

Love is strong as death

“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.”
Song of Solomon 8v6-7

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.” Hebrews 12v1-3

*“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.”*

Chorus sung in the author's youth group

*“Jesus, our only joy be Thou,
As Thou our prize wilt be;
Jesus, be Thou our glory now,
And throughout eternity.”*

St. Bernard of Clairvaux 1090 - 1153

Part 2 of my book Solomon's Song of Songs, as was said in Part 1, is mostly about looking at and gathering helpful nuggets of truth from the specific text of this remarkable Song, albeit using the preacher's licence to develop themes triggered by, but not necessarily directly derivable from, a textual exposition of this Song. Before doing so, I would like to link the two Parts, tie up some loose ends, look further at the wider issues, implications and common themes, and make amends where I consider this is needed. As always after I write about something, when later on I come back to what I have written I see imperfections: in particular those aspects that could have been better expressed, material I should have included (or perhaps excluded), the accommodation of new insights gained in the interim, and further preoccupations addressed, for example as a result of reading more books, including about the Song, and from listening to others.

I spent time in Part 1 reflecting on the various interpretations of the Song of Solomon down the ages, by (usually) worthy commentators and I will return to this. I do not regret not holding to a particular interpretation so I can present a framework for interpreting the text. I see merits in many different interpretations, and I believe the Song has several meanings. It seems the Song, perhaps like much other great poetry, does not come with a key unlocking its meaning and, without wanting to be accused of syncretism, I feel it lends itself to a number of viewpoints. Unlike with certain books of the Old Testament, for example the Psalms, words from the Song are not referred to elsewhere in the Bible, and that only adds to the challenge. Understanding the poet's way, and the significance of symbols used, is a big undertaking and a big challenge in exposition. Yet sitting on the fence is no option as it gets us nowhere, only leading to further confusion. There is an important message for us to find and act upon. As it is written: *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"* 2Timothy 3v16.

My early introduction to the Song of Solomon was given in typological terms but since having my horizons widened, although initially coming as a shock, I am now more aware of and amenable to alternative approaches to interpretation. For example, given the way the Lover and Beloved conduct themselves, the Song has much to teach a man how he should relate to his wife or fiancé, and similarly teach a woman how she to relate to her husband. Some commentators ignore allegorical notions altogether, preferring to see the Song as a human love poem, with overt sexual overtones. While recognising merits in such views, I see no reason to depart much from what I consider provides a more satisfactory and complete way of understanding this Song. As for the (symbolic) identities of the Lover and the Beloved, both for the purpose of this study and how the Holy Spirit (I believe) guided Solomon's pen, this is primarily Christ (God the Son) (the Lover) and the believer (the Beloved), although those who argue for God (the Father) as the Lover, and Israel or the Church as the Beloved, also have a case.

We would be right to view the whole of life's journey as a potentially ongoing learning experience and be open toward changing our minds (albeit grounded upon unchangeable truth) in the light of those things we discover on our journey, or to see new things as these are revealed to us, or reassess old things in a new light. God gives to all of us light, often according to our ability and openness to receive it, and for some it would seem that more light is given than for others, and that gives greater responsibility. We need to live in the light we have and we all have enough to make a great deal of difference in the way to live our lives. Truth and righteousness ought to therefore govern all we do, which are no alternative to the way of love. Rather love enriches everything and is an outcome to everything to do with following God's way. The following questions have long concerned me and I take consolation that these are the very issues which this Song (surprising as it may seem) has something to say, and rather than feel frustrated or become dejected, I can look to the future with hope and optimism:

- How to discern the truth of God’s Word and the grand purposes of God and practise righteousness taught in his Word, amidst confusion, not only in the world but, of particular concern, among believers also, who may ignore or fail to hear what God is saying, or practice error, or be diverted by non-essentials?
- How to reconcile being “inside the veil” (having close communion with God) and being “outside the camp” (as we engage with the world around us, with all its contradictions and difficulties), becoming more like our Lord, who operated confidently in both places, and be always listening to his voice?
- How to believe and do what is on God’s heart, recognising his priorities, where there seems to be a plethora of conflicting alternatives from which to choose, particularly with respect to the poor and marginalised, the great issues of the day, the needs of the human heart, God’s demands on creation and the myriad of minor decisions, all with manifold ramifications, which we have to make each day?
- How to enjoy sweet communion with the Almighty, and yet remain untarnished from the evil that surrounds us, to the extent that it at least shadows what was experienced in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, and will be experienced again to a greater extent in the new heaven and new earth?
- How to realise God’s specific will for our lives and do it; living lives that are ordinary and wholesome, yet doing amazing exploits for our God and finding the correct balance regarding all those things that require our attention?
- How to recognise the discrepancy between that marvellous life of love, to which this Song relates, which is for us to experience and enjoy, and our own impoverishment and waywardness that often prevents us from living that life to the full, yet being able by God’s grace to close that gap?

Whilst contemplating all sorts of conundrums and perplexities, whether in the world, the church, my community, my family and my own personal life, I take comfort that the Lord has all the answers, even when the resolution seems so frustratingly far away at times. One reason why the Song is so important is that when faced with these imponderables, we are reminded that our focus must be on the One “*whom my soul loveth*” (SofS 1v7, 3v1, 3v2, 3v3, 3v4) and we are called simply to cultivate a relationship with him. We might also find solace in the fact that the author of the Song (Solomon), flawed as he was as a man, for example did not experience for himself much of that love he so perfectly portrayed and evidently understood, but faced similar struggles. While the Song shows us the way of love, Solomon’s other books of the Bible similarly have a bearing on the great questions of life with which we have to deal.

Proverbs shows us the importance of wisdom, for example: “*happy is the man that findeth wisdom*” Proverbs 3v13, “*wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it*” 8v11, “*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding*” 9v10. Ecclesiastes shows us

that much of what we see around us is “*vanity and vexation of spirit*” and that as a result of our living in this world we will certainly experience unfairness and arbitrariness in our individual dealings, as well as what we observe by looking around us and, moreover, there is little we can do about it, so it would seem. We do well to note Solomon’s conclusion and (unpopular by today’s standards) advice to: “*fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man*” Ecclesiastes 12v13.

If the major theme of Part 1 was “fired up”, and if “fired up” is, to some extent at least, to be equated with being zealous, we might then ponder on those things that characterise zealots? Such people can be found among all major faiths and are often seen to be, among other things, insensitive to those around them, focused on their particular ‘thing’, and lacking in love, which after all is the overriding concern of the Song of Solomon. The Apostle Paul, prior to his conversion to Christ, was by his own admission a zealot who saw that his duty was to persecute Christian believers, including killing them. While “fired up” is good insofar as it makes us more enthused about the things of God and doing his will, it may not be enough, and without proper checks and balances could become a perverse monstrosity that fails to recognise the bigger issues and to show love.

I reiterate the theme of Part 1, which is a principle theme of the Song, that being “fired up” is attainable and maintainable. I am sad that not only are there many unbelievers whose lives are empty, void of passion and lacking drive to do things that matter, or at least to live purposeful lives, but the same is true of many believers too. Most, maybe all, believers will recall when they first believed that they were “fired up” for God, but somehow things have stagnated and the remaining fire is nearly extinguished. Better preachers than me might speculate why this is so. My feeling is that it is to do with the heart or maybe the spirit. There are hundreds of Bible verses that refer to the heart and the notion that if our heart is healed (from brokenness) and our spirit is restored (from being crushed) then we can enjoy sweet communion with God. Then that meaning for living and burning desire for God’s best will return to us. What is important, and it is the theme of Part 2, and of the Song itself, is that our heart can be put right! “*Why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?*” (1v7b) is the question that the Beloved tenaciously asks at the start of her journey. We are not about mediocrity and decline but rather about ordinary, flawed people doing extraordinary things as part of an intimate relationship with the one “*whom my soul loveth*” (1v7a).

