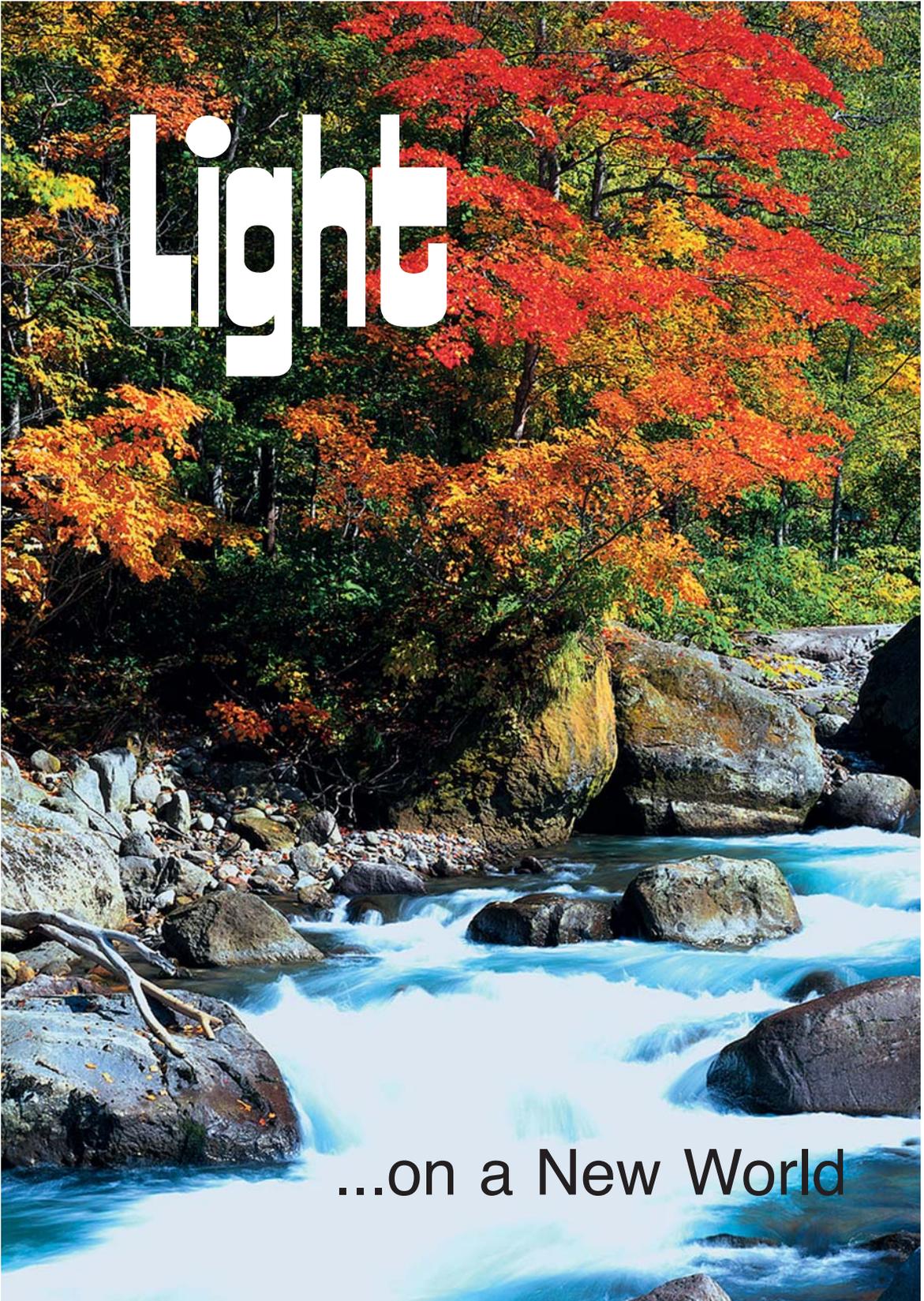


Light

...on a New World



*Published for the
Bexley Christadelphian Ecclesia (Dawn Fellowship)
by*



*Light Bible Publications,
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Bexley, Kent
DA5 1UB, England*

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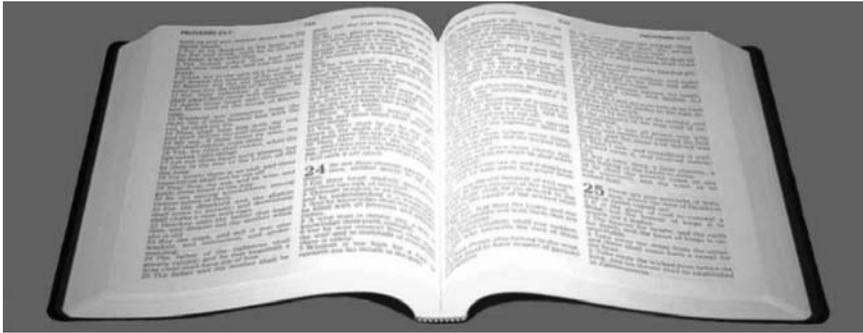
Publications Secretary: Matt Goddon

