

CHRIST CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE - BIBLE GROUP TRAINING

JANUARY 2009 - 'WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?'

FOUR TALKS BASED ON PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

1. "GLORY" - GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSES
2. "GRACE" - GOD'S NEW SOCIETY
3. "GROWTH" - GOD'S WAY OF GROWING THE CHURCH
4. "GRIT" - GOD'S WAYS OF ENGAGING THE WORLD

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WEEK 1: 06 JANUARY 2009: GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSES

Background thoughts . . .

We the church are God's possession (or heritage), by God's will and purpose in Christ, for the praise of God's glorious grace

Members of a culture are often subjects of common, defining events in their history. Christian culture is 'life lived as subjects of God's supernatural, saving intervention in world history – and our history'.

1. Introduction

Good evening everyone and welcome to the first session in our January bible group training for 2009. For me it's a great privilege to be allowed to do this again. Firstly because I know that a faithful bible teaching church like CCB is rightly careful in who and what it allows to be taught to its people. But secondly because it forces me into doing what I love most, which is to dig into God's amazing Word and through studying it, find an ever deeper, more satisfying and, I trust, more fruitful, relationship with our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

As with last year, I need to acknowledge the help and support of everyone in the Linden home group who have again had to put up with me practising on them during the past year some of what you may be hearing over the next few weeks.

The background to this series of talks is my general concern about being a Christian minority in a society that is becoming increasingly impacted by both secular and animistic ways of thinking and living. What happens when Christians mix it with the world? What determines the direction of influence? Whose ideas and values will eventually prevail? I have wondered whether the bible addresses such things.

Research into the effectiveness of social groupings shows that their influence tends to be strong if they succeed in creating a strong sense of identification with the central ideas

and values of the group. But groups in which members are somewhat indifferent to their central ideas and values tend to be less influential in their wider society.

Turning to the book of Ephesians, Paul seems to have been concerned that the churches which he had been so instrumental in founding in the Ephesus area were beginning to lose their grip on the central tenets of the gospel. He knew that this was a constant threat to all his new churches. They experienced ridicule from their peers, violence from their former co-religionists if they happened to be Jews, and of course no support from a very secular state.

Yet at the same time Paul expected that the churches would be able to stand up and reveal God in whatever circumstances they found themselves in. Ephesus was no exception. It was a city noted for trade but also famous for a giant idol to the goddess Diana, or Artemis, the Greek version of the same name. A cult of magic powers and mystical writings had grown up around her worship. For people living in Ephesus magic powers were part of everyday life. And, as with many false religions, there money was also involved; in this case a thriving trade in miniature shrines, or souvenirs of the goddess Artemis. When Paul's preaching and miracles led to conversions there was first a collective bonfire of loads of the magic manuscripts followed by a drastic reduction in trade at the silversmiths. Together these events led to the riot reported in Acts chapter 19.

Now there is evidence that, although the Ephesian church started strongly, the pressures of the pagan world around them began to tell on the Christians there. Old ways of thinking and living were probably starting to creep back in. The allure of more immediate contact with the supernatural world was powerful even though it was clearly associated with false worship. Paul's frequent references to the term 'heavenly places' in this letter do not occur anyway else in his writings. (see 1:3; 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 4:9-10; 6:12). It shows that Paul was very well aware that the Ephesian Christians were feeling massive cultural pressures to slip back into their old, magic-mediated spiritual lives.

It was not as though they were actually worshipping Artemis again or practicing the blatant immorality associated with pagan worship. But the general ways of thinking associated with this background clearly was proving a problem. Before, they would have at least had some sense of influence over things in the spirit realm. But now there was just normal Christian duty without all the religious drama surrounding Artemis' temple.

It is always hard to be left out of the 'in group's' ways of thinking. This is as true of Christians in Johannesburg as it was in Ephesus. We don't want to be regarded as being out of touch with trends and this sometimes means that we adopt as much of the thinking and behaviour of our surrounding culture as we believe is consistent with our following Jesus Christ. Maybe we justify our habits by noting that we don't go as far as living together with our boyfriends or girl friends the way the world does; or we don't swear and blaspheme the way they do; or overdo the drinking.

But are we nevertheless striving to enjoy life in pretty much the same way as everyone else? Are our financial priorities pretty much the same as everyone else's? What about the way our girls dress? What about the way we men use our leisure time? And the ways in which we typically discuss the political and economic problems in our country?

I'm not saying we are all particularly sinful in these areas. What I am asking though, is whether, in some of these areas, we are distinguishable from the surrounding culture? Do our 'normal' patterns of life and behaviour convey enough of the essential nature of the church to make our peers notice that God is at work in our society? What sort of God is conjured up in the minds of our colleagues, friends and neighbours as a result of their contact with us?

These were precisely the sorts of things that seem to have been worrying Paul about the Ephesian Christians. There was no spiritual chaos as there was in Corinth; there was no serious doctrinal defection as with the Galatians and probably not even any noticeable internal strife as there seems to have been at Philippi. But Paul was concerned

nevertheless. On the surface all seemed fine. But it seems that, under the surface, the devil was quietly trying to cook this church alive.

And, just like with the proverbial frog that doesn't notice that the water in which it is being cooked is slowly boiling, no-one seemed to realise that Christians were slowly slipping back into the culture from which the gospel had saved them.

What might Paul's options have been in dealing with this situation? He could have written an expose of the wrongness of idol worship. He could have railed against the occultist religious trappings of Ephesian culture. Or perhaps he could have simply poo-hooped the whole idea of magic and false gods and just warned these young Christians that love of money was usually the hidden motive in many of these traditional religions. Thus armed, the Christians in Ephesus could have tackled the magic spiritism head on and exposed the deceit of those making money out of it. Problem solved!

But, most interestingly, this is not the line that Paul takes in his letter. This is because his diagnosis is not that these other dangerous ideas had grown stronger – maybe they had; but rather that the church's grasp of Christian spiritual realities had grown weaker. What Paul clearly concluded was that the Ephesian Christians needed to be strengthened in their grasp of the gospel truth if they were to remain an effective witness within their culture. For Paul knew that pagan spiritual powers and secular social insights are no match for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, instead of a diatribe against Diana / Artemis Paul produced the most amazing teaching about the origins, nature and destiny of the church anywhere in the New Testament. For the rest of this talk therefore, I just want to summarise what Paul says about the extraordinary, supernatural character of the new culture into Christians have been born through our faith in Jesus Christ. We will concentrate on the three main truths that John Stott covers in the extract I highlighted for your preparation, namely that:

- God's people are God's possession
- God's people are defined by God's will
- God's people exist for God's glory

2. God's people are God's possession

How do we view ourselves as Christian? At one level we the believers in Jesus Christ gathered in a local church in Blairgowrie in Johannesburg, South Africa. We belong to the CESA denomination. Bishop Frank Retief is our presiding bishop. Peter Wessels is our rector. Some of us are on a church council and we manage the affairs of our church. We are reasonably pleased with what we are doing with our church. There are no serious issues on the radar screen. And so I sleep well at night knowing that our church is OK.

But just a minute. Is this the right way to speak about the church? Will this attitude ensure that our neighbours gain the right impression of what the church is? Will this result in the world being convinced that God is at work in Blairgowrie? Or just that some fairly nice, reasonably competent religious types run an innocuous church down at Gordon and Mackay and that they don't bother us too much with their stuff?

Now this may be doing us a bit of a disservice and I admit that I am exaggerating for effect. But the point is, that if we have the perspective that the church is OURS, we will inevitably fall into the trap of becoming a bit like what I have described. But as we will see, Paul teaches a very different view of what the church is and his reason is precisely that he DOESN'T want the church in Ephesus then, or the church in Blairgowrie now, to be just another harmless element in the society.

So let's look at some of the descriptions of the church Paul gives us in Chapter 1:

- “For he chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world . . .” (1:4)
- “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ . . .” (1:5)
- “In him we were also chosen . . .” (v11)
- “You also were included in Christ . . .” (v13)
- “.. those who are God’s possession/heritage – “ (v14)

The first thing to notice, and something that can easily escape one’s notice, is that the most frequent words used to describe the church are: ‘us’, ‘we’, and ‘you’. No-one else other than we who know Jesus Christ are the church that Paul is talking about here.

Secondly, it is impossible to escape the fact that, in Paul’s understanding, this church, comprising as it does, we who believe in Jesus, does not have its origins in anything that was going on in Ephesus then or in Blairgowrie now. The church has its origin in God’s choice of us in eternity. It was a choice that he has taken loving care to ensure would actually come to pass in history [for this is what predestination involves]. And it is a choice that is inextricably tied up with the person of Jesus Christ, who as we know is the person of the godhead who undertook to come into this world to bring God’s eternal, loving, electing aims to fulfilment.

In the light of this action on God’s part, we who call ourselves Christians here in Blairgowrie are not our own property. We belong to God. We are his personal possession. If one were to ask: ‘what does God get out of his big venture of creation and redemption?’, the answer is that He gets us! WE are his heritage, as it says in v14.

In his commentary on this verse John Stott reminds us that the idea of the church being God’s heritage is not a just a New Testament invention. He quotes Deuteronomy 32:9 which says: “the LORD’s portion is his people; Jacob his allotted inheritance.” God compares Israel to other nations which have various tracts of land for their inheritance. But for Himself, although Israel has land, the LORD indicates that He Himself is not interested in land; instead, he has chosen a people for his inheritance. To Paul, the church now is in the position of Israel then.

Paul wants us to know that we Christians, whether here in Johannesburg now or back in Ephesus then, are God's treasure. In exactly the same way as he chose and treasured Israel as his personal possession, so he has also chosen us to be his own possession among all the peoples on earth. We may be told to lay up treasure in heaven, but God's treasure is sitting right here on earth in the CCB church hall!

The point of this teaching is that although events in Ephesus then and here in South Africa now may loom large on our agendas, Paul wants us to stop and rethink what it means to be God's people. We need to look to him to understand our true nature and significance. And only then will we learn how to live in his world without getting absorbed by it. But more of this in later talks.

Now, if you read the selected pages in Stott's commentary for this evening, you will have seen that, having looked at the 'WHAT' of God's people, Stott goes on to answer the question; 'HOW did we become God's people?'

