'he who has seen me has seen the Father' is to be preserved. Such imagery would probably exclude the male altogether, since he would not figure in the reproductive process. The male imagery, on the other hand, includes the female element as part of itself, and this point is made again in the creation of Eve from the side of Adam.

As for the Father/Mother combination, this can be disposed of briefly. It is one thing to say that Father is a term used by analogy to describe the First Person of the Godhead who in reality is far more than the word Father can suggest, but it is quite another thing to say that what is missing in the analogy is the First Person's *better half*. The Mother Image is at least as incomplete as the Father one, and combining them does no more than produce a monstrous hybrid with which it is impossible to construct any pattern of relationship. A Father/Mother would be a bipolar entity which would either exhaust its energies in internal self-relation or else express itself in a distorted, hermaphrodite offspring. Of all the many possibilities which have been suggested for God, this is surely the most inadequate and unreal of them all.

To those who accept the authority of the Bible and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, none of this has any importance. The issue is so clear that further discussion is unnecessary. What does need to be said nonetheless, is that the revelation of the divine Name is *Holy*. We not only disagree with the radical feminists; we also accuse them of *blaspheming* the name of God the Father, by trying to say that the fatherhood of God is mainly a psychological phenomenon rooted in a male-dominated culture of analogy. This is a strong statement to make, and we must not do it lightly. But on the other hand we must bear in mind the deep significance of 'hallowed be thy Name' for the entire logic of revelation, not only as it affects this world, but as it affects the kingdom of heaven as well. The Father's *unique* dwelling-place is in heaven, and the revelation of his Name to us can only refer to something which is true *in heaven*. If this were not so, then the Name we have been given would not be a revelation of the God who is, and we would not have a relationship with anything greater than a figment of our own imagination. I cannot stress too much how important it is to cling to the Divine Name, as it is revealed to us by Jesus himself.

After establishing the honour which is due to the Father, the Lord's Prayer moves on to speak of the power which he possesses. Here it is important to note that the revelation of the Father's power is closely tied to the attitude of submissive obedience which is the second hallmark of true Christian worship. The precise words are

'Thy *Kingdom* come; thy *will* be done, on earth as it is in heaven'. What happens on earth must be a true reflection of what happens in heaven if the revelation of God in Scripture is to have any meaning. Now consider the framework in which Jesus sets this very important principle.

First, we are told about the *kingdom*—another legal concept, since kingdom is primarily a form of government, and one which of course has profound covenant significance. In the Old Testament, as we know, God reproached Israel through Samuel because the people were clamouring for a king. Israel had not comprehended the special character of its nationhood, and wanted to become a nation-state like the other tribes of the contemporary Middle East.

Now the surprising thing about the subsequent narrative is that God granted their wish, and even made the Davidic monarchy a sign and a vehicle of the fulfilment of his covenant promises. This strange fact tells us, I think, two important things about the old dispensation of God's covenant mercies. First, it was a temporary and provisional dispensation in which God was prepared to recognise the power of sin. As the New Testament tells us, it was because of sin, and the people's inability to maintain the Abrahamic relationship with God, that the Law of Moses had been given. We might want to argue that if God could trouble Himself to give the Law, he could just as easily have removed the need for it, but that is not the way the covenant dispensation worked. In the same way, God permitted Israel to have its way over the kingship and turned it into an instrument for His glory, though not before explaining in detail its basic character of a *rebellion* against Him. The second point, which is linked to the first, is that the old dispensation was *secular* in character—there was a Promised Land, a tabernacle and later a temple of the Divine Presence and a Revelation which awaited its fulfilment in the temporal future. Whichever way we look at it, the old dispensation is bound by limitations of time and space which only reassert its basic inadequacy.

The new dispensation has broken down these barriers and raised the experience of covenant mercy to a universal, spiritual level. Just as the Law is now to be written on our hearts, so too, the kingdom of God is within us. This extremely important fact needs to be reiterated in a day which tries by every means to externalise the kingdom. On the one hand we have the liberation theologians, the social gossellers and the so-called neo-evangelicals for whom social involvement is in theory, just as important as—and in practice usually far more important than—personal evangelism.

It is not at all surprising: it is perfectly logical, that these people should use and abuse the Old Testament as the primary source of their ideas. They are, in effect, Old Testament Christians, who have not made the category-leap from external to internal, that which

characterises the shift from the old to the new covenant dispensation. If we look for the origin of this way of thinking, we shall find it in the Puritans of the 17th century. It was Oliver Cromwell, after all, who tried to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land. The Roundhead tradition, which in our own time has flourished in socialism and the Labour movement, has always stood for this basic principle. It was opposed and in the 17th century eventually defeated, by the Establishment Anglicans, who despite their many faults, at least tried to maintain the spiritual independence of the secular power. We may agree that they paid a heavy price for this—a price we are still paying in the shape of an Establishment which gives the State a degree of control over the Church—but the significance of conformity, 1662-style, should not be missed.