VOLUME NINETEEN NUMBER FIVE

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Cover picture: Autumn scene



What the Bible says about... The 'Devil' and 'Satan'

IN CONSIDERING THEOLOGICAL teaching on the subject of the Devil and Satan, we need look no further than any leading Bible dictionary. It becomes immediately apparent that popular theology treats 'Satan' and the 'Devil' as the same personified being whose motives encompass all that is opposed God. As confirmation of this, I quote the following statements from the Davies Bible Dictionary. Under the heading 'Devil' we read:

'An Evil Spirit...The Evil One, Satan the greatest of all fallen spirits...He is the great enemy of God and man who tempted Christ and incites men to sin...He is that old serpent that tempted Eve, a liar and the father of lies...'

Similarly under 'Satan' we read:

'The Devil, pre-eminently 'the adversary', animated by a disposition hostile to all goodness and the chief opponent of God and man, aiming to undo the work of God...In the fully revealed doctrine of Satan, which is seen in the New Testament he is the god of this world who has access to the hearts of men, deceives them, and receives their witting or unwitting obedience...'

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The would-be Bible student undoubtedly sees this as the traditional accepted theological view and may be confused when the same dictionary also states under the heading of Satan:

‘He is however, under the control of God. Only by God’s permission can he pursue his malicious designs. When permission is granted him to carry out his evil plots, it is only that he may become an instrument in furthering the divine plan...’

Apparently there is confusion in the conventional theological view since *‘The greatest of the fallen Spirits, the chief opponent of God’* can only carry out his *‘oppositions or malicious designs’* when he has been granted God’s permission. We make no attempt to clarify the mysteries of this theological riddle but note the Divine principle of Scriptural interpretation in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: *‘For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace...’* [1 Corinthians 14.33].

Adopting this principle, that Scripture is not confused or contradictory, and on the basis of no preconceived mythological conceptions, the true Bible teaching about the ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan’ can be understood. Furthermore, we would add that it is essential that a follower of Christ has a correct understanding of these Bible words. Without such knowledge it would not be possible to appreciate the purpose of Christ’s mission, which is clearly stated in the first letter of John:

‘...For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.’
[1 John 3.8]

PERSONIFICATION IN BIBLE TEACHING

In turning to the Bible then, to find its teaching about the words ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan’, it is necessary first, to note the way in which personification is often used throughout the Scriptures. By this we mean the way that inanimate objects or abstract ideas are often

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personalised, partly as a characteristic of the language in which the Bible was written and also to convey a more meaningful impression. For example in the book of Proverbs, the attribute of wisdom is likened to a woman:

‘She (wisdom) is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her.’
[Proverbs 3.15]

In John’s Gospel record the Spirit or power of God is given a personality:

‘However when he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak: and he will tell you things to come.’
[John 16.13]

This promise of Jesus was fulfilled when the Holy Spirit, the power of God was bestowed on the Apostles (See Acts chapter 2 verses 1-4).

The Bible includes many other examples of such figures of speech, but these will suffice. In considering Biblical teaching on the ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan’ we should ensure then that such figures of speech where used do not cloud our perception of the underlying meaning.

MEANING OF THE WORD SATAN

In order to understand the use of the words ‘Satan’ and ‘Devil’ in the Bible, it is essential that we understand their correct meaning. Firstly the word ‘Satan’ has been taken directly out of the original Hebrew of the Old Testament without translation and when translated simply means ‘Adversary’. Here the biblical translators have used a certain amount of theological licence. In certain instances where it suited them, they have translated the word ‘Satan’ as ‘adversary’. For

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example in the first book of Kings we read: 'Now the LORD raised up an **adversary** against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite...' [*1 Kings 11.14*].

Here the word '**adversary**' is the Hebrew word 'Satan'. We can see that following the accepted theological view, it would be contradictory for God to stir up Satan against Solomon. What we can perceive in the translation is that to be a 'Satan' does not necessarily infer wickedness or sin. For instance, if someone opposes or is adverse to someone doing wrong, then the adversary or 'Satan' would in fact be an adversary for good. Scripture leaves us in no doubt on this point as we see from the following illustrations.

In the book of Numbers we read about the prophet Baalam who was hired by an enemy of Israel, Balak king of the Moabites to prophesy against Israel. God warned Baalam not to do this but Baalam continued to ignore this injunction and we read:

'Then God's anger was aroused because he went, and the Angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an **adversary** (the Hebrew word is Satan) against him' [*Numbers 22.22*].

We notice in this passage that the angel who carried out God's work, is referred to as 'Satan'. Clearly the word 'Satan' does not refer to the 'Devil' or an evil spirit. In the first book of Chronicles there is a passage where God himself is referred to as Satan:

'Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel' [*1 Chronicles 21.1*].

