

The Heart of the Gospel

Two Talks from Delhi Bible Institute's Jubilee Celebrations

David Gooding

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In Praise of Folly: The Christian Doctrine of the Cross

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the chairman and directors of the Delhi Bible Institute, for inviting me along today to share in your joy, and to celebrate the faithfulness of God and all that he has done with you in these past fifty years. It is a particular joy to me too because, as you have just heard, for forty-five years and more I have been a member of the assembly from which Robert Duff came. I am what the Irish call an improved Englishman, simply on the ground that I have lived in Ireland for almost fifty years. My earliest memories were meeting Ilse and Robert in the house of a friend, and then sitting down with Robert as he sketched out the plans he had in his mind, as God had given them to him, for his work. Since then Apsley Street Assembly has been a constant partner, and now in our old age we continue to pray for and support you, so when I get back I shall have to give a detailed report. I ask your permission to say that you send your love and greetings to the Apsley church, and together we shall praise God.

Thinking about this inaugural meeting, I felt in the end that the best thing for me to do tonight was just to rehearse in our hearing what lies at the very heart of all the ministries that God has called the Delhi Bible Institute to do. As I understand it, that heart is the glorious doctrine of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that along with all Christians we say with Paul the Apostle, 'God forbid that I should glory [that I should boast, that I should have confidence in anything else supremely], save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal 6:14 KJV).

The title I've given to this little homily is, 'In praise of folly.' It owes something as a title, I suppose, to the work of the great Dutch scholar, Erasmus,¹ but actually it is founded on a passage of Scripture:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

¹ 'Five centuries have passed since, in 1511, *Moriae Encomium*—or *Praise of Folly*—was first published. In this bestseller, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) famously satirized contemporary European society and many of its representatives.' (Erasmus.org)

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.
(1 Cor 1:18–25)

It has often been said by critics who are unfriendly to the Christian faith that the record of the life and work of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, as given in the Gospels of the New Testament, are largely the invention of his starry-eyed disciples. These critics admit that perhaps there was a historical figure called Jesus; they hazard a guess he might have been a holy man of some kind. They think he might have done what his simple congregations considered *miracles*, but they say they have arrived at the critical decision that the records are largely inventions, certainly exaggerations, by the early apostles and disciples. That raises very large questions, and I'm not here this evening to discuss them; but this I will say. The heart of the gospel is this: '... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3–4). That is self-evidently not an invention of the early Christians.

How do we know it was not an invention by the early disciples?

Because they honestly tell us that when they first heard our Lord Jesus tell them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be crucified, they were dismayed and did their level best to get all such ideas out of his head. They were not in sympathy with the idea; they certainly didn't invent it. When the resurrection of our Lord proved to them that he was who he claimed to be—God's Son incarnate—the most ardent preachers found at once, and continued to find, that the gospel of a crucified Saviour was a scandalous stumbling block to their fellow Jews. It was regarded by the Greeks, at least the philosophers among them, as plain foolishness. Yet they continued to preach it, and two thousand years later Delhi Bible Institute is one of the fruits of it.

Why did they preach it?

Well, far from being an invention by the early Christians, this gospel goes back to our blessed Lord himself. At his birth, you'll remember that Joseph and Mary were told they were to name the child who was to be born by two names: Jesus (Matt 1:21; Luke 1:31), and Immanuel (Matt 1:23). *Jesus*, 'God is Saviour', was given to him because this was the very purpose for which Christ Jesus came into the world (1 Tim 1:15). He did not come predominantly or primarily to teach us ethics; he came to save us from our sins, hence his name, *Jesus*. *Immanuel* means in Hebrew, 'God is with us', for this event, unique in all the centuries of human history, was about God becoming man in Jesus Christ, so that God might be our Saviour and his Son should die a substitutionary death for our sins. This is the gospel.

When John, the great forerunner, was sent to introduce him to the public, amongst all the other things he said was this, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). The Lamb of God? This was sacrificial language, taught by many a symbol in the Old Testament that the way to forgiveness had to be by the blood of a sacrifice, an innocent sacrifice. In Jewish ritualism millions of lambs were killed and their blood shed, to be a symbol and God's 'notice in advance' of the way of forgiveness. It was impossible for mere animals' blood to put away sin. What do cows know about sin? They don't go to bed with a bad conscience, nor do sheep either. They were divinely appointed symbols and shadows pointing

forward to this great event, that one day the Lamb of God should come to take away the sins of the world and by his blood make forgiveness possible.

