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## Bible Study on Romans 8

(76bsr8)

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Unpublished

*Bible Study on Romans 8 given at the Conference on 'Church in the Inner City' by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin held in Birmingham, September 1976.*

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Romans 8:1-4:           There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ.' Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Paul will be speaking later about a liberation yet to be won, for which we long: but first he speaks of an achieved liberation. It is important to read the whole of this chapter together and not to separate its parts. As Christians we are called to be not only fighters for a liberation still in the future, but also bearers of a liberation already won. This is of crucial importance; it means that we go as bearers of a gospel and not primarily as representatives of a law.

Liberation means a change of jurisdiction, the exchange of one regime for another. The first is described as the regime of sin and death, and it is identified in this letter with the regime of the law. We do not use the language of a first century Jew, but we inhabit the same world and face the same realities – the appalling pressure upon our consciences of the contrast between things as they are and things as they ought to be, between the things I ought to do and the incompetence and irrelevance of the things I actually achieve. There are three characteristic reactions to this pressure. The first is to toughen oneself against it, accept a manageable code of behaviour for oneself, and refuse to be troubled about the rest – the typical reaction of the conservative. The second is to be crushed and paralysed by the sheer mass and power of evil – the typical state of the liberal, and to be tempted to look around for the root of the trouble in someone or something else. The third (which is an extension of the second) is to relieve oneself of the burden by

unloading the whole of the responsibility for evil on the other party. This has been taken to its most sophisticated form in Marxism. Marxism is (in this respect) an extreme form of, self-righteous liberalism which (with the help of a pseudo-scientific view of history) manages to combine unlimited moralism about the enemy with a total freedom from the burden of guilt for oneself. Thus moralistic statements by the enemy are unmasked as ideological camouflage for material self-interest, while pseudo-scientific statements about working of the economic system are impregnated with moralistic sentiment (exploiters, toilers etc) disguised as objective statements and therefore insulated from moral judgment. This is what gives Marxism its enormous power among liberals.

The end of all these roads is death. None of them is capable of creating that which the law intends ("the just requirement of the law") which is in fact simply that we should love one another as God has loved us. That is the real content of the law (*dikaionoma tou nomou*), but while it remains a demand, an ideal, a programme – in Paul's language, a law – it can never be achieved. It can only be received as a gift. But we have received it as a gift because of an act by which we were set free from the old regime. This is the situation of those who are 'in Christ Jesus'. How was this done? The answer is given in verse 3. The Law could not do it, says Paul. He is thinking of the Mosaic Law, but the statement applies equally to every formulation of 'what ought to be' in terms of demand, ideal, model, programme, or what you will. 'The Law' could not effect this liberation because it is rendered ineffective by 'the flesh'. I myself, in my anxiety to be a real person on my own, with my own identity and my own dignity (and this is what 'the flesh' means) am perfectly capable of recognising that love is the true secret of life. I can recognise and condemn the contradictions of love which I see in the world and in myself. I know the Law. But as soon as I try to embody that knowledge in a style of living, to pursue an image of myself as that loving person who spends himself for others, then I find myself trapped in one or other of the dead-end alleys that I have described. I am up against the paradox of the law: I know that I ought to love, but if I try to love because I ought I no longer love.

The paradox of the law has been met and mastered in the paradox of grace. Almighty God must leave the throne of the lawgiver and become the condemned victim of the law, so that love (which is the true content of the law) may be received as a gift by those who are condemned by the law. God must be bereft of God, God must become a godforsaken man, so that man who aspires to the dignity of God may become true man for God and for men. The sinless one must be made sin so that the sinful may be accepted as the beloved one. In the cross the flesh – self-sufficient human nature, the autarchic ego – comes to the end of the road. There can be no future for human life which, when the chips are down, is revealed as a conspiracy to destroy God. If the crucifixion of Jesus is the last word about him, then the suicide of Judas is the first authentic commentary on it. But it is not the last word. The end of the road is the beginning of another road. Because we are in the presence of the sovereign initiative of God himself, man does not have the last word. The crucified is raised from the tomb. Out of the grave of every aspiration of autarchic man there is raised a new life which is the gift of God. This new life is characterised in three ways in this passage: it is life 'in Christ', a life which lived as a kind of continuous new creation, through the power of the risen Lord in the midst of a fallen world. It is 'walking in, the Spirit', a life which shares now in foretaste the victory of God's reign. It is 'the fulfilling of the just requirement of the law', a life in which love is constantly being received as a gift which overflows into our words and deeds, in which love is no longer a threatening demand, but a continuously and miraculously renewed gift of grace.