I stress ordinariness because that is how I perceive much of what it is we are called to do and that is how the Beloved struck me when I first encountered her in the Song, and as her character developed during the course of the Song. She knew what it was to do hard toil, had at best a modest perception of how attractive she was, had experienced abuse from her unappreciative brothers (1v5-6) and as we see later was prone to things like bad habits, anxiety and laziness. It seemed that a considerable amount of her time and effort was later taken up in painstakingly, yet lovingly, tending her vineyard and garden

and much of that work might appear to be fairly mundane. Yet we should always be mindful of the bigger picture, the spiritual dimension, as she longingly waited for her lover. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, the spiritual realm is all too real, and warfare between the forces of darkness and light is taking place in heavenly realms, which has considerable bearing on what takes place in the world, including in our own individual situations. We read in 2Kings 6 that Elisha's servant saw the great (human) army gathered around his master, Elisha, in order to capture him. What he failed to see was a greater (heavenly) army that was surrounding and protecting them against the enemy. We need to pray, as Elisha did for his servant, for open eyes to see these things.

I am mindful of the various ways different Christian groups look upon those who profess but do not live by the faith which they profess. Many would declare such persons as carnal, worldly and unspiritual. Others would say that these people are not true believers; they are not among God's elect or truly saved, for if they were, they would be living the sort of lives that God would have them live. Still others might say that such cases show how it is possible to be saved and then lose salvation because of persistent sin. Some earnest preachers (rightly) seek to challenge such behaviour, in a variety of ways, in order to get people "fired up" for God, for such is the need of the hour, as it always has been, but mindful too that such things are often "better caught than taught". What I write is not about methods as such or even about differences in the theology of how to get, keep or even lose salvation. We do know, from Jesus' parables about the end of the age, that there will be a sifting of wheat from tares and a separation of sheep from goats, as well as all humankind needing to face God's final judgement, and that these things alone should create in us a healthy fear that will cause us to be doing God's will and be ready for Christ's coming again. What matters is to encourage people to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, firstly by receiving God's gift of salvation through faith and repentance and to fellowship with and obey him. We do a disservice if our preaching emphasis is to get people to come to Christ and ignore what might happen afterwards. The Song is about a relationship that needs developing. That must what we preach, as well as provide the supportive environment in which the "saved" can function and grow.

The question why and what it means to be saved is crucial. We need to be saved to have sins forgiven, experience wholeness, go to heaven and please God. Salvation is a/the key theme of scripture and incorporates notions of being rescued, receiving health and living life to the full. While we need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we can only be saved by God's grace, where the need for faith in Jesus and repentance from sin is crucial. He came from heaven to earth, was born and lived in humble circumstances, and suffered a cruel death before being brought back to life so he can save whosoever believes in him. Salvation is something God freely gives and cannot be earned by good works. It is about being released from the penalty of sin (past), freed from the power of sin (present) and becoming perfect (future). An essential part of salvation is forgiveness of sin and acceptance by and reconciliation with Almighty God. There was no doubt that

the Beloved of this Song experienced much of what saved people experience. Without any sense of presumption or pride, she relished and was confident in the fact she was loved unreservedly by her lover and it was this that made all the difference.

An often overlooked aspect of forgiveness is to do with when we pray: *“forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”*. Jesus taught we cannot have God’s forgiveness without forgiving others first. Many have stumbled, having an unforgiving spirit, and this forms a blockage to receiving divine blessing. While to forgive might be painful and go against the human tendency to retaliate, and harbour bitterness and hatred, those of us who are called to follow Christ ought to forgive our enemies, as our Lord forgave those who nailed him to the cross. It was also the response of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, when he was stoned to death. While the issue of accountability on the part of the person who has perpetrated a wrong remains, and reconciliation cannot be completely effected when repentance is absent, there is for us a huge release of power when we unreservedly forgive others without imposing conditions. I do not get the sense that the Beloved of the Song harboured an unforgiving spirit, even though she might have had cause to do so. This was why she was confident of her Lover’s love and this was what gave her confidence. Having been released from bitterness and resentment she could face whatever the world threw at her. We also need to learn to forgive ourselves (just as God does). There should be no guilt or self-recriminations provided we have repented. We should rejoice that we are accepted just as we are and whatever our past.

Before proceeding, I would like to explain what I understand when I refer to the divine. My own background has tended to favour using the term “Lord” when discussing or addressing God and this might often be equally applied to God (the Father) and Jesus (God the Son), both being rightful Lord over our lives along with God the Holy Spirit who is our comforter and guide. Christianity shares with the other major monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam) the belief in the one supreme God. Where Christianity differs is that the God title can equally be applied to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, often referred to as the doctrine of the Trinity. That is not to say there are three Gods. Men have agonised over these considerations down the ages but the main body of the Church have been in agreement on the nature of the persons of the Trinity (and there have been great debates and divisions over the nature of the three persons of the Trinity).

Perhaps the fifth century Athanasean Creed expresses it best: *“... Now this is the true Christian faith: We worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, without mixing the persons or dividing the divine being. For each person -- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- is distinct, but the deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory and coeternal in majesty. What the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit. The Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated; The Father is eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three who are eternal, but there is one who is eternal, just as they are not*

three who are uncreated, nor three who are infinite, but there is one who is uncreated and one who is infinite ...” Besides being an essential Christian truth, it also begs the question which member of the Trinity we associate with the Lover. Given the Christ - Church (Bride) relationship described in the New Testament we could say the Son, yet we must be mindful of the God - Israel covenant love relationship of the Old Testament. While the Song’s Lover - Beloved theme suggests the Son, it should be acknowledged that the love of the Father is also a wondrous and liberating doctrine, especially in a day when wounds of family breakdown and absent or inadequate fathers are all too common.

One particular aspect of the Godhead that has stumbled many over the centuries, and regrettably gave rise to many schisms in the church, pertains to the nature of the person of Jesus. Without wanting to ignore the great theological questions that have risen, I feel it needful for this exposition to make the statement that Jesus is both fully God (as affirmed in the creeds) and fully man and that those two natures co-exist without any contradiction even if it goes beyond my full comprehension. Saying this here is pertinent because when reading the Beloved’s account of her lover (interesting she speaks **about** her spouse but he speaks **to** her) we see one who is utterly perfect, which only God can be. Yet we also see a real man. No coward, or wimp, or weakling, or insensitive brute, or aimless waster, but a man’s man, strong and courageous, honourable and chivalrous, magnanimous and determined, wise and caring - all what us men should aspire to be.

So returning to the notion of “fired up” ... my point is that this may not be enough in itself. The nature of the object of one’s affection needs to be correctly understood and it needs to be the right object. Many who get fired up do so about something or someone that is not properly understood or is unworthy of such a response. That is why I am so keen, just like the Beloved in this Song, who extolled the virtues of her lover, who can be our lover too, for us to enter into a relationship of “pure intimacy” with our heavenly lover that is also whole hearted and passionate, not losing sight of course that the Song also parallels the type of relationship we ought to have with our spouse. The triune God has revealed so much already about himself, such that there should be no doubt over the character of the object of our affection. Notions of “fired up” and “pure intimacy” necessarily go hand in hand. We ought to know our heavenly lover truly and enter into an intimate relationship with him and follow after him with every ounce of energy and particle of passion we possess. This relationship is one that can and ought to be enjoyed every moment of our waking lives and thereafter throughout all eternity.