'Do this in memory of me'

We know this comes from the Lord and not from his disciples, because of the memorial supper that he instituted. Before he left them to go to Gethsemane and the cross, he instituted a means by which his followers all down the centuries should remember him.

If you were thinking of something that would really encapsulate for you what Jesus Christ stood for, what would you choose? Many would choose his Sermon on the Mount, with its magnificent ethical principles. Important as they are, our Lord did not choose that when they came together they should recite the Sermon on the Mount in order to remember him. Had he done so, we should have thought of him chiefly as a teacher of ethics. Nor did he say that when they met together they should read stories of his miracles, important as they were; highly significant and worth pondering. Had it been by the recital of his miracles that they remembered him, we should have thought of him chiefly as a miracle worker.

How did he ask to be remembered? He took a simple loaf, broke it and gave it to them, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:26–28). The historical record of the way Christians have kept that memorial feast all down the centuries goes back to the very beginning. Long before there was a complete New Testament, people converted to Christ were meeting to fulfil his wish by that sacred ceremony, simple but profound, to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of him giving his body and pouring out his blood for our forgiveness. It goes back to Christ, then, and that is why the apostles preached it.

Why should people find it offensive?

When the gospel opens to them full and free forgiveness as a gift from God, and the present gift and the future enjoyment of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, why should it sound offensive to anybody? Why should the Greeks, for all their philosophy, think it was foolish? We can see why it was offensive to many Jews, because, as the apostles put it, the story of the cross demonstrates both God's wisdom and his power. It demonstrates his wisdom, in the first place, by diagnosing quite clearly what our human need is.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus

Take, for instance, the experience of the man who wrote the words we read earlier, Saul of Tarsus. In his youth and young manhood, he was a devout Pharisee, doing his *honest*—I underline 'honest'—doing his honest best to keep God's law. He wasn't a post-modernist. He really believed this law came from God; and it did come from God. 'Then,' said he to himself, 'I will keep it. Who can possibly reject the law of his creator and God?' He did his utmost to keep it, and, without exaggeration or foolish pride, he could record that, as far as he knew, he had managed to keep it. At least better than most of his contemporaries.

When he heard the Christians speak of Jesus as being their promised Messiah, it sounded like the most abject insanity he'd ever heard; scandalously offensive. Jesus Christ was hung on a cross—on a *tree*, as the Greek would put it. The Old Testament said that if anybody was

such a criminal that he deserved execution, his dead body was to be hung upon a tree, and it must be removed before sundown, for anybody hung on a tree is cursed by God (see Deut 21:22–23). What were these Christians talking about, saying the man who hung upon a cross, cursed by God, was their Messiah?

Then the risen Lord appeared to him, and amidst the glory that Saul recognized at once as the presence of God, he heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?' Instantly recognizing the significance of that glory, he replied in very careful words, 'Who are you, *Lord*' (Acts 9:4–5). 'Lord' was the Greek for Jehovah, now appearing with the shekinah glory of God to Saul, his persecutor. Replying to the question came the words of the risen Lord, '*I am Jesus*, whom you are persecuting.' Jesus was God! 'The hanged man', as Jews still call him in their Talmud—a man dying under the curse of God—was none other than God incarnate.

The thought rose irresistibly: why was he there, and what did his name mean? Was he the Saviour sent by God, and why did he have to die under the curse of God's own law? Was there no other way that men should be saved? Pondering it long and hard, Paul eventually wrote, 'if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose' (Gal 2:21). 'It cannot be so,' said Saul to himself.

But if Christ had to die under the curse of God, now see the implications for Saul. After all he had done to keep God's law, Calvary showed him that it was not enough. The very law of God he'd tried to keep accused him, through God's holiness and inflexible righteousness. He had sinned in the past and he still came short. It was the end for Saul of all confidence in his own ability to make himself acceptable and righteous in the sight of God. 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (Gal 3:13). He must kneel before the Saviour's cross in humble, abject confession that he was a sinner, and he did.

There are still many, many people who resist this. They are quite religious and earnest to do their very best in life. 'I'm not so bad,' they say. They live as if Christ didn't really need to die, and in the end they can earn their way into God's heaven by their behaviour.

So, it was a stumbling block and a scandal to many Jews.

What of the Greeks?