In a world in which most people regarded the Church and spiritual matters as of far greater importance than secular affairs, the men of 1662 were saying that the State was instituted by God and had both a right to exist and a duty to perform, over which the Church had no control. They opened the way, not only to regarding State employment as a sacred calling in its own right, but to a clear recognition that the Kingdom of God was *not* of this world.

The Puritan mistake, repeated by their spiritual descendants ever since, was to assume that the new Jerusalem could be built by human effort—consecrated, Christian and converted effort, certainly—but human effort all the same. They did not realise the most fundamental truth of all—viz. that except the Lord build a house, they labour in vain, that build it. And the Lord's house, the new Jerusalem, will not be built on earth, but will descend from heaven at the end of time.

Today when we pray 'thy Kingdom come' we must be very careful to avoid the Puritan mistake. But we must be equally careful to avoid its mediaeval predecessor—against which the men of 1662 also protested—and which has resurfaced today in the House Church, Restoration and Charismatic movements. This error is the one which believes that the kingdom *is* the church. Of course, it differs from its mediaeval *ancestor* in that it presupposes a Protestant emphasis on the local, rather than on the universal church, but in theological terms that is a point of detail. It rejects the protestant notion of the invisible church—in this movement, the true believers are clearly identified and highly visible—even if they hide their light under a bushel by meeting in a private house. The Kingdom of God is to be seen, they claim, in all its fulness in their midst, because in them not only Pentecost but the End of Time have already come.

Students of Church history know that this tendency too, was prominent in Puritan circles, though many of the stricter divines contested it fiercely. Their reasons were much the same as ours now—a movement to make the kingdom visible in the Church, can only lead to separation and division between Christians who believe

they have attained some form of higher life and those who have been left behind or even rejected. More seriously, it is a movement which does little or nothing to further the spread of the Gospel, but instead draws its strengths by sapping the energies of already-existing churches. Sectarian groups of this kind all too often have a high proportion of the discontented—a fact which is frequently reflected in the distortions and excesses which can be detected in their teaching.

The New Testament, on the other hand, issues clear warnings against any attempt to set up an external kingdom of God, whether in the State or in the Church. There are even reminders that the ideal of a pure church is unobtainable—the wheat and tares grow *together* until the harvest. Where the kingdom of God must reign, and must be seen to reign, is in the hearts and lives of individual Christians. Evangelicals today are under attack for their individualism, and it seems that everywhere the trend is towards the collective—from team and group ministries to the sharing of the Peace at the Eucharist, supposedly a reminder that we are in communion with each other as much as with God.

Yet against this we must protest that God does His greatest works through individuals who are submitted to His will. Abraham would have failed had he let his family govern his decisions; Elijah would have been sacrificing to Baal if he had accepted the will of the majority. The career of Jesus would be simply incomprehensible. It is interesting to note that the more one speaks of collective body-fellowship, the less one hears of atonement as a substitutionary sacrifice, and the more Jesus becomes an example for us to imitate by self-sacrifice—as subtle a form of salvation by works as any ever devised by man.

More recently, consider what would have happened to orthodoxy had Athanasius put fellowship ahead of truth. Where would the gospel of grace be today if Martin Luther had allowed his conscience to be captive to the monastery Chapter? The Church of England is perhaps unique in Christendom in the way in which it has allowed the individual to flourish without destroying the fabric of the whole. This has been its particular glory, in spite of all the problems caused by unfaithful pastors and bishops. We have a church in which a man of God is free to exercise his special gifts, and to prove his worth in and often against the counsels of the church. It is a very precious inheritance, and the long list of scholars, missionaries, pastors and leaders which the chaotic structures of Anglicanism have managed to produce is a standing witness to the New Testament truth that the kingdom of God is within you, that the power of the Holy Spirit works first on the human heart and then overflows of its own abundance into a world which is crying out for a Gospel which can save us from sin, from death and from hell.