About intimacy and involvement, there are those who see our main, indeed only, worthwhile occupation down here on earth as cultivating a good relationship with the Lord by living a holy life, coupled maybe with evangelism and helping the poor who land on our doorstep, and we do this in preparation for the world which is to come. Other than our lawful occupations, our interaction with the world, so it is argued, should be kept to the minimum. I know this is so because that was how I was taught in my early

years. Part of the reason is a belief that heavenly citizenship is all that matters, along with the imminent return to earth of the Lord Jesus to usher in the kingdom age, a view that the world is going to get worse and we are best not getting too involved (other than spreading the Word), and besides which, it is heaven that should be our goal anyway, and the message we ought to proclaim is one that requires the most urgent attention.

There are others, usually from traditions other than my own, who see the main duty of Christians is to do good in the world, usually in the social sense, and this is how we are to usher in the kingdom. But we need to get a biblical balanced view on the matter, which as far as the issue of worldly involvement is concerned, would recognise certain elements from both sides of the argument that are right and true, and certain other elements that are not. Some of the considerations that we are faced with include: to what extent do we associate with professing believers who do not practise the true faith; to what extent do we associate with those outside the faith who promote agendas that are incompatible with the gospel message; what are the right priorities; what can and should be done and what is it the Lord would have me do? We should keep to the fore our duty to spread the Word, and we can only do this with like-minded believers. While the Song (as any book of the Bible come to that) might not provide us with the answers directly, there is a sense that if our focus is on our heavenly Lover and our heart is toward doing his will then the way forward will be made clear and we will do much practical good.

I know many will disagree, but I see another conundrum. I sense the world will get worse in many different ways, however well Christians do, or however united they become (it might even accelerate the decline as darkness invariably recoils when up against increasing light). Wickedness and the gulf between good and evil will increase. Already in much of the world Christians are being persecuted and suffering deprivation. Also, in the so called Christian west we are faced with social fascism, thought crime, immoral, anti-family and other godless legislation and public policy, as well as unchecked human wrong all around us. The pressure that the Bible teaches us to expect is everywhere. This may limit our involvement. Many will ignore or not recognise this, and will be deceived, and accommodate without discernment the spirit of the age. I believe, based on my understanding of Biblical prophecy, for example Matthew 24, that evil will increase (including the persecution of true believers) even amidst revivals of religion, which will occur in many remarkable and unusual ways and is already happening (glory to God). Christians should pay attention to their inner spiritual life, and to building up and blessing the Church, as well as their relationship with the Lord, and to making an impact in the world that will benefit people spiritually and in other ways. Just as the Beloved of the Song chose to run after her lover, even though others better placed failed to do so, we need to take heed and respond to God's gracious invitation.

I see much of my own Christian discipleship as needing to reconcile various truths that so often seem, paradoxically, to be opposed, and living with those tensions. I take heart

when looking at the life of Jesus. We have already considered the matter of reconciling the human and divine aspects of his character. He has been portrayed as a great king who “*in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness*” yet whose “*arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies*” (Psalm 45v4,5). He has been described as being “*full of grace and truth*” (John 1v14). Pertinent to our study, and what attracted me to it in the first place, those many years ago, is the realisation that he is both “*white and ruddy*” (5v10). This has always intrigued me given the logical impossibility of being both white and ruddy at the same time. Yet he is both and there is no hint of contradiction. There is on the one hand that dazzling purity, righteous intensity, impeccable holiness and diligent attention to duty, and yet on the other hand we are talking about the one who was described as a “friend of sinners”, mixed with “riff raff”, who truly understood (and partook of) what oppressed people went through, could “rough it” when needed, who could go where angels feared to tread, who would say and do things appropriate to the need at the time, yet unpredictable, despite being consistent, and who enjoyed life to the full. I covet that balanced outlook.

Whether in family, personal, business, community or church life, I need to be entirely wholesome in my outlook, and correct in all my dealings, to the point that I might be accused of being a bore and a stickler for detail. There will be times that I have to make a stand, and be ostracised as a result, for truth and righteousness. Most of what I should be engaged in are ordinary every day things with which most will readily identify, and these should be done diligently and well. Yet I can still enjoy life to the full, have fun, be comfortable in the company of, and be able to engage with, befriend and relate to, those who are among the great and the good, down to the dregs of society, from all sorts of views and backgrounds. I take on projects and undertakings that few others will touch, because God is with me, and be courageous enough to boldly tackle difficult tasks (for the sake of the people I serve). I will sometimes go out on a limb doing crazy things for the sake of the gospel but only because that is what my Lord has told me to do. At least that is my aim! Finding balance is the key to dealing with the relationships of life.

My own perspective as a community worker has taught me that there are opportunities in many areas, some unprecedented, for getting involved in our local and wider community, in order to make a difference. Sometimes we feel powerless as to how we ought to respond, but it is not our power that is the issue here. It is to God's voice we should respond and his power that we need. While there are openings to usefully serve we need to avail ourselves accordingly, standing firm on the essentials, being “*wise as serpents and harmless as doves*” (Matthew 10v16). In doing so, we engage in situations that may be messy and without human resolution (so it seems) and which might be beset with difficulties. This may wear us down if we do not take proper precautions, such as prayer, attending to one's health, having fellowship with, and being accountable to, others. God is gracious and will provide a way for us to continue and overcome.

As I consider today's great issues, for example: globalisation, the economy, the balance of power in society, poverty, conflict, international relationships, the degradation of the surrounding culture and, in the west, the erosion of a Judaeo-Christian consensus, the rising tide of Godlessness, moral decay and wickedness throughout the world, environmental disaster, social injustice, ethical and moral concerns, the suffering, oppression and exploitation of the vulnerable and marginalized as well as numerous relatively minor things closer to home, I know we are in a battle. The Lord's people should be in the thick of it, in the sure knowledge that although the odds might seem stacked against us, the Lord's victory is assured, yet sad to say, many choose to be oblivious of such things and seek solace in their own particular comfort zones.

I am under no illusion; wherever we might look there are needs and opportunities that seem overwhelming. We can, and must, address and meet these, with God's help, yet be aware at the same time of the growing tide of wickedness and our own limitations and inadequacies. Sometimes all this seems unbearable but we find comfort in our Lord's words: "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls*" (Matthew 11v28-29). I think of the sons of Issachar who had an "*understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do*" (1Chronicles 12v32) and the need for many more of their kind. Those of us running the race now need to pass on the baton to the next generation, concerning obedience to God's truth and continuing the work, and they must do the same with those who come after them. As I survey commentaries on this Song down the ages, besides those that focus on sexual ethics as a way of interpretation most have sought to explore that intimate relationship that we could and should have with the Lord, and while the language used to express this and the interpretation of details do differ, there is a remarkable consensus on the essentials. This relationship must also cause us to be involved in such ways as the Lord desires, and to lead us to live a life of fruitfulness, all for his honour and glory.

It is the notion of "pure intimacy" that is our overriding concern in Part 2 and it is to this theme that we need to return, notwithstanding the many practical implications about getting involved in the world in which we live. I firmly believe though, that those who enjoy the best and sweetest of relationships with the Lord, are also those who do most good in the world. Much more could be said on these things in the much wider context but now we need to look at the specific text of the Song and be ready to go wherever he (our heavenly lover) will lead us. "*The winter is (indeed) past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land*" (2v11,12) and if only we had ears to hear, we could hear the voice of our heavenly lover calling out to us: "*arise, my love, my fair one, and come away*" (2v13) and "*let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth*" (7v12).