Not all ancient Greeks liked philosophy, and I'm not sure about the modern ones either. Greece was the home of philosophy, of course; from the men in the times before Christ who first turned their thoughts to the universe and began to ask what makes it tick—how does it go; what's it made of?—to those who hit upon the atomic theory. It's been modified now, of course; but what brains they had, to get the idea that everything in the universe is formed of tiny bits of stuff—*atoms*, that they said you couldn't split. We honour them, and the memory of men like Socrates and Plato and Aristotle, who brought their great minds to bear upon the questions of ethics and morality, and the right way to live. When they'd done all their thinking and not come up with any results that would prove to be permanent, it seemed puerile folly to think you could solve the world's problems by preaching Jesus Christ crucified on a cross.

What did God say about that? When men and women use their God-given intellect and think they will solve the mysteries of the universe by their independent thinking, how marvellous of God to so humble himself and create this message of a God who was in Christ,

crucified at Calvary for the world's forgiveness. God has a passing comment, 'For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe' (1 Cor 1:21). With all their philosophy, the Greeks didn't know God. That's a point to be pondered. I used to teach a lot of Greek, but for all their thinking they didn't know God.

Aristotle's idea of God

'God is so infinitely perfect,' says Aristotle, 'that he couldn't think of anything else but himself. He is perfect unity, and thinking even of himself would imply a duality. That's two things: I, who think; and myself, that I think about. God can't be a double like that; he must be just one, so he really can't even think of himself.'

In weaker moments, Aristotle acknowledged that God did think about some things. But what he was sure of was that God didn't think about us. He was so perfect that he couldn't interact with anything else. Just to think about us would reduce his perfection. Does he love us? Of course not. 'God attracts us,' says Aristotle, 'like a very beautiful woman attracts her many lovers, but she's not interested in any of them.' What a God! Marjorie Grene², one of the experts in Aristotle, said that he invented a God no one ever would think of worshipping. How would you worship a God like that?

You will observe that systems of philosophy that seek to find out God by sheer force of independent human intellect end up with a God like that. The Neoplatonists did, and if I'm not mistaken so did the famous ancient philosopher, Shankara. He's not a personal God, we're not his creatures, we just emanated from him. He's not interested in us. Some God!

The heart of God revealed

O the wonder of the Christian gospel: the story of the cross that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life' (John 3:16). This is its heart; here is the very heart of God revealed: 'In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [the substitute] for our sins' (1 John 4:10).

It's not only wise, but its message is powerful, says Paul, for all kinds of reasons. It was while we were yet morally weak, lacking the moral fibre to stand up against sin, that God loved us. Before we'd made any improvement he sent Christ to die for us: 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly' (Rom 5:6).

The word 'ungodly' in Greek means people who have lost their reverence and their respect for God. When they do that, of course, they lose their ultimate values in life: respect for fellow human beings, for the human body, and eventually respect for themselves. While we were still ungodly like that and without values, how would God rescue and save us? By sending his Son to declare that God loved us. It is here, in a God who valued us so much, that we regain our proper sense of value. I can't tell you why he thought it worth giving his Son to

² Marjorie Grene (born Dec. 13, 1910, Milwaukee, Wis.—died March 16, 2009, Blacksburg, Va.), American philosopher who is considered the founder of the philosophy of biology. In 2002 she became the first woman included in the Library of Living Philosophers. (Britannica.com)

ransom our souls. That is the centre of the values of this universe. While we were yet sinners, still coming short, and while we were enemies, we can be reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

I have a story to tell, and with that I'll finish. Some years ago the mountain guides in Switzerland gave notice that if anybody was so foolish as to try and climb the north face of the Eiger in wintertime, and then got stuck, the guides would not come to rescue them. They would freeze to death on their ledge. Two mountaineers decided to brave the challenge and try to climb the face of the Eiger in wintertime, and they got stuck. Watching their bodies from the other side of the valley, the mountain guides said, 'Let them be; they chose it. We're not going to risk our lives to try and rescue fools like that.'