In the parallel account of this incident in the second book of Samuel we are told:

'Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah"' [*2 Samuel 24.1*].

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We can see from these references alone that the word ‘Satan’ carries no connotation of an evil or wicked person, but simply means adversary. It is interesting to note that in the Old Testament which comprises nearly three quarters of the Bible and covers some 4,000 years of God’s dealings with the human race, no suggestion is made that the word ‘Satan’ is a fallen angel or evil spirit. What is more, apart from the first two chapters of the book of Job, there are only three direct references in the Old Testament to the word ‘Satan’. At the same time Israel were continually being reprimanded for their sin. If such a supernatural being or ‘*chief evil spirit*’ was responsible for sin, it is quite remarkable that no reference is made to it.

MEANING OF THE WORD DEVIL

When we examine the word ‘Devil’ (Greek diabolos) as used in the New Testament, we find a different meaning and a term that cannot be applied to anything righteous. Again the word is not a translation of the original Greek language but is derived from the Greek word ‘**diaballein**’. This is a combination of two Greek words – ‘**Dia**’ meaning ‘across’ and ‘**ballein**’ to throw. When translated into English it literally means to ‘**falsely accuse**’ or to ‘**slander**’. If we refer to a Bible concordance, we can see the theological bias of the translators, sometimes translating the word as ‘**slanderer**’ or ‘**false accuser**’ where the preconceived notion of a Devil as an evil spirit clearly doesn’t fit.

For example in his letter to Titus, speaking of the way the older women were to set an example to the younger women, the apostle Paul wrote: ‘*the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behaviour, not **slanderers** (original Greek is diabolos or devils), not given to much wine, teachers of good things*’ [Titus 2.3]. Similarly Paul wrote to Timothy about the wives of leaders of the house of God: ‘*Likewise their wives must be reverent, not **slanderers** (Diabolos or devils), temperate, faithful in all things*’ [1 Timothy 3.11].

We note here that the theological notion of the ‘Devil’ would not fit. The emphasis is on the women not personally being slanderers or

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devils – in other words not being possessed by an external supernatural influence. In both cases then, the words Satan and Devil in themselves give us no indication as to what or who is being precisely referred to. This can be understood from other considerations in the text, in which the particular **adversary** or **slanderer** is apparent in most cases. For instance Jesus said to the Apostle Peter:

‘Get behind me, Satan! You are an offence to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men’ [*Matthew 16.23*].

Here Peter was the adversary (‘Satan’) for in his love for Jesus he wanted to oppose his death, which was adverse to the requirements of Christ’s mission. On a different occasion Jesus said to his disciples: ‘*did not I choose you the twelve, and one of you is a devil?*’ [*John 6.70*] Here Judas Iscariot is referred to, who would lead the crowd of ‘**false accusers**’ (devils) to betray Christ and bring about his death.

THE CAUSE OF TEMPTATION

As in the previous verses considered, when no preconceived idea of a personified ‘chief evil spirit’ is in the mind of the reader, there is nothing in the Bible to suggest such a person and the context of the passage confirms this. What then of other verses that appear to associate the words ‘Devil’ or ‘Satan’ with a supernatural power linked with sin? For example, consider the words from the first letter of John which we partly quoted earlier:

‘He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil’ [*1 John 3.8*].

Jesus, who was manifested to destroy the works of the devil was himself affected by this power for we read in Luke:

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‘Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil...’ [Luke 4.1,2].

The same power is referred to in this chapter as ‘Satan’ and in the end of the account we read that this power of temptation (the devil) ‘*departed from him until an opportune time*’ [Luke 4.13]. In considering verses like these, in order to determine what is really being implied by this apparent power for evil of the ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan’, there is a very important characteristic that must be understood. Only human beings, that is flesh and blood like you and me can be affected by this tempting power, for concerning the nature of God we read in the epistle of James:

‘Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God **cannot be tempted by evil**, nor does he himself tempt anyone’ [James 1.13].

This point is emphasised in the life of Christ, in that he was made of our nature so that he could feel the effects of this tempting power and suffer its consequences in death, unlike God or the Angels. This theme is clearly shown in the letter to the Hebrews where we read:

‘For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour (help) them that are tempted.’
[Hebrews 2.16-18 AV]

Jesus was tempted like us as a consequence of taking on ‘*the seed of Abraham*’. He was born of a woman and like the rest of the human

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race he inherited sin's flesh, as we read in Hebrews chapter four:

'For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.'

[Hebrews 4.15]

THE POWER OF SIN

It is our '*weaknesses*', that are our natural characteristics of flesh and blood which make us susceptible to the power of temptation and which are shown to be the 'devil', as we see from another passage in the letter to the Hebrews:

'Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he (Jesus) himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.'