3. God's people depend on God's will

It's a very good question to ask precisely how we became God's people. Each of us has a unique story of how we came to be a Christian and this is not to be minimized. But in the whole of chapter 1 of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul teaches that Christians are not a product of any human will or action on our part but that we are the product of God's purpose and will.

In emphasizing this it seems that he is very deliberately aiming at changing the way the Ephesians think about themselves. He knows that one of the reasons that they were beginning to weaken spiritually is that if their Christian faith were simply a product of human will and action, it would certainly not be able to stand up against the occultist powers underlying the surrounding culture in Ephesus.

They, just as much as we, will have been prone to understanding their faith mainly in terms of their own personal commitments to the Lord and their own personal stance against sin. But Paul knows that they have been involved with supernatural powers that go well beyond any individual capability to withstand. As he puts it in chapter 2: “. you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air. . ”.

But what about us here in Johannesburg in 2009? Are we more able to stand against the forces of secularism and animism in our culture than the Ephesians could against the occultism in their city? Is the moral power of our wills sufficient for us to hold back the moral decline we see all around us? If we are well intentioned and well organised as a church, will things soon start getting better in Blairgowrie?

Indirectly, Paul is warning us here that we would be very foolish to come to any such conclusion. And the reason is that, in actual fact, we did not Christians because of our own wills. Whether in the sophisticated northern suburbs of Johannesburg or the pagan darkness of Ephesus, our very existence as believers is dependent on God’s will not ours. In fact, later, Paul says that it was our wills that kept us secure in the darkness of sin and away from God!

So let’s look at the various ways in which Paul explains how people become Christians. We have become Christians:

- “. . . in accordance with [God’s] pleasure and will . . ” (v5)
- “. . . in accordance with the riches of God’s grace . . ” (v7)
- “. . . according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ, . . ” (v9)

Basically what this all means is that we became Christians because God wanted us to become Christians. He wanted us to be his children. It was what God was aiming at all along when he planned for Jesus Christ to be offered as a sacrifice for sinners. He did it simply because he wanted you to be his.

John Stott puts it as follows: ‘our becoming members of God’s new community was due neither to chance nor to choice (if by that is meant our choice), but to God’s own sovereign will and pleasure’.

This is not to say that we were totally excluded from the process of God making us his children. For the way that God chooses to ‘ground’ his eternal purposes and will in time and space is through us hearing the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, (see verse 13). So, while God has chosen you and, in love, planned your salvation from all eternity, he also willed the means - in which we exercise our duty to repent and believe.

The implications of this are immense. If, ultimately, we are here in Johannesburg as God’s people because of HIS purpose and will, then surely he is not going to abandon us and allow us just to be sucked up into the worldly culture all around us. No, of course not. If it is God who has willed our salvation, then we need to know what we are here for. What exactly is he aiming at with us? To answer this we need to look at the third question that John Stott raises and answers, which is that . . .

4. God’s people exist for God’s glory

In chapter 1 of Ephesians we are left in no doubt at all about what God is aiming at in his eternal plan make sinners into Christians. Three objectives are mentioned and one of these, the third one, is repeated three times. So let’s see what the three aims are and then we will concentrate a bit more on the one that Paul gives most emphasis to.

Firstly, in verse 4, Paul says that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, simply ‘to be holy and blameless in his sight’. He wants to look at holy people; people who reflect back to him what he already sees in his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. In Romans 8:29 Paul makes a similar point when he says: ‘For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son that he [Jesus] might be the firstborn among many brothers. In other words, God wants holy company for his holy Son!

Then, in verses 9 and 10, Paul gives a second reason for God revealing his salvation to us. It is that, through this salvation, he wants us to be the means of ‘bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ’. In other words, God wants his church to be the means of making his kingdom come here on earth, just as it already is in heaven!

But the purpose that Paul majors on is the one we find repeated in verses 6, 12 and 14:

- ‘he predestined us to be adopted as his sons . . . to the praise of his glorious grace’
- ‘. . . that we who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory’
- ‘. . . those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory’

To properly understand from these words what God’s essential purpose is for our lives, we really need to know the meaning of two key words here: ‘praise’, and ‘glory’.

To get a better grip on Paul’s meaning I looked at John Calvin’s commentary on these verses. He says that God’s ‘glory’ means the outshining of his essential goodness. Glory is the heartbeat of God eternally pumping out pure goodness.

Then Calvin says that to ‘praise’ means to display, or show off, and proclaim the quality of something or someone.

So do you see what God is aiming at in us his people? He simply wants us to be the means of displaying, showing off and proclaiming his essential goodness. We are to be the arteries through which his heart pumps out his goodness into the world.

Obviously we can’t do this if we have no personal experience of God and his goodness and so to make sure we do know at least something of what he means, every true Christian is given a little foretaste of God’s heavenly goodness through the Holy Spirit. He is given to Christians to help us to be sure of our share in the glorious salvation that

Jesus has won for us, and to enable us to do our small part in displaying, showing off and proclaiming the glory of God.

5. Conclusions

This then, is how the church is supposed to see itself. And in conclusion I want to emphasise yet again that how we see our selves as the church matters. It will affect the way that we come across to the world around us. We need to ask ourselves whether we want to be viewed as just a mildly religious part of the prevailing culture or as members of something so different that the world starts to realise that God is active in their midst.

Members of a culture are often subjects of common, defining events in their history. In South Africa the key defining events of our culture are the massive social clashes of the past 20 years and the way that these are still playing themselves out in the institutions of South African society. These events have made, and perhaps do still make, living very hard for many of us as previous certainties and a particular quality of life have been replaced by uncertainty and fears for the future.

For others, the hope of promised changes for the better may have been replaced with disappointment at the continuing inequalities and as the reality dawns that the so called good life may yet be a long way off.

But, as the church faces the same pressures as everyone else, the big question is: will we respond merely as members of the culture of this world? Or as citizens of another, eternal culture? For, as I suggested at the beginning of this talk, Christian culture may be defined as 'life lived as subjects of God's eternal, electing purpose in Christ'.

If we want the world to see the church as God's answer to the problems of this world then we need to ensure that we present God's perspective on his church to the world, and not our own. This will at first entail turning away from the world to rediscover what God's purposes are for his church. But, as we learn to understand his eternal purposes and what

it means to live for his glory, we will hopefully find ourselves being enabled to re-engage with the world but from a much stronger platform.

And as we start to focus on revealing God's essential goodness, I believe we will also start to see a new interest in the things of God emerging in the world around us. It may include antipathy as well as curiosity and open interest. But the main thing for us to be concerned about is not the effects but rather, whether we are becoming more and more pleasing to our Father in heaven.

But how do we get from where we are now to seeing ourselves more accurately as what we really are in God's purpose? This could well involve a big change of perspective for many of us. Please rest assured, however, that Paul is very well aware that such a transformation does not come to us naturally, even as Christians. To have our minds changed so radically that we see ourselves as God's possession, defined by God's will, and living for His glory, will require supernatural power. Indeed Paul it will require the same power that God used when he raised Jesus from the dead 2000 years ago.

The reason it needs such power to change us is that, quite apart from our limitations in spiritual understanding, there is the resistance of our sinful hearts. As John Calvin once said: 'the heart's distrust is greater than the mind's blindness. It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought'.

For this reason Paul takes up the whole of the second half of Ephesians 1 with a great prayer that God would open the eyes of our hearts so that we will be able to grasp the great things he has been teaching us about the true nature of the church.

I would like to finish this talk by us all simply reading this prayer through together, but also by urging you to read and pray it through yourself when you go home tonight. And, if you are really keen for God to open your heart fully to all that we have been learning tonight, then why don't you make a commitment to read and pray this prayer every day until we meet again next Tuesday? I can promise you that it will make a big difference!

Let's read then, from v15 to the end of the chapter, and not forgetting that what is written here is Paul's prayer for us as well as for the Ephesian Christians:

'For this reason, ever since I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our lord Jesus Christ, the glorious father, may give you the spirit of revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way'.

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‘WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?’

WEEK 2: 13 JANUARY 2009: GOD’S NEW SOCIETY

Thoughts from last week . . .

From Ephesians chapter 1 we saw that WE, (the church) are God’s own possession, brought into being by his will and purpose in Christ. Christianity is therefore ‘life lived as subjects of God’s supernatural, saving intervention in world history and our history’.

*As a result we Christians have different priorities in life to other people and last week we saw three that Paul sees as important and that it is when God’s people most closely embody **his** priorities, that we may say that we have a Christian culture.*

Can anyone remember these three things, all mentioned in Ephesians chapter 1, that God is concerned that we should be focusing on mainly?

1. Introduction

As I mentioned in my introduction last week, the background to this series of studies lies in my reading of a sociological book by a Catholic priest, Stuart Bate. It is called ‘Inculturation and Healing’. In the book Bate explores what it is that enables some groupings in society to be more effective at conveying a sense of belonging and security to their members than others. His reason for wanting to know this was that he wanted the Catholic Church to be a more effective force for social healing and conveying of hope in the context of all the social turmoil of our country’s transformation period in the 1990s.

His answer, based on a study of two socially successful religious groupings in South Africa, was that successful groupings in a society are those in which members seem to internalise the central ideas and values of the group to such an extent that the invisible world of ideas and values becomes almost tangible. People experience a sense of reality and intimacy that somehow transcends the details of the group’s beliefs and allows individuals to simply feel ‘at home’. And it is this deeper sense of belonging which the group conveys that makes it so successful at nurturing its existing members and also at influencing those who are not yet members.

The groups concerned were the Rhema group of churches, and the larger African Indigenous Churches like ZCC and Shemba. Bate was not necessarily approving their ideas, just noting that it was their ability to translate beliefs into a wider cultural experience that was the reason for their success as social movements. The critical thing in terms of making the ideas of ones group meaningful and accessible to people is that the core ideas need to penetrate beyond the grey matter upstairs and into our attitudes and actions, individually and collectively. Only then will people experience that sense of comfort and belonging that ultimately results in cultural adaptation.

This understanding is consistent with a typical dictionary definition of culture. My Collins dictionary says that culture is ‘The total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action’. Members of a culture, therefore, are typically united by a common ideal, or idea, that shapes the way that they think about everything. These ideas underlie the ways that we do things; the ways that we think, and the things that we take for granted, often without ever questioning them. And these ideas are transmitted from generation to generation and mutually reinforced by members of the group.