A Frenchman heard of it and got together an international team of mountaineers. They took the train up the side of Eiger, walked the rest to the shoulder, and got to the top. They had a great winch with them and put it as near the edge as they could, for the frost and snow had covered the edge and protruded somewhat. They couldn't see the men, who were caught on a ledge, hundreds of feet below them; they had to be guided by lights from the hotel across the valley. One man volunteered to be tied to the rope and go over the edge to reach at least one of the men. He took a mountain cradle and stretcher with him. They let him down, down, down, down, down, until he came level with the man, but he was some feet away. He tried to swing himself to reach the ledge, but he always missed by a little bit. He couldn't make it. With the man nearly mad with terror he had to leave him, and signalled to the men aloft to bring him up. Then they took the risk of changing the position of the great winch and the man went down again, right where the man was. In all his manic struggles and fears, his rescuer came right where he was. Putting the man on the stretcher and the stretcher on his back, he signalled to his friends to haul them up. Putting his feet on the face of the mountain and leaning back with that heavy load, he walked up the north face of the Eiger to the top.

What a faint little picture this is of the marvel of God's grace in the gospel that this Institute stands for. When we were weak, godless, and sinful, when we were even enemies of God, he so loved us. The Saviour came exactly where we were, and he still comes to us exactly where we are, pleading for us to repent of our own inabilities and to cast ourselves on his mercy. Through faith in Jesus Christ and his substitutionary death, we find forgiveness with God, eternal life, and the power by God's grace to live for the Saviour who loved us and gave himself for us.

My closing words to Delhi Bible Institute are these. As I sit and admire your work, may God give you the grace, the strength and the wherewithal to continue in your great ministry of reconciliation, proclaiming the gospel. 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21). Let all your activities stem from this glorious fact and source, and God's righteous blessing will abide on them.

Standing for the Defence and Confirmation of the Gospel

So once more, good morning, and may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. It has been most encouraging to see the title you gave to your presentation, 'Standing Fast for the Word', and in harmony with that theme the topic for our meditation now is, 'Standing for the Defence and Confirmation of the Gospel.'

Our phrase is taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he tells them how grateful to God he is for their cooperation with him. From the moment of their conversion they had stood with him loyally and supported him faithfully in the spread of the gospel. At Philippi, we know about a businesswoman by the name of Lydia; a woman who had been converted from Spiritism; and a retired Roman soldier making up his pension by being the guard in the prison. When Paul had left them, more than once they had supported him financially in his work for the defence and confirmation of the gospel. Now he was writing to them from a prison in Rome. It was no accident that he was there, for towards the end of his life he had become conscious of a special need, not merely to preach the gospel, but to defend and confirm it. That was the reason he was now in Rome, soon to appear before the Emperor Nero. He wanted to defend the gospel because all sorts of rumours and slanders had become rife. It was reported by some that the Christian gospel was a political movement, advocating insurgency in order to overthrow the government. It was exceedingly important that Paul should go to Rome and tell the Emperor to his face that that was a lie. The Christian gospel is not a form of politics.

Many other such accusations against the gospel were faced by Paul when he was in Rome, but this morning we leave that aspect of it to consider another problem that Paul had, and this will be very surprising when you hear it. He sensed the need to defend and confirm the gospel within the Christian communities, and we shall consider four such instances. Two examples from Corinth, one from Antioch, and one from Colosse.

In Corinth, they were beginning to adopt practices in the church that conflicted directly with the strategy of God in the gospel of the cross. Our second example will come from that same church at Corinth, where some of the teachers were beginning to introduce doctrines that contradicted the absolute foundation of the Christian gospel. They were denying the bodily resurrection of our Lord.

Our third example will come from the church at Antioch, where certain teachers began to teach that simple faith in Christ was not enough for salvation. If you wanted to be saved, you had to add certain other conditions.

Our fourth example comes from the church at Colosse. It was not a question of, on what condition can you be saved, but what are the good recipes for deepening the spiritual life? At

Colosse there was a whole batch of recipes. Paul mentions four of them. They were all absolutely bogus; not the Christian gospel at all. That's a rather gloomy topic, isn't it? But wait until you hear Paul preach what the true gospel is.

1. Corinth

So we come to the first of the big difficulties. The practice was beginning in Corinth to form groups and cliques among the Christians, and to call themselves after the names of certain Christian teachers. Some said, 'We are of Paul.' Others said, 'Not Paul, but Apollos.' 'You narrow-minded lot,' said some, 'we are of Cephas. After all, he is the chief apostle, and doesn't he have the keys?'

God's strategy of the cross

In so doing, they were running clean counter to the strategy of God, namely the strategy of the cross. What was that strategy, and what was its aim? God's strategy of the cross was aimed at dealing with a certain fundamental sinful attitude. It relates to the basic confidence of the human heart. This is no small part of what it means to be human. We didn't make this vast universe, and we find ourselves on this planet in the midst of it. In what should we put our confidence for survival and for doing well? God's answer is, 'The basic confidence of the human personality ought to be in God.'