[Hebrews 2.14.]

This passage identifies the 'devil' as the one that holds the power of death. What is this then? Scripture leaves us in no doubt as we see from the following quotations:

- 'For the wages of **sin** is death...' *[Romans 6.23].*
- '...**sin**, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.' *[James 1.15].*
- 'The sting of death is **sin**...' *[1 Corinthians 15.56].*
- 'Therefore, just as through one man **sin** entered the world, and death through **sin**, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned' *[Romans 5.12].*

Yes Scripture is very clear about that which holds the power of death – it is **sin**. Death is the consequence of **sin** and it is this '*power*' which is personified in the above passage from Hebrews chapter 2.

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Christ came to take away or destroy this sin power, by condemning it in the only way possible, that is in his own natural body. For this as we have already seen is where the power of temptation comes from. The importance of Christ's sacrifice can now be appreciated:

- '...but now, once at the end of the ages, he has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' [*Hebrews 9.26*].
- 'who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree...by whose stripes you were healed.'
[*1 Peter 2.24*].
- 'For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and (by a sacrifice) on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh' [*Romans 8.3-compare with Hebrews 2.14*].

THE CONFLICT WITHIN US

Even by comparing this last verse with those verses in Hebrews referred to earlier, it is abundantly clear that the natural weakness that besets each one of us to fall under temptation to sin is the 'devil'. It is human weakness that dwells within each of us, which the Bible describes as '*sin in the flesh*'.

The Apostle James recognised that this inherent weakness in us, which leads us to sin, was not as the result of any external agency but clearly came from within, for he tells us:

'But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death' [*James 1.14,15*].

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The Apostle Paul was very aware of this conflict between the spiritual mind and the adversary that naturally dwelt within him, for he wrote to the believers at Rome:

‘For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find...I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the person who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members’ [Romans 7.18,21-23].

And so Paul exhorts his readers:

‘Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts’ [Romans 6.12].

Note the personification of sin in this verse as a king or ruler who reigns over his subjects. However there has never been a place in the Bible for an external supernatural person or force being responsible for the sins of mankind. This responsibility has always been placed clearly on man, from the introduction of sin by Adam’s disobedience, as recorded in Genesis, to the present day. Jesus told his disciples: *‘For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man...’* [Matthew 15.19,20].

Mankind has always had the freewill to obey or disobey God as He said to Cain: *‘If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door...’* [Genesis 4.7]. We know what choice man has made and Scripture confirms this:

‘Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned’ [Romans 5.12].

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THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

We have established that the Scriptures do not support the notion of a personal 'Devil' or 'Satan'. Indeed to uphold such a doctrine removes man's responsibility for his own sin, and negates the need for Christ to be of our nature, thereby making of no effect his sacrifice in death. If sin's nature - the 'Devil', does not dwell in our flesh, and more importantly did not dwell in Christ's flesh, how then could he have condemned it by the sacrifice of his body on the cross? Scripture shows us what has happened, and we marvel that *'as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man's obedience many will be made righteous'* [Romans 5.19].

God has demonstrated his love for us by opening the way to life, through his Son's great sacrifice and triumph over sin in the flesh. We too can be accounted righteous if we persevere like the Apostle Paul in our struggle against our natural desires and try to overcome the power of sin which lies within each of us. For, as Paul wrote to Titus:

'... the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works' [Titus 2.11-14].

Peter Webb
Kent, England



From our Mail Bag

A READER HAS asked a question concerning ‘Antichrist’. “***Do you believe that there will be such a person and if not what is meant by the term Antichrist?***”

‘***Antichrist***’ is traditionally understood to be the great adversary of Jesus Christ and particularly the one who will oppose Jesus prior to his Second Coming. This idea is derived from the words of the Apostle Paul in his 2nd letter to the Thessalonians which contains a prophetic message: ‘***Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition***’ [2 Thessalonians 2.3].

Who is this person Paul describes as ‘***the man of sin***’? The traditional Protestant interpretation is to identify him with the papal system, with its long history of wonder-working, relics, signs and visions (see 2 Thessalonians 2.9), and its unscriptural doctrines of the trinity, transubstantiation, papal infallibility and the like. This is only part of the falling away however, of which the Apostle speaks.

It is a salutary fact that when looking round the world today we can see the fulfilment of the prophecy in this chapter. There has been a widespread ‘***falling away***’ from the truth taught by Jesus and the Apostles. It can be seen in both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic churches. This ‘***falling away***’ had already begun in the time of the Apostles and in several of Paul’s letters to the churches in the first century, he mentions wrong doctrines that had already begun to make their appearance.