However, an important caveat that I have noted, both after reading Bate’s book and in noting a dictionary definition of culture, is that it appears as though ANY network of ideas, if orchestrated well by a leadership, can become the basis of a strong culture. In other words, just the sense of comfort and belonging that emerge as a group’s core ideas become ‘inculturated’, is no guarantee that the core ideas themselves are good and right.

We last week we saw that the Christians in Ephesus came from a strongly, magic influenced background. It was a cult – or culture – built around a web of ideas focusing on the goddess Diana, or Artemis. As a result the Ephesian Christians had as part of their background, ways of thinking and life values that would come to them naturally. And the reason that Paul was writing to these churches the way he did was that he could see that they were slipping back into the comfort zone of their former culture.

In addition to the attraction of the intimacies of their former pagan culture, there was probably another reason that the Ephesian Christians may have been finding it hard to remain passionate in their adherence to the gospel. There will have been some Christians from a Jewish background among them. For former Jews, much of their former religious culture transplanted itself fairly comfortably into the new Christ centred Christian culture. Their former lives will have benefited hugely from the training of God's moral law and they would have been far less prone to involvement in the occultist, idolatry of the Artemis cult than the pagan background Christians.

As Paul acknowledges elsewhere in Romans chapter eleven, for unconverted Jews to become Christians is like being grafted back into their natural stock. But for Gentiles it is like trying to graft a wild olive onto the cultivated stock. There is always more resistance.

For this reason, some Ephesians may have been thinking to themselves, 'were never going to be able succeed at this new lifestyle; it's OK for these Jews, they know all about the one God Jehovah and his laws. But us? We're always going to be just second class citizens. What's the point of hanging in?'

How did Paul respond? He could easily have just remonstrated with the Jewish Christians to help their Gentile brothers; or he could have warned the Gentile background believers against the idolatry of their previous religion. But, just like a good modern sociologist, he knew that the best way to challenge one culture was to set out the superiority of the key ideas and values of the new culture. The people needed to be re-convinced of what they had already learned about their salvation through Jesus Christ.

Last week we saw the first stage in Paul's response to this situation. It was to take the Ephesians back, deep into the eternal purposes of God which was where their faith in Christ had its roots. He reminded them that they were what they were because it was ultimately God himself, not they, who had made them Christians. And Paul re-

emphasised that Christians are people who have exchanged their own previous main purpose in living for the new purpose of praising God for his glorious grace.

So, this week, we will be looking further at what are the big ideas that define us as Christians. We will be covering chapters 2 and 3. In these chapters Paul reminds the Ephesians what they once were and what they now are. The key verse linking their spiritual past to their spiritual present and future is 2:13: *“But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ”*.

In these chapters, Paul is getting down to the ‘nitty gritty’ of why these Christians were starting to cool off in their love for Jesus. In his sermon on this very verse, the great Welsh preacher, Dr Martin Lloyd Jones had the following to say: ‘Nothing is clearer to all who have any pastoral experience that when people are unhappy about their salvation and are lacking in assurance, and when there is no joy in their Christian life, it is generally . . . because they have never truly been convicted of sin; because they have never really seen their hopelessness, or else that they have never seen their true position as Christians, and the heights to which they have been raised’.

In other words, when our joy in God’s salvation is no longer the all prevailing idea in our minds and hearts, then other lesser ideas start to come in again. At first we may say to ourselves that we are just settling down to ‘normal’ life in our society. But then our priorities in the use of time, the things we talk about most, and the general lifestyle we adopt, start to look just like those of everyone else in the surrounding culture. Before we know where we are we; just an average English speaking, Joburg northern suburbs resident; just an average Zulu or Sotho; just a typical modern Afrikaner. Just like the Ephesians, the ideas and values of our background culture start to again become the dominant influence over us, and the blood of Christ is only a whisper.

So, the approach we are going to take tonight is to look at Paul’s response to this situation as he found it in Ephesus. Paul simply goes back to an account of our status before we became Christians and then to a description of what it means to be Christian. In doing

this he is redefining for the Ephesian believers, and for us, what are the core concepts that underlie any truly Christian culture. Paul knows that it is only to the extent that God's people grasp these core ideas that we will be able to grow spiritually and have the confidence we need to stand humbly yet boldly in the face of a hostile worldly culture.

We are therefore going to look very quickly at ten terrible things that are true of any person who is not a Christian and then ten tremendous things that are true of anyone who is a Christian – ending with a closer look at three of these things that John Stott believes are the true hallmarks of a Christian culture, or what he calls 'God's New Society'.

2. Ten things that are true of anyone who is not a Christian

Now then, we will need to be nifty and well focused because we are going to go quickly through chapter 2 and pick out ten terrible truths about anyone who is born into this world and not yet converted to Christ. Don't try to recall everything at once; I really just want us to feel the weight of the whole list. Every one of us here tonight who is converted must appreciate that every single one of these things was once true of you. And if you are not yet a Christian, what we are going to see is God's picture of you now.

1. Chapter two verse 1 says that before we became Christians we were dead. The numberless times that we broke God's law and our constant failure to live up to his perfect moral standards gave evidence that there was no spiritual life in us at all.
2. The first part of verse two says that before we followed Jesus we followed the ways of this world and lived accordingly.
3. The rest of verse two states very plainly that non Christians, are following Satan. No other being can possibly be meant by the name: 'ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient'. All of us here too, and not just any from an animistic background, were once followers of the devil.

4. In verse three Paul states that the evidence that the Ephesian Christians were indeed once followers of the devil was that, characteristically, they would not question the thoughts, desires and cravings that came to them naturally but allowed themselves instead to be guided simply by what felt right naturally.
5. Paul then concludes, at the end of verse three that people just like us, who were spiritually dead and followed the world, the devil and our own sinful natures, were by our very natures objects of God's wrath. Sin is the natural self expression of human beings born into this world. Wrath is the essence of God's natural revulsion at this.
6. The Ephesian Christians who were formerly non-Jews, also had the ignominy of being despised rejected as outsiders by God's Old Testament people the Jews. In South African society our 'k' word, kaffir, originally meant pagan. But to be called it as a black person would have been a bit how it felt to be a Gentile within a Jewish culture. And, leaving aside the wrongness of social discrimination, Paul wants the Ephesians to feel that sin brings with it a similar, though quite justified, status as an untouchable. As sinners we deserve only to be on the rubbish dump of society. And the New Testament's word for hell is simply Gehenna, the place for burning rubbish.
7. But not only did their former status make the Ephesians into social outcasts in religious society, it also brought something far worse. In verse 12 Paul says '.. remember that at that time you were separate from Christ'. In chapter one Paul used the term 'in Christ' as shorthand for having access to all the blessing of salvation. To be separate from Christ means to be cut off from any salvation blessing whatsoever.
8. It goes on: anyone who is not a Christian is simply by definition excluded from citizenship in Israel. This means they had no standing with God at all. Even unbelieving Jews had at least access to the outward blessing of living in a God-oriented culture with all the security brought by having God's good laws in place.

9. And on: a non-Christian, according to Paul, is a foreigner to the covenants of the promise. The church should be the place where all God's great gospel promises are preached and heard. But non-Christians don't normally have access to the place where they might hear God's promise to save whoever believes in Jesus.
10. Finally, and as a result of all this terrible stuff, Paul concludes that non-Christians are simply without hope and without God in this world.

I just wonder whether, if we all spent more time remembering what our status was before we became Christians; whether we might appreciate verse 13 a bit more: "But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away, have now been brought near through the blood of Christ".

3. Ten things that are true of everyone who is a Christian

Now, let's turn to the blessings of being a Christian, which will surely be all the more appreciated by anyone who has fully absorbed that last terrible list. Once again, don't try to recall each point but just let the cumulative effect have its impact.

1. In chapter 2 verses four and five, Paul says 'But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive, even when we were dead in transgressions. The first blessing of salvation is to be made alive. Spiritual life was given to us. Without this we would not even be in a position appreciate any other blessing!
2. Then, also in verse five, and again in verse eight, he tells us that 'it is by grace that you have been saved'. Saved means rescued. Grace means God was good to us though we deserved to be left lost in our sin. And he uses our faith to achieve this, not our works, so that we will not be tempted to boast about our hand in the action.
3. And salvation doesn't just mean being pulled out and left gasping on the edge of the swimming pool, barely alive. Paul says that 'God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus – just as a way of expressing his

grace more fully and showing us, his treasures, off for ever in heaven.

4. In verse ten we see that a Christian is 'God's own workmanship', the deliberate work of a craftsman, and designed specifically to do things which bring honour to our God.
5. Verse 13 is the heart of it all: 'But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ'. The blood of Christ underlines the satisfaction God experiences that full atonement has been made for all our sins. We enemies have become God's friends through the costly initiative of Jesus' death.
6. Then, especially for Gentile Christians, it was such a relief to know that their relationship with God was secured in Jesus Christ and no longer through the embarrassing process of becoming a Jew first before they could have peace with God. Paul says in verse fourteen, 'He himself is our peace, who has made the two one, and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility that stood between Jews and Gentiles. But now, Christ's death gives equal status to Jews and Gentiles because all that the Jewish law ever demanded had now been completely fulfilled in Jesus.
7. Verses seventeen and eighteen go on to teach that peace between Jew and Gentile is only a token of the much greater peace, that between man and God. As proof of this peace, Paul says that both Gentiles and Jews have the same rights of access to God because access is mediated by the one Holy Spirit who is common to all believers.

And if this all is not enough, we then come to the three wonderful salvation privileges that John Stott writes about in the section of his commentary highlighted in your notes. In Stott's words, Paul 'pictures the new Jew Gentile community as God's kingdom, God's family and God's temple. Let's look at these three blessings a little closer.

8. Firstly, verses nineteen and twenty emphasise that these Gentile Christians have now acquired citizenship. Anyone who has been an immigrant or refugee will know the relief that comes when you finally get your permanent residence and then full

citizenship papers. Suddenly life becomes worthwhile because you know that you have the same rights as anyone else.