As in Spring, with the opportunities that come about as a result of new life and with it the potential for growth and fruitfulness, there is much he wants to show us and much for us to do. In so doing we discover love that *“is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it”* (8v6-7). Sorrow and suffering, rejection by one’s peers, and those who are close to us, misunderstanding, unrequited love, ignominious failure, frustrated ambition and wasted opportunities there may have been, and may be so again, but the Song takes us beyond these things to a higher plane. We have been called to a place where we can sing, dance, celebrate and spread abroad his love; to be sober, yet glad in his company, and, with his help, produce fruits in due season that are available for all to enjoy, especially our heavenly lover.

The final word must be about the principle theme of the book, love: introduced and developed in Part 1 and to be further developed in the rest of Part 2. The first of the many references of “love” in this Song sees the beloved yearning for intimacy with her lover, and commenting on the superiority of that love over all other things: *“thy love is better than wine”* (1v2). The last is the title of this chapter, reminding us that love endures and overcomes all adversity, and as for the beloved, she has been set as a seal upon her lover’s heart, and because of this her position is safe and secure. In between we see the lover wooing his beloved and leading her into amazing areas of fruitful service and astounding relationship, with the full assurance of his abiding and rich love; with the beloved running after and extolling the virtues of her lover, and enjoying his love, fully assured that she is her *“beloved’s and his desire is toward”* (7v10) her. Many, including sincere believers, fail to grasp the love that is not only worth finding, and freely offered, but is available now to you and me. If we can embrace this truth it will revolutionise our lives and give our lives untold significance and purpose, and so much more besides.

*“Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Spirit, breathing from above,
Thou hast taught me it is so.
Oh, this full and perfect peace!
Oh, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.”*
George Wade Robinson (1838 - 1877)

*“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”*
Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748)

*“Immortal Heat, O let Thy greater flame
Attract the lesser to it; let those fires
Which shall consume the world first make it tame,
And kindle in our hearts such true desires.
As may consume our lusts, and make Thee way:
Then shall our hearts pant Thee, then shall our brain
All her invention on Thine altar lay,
And there in hymns send back Thy fire again.
Our eyes shall see Thee, which before saw dust,
Dust blown by wit, till that they both were blind:
Thou shalt recover all Thy goods in kind,
Who wert disseized by usurping lust:
All knees shall bow to Thee; all wits shall rise,
And praise Him Who did make and mend our eyes.”*
George Herbert 1593-1633

*“If I might only love my God and die!
But now He bids me love Him and live on,
Now when the bloom of all my life is gone,
The pleasant half of life has quite gone by.
My tree of hope is lopped that spread so high,
And I forget how summer glowed and shone,
While autumn grips me with its fingers wan
And frets me with its fitful windy sigh.
When autumn passes then must winter numb,
And winter may not pass a weary while,
But when it passes spring shall flower again;
And in that spring who weepeth now shall smile,
Yea, they shall wax who now are on the wane,
Yea, they shall sing for love when Christ shall come.”*
Christina Rossetti 1830-1894

“For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body”.
2Corinthians 4vv5-10

Truth shall make you free

*“Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of **truth**, hating covetousness” Exodus 18v21a*

*“And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and **truth**” Exodus 34v6*

*“He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of **truth** and without iniquity, just and right is he.” Deuteronomy 32v4*

*“Only fear the Lord, and serve him in **truth** with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you.” 1Samuel 12v24*

*“Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the **truth** in his heart.” Psalm 15vv1-2*

*“O send out thy light and thy **truth**: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles.” Psalm 43v4*

*“Behold, thou desirest **truth** in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.” Psalm 51v6*

*“Let not mercy and **truth** forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart:” Proverbs 3v3*

*“Buy the **truth**, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.” Proverbs 23v23*

*“A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto **truth**.” Isaiah 42v3*

*“And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in **truth** and in righteousness.” Zechariah 8v8*

*“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of **grace** and **truth**.” John 1v14*

*“But he that doeth **truth** cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.” John 3v21*

*“But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in **truth**: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in **truth**.” John 4v23-24*

*“Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the **truth**, and the truth shall make you free.” John 8vv31-32*

*“Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the **truth**, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” John 14v6*

*“Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all **truth**: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.” John 16v13*

*“Sanctify them through thy **truth**: thy word is **truth**.” John 17v17*

*“Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the **truth**. Every one that is of the **truth** heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto him, What is **truth**? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all.” John 18v37-38*

*“(Love) Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the **truth**” 1Corinthians 13v6*

*“But speaking the **truth** in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:” Ephesians 4v15*

*“Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with **truth**, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;” Ephesians 6v14*

*“(God) Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the **truth**.” 1Timothy 2v4*

*“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of **truth**.” 2Timothy 2v4*

*“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in **truth**.” 3John 1v4*

Even among those who have my understanding of the significance and meaning of the Bible, there will be differences in interpretation and also in application. This is particularly the case with the Song of Solomon, even if people do share my allegorical or symbolic leanings: that the book is mainly about the idealised human and divine love relationship. It might be tempting, given so many conflicting interpretations by the “wise and good”, to conclude that finding out the truth of what this song is all about is not possible and that even truth itself is unimportant, unattainable or relative. I reject that view and firmly believe that in the three thousand years since the Song was penned, those who have gotten into a relationship with the Lord, coming as they do from widely different cultures, circumstances and church (and Jewish) traditions, have been able to echo many of the sentiments expressed in the Song. The truth is that it depicts the very relationship God had in mind for his people all along. They share a remarkable unity regarding their spiritual journeys and insights despite their wide differences in understanding the detailed text and individual circumstances. With reference to the different ways the Song has been understood down the ages, from purely literal to purely allegorical or a more “pick and mix” approach, attention to the question of truth has to be a matter of great importance when deciding ‘what does the text mean?’

Truth is neither relative nor unattainable. It is of prime importance and something we need to seek out. It is important, because an understanding of all of the great questions of life, knowing how to act in a particular situation, doing all we need to do, is possible only if we know the truth. It helps make sense of the circumstances and culture in which we operate, realising a good deal of it is based upon lies. Even if my understanding of the Song’s main message is not true and it is merely an example of contemporary middle eastern love poetry, whose main message is one of sexual ethics, in particular how to make love to one’s partner in a way that meets divine approval, there are still valuable truths to glean as to how we relate to others and God. One might dare venture to suggest that there may indeed be a number of alternative valid ways to interpret the Song, which might also have a bearing on how one defines the term “absolute truth”.

A word search of the number of times “truth” and related terms is mentioned in the Bible reveals numerous references (224 for “truth” alone) and, unlike many other words often used, these are spread throughout all the books and in many different contexts. The texts at the start of this chapter reveal a diversity of notions associated with “truth” such as it being an integral part of God’s character and his dealings with humankind. It is his expectation of how we are to behave, and it is strongly linked with righteousness insofar as those who value truth must also practice righteousness. It seems that most of the truth we have to deal with, is not to do with lofty axioms but rather with the ordinary, simple things of life and getting on with our lives in the best way possible. Not only is truth of utmost importance, but so is knowing and following it, regardless of cost. And a cost there will be: just as darkness opposes light, and the Bible is quite clear in declaring this is what will happen, so error will invariably oppose truth. And while truth is vast and has

many dimensions, implications and inferences, and there is a price to pay when we follow it, the reward is immense, not least the freedom that comes to those who know it.