The title ‘***antichrist***’ is only found in the letters of John. The prefix ‘***anti***’ is taken as meaning ‘***against***’ which is the meaning of the

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word in Latin. However in the Greek language of the New Testament **'anti'** signifies a substitute or rival, having here the sense of a false claimant to the title **'Christ.'** Nor is the term scripturally restricted to one man, for John speaks of **'many antichrists'** [1 John 2.18; 2 John.7], who separated themselves from the company and fellowship of the Apostles. Such persons were liars, because they denied that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and in denying the Son of God they also denied the Father who sent him [1 John 2.22].

The word **'antichrist'** is linked with the word **'deceiver'** in 2 John verse 7. The meaning of the Greek word **'planos'** is **'one who leads astray'** or deceiver. The warning of the Apostle is therefore for the believers to be on their guard against those who pretend to be **'Christ'** and through their words lead believers astray from the Truth of God's word. This was already happening in the time of the Apostle John who wrote his letters towards the end of the first century AD. Jesus warned the disciples to guard against these false Christs who seek to lead others astray. He said **'Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, saying, I am the Christ, and will deceive many.'** [Matthew 24.4,5]. This passage is part of the mount Olivet prophecy which was given in answer to the question posed by the disciples: **'what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'**[Matthew 24.3]. We can therefore expect that **'antichrists'** will be in the world, deceiving many people prior to the Second Coming of Christ.

The Bible teaches that Christ was born through the operation of the Holy Spirit on his mother Mary [Luke 1.35] and therefore God was his Father. However he was a member of the human race through his birth of Mary. His flesh was no different from the rest of us, except that unlike us he was able overcome the evil desires of the flesh (the human nature inherited from his mother Mary) and led a sinless life. As we read in the letter to the Hebrews he **'...was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin'** [Hebrews 4.15]. His death on the cross would not have achieved anything if he had not been a member of the

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human race. However, as Paul tells us, his death on the cross was a victory over sin's flesh and through the miracle of his resurrection the way to eternal life became possible for all those who believe and obey the Gospel [*Romans 5.19 and 1 Corinthians 15.50-57*].

What is it that leads many astray? It is the deception referred to in the words of Jesus. This is made clear from the passages in the 1st and 2nd letters of John. In the second letter we read: ***'Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh'. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.'*** Those who adhere to the doctrine of the trinity are following this deception which seeks to change the nature of Christ and therefore undermines the wonderful message of the Bible concerning his saving work.

To summarise, the Apostles warned the believers to be on the look out for those who will deceive many people into believing things not taught in God's Word. These are ***Antichrists*** or false Christs. They were already practising deception in the 1st century church and will continue their evil work until Christ returns. The lesson from the words of Paul to Timothy is this:

'But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of knowing from whom you have learned them. And that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' [*2 Timothy 3.13-15*].

Editor

What did Jesus mean?

‘If any one comes to me and does not hate his father and mother...he cannot be my disciple.’

THESE WORDS ARE to be found in Luke chapter 14 verse 26. They seem like the harshest words imaginable, unless Jesus did not mean it quite the way it first sounds. At face value, words telling us to hate our families seem to be beyond normal rationality.

The object of this article is to explore the meaning of these words spoken by Jesus. His statement on that day brings to mind things that have united or divided families. They also focus on the way that religion sometimes cuts across not only friendships but also the relationships within larger groups, even in nations. The peoples of Ireland for instance seem to have been painfully divided by an intransigence that has often been said to come from their divided religious perspectives. How many times have you heard people say something to the effect that religion has caused more wars than anything else in human history?

We must try to understand what Christ’s answer would have been to those who would accuse him of bringing war not peace. All of this makes a rather wide topic. I can imagine the points of argument already forming in your mind as they have in mine.

What we must do however, is start by simply getting back to the words of Jesus, the alleged author of these problems. Jesus often spoke about the two opposing attitudes of mind involved in **love** and **hate**. In

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trying to understand the meaning of these two words we need to put aside the emotive aspects of modern day English.

CONSIDERING LOVE FIRST OF ALL

What was it that Jesus usually meant when he spoke about love, if the biblical meaning differs from the connotations that English speakers put on love? In addition to that question most of us would wonder, what kind of love did Christ show for his own family? His words in our title suggest he was a rather cold man, whose family meant little to him because his life was being lived out on a greater stage.

What Jesus actually said and did concerning love for his family and for his wider family of human companions (including his followers) can be learned from passages like the following:

‘But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you...that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven.’

[Mathew 5.44,45]

This statement is interesting because Jesus is obviously not telling us to like our enemies with that kind of fondness that we associate with loving say a member of our family. That would be plainly hypocritical and extremely impractical. What he asks of us is this; to try to do our enemies the utmost good that is within our power. This attitude of mind is the basic meaning behind the New Testament word that Christ used. Our nearest English words for that challenging approach to life are love or charity. These words do not convey the full unconditional force for good to be offered to friend or foe alike that Jesus always required. The Greek word *agape* used in the New Testament has been translated into English as love.