Once foreigners and aliens, in Israel, the Ephesians are now fellow citizens with God's people. And the wonderful thing is that this new kingdom is not just an extension of access rights to old Israel, but a completely new type of kingdom in which all are together. As John Stott says, 'God's kingdom is not a territorial jurisdiction or even a spiritual structure. God's kingdom is God himself ruling his people. And the reason that its citizens are free and secure is that our rights are built on the sure, infallible foundation of Jesus and his apostles.

9. But as well as being legally secure, God's people also have an even greater privilege. Our rights are just legal and technical. But they are family rights. We are members of God's own household.. He wants us to feel fully at home, no longer as minors but as fully fledged family members. Stott says the emphasis is on brothers living together not just children secure with their father. He wants us to experience that sense of belonging that we mentioned earlier on.

But it is a belonging that surpasses any merely felt sense of home that may be mediated through other cultures in this world. We do not want to despise such blessings. But this is different. We are brothers and sisters of God's own Son, with an eternally generated pedigree in place to guarantee our place in his home forever.

10. Now surely there is nowhere to go beyond such intimacy? God wanting us to belong to Him, living as His children? But in fact there is one level higher. Verse 22 says that "In Christ we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God himself lives by His Spirit".

For over a thousand years the focus of the worship of God's people was God's temple in Jerusalem. People, Gentiles included, would travel for days and weeks to have the glorious experience of worshipping God in his prescribed ways in the prescribed

place. But now, God is saying, 'I don't just want you to belong to me. I want to belong to you. In my Son Jesus Christ, I can no longer be complete without my people. What I am now doing through you my people, is to build the greatest home in the world. A place fitting not only for my princes and princesses in Christ to live; but for we ourselves to come and take up residence.

No more human temples. No more man made edifices. No more man made religion, whether magic or secular! But instead, a people in whom God lives by his spirit. Here was something to upstage even the most intimate worshippers of Artemis. And here is something for us all to feel so, so proud of. We, you and me, are being made into our God's final dwelling place.

Before we finish, we need to ask one last thing. In the case of all of these blessings, we need to ask what God's motive was and what was the power that brought about our transfer from the first terrible list to this second tremendous list. Paul would summarise his answer to both these questions in just one word – grace. To Paul, grace conveys everything that is central about God's character. It tells us why he does what he does; and it tells us how he does what he does.

Grace is both attitude and activity. In terms of attitude grace speaks of God's deep compassion to creatures made in his own image but destroying ourselves in the folly of sin. In terms of power, grace speaks of the infinite moral force which God the Father, God the Son and God Holy Spirit deployed as together they undertook the only action which could ever save sinners from Satan's clutches and hell itself.

It meant 'bearding' the devil in his own lair. It meant taking the flesh of sinful man and assuming the guilt of us sinners. For God the Father it meant placing on his own Son the punishment that was due to us. For the Lord who is the Spirit, it meant supernaturally upholding Jesus so that he could bear the infinite force of divine outrage poured out onto a human soul just like our own..

Try as he might – and he does try - Paul could never find enough words to express his amazement at grace. And in chapter three, he shares with us his further amazement that God should condescend even further to allow him a persecutor of Gentile Christians, to be the chosen channel of bringing the message of his grace to those who formerly had nothing. Paul knew that the power to live a Christian life comes ultimately from sheer amazement at grace.

4. Conclusion

I would like to conclude by coming back briefly to where we started. We learned at the beginning of this talk that it is the ideas which permeate a society that define the culture of the society. The society most permeated by its core beliefs and values is the one that will be most influential in the world. What we have just been through are the core facts that are the foundations of the Christian gospel. The reason that Paul has been so extraordinarily detailed and almost repetitive, is that he knows that it is only as these ideas permeate the very being of every Christian, that we will ever truly know what we are really about and what our mission in this world is. These gospel facts define us as Christians and they should set the agenda of our thoughts, words and deeds.

A Christian who is full to overflowing with the knowledge of these truths will inevitably bring these things to bear in all his or her decisions about everything in your life. It stands to reason. Whatever dominates our thinking, both individually and collectively, will determine the impact that we make on others in our society.

If the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not being perceived primarily as the people of the gospel that saves from people from sin and brings people to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then, according to Paul, we are a secular culture rather than a Christian culture.

But how can we get to the place where our minds are more dominated by these amazing sin truths and gospel truths? Once again, as in chapter one, Paul does not finish off simply with teaching. We saw last week that there is always a supernatural element to

being transformed in our minds so as to think God's thoughts not our own. Here similarly, Paul knows that if ever we are going to be overwhelmed with the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ's gracious saving work on the cross for us, it is going to need supernatural power.

We need the Holy Spirit to work that love into our minds and hearts until it is so strong in all of us that, whether we are Xhosa or Shangaan, Zulu or Afrikaner, Bushman or British, the world will see the same thing. They will see a people united in their appreciation for what Jesus once did to save us from our sins and raise us up to be his holy heavenly family.

For this to happen we need to pray, and pray, and pray for God to fill us with an understanding of his grace. So let's finish by reading the amazing prayer that Paul has given us in chapter three, from verse fourteen to twenty one.

“For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

CHRIST CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE - BIBLE GROUP TRAINING

‘WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?’

WEEK 3: 20 JANUARY 2009: GODS WAY OF GROWING HIS CHURCH

Thoughts from last week . . .

Going back to the first talk in this series we saw from Ephesians chapter one that Christianity begins not with our choice of God but rather with God choosing us in Christ in eternity past and that his strategy in choosing us to be his people is that we should be the means of revealing his glory first for a time in this world and for ever in the next.

Then, last week in chapters 2 and 3, we learned that Paul’s tactic to enable Christians to realise God’s overall strategy, was to ensure that the mindset of Christians is dominated by clear thinking about the desperate dangers of sin and the amazing grace of salvation: We saw this in ‘ten terrible truths about sin’ and ‘ten tremendous truths about salvation’.

Tonight we move on from the classroom of strategy and tactics to the training ground of Christian character formation. Then, and only then, according to Paul, will the Ephesian Christians be ready for spiritual battle. But that is the subject of next week’s talk.

1. Introduction

Throughout these talks I have been referring to the idea of Christian culture. I have indicated that a culture is a grouping of people who are defined by a set of core ideas and values. Successful cultures are ones in which these central ideas and values become internalised among the group members to such an extent that they become almost tangible and contribute to a strong sense of belonging and comfort.

When this stage of ‘inculturation’ of a group’s ideas is achieved, its ability to influence others is enormously enhanced. This is because people can literally see and feel the culture. The core ideas begin to make more sense to outsiders because they are being modelled as well as verbalised.

Now, as an evangelist, Paul obviously wanted the Ephesian churches, and all his other churches, including ours here in Johannesburg, to have the maximum possible influence for God in the world. But it is so interesting that he never attempts to take a shortcut to gospel effectiveness by simply telling Christians to tell others about Jesus.

It seems rather, that he wants Christians to be so infused with knowledge of the truth about God and his salvation that absolutely everything about the way we think and speak and act in the world is a clear signpost to the world of eternal reality. It is as if the unbelieving world outside of the church is then forced to engage with the gospel message with every one of its senses.

Think of holiness for example. To God, holy living brings a sweet smelling aroma. In the sad world that we live in, true righteousness and holiness can be such a breath of fresh air to people steeped in the darkness of sin that thoughts of hope and God may emerge.

Think of truth, which in the bible is often conveyed with the metaphor of light. Truth can be seen. It brings light and clarity into a world where lies and confusion are the norm.

Think of salt. Christians are called to be the salt of the earth. Salt is designed to make good things taste better and to stop things going rotten. As Christians internalise and live out the truth about being saved from sin and brought into God's gracious salvation, people in the world can almost literally 'taste and see that the LORD is good'.

That's three senses; what about touch? I have already said that in cultures where the core ideas are internalised and lived out in community, there is an almost tangible sense of protection and comfort. Love is supposed to be tangible. The apostle James says as much when warning that faith without deeds is dead. He is sympathising with those poor Christians who quite legitimately may be thinking 'if I can't touch love it doesn't exist.

And finally hearing. People come to faith in Christ by hearing and then believing the truth of the gospel as Paul indicates in Romans chapter ten. This is vital. But Paul knows that a church that engages only the hearing of the world without engaging its smell, sight, taste and feel, will be like a car trying to go with most of its cylinders out of action. There will be smells alright, and probably dirty smoke to see; and the acrid taste of unburnt fuel. The ride will feel bumpy, and there will certainly be sounds.

But what overall impression do you think will be given to passers by. Are they going to be convinced that this is the solution to humanity's travel needs? Yet this can be precisely the effect that the church may have in the world if we neglect the lesson of Ephesians that the church is supposed to be a community so comprehensively Christian that the blind can 'see' it, the deaf can 'hear' it and those dead in their sins can't ignore it.

We have mentioned before that the churches in Ephesus were not doctrinally off beam, nor were they slipping into open sin. But somehow they were losing direction and also losing their ability to make a difference in the world they lived in. Instead of influencing the surrounding culture for Christ, they were starting to slip back into it themselves.

Now this can happen in any church. If it is not happening with us then let's be very realistic with ourselves and realise that it could happen. And the best way of making sure that one is not going backwards is to be absolutely certain that you are going forwards! That is why Paul moves on in chapters four and five of his epistle to speak about growth in the Christian life. If we at Christ Church Blairgowrie want to ensure that we influence the world around us for Christ more than it influences us for its purposes, then we need to know how to grow as Christians.

Spiritual growth starts by remembering the eternal realities behind our salvation as we saw in the first talk. It then goes on, as we saw in the second talk, to recalibrating our moral compasses around the twin reference points of the awful realities of sin and the amazing grace of God's salvation. And now, having re-established the Ephesians' spiritual bearings, Paul moves on to reminding them of how spiritual growth actually happens and this is the heart of tonight's talk. We will look at Paul's teaching on spiritual growth under the following three headings:

- The nature of the church and its role in our growth 4:1-16
- The nature of conversion and its necessity for any spiritual growth 4:17-24
- The nature of Christian morality as evidence of church growth 4:25 - 5:21

2. The nature of the church and its role in our growth

Paul's very first point about how spiritual growth works is his insistence that the church is very different from any other organisation in society. In verses three to six of chapter four he notes that by its very nature the church is a spiritual community. By this Paul does not mean a religious community as such. What he means is that the church as a community is defined by reference to the person of God. Because God is a spirit, and indeed a triune spirit, the church is by definition a spiritual organism not a human organisation. And because the Spirit of God who called the church into existence is defined by his essential holiness, his church must be defined primarily by its holiness; that is by its ability to model the character of its originator.