That basic confidence has been perverted. Ever since Adam sinned in the garden of Eden, the temptation has been present with all humanity to transfer our confidence from the living God to some other person or being, or to some other things. God protested against it:

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me. (Jer 9:23-24)

When the Scripture talks of *boasting* in this sense, it's not talking about blatant self-advertisement, like what car you drive. 'A Ford. Yes, they're very good, I prefer the Bentley myself.' 'My son is going to the very best university.' All that kind of silly stuff.

No, the Bible isn't talking of that kind of boasting. It's talking of our basic *confidence*. In what is my confidence placed? Says God, 'Let not the rich man put his confidence in his riches. Let not the wise intellectual put his confidence in his intellect.' Our confidence must be in the living God himself, and to transfer that basic confidence from God to anything or anyone else is fundamental idolatry.

All humanity has had its confidence perverted by his satanic majesty, and it was God's strategy to undermine that false confidence and bring back confidence in God. Hence the strategy of the cross. How can I put my confidence in a crucified man? Here we see the demonstration of the folly of misplaced human confidence. Man's falsely placed confidence has taken him away from God, so the only way of bringing back that confidence is to present mankind with a man crucified on a cross, and for us to preach through him a way of repentance and a way back to God.

The Corinthian believers had professed to believe that gospel message. If you had challenged them, they would have said, 'Yes, of course our confidence is in God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

But Paul asked them, 'Why then are you calling yourselves after the names of other men?'

It is understandable why some of them did it, because people naturally prefer certain preachers to others. Some liked Apollos. 'Oh, he is such a preacher. The very way he pronounced the word Mesopotamia was delightful.' They felt very stirred by his preaching. 'Paul's bodily presence is weak; he hasn't even got a wife; he doesn't know how to dress; his speech is contemptible. Why doesn't he take a few lessons in elocution? He has all these intellectual doctrines.'

Others said, 'You can have the preachers you like, but we like Cephas. He's not a very good preacher, and not so intellectual as Paul, but he is practical.' They didn't need to give Peter the advice that people address to me: 'Be practical,' they say.

We value all the different gifts in the church and praise God for them. We should welcome them all, for we need them all. To start dividing the church and call your particular group after one preacher or after one set of doctrines or something, is to fall foul of God's strategy of the cross.

Listen to Paul: 'What are you doing calling yourselves after me? "We're Pauline Christians." Was Paul crucified for you?'

Well, indeed not. Between our blessed Lord and Paul there was an infinite division. Paul stands with us as a sinner before God, needing to be saved. Christ and Christ only was crucified for us. Were you baptized in the name of Paul? It would sound a bit comical, wouldn't it, if not blasphemous? Imagine a Christian preacher baptizing somebody, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and of Paul.'

Mercifully the Christian church has never fallen for that one. But why do we name our churches by names other than the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and thus diminish the unique glory of our Lord?

Misplaced confidence

This question of man's confidence in men has been a perennial problem. It was the difficulty in ancient Israel. In the times of the Judges, whenever God allowed Israel to be defeated by their enemies because of Israel's sin, when they repented and cried to the Lord he raised up deliverers for them.

It happened several times; but in the days of Samuel Israel got tired of it. You see, they had lots of enemies, and if there was a big Philistine breathing down your neck and you've got to have a prayer meeting for God to raise up the deliverer, it can be a bit nerve-racking. So the people came to Samuel and said, 'Samuel, you're a good man, but your sons are no good. We're tired of this business, having to pray to God to raise up a deliverer every time the enemy comes up. We have a suggestion, Samuel. You select and anoint a king for us, and when the enemy comes we shall already have a king in place to deal with him. That will eliminate too many prayer meetings.'

Samuel was upset, and so was God. Said God, 'All right, Samuel, I'll provide them with a king.' God chose Saul, and Samuel presented Saul to the people. When the people saw Saul they were delighted. He stood head and shoulders above everybody else.

'God,' they said, 'you've done wonderfully now, because Saul's a very big man.'

Things went very well for a little while until one day a colossal man came out of the camp of the Philistines. His helmet was as big as a trashcan and his spear like a telegraph post. Not only were Israel absolutely scared stiff, but Saul himself, that big man, was scared. That's the trouble with putting your trust in big men; they're all right until a bigger man comes along.