If all our talk about God is NOT true, then we have been wasting our time all along and may as well go out and get drunk. It is not what I say that matters, but what God says, and whether or not what is purported to come from God, is indeed from God. As for the message that ought to be preached, the reason for accepting it, is not that in so doing, we obtain forgiveness, eternal life, peace, joy and so on, but because it is true (and it matters deeply). We preach the gospel fervently, and despite the difficulties that might face us, for that same reason. Looking back over my life, I recall times I felt wretched and far from God. I have felt like the Beloved in the Song who could not find her Lover despite her frantic searching. Yet just as she had the presence of mind, when asked what sort of person her beloved was, to say he is “*the chiefest among ten thousand*”, SofS 5v10 and “*altogether lovely*”, SofS 5v16, I have felt compelled to proclaim what was/is true because it was/is the truth and because it mattered. This was irrespective of personal circumstances, and that in doing so, I could be ridiculed or rejected, and my own heavy heart and sense of failure. The truth about truth is that it remains true despite the context, culture and historical period in which it has been, is being and will be proclaimed.

As for Jesus, to paraphrase the great twentieth century Christian apologist, C.S.Lewis, logic demands that we believe one of three things about him: firstly, he was mad (just consider his claims, no-one in their right mind would make these); secondly, he was bad (he deluded people to the point they laid down their life on the basis of false claims); or thirdly, he is who he said he is, that is the living Son of God, the only begotten of the Father (demonstrated by his being raised from death, something witnessed by many people on many different occasions). If he is the Son of God, everything he said about himself is true, and we need to follow him right now, and with no further ado or delay, and we must do so with every ounce of energy and resource we possess.

We could become flummoxed and stumble when we discover that even good Christian people disagree on matters that are important. While not an exhaustive list, I would include such questions as being those where disagreement seems to be common:

1. Did God create the earth in six 24-hour days and no more than 10,000 years ago, as a literal interpretation of the Bible might lead one to conclude, or did he use the process of evolution occurring over a period of millions of years?
2. Is the setting up of the modern state of Israel as a result of divine intervention, or (especially) given that many of the protagonists and founding fathers of that state were not believers in God, should this not rather be seen as man’s work? Also, a hugely consequential question is: where does Israel stand today in the divine order of things, and what are God’s purposes for Israel?
3. Do we have the fullness of the Spirit (at least potentially) when we are converted to Christ, or is this something that comes about as a result of a post-conversion

experience? Moreover, are the gifts of the Spirit, mentioned in the Bible, in particular the “sign” gifts, still available today, and if so who receives them, and how are these to be received, and is it appropriate to seek after such gifts, and under what circumstances ought they be exercised?

4. Will Christ come before the millennium or after, and if before, will he first take the church secretly, before revealing himself universally?
5. Should Christians be more concerned with issues like abortion and homosexuality (and the politics of the right), or with that of the environment and social justice (and the politics of the left)? Or should Christians not become embroiled with such issues, given our heavenly priorities?
6. Is there such a thing as “Apostolic Succession” today or did the church effectively lose this gift/right long ago, by it acquiescing to false doctrines and practices, compromising with the world and rejecting some of the Lord’s own people? This then begs the question: who (if any) are the true under-shepherds of the church and how are these to be appointed?
7. In the light of the modern trend of women taking positions of authority in the churches, just as happens in society as a whole, what ought to be said concerning the acceptable role of women within the church?
8. How do we reconcile such notions as predestination and freewill, or that of the eternal security of the saved, and the possibility of falling away because of sin?
9. How should Christians get involved in the world (if at all), in particular tackling the thorny question of working alongside unbelievers, with their sometimes ungodly agendas, to address issues such as social injustice, and at the same time retain their distinctiveness as God’s holy people?
10. Can Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals and Charismatics ever become reconciled, given their widely differing belief systems and approaches? If the true church is a remnant, comprising but a portion of professing Christendom, how will the true unity of the church, as prayed for by Jesus (John 17), be achieved, and given the potential for unacceptable compromise, when engaging on an ecumenical basis, how active should we be in bringing about this great ideal?
11. Is Hell a real place, what is it like, and who goes there?
12. Regarding the local church, a whole plethora of issues arises around how its life should be manifest in matters such as worship, ordinances, sacraments, eschatology, fellowship, evangelism, mission, ministry, government, discipline, the place of gifts, approach to Biblical interpretation, the doctrine of the communion of saints, and the relative importance of church tradition in our decision making, as well as in its relationships with other churches, non-Christian agencies, the state and the wider community?

While I recognise that on all of the above issues, it is possible to argue alternative, strong cases, it does not let us off the hook (as it were) of needing to discover where the truth lies, for whether we like it or not, this does have profound implications. I have

already set out my own position on a number of these issues, although I do not claim infallibility, and do recognise my own shortcomings and lack of knowledge, which is why seeking after truth is so important. We do well to recognise that we will differ from others of faith, integrity and good will, and we do well to choose those issues where we need to stand firm, and not waiver, and those other issues where we can agree to differ, or even to allow others to put forward things we disagree with, and for a time be allowed to win the day, knowing that truth will always win through, doing all for the sake of peace and perhaps more importantly, so that higher goals can be attained. It seems to me right to engage with those who do not hold to the truth, in order to do good where this is possible. Notwithstanding, the need to stand firm on those essential truths that are discussed elsewhere in this chapter, and the practical difficulties we will meet, it is even more right to have meaningful associations with Christian believers, and when possible have spiritual fellowship, as that would go toward fulfilling Jesus' prayer in John 17.

Always, we should recognise our limitations in understanding. God has not called us to unravel every truth under the sun (such things have to wait until the life to come) and likely we need to tackle truth according to our calling, gifting, the need, and, dare I say it, our particular interests. I am convinced that even the most worthy down the ages, regarding qualification and ability to comment on "truth", only addressed a portion of it, and even their perception of that truth on which they did comment, was sometimes incomplete or even plain wrong. Finally, when talking of the things of God, we must recognise that we are dealing with a profound mystery. It cannot be articulated using mere words, or be made to fit into neatly prepared boxes of our own making, or for our convenience. Praise God for the day when all will be fully revealed. As the Apostle Paul so aptly said: *"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known"* 1Corinthians 13v12.

Of the statements, taken from the UK Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith (<http://www.eauk.org/about/basis-of-faith.cfm>), which are listed below, I have no doubt these are indeed truths; absolutely, necessarily and essentially:

We believe in...

1. The one true God who lives eternally in three persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
2. The love, grace and sovereignty of God in creating, sustaining, ruling, redeeming and judging the world.
3. The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God - fully trustworthy for faith and conduct.
4. The dignity of all people, made male and female in God's image to love, be holy and care for creation, yet corrupted by sin, which incurs divine wrath and judgement.

5. The incarnation of God's eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—born of the virgin Mary; truly divine and truly human, yet without sin.
6. The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.
7. The bodily resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of our resurrection; his ascension to the Father, and his reign and mediation as the only Saviour of the world.
8. The justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ.
9. The ministry of God the Holy Spirit, who leads us to repentance, unites us with Christ through new birth, empowers our discipleship and enables our witness.
10. The Church, the body of Christ both local and universal, the priesthood of all believers—given life by the Spirit and endowed with the Spirit's gifts to worship God and proclaim the gospel, promoting justice and love.
11. The personal and visible return of Jesus Christ to fulfil the purposes of God, who will raise all people to judgement, bring eternal life to the redeemed and eternal condemnation to the lost, and establish a new heaven and new earth.