Because of this, Paul commences his teaching on spiritual growth by an exhortation to the Ephesian Christians to be aware of the essentially spiritual and moral nature of the church. 'I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received'. Be in awe of what it is that you are part of. Pride and arrogance are out of place. Instead, humility, gentleness and patience are the immediate responses that Paul expects from anyone who has even the vaguest realisation that to be a Christian means to be God's holy people, joined together by the Holy Spirit in order to model the holy character of God.

Paul therefore urges us to keep the unity of the Spirit because it is the one Holy Spirit who is in everyone and anyone who is a Christian. Furthermore, we all have the one and the same head, the Lord Jesus Christ; one set of doctrinal teachings, and one heavenly Father. It is this essential spiritual unity on which Paul now builds his teaching about how Christ's spiritual community grows.

From verse 7 through to verse 16 Paul then teaches that the growth of the church involves partnership between three main parties: the Lord Jesus himself; his called and ordained ministers, and God's people generally. We will look quickly at the role of each party because if even one party is not fulfilling the role allocated by God, then the church will either grow in a very lopsided manner, or it will simply not grow at all.

Firstly, the role of the church's head, Jesus Christ. Verse seven says that Christ does three things to ensure that his church grows: first, he gives grace to each one of us. Last week we learned that grace involves both attitude and action. So, from his place of glory in heaven, Jesus gives to all his people the spiritual power to develop Christian attitudes and the moral power to act in Christian ways.

The second thing that Jesus does, or rather did, to 'grow' his church was to establish a foundation of truth. To do this he gave apostles and prophets, who preached the gospel in the immediate period after his resurrection and who, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, also gave us the written works which we now know as the bible.

And the third thing Jesus does is give us the teachers care for and to build up the church by carefully applying the foundational teachings we have just mentioned.

Turning now to the second party in the church growth partnership, we have the called and appointed ministers. What is their role? Firstly it is vital to remember that called and appointed ministers of God's word are Christ's gift to the church from heaven and need to be valued as such. And what is their role? Again there are three things: firstly they have a mandate to conform their teaching to the foundation of truth that Jesus has established.

Secondly Christ's ministers are to be totally committed to their high calling. Paul gives us a flavour of the degree of commitment that is involved in the work of ministering God's word in verse one. He refers to himself as 'a prisoner for the Lord'. Now although he probably wrote this letter from an actual prison, I think that he was drawing on his immediate circumstance to highlight the fact that Christian ministry is a total calling. Paul laid aside all other calls on his career and gave himself wholly to his calling. Those entering the ministry need to remember this; the church's growth depends on their total, sacrificial dedication to God's calling on their lives.

The third role of the ministers of God's word is, as we see in verse twelve, 'to prepare God's people for works of service'. I could say more on this ministerial task here but I think it is more appropriate to say it in the context of the role of God's people generally.

We have seen what the Lord Jesus Christ does to make sure his church grows, and we have seen what he requires of his gospel ministers. But now let's look at the third member of the church growth partnership. You and me. What does the Lord require of us, the normal members of his church? Because it is clear from this passage of Scripture that the church does not grow unless all three elements in the spiritual organism are functionally properly.

Again I can identify three things. First we are meant to engage in works of service. What sort of works? Paul does not specify but he does say that our works of service are designed to build up the body of Christ till we all reach unity in the faith and attain to a maturity in our knowledge of Christ. So I would reckon that he has in mind things that bring us together in doing things specifically because we are Christians and based on our ever deepening understanding of the implications of Christ's saving work for us.

In chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans Paul gives some insights into the sort of things he thinks should follow from our understanding of the gospel. In precisely the same context of teaching about the functioning of the body of the church as Christ's body, Paul lists things such as teaching, serving generally, encouraging, giving to meet others' needs, leading or governing and simply showing mercy in a cheerful manner.

But before listing specific works of service, Paul had used an amazing all encompassing term for what he wanted to see in response to the amazing grace of salvation. 'offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship'. The normal Christian life of normal church members is to be characterised by sacrificial service. We have seen how the Lord Jesus calls for a truly sacrificial lifestyle from all his gospel ministers. If we want to see truly sacrificial lifestyles continuing among our church's ministers it follows that we must respond in truly sacrificial works of service.

That was the first element in our role us as normal everyday Christians. The second is seen in verse. If our first task is active works of service, our second is about preparing our minds to understand what is going on in the world. In verse fourteen, Paul is anticipating that as a result of our getting along side of people and serving them, we will also start to become familiar with all the bad ideas out there in the world that cause damage and confusion and spiritual darkness. And he expects that as we serve we will find ourselves progressively becoming able to withstand dodgy spiritual ideas and useless worldly philosophies. We will learn that just as it is that our gospel truth builds people up, so the worthless philosophies of the world drag people down.

This leads us on to the third role of every Christian like us. See verse fifteen: our role is to keep on 'speaking the truth in love'. If serving has the effect of clearing our minds about false teaching, it also opens doors for speaking true gospel teaching.

In summary, the open secret of church growth is for Jesus to do his work; our ministers to do theirs and we to do ours. Jesus Christ of course cannot and will not fail. But because the church is an organic spiritual whole, I sometimes wonder if there is a mysterious way in which he links the intensity of his work in growing a church to the intensity of the obedience of his ministers and ordinary members. He sacrificed his life to save us. Surely we, ministers and members alike, should be doing no less to see that we become a community that really brings honour to him!

3. The nature of conversion and its necessity for any spiritual growth

More briefly I want to next talk about a very important doctrinal issue that Paul deals with in verses seventeen to twenty four. It is something that John Stott rightly highlights in his commentary. And it is the true nature of conversion. We have already seen that the church as a body is spiritual in nature. But the apostle Paul and Stott following him closely want us also to be aware that an individual Christian is also an essentially spiritual being. Let me explain.

In verses seventeen to nineteen, Paul is starting to tell the Ephesian Christians what the difference is between a Christian culture and a pagan culture. Although the difference shows in behaviour, Paul states that the clearest evidence of being an unconverted pagan is the futility of one's thinking. Pagan Ephesians are, according to Paul, 'darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is within them due to the hardening of their hearts'. They live immoral lifestyles because they think godless thoughts.

In verses twenty to twenty four, Paul contrasts this to what has happened to his Christian believers. He reminds them that in coming to know Christ they had in effect, put off their old nature, the old self, and put on a completely new nature, a nature created afresh by God. A nature designed to progressively show what the true righteousness and holiness of God look like.

John Stott insists, and I agree with him, that the way that most bible versions translate this passage miss the point and have Paul commanding the Ephesians to put off their old natures and put on new natures. But in the original Greek, he is really reminding them that they had been taught that, in Christ, they had in principle already exchanged their sinful natures for the new nature. They had been born again. They had been regenerated.

And it is precisely because in Christ they have new natures, that Paul is commanding them to no longer live as the Gentiles do. In other words Paul is urging that a Christian lifestyle must start emerging from the new Christian natures. Without the new spiritual life within the individual believers, there can be no spiritual growth. John Stott puts it as follows: 'It is [only] because we have already put off our old nature, in that decisive act of repentance called conversion, that we can logically be commanded to put away all the practices which belong to that old and rejected life'.

Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ are the way to receiving new life from God. These visible, human acts are the evidence of the invisible work of God in bringing about that 'new creation' that we call a Christian. Because it is in this way that God adds to his

church, the clear implication of Paul's teaching here is that the church cannot grow unless people receive new life.

4. The nature of Christian morality as evidence of church growth

Now as we turn to the final section this evening about the actual moral character of the church, some people may be wondering why I have made so much of the points about the essentially spiritual nature of the church and the radically spiritual nature of Christian conversion. The reason is this. Many of the moral injunctions that we are going to look at right now could well be taught by other moral communities. Muslim culture for example might assent at least to many of the moral calls made on Christians by Paul. Quite often one may find agnostic and even atheistic cultures espousing similarly high moral values to those we are going to look at.

But however ethical any other cultures may become as a result of the relative rightness of their beliefs and behaviour, it is not the same as Christian culture. Christian culture is not only ethical, it is spiritual. It is not only temporal in its outlook, it is eternal. It is not only humanistic in its concern, it is Christ and God honouring.

The point I am making is that in Christian culture, we can never allow our morals to become divorced from our Christian heritage. The context of our moral living is the eternal purposes of God to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, Jesus Christ. Our moral compasses are calibrated against the ten terrible truths about sin and the ten tremendous truths about salvation by grace. Our moral lives have a meaning that is lacking in any other culture however high its ethical standards may be.

I hope I can make the point as we quickly go through some of the moral exhortations that Paul makes from chapter four, verse 25 through to chapter five, verse 21. What I hope to show is that although some of these injunctions may be shared by other cultures, Paul makes them distinctively Christian by giving a Christian reason for virtually every moral exhortation that he makes. Let's have a look at a few before I try to draw things to a conclusion.

Verse twenty five: ‘put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour’. Most cultures could go along with this. Truth is good; lies are bad. But look at Paul’s reason: ‘for we are all members of one body’.

Verse twenty eight: ‘do not steal; but work and do something useful with your hands’. Most cultures and even legal systems go along with that. In the UK a new law is putting a lot of pressure on people out of work to get back into work. But the reason is to save state funds not to enable people to share with those in need which is the reason Paul gives.

Verse thirty two: ‘be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other’. Kindness and compassion can be seen in many traditional cultures. Forgiveness is less common but not unknown among non-Christian peoples. But Paul urges forgiveness not as a moral bonus, but because ‘in Christ, God forgave you’.

In chapter five, verse three Paul speaks against immorality, impurity and greed. And there are certainly those in nominally Christian environments who would go along with some of this at least. In Africa we are being forced to face up to the desperate health dangers that go with immoral and impure acts. And in the context of the current global credit crisis we often hear of greed on Wall Street being blamed. But what does Paul say? ‘simply that ‘these are improper for God’s holy people’.