God saved the people that day; not by providing an even bigger man, but by a little stripling called David. He went out to meet Saul with nothing but a rod, a few stones and a sling. Stupidly weak weapons, you might think, but David announced to Goliath what the basic principle of his warfare was. 'You come with all your big manhood and your big weapons. I come to you in the name of the Lord God, and it's the Lord God who will defeat you' (see 1 Sam 17:45-46).

Oh that we had the wisdom not to boast in more strength or riches or whatever, but to have confidence in the Lord and let the world know clearly that we follow Christ, and his is the only name in which we glory.

2. Corinth again

Our second example also comes from first Corinthians. They were a very reliable church: if there were false ways of doing things, you could rely on them to do them. There were some in Corinth who were teaching new doctrines, which implied a denial of the bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus and thus undermined the very gospel they were supposed to preach. If Christ has not risen bodily from the dead we have no gospel to preach, and the apostles are found to be deliberate liars.

Where did they get these ideas from, then, that there is no bodily resurrection? All sorts of reasons are suggested. Actually it goes back to their false ideas of creation, for most of the Greek philosophers did not believe in creation. If they believed in God at all, they believed not in creation but in *emanation*. The Bible teaches that God created the universe out of nothing. God created it, but the world isn't part of him; the Greek philosophers preferred what we call emanation. Just as you get rays of sunlight coming out of the sun and the sunbeams are part of the sun, they thought that creation emanated out of God. It carried the implication, of course, that everything in the universe is God in some sense. That's what Plato taught, and Neoplatonism and Hindu philosophers teach the same.

That had the unfortunate result that people came to think that God must be perfect and spiritual. He didn't create us; we emanated from him through endless angels and various sub-deities. One of these lesser deities went and created matter, and what a disaster that was. Our chief aim in life is that we develop such spirituality that we can escape the body of matter and merge with God. It's absolutely false, and in the second and third centuries the Christian church had to fight hard against the philosophers to deny the theory of emanation and hold hard to the doctrine of creation. We're not part of God; God created us, bodies of flesh and bone.

God is not ashamed of the human body. 'It is good,' says God. Defiled by sin, yes, but basically good. We see the wonder that God became man: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). At Calvary he gave that holy body without spot to God (Heb 9:14). When he arose from the dead and his disciples thought that he was a spirit or something, he said, 'Don't be afraid. Handle me and see. A spirit has not flesh and bone as you see me have, bodily risen from the dead' (see Luke 24:38-39). The glorious thing about the gospel is this, and it's enough to make your heart miss a beat: there's a human body in heaven at this very moment. Our risen Lord has taken humanity to the very throne of God, and one of the glories of the Christian gospel is that one day not only shall we be in heaven, but we shall have a body like his glorious body (Phil 3:21). We are not to be ashamed, therefore, of the physical human body.

But the Greek philosophers didn't like the notion of the resurrection of a body, and Hinduism likewise; their great goal is to escape matter and be absorbed into 'the One'. If you're very bad when you die, they say you'll have to come back into a human body. Ah, how different is the gospel of our living Lord Jesus Christ.

How do you get this salvation?

You say, 'by simple faith, my good brother.'

Amen, of course that's the answer. By faith, not by our works, nor by our ritual. When we have been saved by faith through Christ, God has a whole array of works for us to do, and we show the reality and genuineness of our faith by the works we do.

Permit me a humble illustration. When a baby is born, they tell me that the baby lets out an almighty cry. Instead of being sorry for it, everybody is delighted because the cry is the evidence that the baby has life. But anybody knows the baby didn't get life by crying. That's altogether a different process. As far as the baby is concerned life is an utter gift, and it doesn't have to do anything for it.

The two questions are different. 1. On what condition do I get eternal life? That's an absolute gift, given through faith. 2. How do I show that I've got life? That's by our works. This morning we are concerned with the question: what is the basic condition upon which we receive forgiveness and eternal life? And the answer is, not by our works, nor by our rituals, but by repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Antioch

The evidence of the Acts of the Apostles is that the issue became confused very early on in the Christian community. At first many who got converted to Christ were Jews who had been circumcised according to their Jewish religion, but then they repented of their sins and trusted the Saviour. They were justified by faith (Rom 5:1). It didn't occur to them to think, 'What has circumcision got to do with being saved?'