It is these truths that I must defend with my life, and explore their implications to the nth degree. While often critical of the narrowness of my own particular Brethren upbringing, I am grateful to those who urged upon me the importance of the need to “*earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*” Jude 1v3. I recall as a young man, enduring the 6.30pm Sunday evening gospel meeting, where the message was a variant on the theme of “you must accept Jesus into your life and be saved.” I also recall, that as a young man I was encouraged to “*preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine,*” 2Timothy 4v2. At one level, the gospel comprises an incredibly important yet simple message. Jesus said: “*for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*”, John 3v16, and he also said: “*he that believeth not is condemned already*” John 3v18, so the making of such points is entirely necessary. The mistake was in thinking that we were discharging our evangelistic duty by holding such meetings, which in all likelihood would only be attended by the converted, and neglecting the need to seek out and build bridges to the unconverted where they were, and exploring the wider implications of the gospel message in order to build one another up in our holy faith.

I perceive another mistake was confining the preaching of the gospel to the subject of the Atonement (Jesus' crucifixion) as if that was all there was to preach, overlooking the doctrine of the Incarnation with its emphasis on God's interest in all aspects of our lives, and its often “tenuous” link with the “social gospel” with its emphasis on practically helping the poor and dealing with social injustice, and that of the Resurrection, with its emphasis on Christ rising again from the dead, and his living presence in the world and the lives of those who receive him, realising that the Holy Spirit has been given to us in order to help make us holy, and to empower the church to carry out God's service.

Elements of the gospel message are in all sixty-six books of the Bible, some more pointedly than in others. In the Song of Solomon, we see a wonderful picture of this most unlikely of women becoming the object of her Lover's love, being drawn into a relationship with him, responding, and then the relationship growing and flourishing, amidst trials and tribulations. Such can be our experience also. Central to all this, is his grace. We do not deserve to be rescued, because of our rebellious attitudes, and we do not deserve the gift of eternal life, and moreover, we cannot earn anything by our own good works, but it is the grace of God, freely given, that makes it all possible. While down the ages people have twisted the notion of grace, for example using it as an excuse for our own wrong actions, the truth is that the same free grace that frees us from the bondage of sin, also enables us to freely become bond-servants to Christ.

Regarding the gospel message and the preaching of it, these are things we must "*earnestly contend for*" including in the most difficult and remote of areas, to the most unresponsive of peoples and under the most antagonistic of controlling authorities. Already the best of believers the world over, are suffering because of opposition to the gospel (every day I come across new evidences of this), and we must be prepared for the same, for it will surely come. I cannot ignore those who understood these things and have paid for their stand with their lives, or may do so soon. I do not speak these things lightly, given there are many regimes where speaking the truth will result in a death sentence. I would want to commend those who suffer, because they "*defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy,*" Psalm 82v3, as that is what God requires of us all. Maybe standing with those who suffer in this way, is one of the great services we can do, as is finding appropriate ways to make truth known, especially that which pertains to the gospel message, for in this so-called enlightened age, which actually is anything but, we can find many excuses for not evangelising and all sorts of other (good but not the best) things to do.

Understanding, practising and proclaiming these truths are so important. Imagine someone shipwrecked in hostile waters, weak or injured and about to drown. We have an opportunity to take our rescue boat out to save that person from drowning. They may not respond to our help (unlikely given their predicament) but at least we can rescue the perishing should they choose to be rescued, without which he/she/they would undoubtedly drown. The stakes are high, although most people are unaware of how dangerous their predicament is, partly because the sense of the fear of God has been lost in society, and in the church, and the gospel is not proclaimed as it should be. God is a holy God and those of us who serve him must call sinners to repent, for they are destined to a Christless eternity if they are not saved. We must point them to the Saviour. Being clear what the gospel is, and proclaiming it to all and sundry, using whatever method and opportunity available to us, in season and out, acceptable or not, has to be our priority. When preaching the gospel, it is right to emphasise how to have sins forgiven

and receive eternal life, and also to emphasise that God must be approached with fear and trembling, and a repentance that starts rather than ends at conversion.

My understanding of Scripture is, that in these last days, there will be a falling away from the true faith, with professors distorting the faith (as well as many unlikely people coming to faith) and many well meaning Christians being duped as a result. The time is coming and has come, for there to be revival amidst persecution, blessing amidst suffering, and a greater unity among those who are members of the true church (Christ's mystical body). While looking for the coming of the Lord, we need to be open to God doing amazing things, and being caught up in the flow of his Spirit and his blessing. For the sincere seeker after truth there will be numerous soul-searching questions; many can only be fully answered in eternity. The questions, I suggest, we ought to ask, include:

1. Where does the truth lie on a whole range of issues, such as discussed above?
2. What are the practical implications of each truth?
3. How do we respond to people who do not share our understanding of truth?

I had an experience as a newly converted teenager that disturbed me, and caused me to falter (as sadly, I have since seen happen to others, who afterward drifted away from the church and the Lord). My dilemma was that I felt I could only be considered as a fully accepted part of one or other group of believers, if I could sign on the dotted line to all of the beliefs they held, and dare I say it prejudices also, within their group. I felt out on a limb from most groups around me. I had a similar experience of being on the outside, when I later returned to my home town, after having lived away for several years, and looking for a fellowship to join, started with those I perceived to be most spiritually lively or where I could be of most use. Back in the 1970s, I found myself being rejected by the emerging charismatics, because I did not hold to Spirit baptism necessarily being separate to conversion, but at the same time I was also rejected by the established non-charismatics, because I believed the gifts of the Spirit are for today, for such are the promises of God, and the need for experiencing the gifts, is greater than ever.

In my own preaching ministry I often associate with the "fundamentalists", but am saddened by (and reject) the necessity of not only having to subscribe to doctrines such as contained in the Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith, but also to non-essential (or even erroneous) beliefs such as creationism, a particular form of church government, the cessation of spiritual gifts, and the pre-millennial rapture of the church. I am sad too, that many believers' vision for the church only encompasses their particular fellowship and restricted sphere of interest, and of churches whose vision for their community only involves their church. They fail to recognise the valuable contribution of other churches and the need to serve with them. Such a narrow view is unbiblical and unhealthy. I have no doubt such a state of affairs occurs in all sections of the church although the main issue is usually not doctrinal divergence, but rather of unconditional acceptance and

mutual affection. In a nutshell, and in general, it is not our failing to come to an agreement, as to what constitutes the truth that divides us, but rather our lack of love.

Since those early experiences and my subsequent awareness of the multitude of differences which exist in the church, and out of it, I have concluded that for me (and I would urge for others also):

1. I will work with anyone, regardless of their beliefs, or whether they hold to “the truth” on a particular matter, on projects, or causes whose outcome is in accordance with God’s Word, e.g. helping the poor.
2. I will listen to what those who disagree with me have to say, but at the same time, look for divine wisdom and understanding, through prayer and studying the Bible, being always mindful that truth can be found in many unlikely places.
3. I will not compromise the truth of the gospel (I again refer to the above basis of faith) and will undertake to make the gospel known whenever opportunities afford. I will do all I can to counter lies and deception, deal with injustice and oppression, and promote practical righteousness, both in personal and public life.
4. Seeking the glory of God must be my prime concern, obedience to God my particular obligation, and fully living out truth in my life, my daily duty.
5. While being true to God’s Word and the Spirit’s leading, must govern my actions, I must accept people as they are, even if we do not agree, but also I must separate from evil, and exercise appropriate discipline, when God’s Word is disobeyed.
6. Notwithstanding needing to address the urgent needs of the hour, and recognising my own limited understanding, I must seek to establish, and share truth, on matters of faith. While drawing on the Bible and the teaching of godly men down the ages, I realise that no-one had the monopoly on truth, and most were flawed.