Chapter five verse 18: ‘do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery’. When we were in the UK in December there was great concern about violence and debauchery that was being attributed to excessive drinking resulting partly from a major relaxation of the regulation of pubs. So secular cultures may well agree completely with Paul in regard to the moral injunction itself. But where other than in a Christian culture could you add, ‘but be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord’.

The implication of all this is that when spiritual growth starts to happen in the church it will indeed show itself in a lot of personal moral transformation. But it will be more than just an outward moral compliance. It will be an understanding desire to live a life worthy of the Lord who has saved us.

In its morality, a Christian culture has its eyes on pleasing God, whereas secular cultures will be content with a morality that simply fosters social order. In a Christian culture, moral behaviour is the outcome of a prior spiritual transformation. In secular culture it is at best a means of bringing the greatest happiness to the greatest number (and perhaps too at the lowest cost!).

Ultimately, in a Christian culture, morality is an expression of our personal relationship with a divine being, something unheard of even in other religious cultures like Islam and Hinduism, or even in nominal Christianity. Where else but in a Christian culture could you find a place for moral injunctions such as: ‘do not grieve the Holy Spirit’, or ‘be imitators of God as dearly loved children’; ‘now you are light in the Lord; live as children of the light’; understand what the Lord’s will is’; and ‘submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In summary of this section, I just want to ensure that we all understand that church growth is not simply ethical development. It is this, but as we have seen, people from other cultures can sometimes exhibit quite wonderful examples of high ethical behaviour. There are heroes of moral endeavour from many cultures around the world. The idea of noble behaviour catches the imagination of all cultures.

But ethical performance and even growth is not the same as spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is a product of spiritual life. Spiritual growth always acknowledges its source. Tonight in the inauguration ceremony for Barack Obama, Rick Warren ended his prayer for the new presidency ‘in the Name of the one who has saved and transformed my life – Jesus’. That is Christian ethic. And Christian culture is culture where the dominating influence on ethical behaviour is not social functionality or economic viability or even

human happiness. Rather it is a culture where all ethical endeavour is undertaken in the power of a gracious acknowledgement of the mercy of God in Christ.

5. Conclusion

There is no long conclusion tonight because I want you to have a lot of time to consider the question in the practical session. But here, quickly, is a summary:

- In a Christian culture love should be tangible

- In a Christian culture, all stakeholders in Christ's church play their part fully:
 - Jesus Christ builds his church on his once and for all sacrifice on the cross
 - Ministers of the gospel build the church through their sacrificial commitment to preaching the gospel, and
 - Every church member builds the church through our sacrificial service in response to the above

- The church grows as new members are born from above and put off the old self and put on the new self

- The church grows as its members express their new life in Christ by acknowledging him in every type of righteousness and holy endeavour

CHRIST CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE - BIBLE GROUP TRAINING

‘WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?’

WEEK 4: 27 JANUARY 2009: GOD’S WAY OF ENGAGING THE WORLD

Thoughts from previous weeks . . .

In the past three weeks we have seen that Paul is dealing with a situation in which the churches in Ephesus were being sucked back into the magic influenced thought patterns of their former culture. Instead of them influencing the world for Christ, the thinking in churches was being influenced by the pagan world around them. To Paul, the giveaway symptom was not any open sin or doctrinal aberration, but rather that the Ephesian Christians appeared to be losing their previous passionate love for Jesus.

Interestingly, Paul does not respond by attacking the background pagan culture head on. There is no ‘Beware of the idol Artemis’; or even ‘You shall have no other gods before me’. For Paul knew that outward behaviour is an expression of the state of people’s minds and hearts; and that the state of people’s minds and hearts reflects the strength with which the core ideas and values in a culture are being grasped.

So, before getting onto moral exhortations and eventually the practicalities of spiritual warfare, Paul sought first to lift the minds and hearts of the believers back to the glorious place where their salvation had its origins, in Christ in heaven. This is what we looked at in the first talk which I have called simply, ‘glory’. Then, in our second talk, we saw how Paul explained in great detail, how the glory of God has been expressed by saving people like us, lost in sin, without hope and without God in the world. He did this by showing amazing grace to us through Christ’s death. Therefore, ‘grace’ summarised that talk.

Then, last week, we saw that the sort of transformation that is the only reasonable response to glory and grace, has to start with new life, or regeneration. Without new life, there can be no spiritual growth. And the kind of growth Paul wants to see is not just better ethical compliance with a set of moral rules. Instead, Paul calls on the Ephesian Christians to demonstrate their relationship to God by growing in the kinds of behaviour that reveal his character. Naturally, the talk was summarised by the word ‘growth’.

1. Introduction

But, as we shall see this evening, Christian moral growth doesn’t take place in a vacuum. It takes place first and foremost in real life social situations. And, secondly, it takes place against a backdrop of a real spiritual dimension. The social context of spiritual growth is seen in Paul’s teaching on marriage, home and work and the spiritual context in his teaching on spiritual warfare, both of which we will be looking at tonight.

Paul has already introduced the spiritual or supernatural context of his teaching in his letter, and I mentioned in the first talk that one of the reasons for this is that Paul was aware of how the Ephesians' background had made them very sensitive to supernatural reality. But their exposure to the spirit world was an unclean and dangerous exposure. Paul is using this letter to teach them that the only clean, safe way to engage the supernatural world was through Jesus Christ who has ultimate authority over both the spiritual and physical realms. And Jesus manifests this rule here on earth by revealing himself to sinners and transforming their lives. His superiority over all other spiritual powers is seen mainly through the transformed lives in the church.

The implication is that God's way for Christians to engage in spiritual warfare is not to have direct dealings with the devil's kingdom, the way that the Ephesians used to engage in, but instead for his saved people to live practical godly lives in society, all the while recollecting the gospel truths by which Jesus himself has dealt the death blow to Satan.

How this works out in practice is what tonight's talk is all about. We will be looking at God's ways of engaging the world or, more accurately, engaging the spiritual realm that lies behind what we call 'the world'. In the context of the overall theme of these talks, 'What is Christian Culture' we can also say that what we are looking at tonight is what God's new society look like when it is successfully engaging with other cultures.

God's new society is the church. And if a church is to have a bigger impact on the world than the world has on it then it needs to be comprehensively and, I think we can also say, even successfully Christian. According to Paul, such success will reveal itself in the following four areas:

- **Married life** – or how we understand, and model, Christ's love to society
- **Family life** – or how we understand, and impart, God's moral law to society
- **Work life** – or how we understand, and implement, God's mercy in society

- **Spiritual life** – or how we understand, and deploy, God’s spiritual defences to enable us to keep on standing strong as we get involved in society in the above ways

2. Married life

Chapter five verse twenty two to thirty three are the most comprehensive statement on Christian marriage in the whole New Testament. Although Paul does write at more length in 1 Corinthians chapter seven, there he is responding to particular problems that have been brought to his attention. Here, on the other hand, he is simply stating what marriage is all about. It is the ideal or template for a marriage that will work well and so bring honour to God.

But following Paul’s own way of thinking, I want to ask: why does he bring in teaching about marriage here in the first place? As far as we know there was not an issue in this area as there clearly had been in the church at Corinth? So why talk about marriage in such detail and with such intimate and spiritual language?

To answer this we need to stand back a bit and see what Paul has been saying about the church throughout this letter. In chapter 1 verse twenty three we read that the church is Christ’s body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. In chapter two verses twenty one and twenty two, Paul says that the church is a holy temple, being built to become a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit. In chapter three verse ten, we see that God’s purpose is that through the church his manifold wisdom is to be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. And then, in the amazing prayer at the end of chapter three we see that God wants his church to be the place where there is such an extraordinary level of mutual, intimate knowledge between Christ and his people, that the church will be a lamp which burns throughout eternity with God’s glory.

Now, put yourself in Paul’s shoes. What aspect of human relationships should he focus on that will best enable Christians to demonstrate visibly in a dark, sinful world these amazing truths about what salvation means? Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us. Jesus wants us to be the most beautiful object in heaven one day. God the Father longs to see his Son’s human happiness completed. He has a photo of his Jesus’ church on the

mantelpiece of his lounge. He can't wait for Jesus and his beloved church to be together for ever. So, how else to communicate to the unbelieving world such intense love than to model it in our marriages?

Paul knows that Christian love will seem strange to the unbelieving world. In John's first letter, chapter three, he wonders 'what manner of love is this that we should be called the children of God? It's unreal. It's unearthly. But yet we must somehow be able to give to the world a flavour of what Christ's love is really like. And this is why Paul gives this teaching on marriage.

If Christian marriages really do model Christ's love in the way that Paul describes in these verses, then things will start to stir in the world. Christian marriage challenges other cultures like nothing else in the world ever can. Love and gentleness shown to the precious 'weaker vessel' as Peter describes wives in his letter, can be a more powerful way of intercultural penetration than a thousand words. A Christian wife's humble submission yet evident total fulfilment can be a greater rebuke to a proud Islamic scholar or great Zulu chief than years of patient instruction.

And such attitudes do not need to be restricted to those who are married. Linda and I had the privilege of knowing a man called Dr. Lionel Gurney. He was the founder of the Red Sea Mission Team which works among Muslims in the Red Sea coastal countries and elsewhere. He was never married, even though he must have been a tall, powerful and handsome man in his younger years. But his attitude to women never stopped provoking questions among the Muslims among whom he worked. They couldn't understand how such an important, impressive looking man could be so gentle, thoughtful and caring towards the many women who worked in the mission.

We might nowadays regard some of this great man's ways as a bit soppy. But the lady missionaries didn't because it was such a refreshing change from the way they were generally treated in the societies in which they worked.

And Dr. Gurney, without speaking a word to these Muslim men, initially, had already revealed the character of a very different God to their Allah. And when he did speak to them of the Lord Jesus, a way to their ears had already been paved via their hearts and consciences!

Marriage and the status of women in marriage and society are among the best indicators of a culture's knowledge of God. For example, Geneva in the 1540s and 50s, was spoken of as a 'women's paradise! How so? Wasn't this where John Calvin preached so powerfully on election, predestination, sin, salvation and regeneration that some in later generations of Christians have felt embarrassed at him going over the top with his insistence on biblical orthodoxy? Maybe so. But at the time, one of the most tangible effects of Calvin's preaching was to breed such a degree of freedom and respect for marriage and for women generally, that in comparison to the lot of women in the surrounding cultures, Geneva was called a paradise.