It is clear from the next section of the Lord's Prayer that the power of God is not revealed unless the heart of the believer is governed by an attitude of obedience to His will—*thy will be done*. Here we have a resumé of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who shed the first drops of His blood not on the Cross but in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he wrestled in prayer with the Father to make this precondition of service a reality in His own life. Today we hear a great deal of theology about the Suffering Servant and the meaning of the Crucifixion for the sufferings of mankind in general. But surprisingly we hear almost nothing about the struggle in the garden—not *my* will, but *thy* will be done. The reason can only be that this experience of Jesus has not been properly understood—and like most experiences it has not been understood because its essential basis has not been shared. Self-sacrifice without its concomitant submission is not only possible, it is practised very frequently. Often clergymen come unstuck for precisely this reason—they have given of themselves for years in difficult circumstances and had little or no visible reward. Maybe they have struggled to build a strong congregation, or to recreate the very special conditions of Central London in the middle of nowhere. They may not have been trained to expect discouragement, failure, attack from the enemies of the Gospel (who are always most active when the work of sowing the seed is most effective). No doubt they believe that they are doing God's Will, but in fact they may have seldom if ever seriously questioned *themselves*—their own motives, their own worthiness, their own gifts. They have not learned that it is in our weakness that God's power is made strong, because He desires *obedience*, rather than *sacrifice*, even if that sacrifice is of ourselves.

Indeed it is often precisely to men and women in this kind of spiritual state—defeat which they cannot understand—that charismatic experience makes its greatest appeal. Read the biographies and autobiographies of those people; time and again it is during a period of discouragement and spiritual dryness that this form of release has come. We recognise the validity of this testimony as far as it goes—many people have indeed experienced a new lease of life in precisely these conditions, but we must question whether it is conforming to the teaching of the New Testament, to claim that this is the way we may expect the Holy Spirit to work. The principle of *submission* plays a large rôle in charismatic circles, but this is where the misunderstanding begins. The submission of Jesus to the will of the Father was a *secret* affair, known only to a few (who were falling asleep at the time). It was *not* proclaimed as a kind of wonder-drug, a panacea available within a restricted fellowship at the direction of a gifted leader. Those who have known the true wilderness experience—Elijah, Jesus, Paul, to go no further—did not make it a prominent feature of their proclamation, but used it to feed their own spiritual

growth. What the *public* sees may seem to bear little relation to what has happened to the servant of God in his *private* life—here only the most discerning spirits will see and understand what the marks of suffering and submission are in those whose ministry is blessed by God.

I believe that the charismatic movement has offered us a superficial, instant formula for spiritual success which needs to challenge us to search the Scriptures more deeply on this point. To struggle for years without success and then to abandon the fight in favour of a life of praise and self-expression in worship is not honouring to God because it is not fulfilling His will for us. His will is that we should be submitted to Him, not *outside* the struggle, but *in* it. The man of God is not called to hold hands with the like-minded in a closed fellowship, but to use his hands to build the walls of Jerusalem secure in the knowledge given by Nehemiah, that the joy of the Lord will be His strength. He is called to penetrate enemy strongholds, to take the fight into hearts and lives where the devil holds sway. It is the principle set out in one of the finest hymns in the English language, Charles Wesley's:

1. Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go
My daily labour to pursue
Thee, only Thee resolved to know
In all I think, or speak, or do.
2. The task Thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil
In all my works Thy presence find
And prove Thy good and perfect will.
3. Thee may I set at my right hand
Whose eyes mine inmost substance see
And labour on at Thy command
And offer all my works to Thee.
4. Give me to bear Thine easy yoke
And every moment watch and pray
And still to things eternal look
And hasten to Thy glorious day.
5. For Thee delightfully employ
Whate'er Thy bounteous grace hath given
And run my course with even joy
And closely walk with Thee to Heaven.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven! Once that principle is firmly established in the *secret* place of our own lives, then all becomes possible. We shall be free to run our course with even joy, and closely walk with God our Father, to Heaven His dwelling-house.

From the honour and obedience due to the Father comes the work of the Father which He does for us. He *provides* for us in our daily

bread, He *forgives* us, and expects that we will show His forgiveness in our own relationships with one another. Finally He *protects* us by giving us the wisdom and the strength not to yield to temptation, and by delivering us from evil. In this sense, the Christian leads a *charmed* life (*charm* is derived from *charisma*, and has nothing to do with magic). God's power is a reality in our experience, but it is a reality and an experience which works itself out within a carefully structured framework of relationship.

In summary, *what God can do depends on who God is*. If we have no idea who He is, or if our knowledge is faulty, we shall never know what He can do. Living the Christian life is impossible unless we are first prepared to honour and obey the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the way that He Himself was obedient unto death—even death on a cross! Secondly, *what God will do depends on how we worship Him*. If we acknowledge His power but are not prepared to worship Him in the way in which He has prescribed, then in effect we are setting ourselves above Him and trying to use Him for our own ends. We are making Him into a heavenly machine which may be more powerful than we are, but which we expect will respond to our control. The desire to use God, rather than to be used by Him is one of the most fatal flaws which can ever mar a Christian life. Which of us would dare to claim that we are entirely innocent of the attempt?

To be continued

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