But what do we make of those who do not accept the afore-mentioned basis of faith to be true? As for those who are Catholic or Orthodox in their beliefs, and those in mainstream churches who hold liberal views, or even members of “heretical” sects, there can be no compromise when it comes to understanding and proclaiming the gospel. Watchfulness has to be exercised in seeking to build spiritual relationships (as well as with those who seem doctrinally “sound”), although it should be said that there are many sincere believers in all of these groups, and common ground can no doubt be found in many areas. I feel it is more important to be burning with passion for Jesus, yet lacking in doctrinal understanding, than being doctrinally sound yet like the church in Laodicea in becoming lukewarm. (Revelation 3v14-22). If I have a choice as to who I am going to associate with, it has to be with those who are burning with love for Jesus.

As for members of other religions, it is right to build bridges as far as we can, to value their ethical stance, and respect for the divine, but without conceding alternatives to the gospel. As for those who do not believe in God, some of these would claim to be earnest seekers after the truth, yet reach opposite conclusions. One such person is the militant

atheist and populist author, Richard Dawkins. When I heard him being interviewed, he re-iterated several times, that he was seeking after truth, but that his quest left no place for God, who he thought did not exist, so therefore following religious dogma was a worthless undertaking, indeed a harmful one, as it was an unhelpful distraction. While disagreeing profoundly with Dawkins' conclusions, I do have a semblance of admiration for his position insofar as he wanted people to find and follow the truth, rather than 'what makes them feel good' irrespective of whether or not it is true.

Here again, I have concerns: if God does NOT exist and we are as a result of chance happenings, how can we say that we are significant, or that right and wrong exist? This goes against the grain, for most of us consider, that what we do, and our relationships with others, to be significant, that right and wrong do exist, and that there is order in the universe, not brought about by mere chance. If I were to accept the atheistic position, I believe I would despair over the pointlessness of human existence and absence of a moral base, as that is the logical outcome of such thinking. Then I ask the question, how do two people, who let us say for argument's sake, are sincere seekers after truth, but have opposite views about God: one believing God exists and has revealed himself, and must be obeyed, and the other that there is no God, and that he should be discounted from thoughts and attitudes. How come these reach such different conclusions? The Bible gives us hints as to why this is so, but not crystal clear insights. Firstly, there is the "god of this world" who blinds men's eyes; then there is the deceitfulness of sin that causes us to believe wrong is right and right is wrong; then there is the sovereignty of God who reveals himself to some and not to others; and finally there is the notion that those, who sincerely seek to do what is right, will be led into a knowledge of the truth.

I have observed that there are many whose ideology, or beliefs, oppose those of Christians, who accuse us of propagating falsehoods and distortions, and even have the audacity to claim the moral high ground when it comes to "the truth". There are others who oppose us, because of our standing for truth poses a threat. For those who are subject to such attacks, rather than feel threatened (which we are), and feel the weight of attacks (which are real), instead should feel pleased that we have an opportunity to speak out for truth, (and God), and that it is a privilege and joy to share Christ's sufferings and to be counted worthy (not that we feel it at the time) of receiving such attacks, and surely there is a reward to come. The faith we profess, is based on certainties, despite being a faith. It is based on historically verifiable facts, having down the ages been proved in the experience of many, and having a consistency, that allows for the most rigorous of scientific investigation. We have nothing for which to apologise, and it is the opponents of truth that are on a shaky foundation, because what they say is wrong, and such errors can and should be exposed. My hope is that there will be those, including those reading this, who will expose error and defend truth. We must humbly carry on saying and practising what is true and "*be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear*" 1Peter 3v15.

I have also observed that few, if any, are fully sold out on practically searching out truth in all of the important areas, and even if such people do exist, that search will invariably be flawed through negative past experiences, human fallibility and prejudice, limited world views and confounding accumulated intellectual baggage, and even among the best Christians, constraint by the narrowness of their church's teachings. Most would prefer that which is expedient, and makes life more comfortable, to following to the logical conclusion, that which is true. This makes me appreciate more, those who prefer to suffer, rather than compromise concerning truth (not all of whom necessarily have right beliefs about God). There are many others too, who succumb to the spirit of the age by holding to the notion, that truth is relative, and those holding opposing views can all be right. Certainly, in the climate that currently exists in Europe and USA, this represents an easy way out for promoting tolerance (although ironically, intolerance in today's society is as rife as ever). If the issues at stake were not so important, there would be no justification for (potentially) upsetting homosexuals, by saying practicing homosexuality is sinful, or to those who support abortion, that they are condoning murder, or to those adherents of other religions, by saying that Jesus is the only way to God, meaning they must be wrong, and at the same time risk being legally challenged.

We are bound to tell the truth, which is mainly absolute and objective, and not relative and subjective. We are compelled to search and speak out for truth. I wonder how many have followed in the steps of Pontius Pilate, when he was asked the question "*What is truth?*" Pilate knew very well, that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him, by the religious authorities, and of their desire to remove barriers to (their) holding on to power, for by yielding to their wishes to execute Jesus, and thus placating those very authorities, his governorship would be made so much easier. Sadly for most, doing what is expedient, or comfortable, is preferred to doing that which is consistent with truth. By taking the easy option, we allow error to go unchecked, and in preferring falsehood over truth, we open up the floodgates for all sorts of evils to prosper.

In summarizing how we might look at approaches to truth, that challenge the traditional Judaeo-Christian view, we should first say that truth can be found in many unlikely places, and even, when we feel isolated, God has his champions for truth. I often think that among the most profound of truths that have been stated in the Bible, were those by a donkey, and by Balaam, his unsavoury master (Numbers 22-24). Regarding alternative approaches to truth, it might be said that while the proponents of those approaches may discover certain truth, in the main, truth is NOT found, or can only be partly found in:

1. Rationalism (i.e. truth can only be established if scientifically proven).
2. Relativism (i.e. truth can, and should be, accepted on the basis of individual opinion and preference, and (supposedly) it should not impose itself on others).
3. Romanticism - if it raises the importance of emotion over reason, (although feelings are important, and many great poets and musicians were romantics, and

- especially, if those feelings come through encounters with the occult or drugs).
4. Religion and philosophy not revealed through the Hebrew prophets and Christ.

One of the (many) marvellous things about truth, is that we need not feel threatened by those who teach or practice error, or who display ignorance, or who are antagonistic because we challenge their false axioms, since truth stands forever. I make no apology, that as a community activist, I work with those who hold widely differing religious and philosophical beliefs, in order to achieve common goals aimed at benefiting the whole community and do so because I am confident in the truth. Of course we have an obligation to the young and vulnerable, to expose error, protect from harm, and point in the right direction. Declaring what is true (and wholesome) is what the church must do, but truth needs to be followed to its logical conclusion, and needs to be life-changing insofar that not only must we be men and women of integrity and utterly trustworthy, but that we live our lives, compatible with that truth. In particular, if it is true that God of the Bible, is to be obeyed, then we must obey his commands. If I have regret, it is that I have known the truth, and have preached the truth, but I have not always followed the truth, and the walk has not always matched the talk. That has to change. I have not arrived yet, but by the grace of God I trust that one day I will be.