How can Christian people, both married and singles make a powerful stand against both the western secular and African animistic strands of modern culture? We can do this by ensuring that the quality of our marriages and the character of our male-female relations generally, are real live working models of the sacrificial love and sacrificial submission that Jesus showed in becoming our Saviour.

You may think that this is not easy to achieve. I will agree with you. It's always going to be a battle. Marriage and the purity of male female relations generally, are probably top of Satan's hit list for unravelling Christian culture. And this is precisely why Paul places marriage at the very centre of the way in which churches engage in spiritual warfare. It is here more than anywhere else that we demonstrate the depth of our understanding of the gospel. When Christian marriages consistently reveal the depths of Christ's love, then we are getting closer to being a Christian culture. And, as I have been saying all along, when Christianity becomes truly inculturated in this way, the tide of influence will begin to shift towards the church influencing the world, and not the other way round.

3. Family life

The second theatre of Christian warfare is related to the first. But as we shall see, the focus switches from revealing Christ's love, to revealing his law.

There is a principle in the spiritual life that while salvation itself, that is our acceptance as righteous in God's eyes, is never a product of our obedience, our enjoyment of salvation and usefulness as Christians is indeed linked to our obedience. This was evident throughout the history of Israel. When the people of God failed to honour God in covenant obedience, God first warned and then took action. One of the main evidences of the Lord's displeasure with his people was that he allowed their enemies to gain victories over them. They were no longer able to hold their ground in battles. And the result was misery.

In New Testament times it is very easy to imagine that this principle no longer applies. Do we get so blasé about salvation being free that we forget that sanctification is suppose to follow justification? And though sanctification is also a product of grace it is different from justification. Justification is an act of God's free grace on our behalf. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace within us. As such it entails our obedient cooperation.

Just as with Israel in the Old Testament, so with the church in the New Testament, if we are lax in our obedience to God's law we will find ourselves becoming less and less able to stand against the devil's temptations. And before we know it we look rather like the world from which we are supposed to have been saved.

Now where is the habit of obedience to God's law best learned? According to the bible, the habit of obedience is learned in families. So when Paul moves on in chapter six to talk about children obeying parents, he is not suddenly moving from his main subject of how to arrest backsliding into the world. He is again laying a foundation. He knows that covenant obedience is a key not only to enjoying the blessings of salvation but also to spiritual robustness in the church.

Who knows how much of the relative weakness of churches in influencing the world is as a result of God allowing us to taste the consequences of lackadaisical attention to his holy law? Have we allowed ourselves to be influenced by that version of the gospel that says that once we are saved we no longer owe any moral duty to God? I believe we may need to think this one through a bit more than we realise. God has saved us to be holy and holiness is measured, at least in part by our obedience. Obedience to God's law is also a measure of our love for Christ. Jesus says if you love me keep my commandments.

If the churches are to recover this sense of holiness through covenant obedience, then Paul lays the responsibility for this actually occurring squarely on the fathers in the church. Covenant obedience, which as we have seen is a vital component of being able to resist Satan's attacks on the church, does not come about automatically. It happens through fathers both modelling and teaching their children what it means to fear the Lord.

It is clear from verse four that this does not mean being harsh. Paul clearly says: 'do not exasperate your children'. Children usually get exasperated when they notice that what they are being taught does not tie up with what they are seeing in their parents. So, in order to teach our children obedience to the Lord, there will have to be very visible obedience to the Lord in the lives of parents, and fathers in particular.

I want to make a special plea, therefore, to all of us who are fathers. Do we realise that the future stability of the church; its ability to stand against Satan's attacks depends on us? Do we realise that the church's ability to influence the world more than we are influenced by it depends on whether our own personal thinking is so influenced by the gospel that our children know instinctively that Dad is disciplining me because he fears the Lord.

What I am saying, in other words, is that Christian culture is ultimately built by Christian men demonstrating Christian character in the way they train their children. If we have a culture that is more worldly than Christian, it unfortunately says a lot about the priorities

of fathers in our society. Interestingly, I think that this is something that Angus Buchan has picked up on. It seems that in some of his rallies he has made a very strong plea to men to repent before the Lord and again take up their rightful duties as spiritual leader and teacher in the home. Buchan understands that if there is to be a significant spiritual recovery in our country then fathers need to be convinced that the spiritual nurture of their families is far more important than any other demand on their time.

One of the reasons why Afrikaner culture, at its best, has made such a powerful impact on this country is this: that father was respected not only as head of the family socially but also its representative before the throne of God. 'Boekevat', reading the bible and praying together as a family after dinner, was once an integral part of Afrikaner society. The bible was given a central place and, in the best homes, and children knew that Papa really meant business when he brought the family before God in prayer.

There will be no Christian culture in our country until we fathers again accord this degree of priority to the bible, first in our own lives and hence, in our homes.

4. Work life

Now then, let us turn to the world of work and see whether here too Paul has more to say than might at first meet the eye. In what ways may the work environment prove to be a spiritual battleground and a place where we can demonstrate the supernatural before a generally sceptical world? For the workplace is where the most public encounter between church and world occurs. It is where most adults spend most of their waking hours. If the tide of influence between Christian and worldly cultures is going to be revealed anywhere it is surely here.

On the surface, it would seem that Christian influence in the work place is all about attitude. Certainly it is for employees. How will a boss distinguish between Christian and non Christian employees? It is not often in the technical quality of work delivered because well trained and disciplined non Christians are generally just as good if not better than their Christian counterparts at actually doing a job of work. Paul does not call on

Christians to excel technically to prove that they really are Christians. Neither does he say ensure that you prosper if you really want the Lord to be honoured.

Instead he says something far more demanding and radical. ‘Obey your employers just as you would obey Christ’, i.e. wholeheartedly and not with an eye to immediate recognition but to a reward that will come to us simply for pleasing him. Have you ever thought that in this way bosses may come to learn something of Christ not from what they see in the employee but what they experience in themselves?

Not many bosses these days are treated with the intrinsic respect that is due to proper authority. Many don’t deserve it. But I am sure that Paul didn’t need the likes of us to inform him what typical worldly bosses can be like. He will have been very well aware. Remember that one big boss in Ephesus was also very influential in the silversmith guild. When he saw trade in his Artemis idols declining he stoked up a riot. Can you imagine what it might have been like dealing with the likes of him? Yet Paul still says obey your employer as you would obey Christ.

Imagine yourself as a really tough, and perhaps sometimes unthinking, unfeeling boss. Most people resent you and are uncomfortable in your presence. You know that they talk about you behind your back and that just makes you worse. But then there is this one young woman who quietly bears with you. She listens more carefully than others to what you say. She is not the star of the show but she is not cowed by you but at the same time shows a deferential attitude. You can’t understand it but somehow her presence makes you feel better. It seems to soften you. With her around you somehow feel more comfortable with your authority but less given to your normal bouts of temper.

Over time you are so struck with her attitude that you call her in and ask her what makes her less bitter than the others and willing in her work even when he is not around.

‘There is a reason Sir’, she says. ‘But I am not sure whether you may agree with it’.

‘Look’, says the boss, more gently than she has ever heard him speak, ‘I’ve asked you so just tell me what it is’. ‘Well, Sir, I just try to imagine that you are really governing the

business in my Lord Jesus' place and if he were here I would try to serve him just as I do you'.

Maybe a bit far fetched? I wonder. In the practical session afterwards we will ask one another whether we have ever seen a non-Christian so impressed by a Christian's godly attitude in the workplace that it has actually led to a question. This young woman simply obeyed what Paul teaches here and then was ready to give a reason for the hope that she had when the boss asked her. Similar attitude lessons are here for Christian bosses but we will also cover these in one of the questions in the practical session.

We all experience the pressure of the world and perhaps quite rightly speak of the devil having a go at us through people set over us, or indeed under us. And Paul knew that this is in fact precisely how the devil works to tempt Christians to behave in work just like any other person would. But what if all Christians started to take Paul seriously and treat their bosses like they would the Lord Jesus himself; and treat our employees as if we and they served the same Master, Jesus. This would be big surprises for many bosses and many workers. But it would also be shock horrors for the hordes of hell. Aaarrggh, the cry would go up in hell. They've rumbled us. The Christians are taking Paul seriously again. Man the pumps, we're sinking. Would that hell would sink in its influence over God's people. But just think; here in simple injunctions about the world of work, Paul is introducing us to effective strategies to turn back the powers of hell in our society.

But perhaps becoming culturally Christian like this in the work place is a call too far for you. You don't know how things have changed in my office. You don't know my boss. He knows nothing. He's not only incompetent; he's also corrupt and uncaring. There's no more accountability. Skill is no longer acknowledged. Experience is shown no respect. Any semblance of Christian ethic or responsibility is dying. This is just not on.

My friends, I know. I have been there too. In the workplace, the worst will often be thought of a Christian until all other options have been eliminated. And any underlying good in us might not be acknowledged until ten years after one has left! But does that

make it any more right to be just like other workers? Surely we realise that we are not ultimately fighting against human beings but against spiritual forces of evil.

Thus far in his advice on the practical deployment of Christian truth in an ungodly world Paul has not come to the fact that the battle is spiritual. But I hope that you have been able to see that in fact marriage home and work are actually the places where the spiritual battle rages most strongly. And they are also the places where the stand against the devil has the most practical aspect of all. The passionate gospel love of Christ can be demonstrated through our marriages. The covenant obedience to God's law needs to be nurtured in our homes. And the merciful, forgiving heart of the gospel can be demonstrated in our workplaces to those wretches, our bosses, who deserve it the least!

5. Spiritual life

But finally, and especially for who may be somewhat spiritually hard of hearing, Paul actually spells out what is actually going on behind the forces that try to destroy society. Here in the book of Ephesians, and almost nowhere else in his writings, he lifts the veil on the awful world behind visible reality. The devil and his angels really do exist. The Ephesians were familiar with the supernatural because of their magic influenced culture. But they didn't realise how dangerous it is. They thought that direct contact with the spirit world was quite acceptable. But Paul has made it clear that the only acceptable way of engaging with the supernatural is through the Lord Jesus Christ, the ruler of both the spiritual and material realms.