At this point most of us would accept that the Gospels describe a man whose whole life was spent trying to do unmitigated good for

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everyone else, even to those who did not want it from him; even for his murderous enemies and the masses who never listened - this was perfect *agape* love.

Jesus said '*honour your father and your mother*' [Mark 7.10] quoting the Ten Commandments. He was responding to a conspiracy that he saw in Jewish society at the time. The expense of looking after aged parents could be avoided by openly dedicating one's wealth to the temple. This meant in effect that their wealth would not be touched for earthly things like looking after their parents' needs. It was a mean device that covered over their neglect. So Jesus spoke very bluntly against this hypocrisy because it spurned the God-given duty to properly honour our parents.

Nothing Jesus said or did was two faced. There was never a hint of hypocrisy about the quality of his personal life even though every moment was open to inspection and criticism. Nobody could say anything on this day recorded in Mark chapter seven, to the effect that he did not in any way honour his own parents, otherwise they most surely would have. Neither can we honour our parents and at the same time hate them. Not in anything like the normal way that hatred expresses itself (we will come back to hatred later).

Jesus said '*Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God*' [Luke 18.16]. We cannot even try to conclude that somehow Jesus wished mothers and fathers to be hated but on the other hand little children are to be received at any time.

The gospel records do not explicitly describe the details of the relationship of Jesus with his family in adult life. There is however a pattern of a loving relationship even though he had to break away from the close family life that he might otherwise have had. His mother was with him at the wedding in Cana at the beginning of his preaching work and she was beside him at the cross at the end.

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Those last hours confirm the loving care that existed between them. Their moment of 'farewell' at the cross has been preserved for us:

'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing by, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home' [*John 19.25-27*].

Love for one another held this small forlorn group together at a time of real heartbreak and the relationship of Jesus with his mother is placed at the centre of these few verses. Hours of suffering had brought Jesus close to death when he made provision for the mother he loved. His mother was to have a son and his close friend John was to have a mother. This was absolutely necessary because it had to fill the gap. No matter how imperfect, this substitute family was to be a replacement for the cherished relationship that had existed between Jesus and his mother up to the last. (It would seem that Mary's husband Joseph has probably died before the events recorded in John chapter 19).

The Scriptures open up to us Christ as a man with warm human emotions of a kind that must have often tested his principled and godly mind. His thinking tends to be towards the limits of our understanding, certainly beyond ordinary worldly attitudes. So, it is clear that he found certain things in life 'hateful' only because they were being compared with his absolute love for Godly things.

I have noticed that the almost standard media portrayal of a deeply religious person, is one of unbalanced extreme combined with personal coldness. This has little to do with the Jesus we know from the

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Gospels. He ate and drank with those thought to be the dregs of humanity - outsiders and unacceptable to society at the time. He kept company with Judas and gave him loving support right to the very end, all the while knowing his friend was a thief and a betrayer. At the moment of his death he prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him. He did all this good with an extraordinary carefulness that drew people to him right up to the moment when he lost consciousness. However this does not alter the fact that there were many things about their lives, that in a special and unique way he also hated.

HATE - THE OPPOSING ATTITUDE TO LOVE

The mind of Jesus was tuned in to the sublime perfection of his Father's house. He was born to show godliness to the world and the pattern of his thinking will not come to us easily. Perhaps we can however perceive how Jesus felt about the substandard aspects of our average human existence and then express his rejection as being like 'hating' even mother and father? To understand this we will now look into this word 'hate' and the way Jesus would have used it.

Here are three passages from the Gospels including the verse of our subject heading, where Jesus talked about love, hate and family:

'While he was still talking to the multitudes, behold his mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with him. Then one said to him, "Look your mother and your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with you." But he answered... "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And he stretched out his hand towards his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" [*Matthew 12.46-50*].

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‘And great multitudes went with him. And he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it...So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has, cannot be my disciple” [Luke 14.25-33].

‘No one can serve two masters; For either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon’ [Matthew 6.24,25]. (Note: the word *Mammon* means money from Aramaic word *mamona* meaning wealth or profit).

The idea that it is good to hate your own life found in the passage from Luke chapter 14 tells us that Jesus was putting a very particular meaning on the word ‘*hate*’. No word from God ever tells us to hate the day by day blessings of life. Sadly, some of us may feel this way if we are affected by depression but the advice from God’s word is enjoy your life as a gift from Him (See for example Ecclesiastes 11.7-10).

If we also examine the idea of loving and hating money found in Matthew chapter six, we can see that it can only have a profound meaning if Jesus was talking about an absolute preference against money only where a choice has to be made. There is nothing at all wrong with money in itself until we begin to choose it as our hearts desire. If we prefer money to fulfil our life rather than God’s good hand, then in Christ’s view, we are losing our way and perhaps even lost to God because we have chosen the world instead of him.

WHAT DID JESUS MEAN

In the book of Genesis we learn about Jacob's feelings for his two wives:

'And he (Jacob) loved also Rachel more than Leah
...And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated he
opened her womb: but Rachel was barren.'