Here is surely the distinctive thing which a Christian can bring into a situation: the reality of love received as a gift here and now, a gift of the limitless power of God in the midst of the tangled web of sin – our own and that of society. There has been a lot of talk (especially since the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC) about the so called vertical and horizontal dimensions of our discipleship. The WCC has been criticised for being too much concerned with the horizontal – by which was meant concern for things like racial and social justice – and not enough with the horizontal – by which was meant prayer, worship, theological reflection etc. One understands the

anxiety, but surely that way of stating it is hopelessly misleading. If we agree that all Christians must be concerned both with prayer and the Bible, and with justice and compassion for the neighbour, how are they related? Are we to look for a nice compromise between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' – which would mean going off at 45 degrees and getting into an orbit which touched neither heaven nor earth? That is – in fact – what has often happened to the Church. The problem has been wrongly stated. It is not a question of vertical and horizontal; it is the old question of Law and Gospel. The point is that the 'just requirement of the law' (which certainly includes social justice as well as personal kindness) is truly fulfilled not as a programme but as the overflow of a gift received. I do not, of course, want to deny the obvious need for well thought-out programmes of action to meet specific needs. My point is that the distinctive Christian contribution will be something which is a kind of surplus, a gift, an overflow – a loving and hopeful joy which transforms concrete actions into signs of God's kingdom and sacraments of his love.

I remember here a day when I had to face a very ugly situation in one of the tea estates in the hills of South India. I had to leave at 4 a.m., climb 3,000 feet of rough hill track and go into an unknown situation where there might be violence. It was a morning of cold and rain. The local Pastor didn't feel well and called off at the last minute. I needed a companion as I could not face that day alone. There had come to see me the previous night a man whom I had first met as a prisoner in Madurai jail, serving a life-sentence for murder. He had been converted and baptised in jail and after completing his term had returned to his village and become part of the local congregation. When he saw the situation he was eager to come with me. I was more than grateful to accept the offer. Throughout the many tough moments of that day he was at my side his courage, gaiety and friendliness were a tonic at every point. A bishop would not normally choose a newly converted murderer as chaplain, but it was exactly that sense of being liberated, of being taken out of a tyrannous power and placed under the rule of a living and life-giving Lord which the situation needed. The 'just requirement of the law' is simply love, and love is a gift – part of the gift that comes with liberation.

vv. 5-8

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Here the contrast between the two regimes, the two jurisdictions, is further drawn out. There is a total contrast between the two kinds of life under the two different powers. Here I must protest against the NEB translation which expresses the contrast in terms of 'lower nature' and 'higher nature'. That is surely an intolerably moralistic misinterpretation of what Paul is saying. It is of a question of the higher or lower elements in human nature. The scribes and pharisees who condemned Jesus to death would – in any ordinary use of language – be regarded as those who followed their higher nature rather than the stooges and prostitutes whom he welcomed into his company. No, the contrast is between the life of autarchic man who seeks to have a standing of his own before God and his fellows, and the life of the forgiven man who knows that he lives simply by the loving kindness of God. It is the difference between the two brothers in the parable – the one who took comfort in the fact that he had obeyed all his father's commandments and could not be put on the same level as the one who had broken them all, and the younger brother who could only be overwhelmed by his father's love. 'The flesh' can be very comfortably at home in our 'higher nature' – indeed that is its natural habitat! Paul is not talking in moralistic terms at all. He is talking about a totally new situation arising from an act of liberation for the whole man through what Jesus has done. When the centre of my concern is my own identity, I am 'setting my

mind on the flesh'. When the centre of my concern is that Jesus should 'see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied', I am setting my mind on the Spirit.