And, in these last verses Paul summarises his whole message. He has been writing about how to recover spiritual fervour and to avoid being drawn back into the culture of the world around us. He started by taking us up into the glories of eternity past and the purpose of God in Christ to bring us through to eternity future. He then describes the devastating destruction that sin wreaks in the world and in human lives and contrasts this with the amazing grace by which Jesus has purchased for us reconciliation with God and reconciliation with any human enemies. He has taught that the growing godliness that should follow our understanding of these things is only possible if we have been renewed

inwardly by the power of the Holy Spirit. And finally we have seen that he expects Christians to show true grit as we stand for truth and righteousness in our marriages and homes and places of work.

So, why then this addendum on spiritual warfare? Most sermons I have heard on these verses focus on the various pieces of the armour and explain how each piece works. That is good. But because I think that Paul is simply reemphasising here all he has already said about the need to understand gospel truth if we are going to survive as Christians, I have decided to pass over the usual exercise and instead draw your attention to some of the more general points that Paul is making as he goes through these truths.

The first point I think we should be struck by is Paul's repetition of the word 'stand'. The second point can be seen in the three terms: 'in the Lord' in verse ten; 'of God' in verse eleven and 'in the Spirit' in verse eighteen.

Firstly the word 'stand'. Paul says stand; not attack. He expects that as we engage in spiritual battle the evidence of success will not be our victory, whatever we think that may be, but simply that as troubles come and go we are left standing. Standing and not swept away by false reaching or the latest spiritual craze to sweep the church. Still standing in our ever clearer understanding of the gospel. Still loving our wives. Still teaching our children despite the perplexities that force us to check and check and check whether we really believe it all ourselves. And still hanging in there, serving my thoughtless boss. Despite not yet having got a BMW. Despite losing my political privileges to the new faction after Polokwane¹.

Still standing though my church is still the same size as it was twenty years ago. Still standing though my church split and our family was split and I was hurt deeply. Still standing for Jesus. Anyone who is still standing for Jesus now after all the battles of a normal Christian life is testimony to the keeping power of the gospel and the superiority

¹ Reference is to the African National Congress's policy meeting in Polokwane in December 2007 when a major change of political direction took place and, as a result, many national, provincial and even municipal leaders found themselves being forced out of their jobs in favour of those more aligned with the new direction in the party.

of Jesus over Satan. And all that Paul is saying in these verses about spiritual warfare is: 'know these truths and you will continue to stand'.

Finally, let's have a look at those three little phrases: 'in the Lord'; 'of God', and 'in the Spirit'. These three phrases contain the ultimate secret of all spiritual victory. Remember that Paul says nothing in the spiritual warfare verses about spiritual victory. We are to stand. We are not to declare victories for the Lord in this neighbourhood or over this or that power in society. In these verses there is nothing about any other victory than the one that is 'in the Lord'. The one that is 'of God'. The one that is 'in the Spirit'.

Firstly, when we are told to be strong IN THE LORD and in his mighty power, verse ten, we need to realise that this is speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who has conquered death and Satan and hell and sin and is now alive for ever. His is the only victory. And the secret of spiritual warfare is grasping the implications for us of Jesus' victory. Jesus has destroyed the ten terrible facts about sin and has brought in their place the ten tremendous truths about salvation that we learnt about in the second talk. When we have internalised these truths we will find that we are able to stand more effectively.

Secondly, when we are told to put on the full armour OF GOD we need to remember that the things God has provided for us, listed in verses fourteen to eighteen, to enable us to stand are simply spiritual truths. In the Old Testament, some of these spiritual truths are likened to the various defensive structures in a mighty castle. These gospel truths: truth itself, righteousness, the readiness of the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit's sword, and the privilege of prayer, are the only weapons that Satan really acknowledges.

When people like the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, in Acts chapter nineteen, try dealing with devils in a different way the result is disastrous. Do you remember what the devils said? 'Jesus we know and Paul we know, but who are you'? And possessed person then gave the seven young men the hiding of their lives. These men had seen the effects of the gospel and they wanted its benefits. But because they didn't know the truths of the gospel and they paid a high price.

It is because these truths are OF GOD that Satan fears them. Learn them, and live!

Thirdly, when we are told to pray IN THE SPIRIT, remember that this means simply to consciously have in mind the things that the Spirit has in mind. Jesus said that a role of the Holy Spirit was to be to 'take of what is mine and give it to you'. Praying 'in the Spirit' therefore means praying with a deliberate recollection of all that Jesus has done for us. It means praying confidently because as we remember that the victory over Satan belongs to Jesus, and that we ourselves belong to Jesus, we will find ourselves gaining the courage to keep on serving our husbands or loving our wives, obeying our parents, nurturing our children God's way, and continuing even in very difficult work situations.

When Christians start to acquire the habits of being strong in the Lord, of putting on the defensive truths of God's gospel, and praying consciously in the light of everything Jesus has done for us, then we will see the cultures of this world being visibly influenced by another, invisible but far more powerful culture. The culture of the kingdom of God.

I know that we all want this to happen but feel helpless in ourselves yet as we saw in the first and second talks, Paul is well aware of our human weakness and has given us some amazing prayers to enable us to grow together in our understanding and appreciation of the glory, the grace the spiritual growth and the true grit that will, God willing, one day make us a truly Christian culture again. So, before we go to the last practical session, let's take advantage of our privilege of praying by saying our Lord's Prayer together.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

PRACTICAL SESSIONS

CHRIST CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE - BIBLE GROUP TRAINING

JANUARY 2009 - 'WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?'

PRACTICAL 1: DOES THE WORLD'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH MATTER?

1. The source of the church

- a. Does God view his people as the product of his purposes, or ours?
- b. Do you typically view your Christian life as the outcome of God's choice, or yours?
- c. Does the world see the church as the outcome of God's activity, or ours? Why?

2. The purpose of the church

- a. What does God want the church to focus on, mainly?
- b. What does our church focus on, mainly?
- c. What does the world think the church focuses on, mainly? Why?

3. The 'culture' of the church

Based on your answers above, allocate 100 points among the three categories in the table in order to describe the relative strength of influences on what our church is like.

Whose perspective has most influence?	Share of a 100 points?
God's thoughts?	
Our perspectives?	
The world's ideas?	
TOTAL	100

4. Some Scriptural cases of impressions of God created by the church

Queen of Sheba seeing Solomon's Israel (1 Kings 10:1-9, esp. v9)

God's name blasphemed among the Gentiles (Romans 2:17-24, esp v24)

Let men see your good deeds and glorify God (Matt 5:16)

The church reveals God to the invisible world! (Ephesians 3:10-11; also v21)

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JANUARY 2009 - 'WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?'

PRACTICAL 2: DEFINED BY CHRIST'S RECONCILING WORK?

1. How much have you, personally, understood and felt these truths about sin?

The 'ten terrible truths about sin'		Score / 10
1	'dead in transgressions and sin'	
2	'following the ways of this world'	
3	'following the devil'	
4	'gratifying the cravings of the sinful nature'	
5	'by nature objects of wrath'	
6	'despised and rejected'	
7	'separate from Christ'	
8	'excluded from citizenship in God's kingdom'	
9	'foreigner to the covenanted promises of God's family'	
10	'without hope and without God in the world'	

2. How much have you, personally, understood and felt these truths about salvation?

The 'ten tremendous truths about salvation'		Score / 10
1	'made alive with Christ'	
2	'it is by grace you have been saved'	
3	'raised up with Christ and seated in the heavenly realms'	
4	'God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works'	
5	'in Christ Jesus you have been brought near through the blood of Christ'	
6	'He himself is our peace . . . who has made the two [Jews/ Gentiles] one'	
7	'reconciled to God through the cross [we all] have access to the Father'	
8	'you are . . . fellow citizens with God's people'	
9	'members of God's household'	
10	'being built together to be a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit'	

3. Grace is God's way of reconciling these two extremes and is the core concept of a Christian culture. Are we as a church family united by our understanding of grace?

Grace – the core concept of a Christian culture	Share of a 100 points?
Do we, as a church (or denomination) have a SECULAR culture?	
Do we, as a church (or denomination) have a GRACE culture?	
TOTAL	100

CHRIST CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE - BIBLE GROUP TRAINING

JANUARY 2009 - 'WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?'

PRACTICAL 3: THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN CULTURE

1. Based on what we have been learning together, how would you characterise South African culture in 2009? Allocate the 100 points among the three options.

What sort of culture are we predominantly here in South Africa?	Share of a 100 points?
A 'SECULAR' culture?	
An 'ANIMIST' culture?	
A 'CHRISTIAN' culture?	
TOTAL	100

- 2. What are some of the things that make it difficult for you to communicate effectively with people from a different cultural background to your own?**
- 3. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and discuss what Paul's approach was to bridging cultural divides when preaching the gospel.**
- 4. Read Romans 1:14-17 and discuss what motivated Paul to reach across cultural barriers with the gospel.**

5. Going back to Question 1, what is most needed from the church if the score that you allocated to 'CHRISTIAN' is to be higher, not lower, in 10 years time?

CHRIST CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE - BIBLE GROUP TRAINING

JANUARY 2009 - 'WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE?'

PRACTICAL 4: GOD'S WAYS OF ENGAGING THE WORLD

1. Does anyone have an experience of Christian marriage (or a Christian perspective on male female relations generally) that led to an opportunity to speak for Christ?
2. Based on what you have learned in these talks would you say that your home reflects / contributes to a 'culturally' or a 'socially Christian society?' (see notes below for guidance)?

Is your home culturally, or just socially Christian?	Share of a 100 points?
'Culturally' Christian	
'Socially' Christian	
TOTAL	100

Notes:

A culturally Christian society: one in which so many people's hearts and minds are affected by their understanding of gospel truths that marriages, family upbringing patterns and ways of engaging with others in the workplace become visibly Christ honouring.

A socially Christian society: one where habits of church attendance, opinions on moral issues and to some extent moral behaviour, are based on the influence of key individuals, church organisations or political groupings, rather than on personal gospel understanding.

3. Does anyone have a testimony about how your Christian attitude in the workplace has led to some wickedness being stopped or to good being introduced?

Have you ever thought of Paul's teaching on 'Christian Armour' as a helpful summary of key gospel truth to draw upon when in need? Does anyone have a testimony about this?