[Genesis 29. 30-31 AV]

Despite the complications of their family life Jacob seems to have treated Leah with proper consideration as a wife. It could never be disguised however that Rachel was the real love of his life and this unfortunate inequality in Jacob's feelings was called hate, only because his feelings for Leah were inferior. It was not because Jacob acted towards her with unkindness or malice or any of the things we normally associate with hatred.

So, on that day at the Pharisee's house recorded in Luke chapter 14, Jesus was asking them to give their natural affections only second place to the things that God asked of them.

In order to demonstrate to the crowd the extent of what he was asking, he chose a painful example that they could all have empathy with - choosing God over your own family. At the time Jesus was in the middle of a great crowd who were following him. He also had along with him the few disciples who were close to him. He looked round at the whole company and said in effect as one writer puts it: *'It is possible to be an associate member of my family but still not be a real disciple.'*

If you and I are to be real followers of Jesus we must make God's commands a first choice in our life, especially where they are in conflict with our natural loves, hopes, desires, friendships and family loyalties. In practice most of us find this difficult because it is so natural to place most value on the many pleasurable things that life contains.

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When we start to feel unequal to this example of Christ, we may recall that God's grace flows like a fountain. He has promised us that even a sub-standard performance in this respect can be balanced up if we have an abiding inclination to choose him first. God has promised to those who choose him, that he will make them part of Christ's family and heirs of the promise of life.

Jesus led the way in hating his own life. '*Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*' [Matthew 26.39] was the width of that narrowest daily road that he chose for his own life. This amounted to a perfect, complete offering to his heavenly Father, made for Jesus himself and for us if we choose to be his family. We must then learn to '*hate*' this life, not because it is actually hateful or miserable, but because we must make the same choice that he made so decisively.

'And this is the will of him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day' [John 6.40].

Alongside this astounding gift to all of us comes Christ's simple request to prefer him to the things you might want for yourself. We can see then how he termed this choice as being like hating your mother, father and family.

"HATING" MOTHER, FATHER, FAMILY, FRIENDS AND LIFE

It is surely worth repeating that this is not given to many of us to do well but he asks that we try harder! Living this way will bring with it a share of discomfort, disappointment or awkwardness, but it fades into insignificance as we experience companionship within the family of Jesus. It might mean giving up some precious family time, not joining in, even staying apart sometimes, perhaps arguing the case in the family forum and not always keeping quiet. Furthermore, it might mean pain to you and to someone else when it becomes obvious that

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you are choosing to put them in second place. To be a reflection of Jesus we have to make these choices and prioritise but never allow hatred to live within us in the normal sense. We must never disrespect others or encourage malice let alone promote the violence and killing that are sometimes linked to religion. Those who are cruel or violent or even kill in the name of religion can never be followers of Jesus.

When the causes of wars, genocides and other eruptions of violence are extracted from the recorded history it is clear that religion has often been used as a totem or badge of allegiance to two warring sides, hiding almost as an excuse, the real reason why war is found in human nature. James, the Lord's brother said this:

‘Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask’.

[James 4.1,2]

The words of Jesus come to mind. ‘*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*’ *[Matthew 5.9]*. Here is a family that is worth belonging to! The prospect before the true sons and daughters of God is this:

‘...Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’ *[Revelation 21. 3,4]*.

God's timetable for this imperfect world is running down and soon it will be proclaimed:

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‘...The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever!’ [Revelation 11. 15].

Jesus saw ahead of him the wonderful and enduring prospect described in these two passages from Revelation chapters 11 and 21. He therefore gladly chose God’s way above every thing else in his life. You and I can be eternally glad that he did so. His teaching can be summarised as follows:

- Jesus said you can’t be my disciple unless you ‘hate’ your own family.
- Although there are signs that Jesus had an estrangement from his family when they did not understand his mission at first, we can see in the gospel records the natural love that he had for them and the love his mother had for him.
- Jesus was using words that are not really equivalent to our words for love and hate. It is worth studying the meanings of his words in order to understand that Jesus was really talking about choosing God above the things that are naturally dearest to us.
- That kind of choosing is the only ‘hatred’ that Jesus asks of us.
- Those who mistreat their family in the name of religion are in error. Those who invoke war or bloodshed in the name of Christ do so because it is something they choose to do.
- Christ demonstrated the opposite reaction: ‘*If I then your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you*’ [John 13.14,15].

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Plants of the Bible

Common Acacia

OUT OF SEVERAL species of Acacia indigenous to Israel, the one featured in the Old Testament almost certainly is the Common Acacia. It grows in the desert mainly along the wadis or dry watercourses, which are occasionally filled by freak storms. On the other hand, it inhabits barren regions where few other trees can subsist. Especially conspicuous on Mount Sinai, today it grows freely in the Negev desert, where it is protected by law. It blooms in spring but also secondarily in summer. The minute flowers are white, aromatic, and borne in small clusters.