vv. 9-11

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

Now we come to the positive implications and consequences of this transfer from one jurisdiction to another. In verse 10 the RSV (which I am following) is misleading. Today's English Version gives a truer rendering. The contrast is not between 'your bodies' and 'your spirits'. Barrett translates: "The body, on the one hand, is dead in account of sins, but the Spirit, on the other hand, is at work giving life because you are righteous before God." It is the picture with which Paul has made us familiar of life as a gift of God constantly renewed in the midst of our dying. 'You are not in the flesh' ; the old ego is stymied. His title to exist has been cancelled by the dying of Jesus. But there is a new reality, a life which is the continually renewed gift of the living Spirit of God, because you are right with God. The new relation, which is wholly a matter of faith and thanks and love and praise, puts you in that right relation with God in which his life is a continuous gift to you. The old relation, which was a matter of establishing my own identity and standing before God, precluded that gift and locked me up in death. But – and here we move to a new stage in the argument – this life-in-the-midst-of-death is not the permanent condition of man. What is given by the Spirit is not only life now, but the promise and foretaste of a future in which death will be, wholly overcome by life, a future in which the whole person ('your mortal bodies') will be quickened and renewed.

How can we make this assertion? On the ground of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (verse 11). The resurrection of Jesus is the ground of our assurance because it is the first-fruit of a new creation. Paul will speak later in the chapter about the cosmic implications of this, but first he speaks of its implications for the human person. (The same order is to be noted. in I Corinthians 15, where Paul speaks of 'Christ the first-fruits', then 'those that are Christ's' and finally of the subduing of the whole cosmos to him.) The resurrection of Jesus is a first-fruit. It points forward. There is no single case in which the risen Jesus is said to have appeared merely, as a vision apart from a promise. (A possible exception is Acts 7:56, but here the thought of promise is very close.) He appears in order to direct their minds and their steps towards the completion of that which he has begun – the bringing of all things into subjection to the reign of the Father.

The preponderant weight of recent western theology has been on the side of a purely spiritual, inward interpretation of the resurrection. It is seen as an event in the spiritual lives of the disciples rather than as an event in the public history of mankind. If one looks at western liberal Christianity from the outside, this is a typical adaptation of the Gospel to a culture which has lost hope for the future and seeks meaning in a private world, with the help of existentialism or of various forms of pietism. A powerful challenge to this whole movement comes from those parts of the Christian world which are seriously concerned about the public future and which are therefore engaged in dialogue with Marxism and in practical co-operation with Marxists. Marxism takes the eschatological element in the Gospel seriously but secularises it. We shall learn more from meeting this challenge than from going along with the currently acceptable tendency to spiritualise it. St. Paul begins with the work of the Spirit in the life of man through what Christ has done on the cross. He sees this work moving out into the whole of man's personality ('your mortal bodies') and eventually into the whole cosmos (vv. 19-21). The basis of

his assurance is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead – an event, whether believed or not, in the public life of mankind.

vv. 12-17

So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh to live according to the flesh - for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry "Abba! Father!", it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God; and, if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

We live by grace. We are debtors to the living source of life. Human life considered as a thing in itself is inexplicable. Sought as an end in itself it is death. To try to save oneself is to be lost. Even when this is done in the most sophisticated ways – "to develop my own highest potentialities", "to become an authentic human being", "to become a real person" etc – it is all death. Life is a gift to be lived by giving. Jesus is true man, as he is simply man for God and for others. Life is lived by being constantly surrendered. It is received when we are delivered from the old jurisdiction (which is in fact imprisonment within the ego) and receive the gift of life poured out for the life of the world in the dying of Jesus. This life is a life of sonship, a gift of him who is the Son. As he spoke with his Father in the intimate language of sonship, so we are enabled by his living Spirit to say 'Abba' – to speak his very word. The new regime is not one of slavery, but of sonship'. There is a profound contrast here. The slave does his duty in order to avert his master's wrath and to earn his favour. He is living in a world whose centre is the self – the vulnerable, threatened self. A vast amount of religion is slave-religion. Its centre is the self. Its chorus is a wearisome reiteration of the theme: "for me, for me". A son has been delivered from this imprisonment. He is wholly identified with his father in hope and desire. That his father's affairs should prosper is his longing. To share in his work is his joy. The centre of his attention is not his own security, but his father's honour. A religion of sonship has at its centre the prayer: "Father; your name be honoured, your will be done, your reign come."