Then some Gentiles began to get converted. They said they were saved, but they hadn't been circumcised. Now what? That forced the Christian communities to do some hard thinking. Do you have to be circumcised in order to be saved? Did circumcision contribute something to being saved? Or how was it?

There came down some men from Judea to Antioch, where they were largely Gentile Christians, and they began to teach the apostles that you cannot be saved unless you are circumcised in accordance with Moses' law. When Paul and Barnabas heard that, they said, 'Not on your life,' and they went up to Jerusalem to get a united statement of the situation from the apostles. 'Does this little operation upon a baby count towards salvation? Is it necessary for salvation?' There in Jerusalem the apostles gave their answer (see Acts 15). 'No, indeed not. It is our conviction,' says Peter, 'that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by work or ceremony, that even we Jews are saved in exactly the same way as the Gentiles. God has given the Gentiles his Holy Spirit, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Please don't tempt God by suggesting that faith in Christ is not enough, and that to be really saved they must submit to this operation.'

So the apostles stated the truth of the matter; but it's one thing to hold doctrine in our heads, another thing is our practice. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, tells us that they had a conference at Antioch. I don't know whether they had a presentation! I think they did, because Paul and Barnabas saw to it that people heard how the Gentiles got saved. Peter came down, of course, and at the conference dinners he ate with the Gentiles. Then some people came down from James in Jerusalem, and Peter got up from the table. I don't know whether he said he had a stomach ache or something! When Paul saw what he had done, he said, 'No, you don't! Before these fellows came from Jerusalem you were happy to eat with Gentiles, weren't you? Despite the food laws, and despite the fact that they weren't circumcised, Peter, didn't you believe in your heart that they were saved of the Lord and had his Holy Spirit? They didn't need to be circumcised or keep the food laws. Why are you withdrawing now?' And then he accused Peter of a very nasty thing; he accused him of hypocrisy (see Gal 2:11-14).

Now, there are two forms of hypocrisy. One is to profess you are a Christian, even if you're not. The other form is to pretend you are not, when you are. Peter believed in his heart that circumcision wasn't necessary. That's what he believed; but now in his behaviour he was pretending he didn't believe what he did.

'I resisted him,' says Paul. Why did he resist him? Because if he'd allowed Peter to get away with that, and people were to get the idea that circumcision of a baby somehow helped, who knows how, in getting saved, then we who sit here today would be in doubt as to what the truth of the gospel is. We have not only to believe Christian doctrine, but we have to be careful in our behaviour lest we introduce elements of practice that contradict the basic truth of the gospel.

I shall have to reserve my fourth example (Colosse³) for my next celebrations in Bible Bhavan, for our lunch awaits us. May God bless his word, and give us the grace not to behave like Peter did at that other dinner table in the ancient conference in Antioch.

³ See Appendix.

APPENDIX

*Extract From the Transcript, 'How Can Colossians Help Me?'*⁴

Apparently, going around the ancient world and troubling the believers, there were teachers who unashamedly would have recommended things other than Christ for the development of the spiritual life. No true believer is going to be permanently misled by those things, but we shall have to be careful. If I came to you and said, 'My dear brother, what is the secret for going on with God, for entering into the deeper things?', I wonder what the first word would be that would come to your lips. Would it be 'Christ'? Would it be something else? Let us, therefore, briefly look at some of the other recipes for the deepening of spiritual life that were being advocated by these false teachers to whom Paul alludes in this letter.

False Recipe 1: 'Special' spiritual experiences

Let no one disqualify you [rob you of your prize, RV], insisting on asceticism and worship of the angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head. (Col 2:18-19)

There are difficulties in Paul's language here, and in the translation of it, but the recipe that some of these teachers were recommending is obvious. It was going in for various super-duper spiritual experiences and embarking on visions. Not perhaps worshipping angels; I doubt whether any that would have dared to call themselves Christians in those early days would have recommended actually worshipping angels. The introduction of the worship of angels into Christianity came some centuries later. I myself think what Paul means is that these false teachers alleged that they could introduce you into such experiences of the spiritual world that you could actually join in the worship of angels as they worship God—'tongues of angels'. 'No,' says Paul, 'such so called spiritual experience is not of Christ. In fact, it will minister to our fleshly mind, and to go in for it is "not holding fast to the Head".' In my worship, in my spiritual exercises, it's not listening in to the angels that I need to be doing; it is holding fast to the Head, which is the Lord Jesus.