The Acacia is remarkable in that its long taproot can penetrate deep into the earth - sometimes up to about 30 metres – enabling it to survive decades of drought by tapping subterranean reservoirs out of the reach of other plants. In addition, in times of extreme water stress, this tree can shed all its leaves, thus reducing transpiration entirely.

The Acacia is mentioned in the Bible particularly in the book of Exodus and especially in connection with the construction of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant, when Moses was wandering in the desert region of Sinai with the people of Israel.

One of the first instructions that God gave Moses was a command that the children of Israel should build a tabernacle which they would carry with them as a constant reminder of the Divine presence. *‘And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them’* [Exodus 25.8]. In addition, *‘they shall make an ark of acacia wood (shittim wood KJV)’* [Exodus 25.10]. Incidentally, the wood of the ark was overlaid with pure gold, representing faith (as gold tried in fire) which can bring us through trials resulting from fallible human nature (the wood).

LIGHT ON A NEW WORLD

The word 'shittim' is the plural in Hebrew of 'shittah' first mentioned in Exodus chapter 25 verse 5. It is derived from the root meaning 'to pierce' because of the tree's thorny nature. However, the Septuagint version of the Bible translates the term 'shittim wood' as 'incorruptible wood' because of its long-lasting nature. Of the twenty-four references in the Bible to Acacia or Shittim, nineteen are to the Acacia tree and five to places associated with it. In some parts of Israel, Acacias were so abundant that their name was linked to a particular region or place. There are Bible references to Acacia (Shittim), [Numbers 25.1; Micah 6.5] Abel Acacia Grove (Abel Shittim) [Numbers 33.49] and to the Valley of Acacias (Shittim) [Joel 3.18].



Acacia tree in Asia

As a result of dry and windy weather, the trees grow extremely slowly; most only reach 5-8 metres in height after a long time. Others acquire a characteristic shape - flattened on one side through exposure to the elements. Because they grow so slowly, the extremely beautiful orange-brown wood is particularly very close-grained, hard

and dense, smooth, without knots and having high tensile strength for its size. It is resistant to rotting and insect attack due to preservative substances forming in the heartwood. This darkens with age and is most attractive when polished. However, the angular branches are gnarled and rough, with black bark and covered with sharp thorns.

The acacia was the only desert tree producing wood suitable for the carpentry involved in making the tabernacle and ark. The

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following items were made of acacia wood: the ark and its poles, the table of showbread and its poles, the brazen altar and its poles, the incense altar and its poles, and all the poles for the hanging of the curtains as well as the supports. In short, all the structural features of the tabernacle were constructed of acacia wood.

Being a small tree, its planks are relatively narrow. Recent research on the weight of the wood used in the tabernacle shows that solid boards would be extremely heavy. Therefore, it has been postulated that narrow poles were used rather than planks. Although the ark was some three metres long, such poles would have enough strength.



Acacia leaves

The soft leaves are even more nutritious than grass so the goats and sheep accompanying Israel as they crossed the Sinai and Negev deserts would be well fed. In addition, the trees produce a good crop of hard, multi-seeded fruits; the coiled and twisted pods fall when ripe and are excellent fodder for grazing animals.

Acacia trees would provide the only quality cooking fuel for the Israelites and also for fires in the colder weather when the desert temperatures may dip to near freezing. Oozed sap (known as Gum Arabic) would have been a useful cooking ingredient.

Interesting though these facts may be, their importance is lost unless we look to the future in faith and hope of the glorious change that God has promised to bring about when His kingdom is established on earth. In that time the acacia tree will gain prominence, for the prophet Isaiah assures us that the most inhospitable areas will be

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rejuvenated with trees: *'I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia (shittah) tree, the myrtle and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the cypress tree and the pine and the box tree together' [Isaiah 41.19].*

Furthermore, no longer will there be need for the Acacia to send its roots deep into the earth for *'...it shall come to pass in that day that the mountains shall drip with new wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water; A fountain shall flow from the house of the LORD, and water the valley of Acacias. [Joel 3.18]*

This is part of the glorious prospect that awaits the true followers and friends of Jesus Christ, the one who overcame human fallibility and became their great Redeemer.

Don Smith
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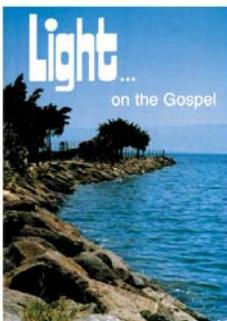
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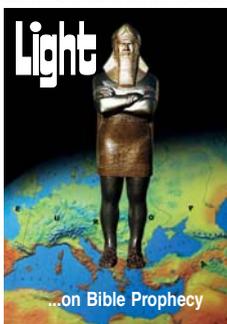
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