Back to the role of the church: a number of things particularly strike me about the early centuries of the church. Firstly: the church functioned amidst great persecution and pressure, where martyrdom was often the price to be paid for standing by the truth and not renouncing the faith. Secondly: heresies and controversies abounded, and while the church failed in many ways, it did much to withstand most of these, largely because of those who knew the truth, and preached it. Thirdly: if the first two things were not so, then Christianity in any viable form, would not be around today. We owe an enormous debt to these men and women and we honour their legacy by continuing where they left off. While the nature of persecution may be different today, it is no less real, not just in the many places where practising Christianity is outlawed or suppressed, but also where there is supposedly freedom of religion. While the nature of false teaching may have (often in subtle ways) changed, this is still very much prevalent and with devastating consequences, often emanating from respected teachers. Error has to be countered by the proclamation of truth, backed up by a vibrant faith that is the outworking of the truth.

Carved over the door of the old Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England, is the text: *“the works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein”* Psalm 111v2. Associated with that laboratory, have been some of the world’s greatest scientists, many of whom were professing Christians. I believe these scientists mostly accepted God’s existence through simple (but not blind) faith, rather than as the culmination of an intellectual reasoning exercise, yet saw nothing in that faith that was inconsistent, illogical or incompatible with their scientific quests. No doubt their faith inspired them to search out truth in the scientific realm. They were only carrying out,

after all, the mandate God gave humankind at the time of creation: “*be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it*” Genesis 1v28, which is what good science will allow us to do. While there are many today who would want to drive a wedge between having a faith in God and having a respect for science, this was far from the thinking of such men who regarded search for truth as an important occupation irrespective of the realm in which their enquiry was made, seeing no conflict between the different lines of enquiry. They would no doubt have subscribed to the old adage that “all truth is God’s truth”, and that by seeking it out they were doing the right thing.

Such an attitude commends itself in our own occupations. We must seek out truth where it is to be found, but also realise our limitations, and to prioritise, concentrating on those things that matter. As I come to the end of my life, I see more and more truth out there that I have yet to fully grasp, some to do with my interest in historical theology and some to do with the issues pertaining to the hugely consequential, cultural wars that are going on right now and that will undoubtedly determine the sort of world we live in. Even as I am writing this chapter, new light is dawning on certain aspects of truth, which I am able to see more clearly or in a new way. One of the things that I have learnt in studying the history of the church, and observing contemporary church, is that no single section of it had all of the truth, but many had and have important parts of the truth. I am mindful also, that there are many issues we face, that our forefathers also faced, and that the way they dealt with these can be illuminating for our own situation. As I reflect on yesterdays and tomorrows issues, I am mindful of today, for example, God’s healing power in the world today and confess that regarding that area of truth, I am a babe.

I have to let much of what I do not know rest, and do what God has given me to do, even in the simple every day things of life and family, and allow others to fight individual battles in the truth war that I cannot, but in the sure knowledge that the Lord of Hosts has already won that war, hallelujah. Just as God gives his children different gifts, so he also allows them to pursue different aspects of truth. We do well to seek out truth, by examining Scripture, and by being obedient to God’s Word, and to the leading of his Spirit, and in all areas, whether “secular” or “sacred”, where there are gaps, we ought to encourage others, especially the younger generation, to search out those areas of truth in order to benefit others. We should not fear the repercussions of such a quest or be prejudiced should our enquiry lead us down a path we do not expect, because truth is always better than error. We should continually rejoice in the one who declared that he is the Truth, and in the assurance that by knowing the truth, we shall be set free.

There is a perception that a person who is overwhelmingly focused on truth, is liable to neglect the softer things which make life bearable and enriching, such as goodness and kindness, and not leave room for artistic expression, rest, recreation and fun. The image may be of one who steamrolls over anyone who opposes his perception of truth. There is also a perception, not altogether without basis, that Christians, particularly the more

earnest ones, can be prickly, judgemental, non-empathetic, aloof in their dealings and even neurotic. I am convinced that some feel excluded as a result, and favour the pub in reacting to those things. I am glad that none of this is so with the Lord Jesus, who is “full of grace of truth” and neither should it be so for Christian believers who are told to speak the truth, but to do so in love. I find the gospel account of Jesus’ dealings with different people quite revealing, and here it should be realised, that he encountered men and women from all walks of life, beliefs, needs, outlooks and dispositions. I have often been moved to tears by such texts as “*a bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench*”, Isaiah 42v3 and “*the Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary*”, Isaiah 50v4, seeing how this was practically realised in the life of the Lord Jesus.

There is no doubt Jesus discerned what was in people’s hearts and invariably said and did something that was appropriate for the occasion and met the need of the hour. Undoubtedly, Jesus showed practical compassion and human kindness wherever he went. He could speak words of comfort to the hurting, blessing to the poor, healing to the wounded, and wisdom to the wavering; yet he could be scathing in his denunciation of hypocrisy or to those who lauded over others in a wrong way or who oppressed the poor, or dealt unjustly. Everything Jesus spoke was truth in the context of love, and was intended to build up rather than break down. Even in judgement there was the prospect of mercy for the penitent. His actions and example he set, are what we must follow, even if we do not get to speak another word, for our priority has to be living out the truth.

I have no doubt that if God told me all he knew about me, and the consequences of my actions, or all there is to know, right now, I could not bear it, but I am glad he reveals things I need to know each step of the way, and it will be in his time and way. While I yearn for more truth and better balance, I am mindful that such knowledge brings greater responsibilities. I want no more, than those I care for, to know and live out truth, and for truth to prevail, which it surely will, when Jesus returns. I stand humbled because I know and understand so little, yet must wonder in awe before the God who knows all things. For now, I must get on with the business he has given me to do, and live in the light of that which I know to be true, whether about myself, the world and its wisdom, the great questions of life, or the profound mysteries of God and seek to be channels of blessing in the service of the Master, for his honour and glory. Finally, just to recap:

1. Truth is an essential part of God’s character and relates to how he wants us to be.
2. Seeking out truth should be our primary pre-occupation.
3. Truth can be discovered in many areas: the Bible and science, to name but two.
4. Practicing the truth is every bit as important as knowing it.
5. There is a strong link between knowing truth and practicing righteousness.
6. Embracing truth brings freedom.
7. Declaring the truth in appropriate ways is our responsibility.
8. Truth must be balanced with grace and love.

9. Standing up for truth will attract opposition.

10. The ultimate truth is Jesus and God's word.

*"The **truth** is incontrovertible, malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end; there it is."* Winston Churchill

*"Whenever you have **truth** it must be given with love, or the message and the messenger will be rejected."* Mahatma Gandhi

*"**Truth** like the sun can be shut out for a time, but it ain't goin' away."* Elvis Presley

*"If you look for **truth**, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or **truth** only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair."* C.S. Lewis

What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer.

*"What is **truth**? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer."* Francis Bacon

*"When I tell any **truth**, it is not for the sake of convincing those who do not know it, but for the sake of defending those that do".* William Blake

*"**Truth**, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold".* Leo Tolstoy

*"We do not err because **truth** is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable".* Alexander Solzhenitsyn

*"Let us begin by committing ourselves to the **truth** - to see it like it is, and tell it like it is - to find the **truth**, to speak the **truth**, and to live the **truth**."* Richard M. Nixon

*"I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of **truth** lay all undiscovered before me."* Isaac Newton

*"The amount of **truth** God will use to regenerate a person is something we cannot dictate. God, in the wind of the Spirit, blows where he wills. Yet, it is **truth** God always uses; it is never our tool (pamphlet, outline, program or famous speaker) in evangelism that works. All success is God's. To him alone be the glory."* Will Metzger

"Faithful Christian, seek the truth, hear the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, speak the truth, adhere to the truth, defend the truth to death; for truth will make you free from sin, the devil, the death of the soul, and finally from eternal death." John Hus - a Martyr