⁴ This deals with the topic Dr Gooding did not have time to finish at DBI. See also 'Studies in Colossians', Talk 8.

False Recipe 2: Philosophy

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him. (2:8–10)

Another false recipe for the deepening of spiritual life is called philosophy. Now I doubt whether Paul was referring to what we today normally call philosophy. That is an academic discipline with its formal logic. What Paul is presumably talking about here are things that went under the name of philosophy but weren't real philosophy at all. Things like theosophy, or some of the Indian mystical religions and yoga, and such like things. All those who claimed special knowledge that wasn't common to all believers. Paul here says that seeking that kind of special knowledge and great mysteries and advanced learning is wrong. Why? We don't need it anyway. For 'in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (v. 3), and if you are in him you have been filled, because he is the very fullness of God. If you have been filled with Christ, there's no room for these other things. Beware of bogus claims to knowledge. Every believer is in Christ; every believer has been filled; and all the fullness of the Godhead is available to every believer in the Lord Jesus.

False Recipe 3: Asceticism

Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. (2:16)

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (2:20–23)

These are things that we generally put under the term of asceticism, which sounds a long word but isn't really. *Askeō* in Greek means 'to practise'; and then it comes to be used of an athlete's practice and training. If you are to be an Olympic swimmer, you'll not only have to shave your head, sir, but you'll have to get up very early in the morning, in all weathers be down at the swimming pool to swim about twenty miles before breakfast, be in bed by ten o'clock, and all that kind of thing! That is what the Greeks would have called *askēsis*, stern exercise. Then it came to be applied to spiritual exercises, and is generally applied nowadays in particular to those so-called spiritual exercises that take the form of being hard on the body: putting peas in your shoes, using hair shirts, training yourself to say the same monotonous prayer ten thousand times just by sheer willpower.

All such rigorous things like this have particular rules: handle not, taste not, touch not. These things have a show of wisdom in 'will worship' (v. 23 KJV), meaning the development of your psychological power and severity to the body. You may wonder how it is that these kinds of things ever appeal to anybody. I must confess they don't appeal to me, but then that's

because of my sinfulness in another direction: I like to stay in bed too late on a wet morning! How is it that they ever appeal to anybody? Because there is in every true believer a desire to be holy. In your desire to be holy have you never found yourself wishing that there was some recipe for being holy overnight? Have you never felt yourself saying, 'I think I'm missing something; I'm struggling against these sins still.' And along come these chaps saying, 'If you really want to be free of sin and come to the happy state of sinlessness, here is a recipe for it—rigorous disciplines.'

Paul says that they are absolute humbug. Instead of promoting holiness they will do the very opposite. They will lead to the indulgence of the flesh, sometimes by reaction. When the body has been severely used, it will sometimes take its own revenge in the other direction, and that will take its toll in the form of spiritual pride, like the Pharisees with their rules and regulations, imagining they were holy. 'You tithe mint, dill and cumin,' said our Lord to them, 'you wash the outside of the cup and your inner self hasn't been touched, full of extortion and wickedness' (see Matt 23:23–26). It is not the way to deal with the flesh.

What then is the way to deal with the flesh? Let me just point you to the verses. That's all I may do, and we're trying to gather the general argument of the epistle. Here is God's recipe to deal with the flesh:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. (1:21–22)

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. (2:11)

Here is God's great gospel; God's way of dealing with the flesh. Then, in the power of the risen Lord, we are to do what chapter 3 and verse 5 tells us: put to death—not our physical bodies—but what is earthly in us, in the sense of sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry.

False Recipe 4: Fighting spiritual forces

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (2:15)

When it comes to conflict with demonic powers, these false teachers talk much about principalities, powers and dominions. They would have told you that it was possible to have direct experience, to enter into those realms and listen to the worship of angels, and there to struggle over demons and principalities and powers. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul does tell us straight that we wrestle against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places. That is perfectly true. But if our struggling against the spiritual opposition is going to be effective, we shall have to learn that it is not our victory or by our might. The victory has been won for us by the Lord Jesus. Therefore, if you would strengthen me in my fight against evil spiritual powers, don't fill my mind with endless discussions of evil spiritual

powers; do like Paul does, concentrate my mind on the Lord Jesus and on the fact that he has won the victory over those powers. This great victory over the powers of hell has already been achieved and the Lord has now ascended triumphant.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.