But already we have seen that sonship means looking forward. The son is the heir. We shall share in all that the father has. So sonship means hope. But who is the son? How is he recognised? He is recognised by his solidarity with Jesus, the Son, and that means by solidarity with him in his bearing of the sin of the world. We are heirs – 'provided we suffer with him'. The sufferings of Jesus are not just any kind of misfortune; they are the messianic sufferings, the sufferings that are experienced at the point of confrontation between the reign of God and the power of evil. As we are exposed at that point, we know that we are heirs – and we have hope. Here arises one of the paradoxes of the Church's story – that it is precisely at the moments when the pressure is greatest, when there is a head-on clash with the powers of evil, that the Church is at its best – or rather that the Spirit's witness is at its clearest. It is the consistent teaching of the New Testament that it is in situations of persecution that the Spirit himself will bear witness to Christ's lordship in the midst of the hostile powers.

About a decade ago the Government of the Indian State of Orissa passed an act which was called (euphemistically) the "Freedom of Religion Act". It made it a criminal offence to seek the conversion of a person from one religion to another. Under this act a number of Christian pastors and evangelists were arrested and imprisoned. There were – of course – great agitations in the Church.' For some time nothing happened, and then suddenly the men were discharged and cases against them dropped. I was curious to find out why the Orissa Government had apparently suddenly changed its mind. I learned that the explanation was as follows. The Government of the State at that time was in the hands of the Swatantra Party, whose leader was the great Rajagopalachariar, one of the veterans of the independence struggle and the first Indian Governor,

General of India. He was then nearly 90. I was told that he wrote to the Chief Minister of the State to the following effect: 'I advise you to leave those Christians alone. If you have read any history you will know that the more you harry them the bolder they become.'

When we share the suffering of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus, who is the Son, assures us of our sonship, and thereby of the fact that we are heirs of all things. Therefore, through the Spirit, suffering becomes the occasion of hope, and the hope concerns nothing less than the glorifying of Jesus through the completion of his whole work. Suffering in this sense, namely the suffering which comes at the point of confrontation between the reign of God and the hostile powers becomes therefore the point at which witness is born to, the reality and the coming victory of God's reign. This is the repeated teaching of the New Testament. At this point we fill out the commitment which was undertaken in our baptism. In his baptism, Jesus accepted for himself the messianic sufferings which were threatened by John the Baptist. He identified himself totally with those upon whom these sufferings were threatened and took them upon himself. At that point he was acknowledged to be Son of God, and anointed with the Spirit for his mission. Our baptism is our incorporation into that baptism of Jesus, begun in Jordan and completed on Calvary. As we fill out our baptism by following Jesus along the road that took him from Jordan to Calvary, we receive the assurance of our sonship and the assurance therefore of our inheritance, and our lives become the occasion for the Spirit's witness to the reality of God's reign over all things.

This thought of our inheritance leads on to a much fuller and more daring account of the Christian hope: it is hope not only for ourselves but for the whole creation.

vv. 18-21            I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope, because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Paul has spoken of suffering, but immediately he goes on to say that our troubles are not worth mentioning in comparison with the greatness of what we hope for. And what is it that we-hope for? We have seen that the hope is first 'the quickening of our mortal bodies' – the renewal of us as persons. But Paul does not stop there. Much religion, including much Christian religion, does stop there.. Religion is understood to be about the personal life, about the soul, and about the more intimate and domestic aspects of our lives. It is about people, not about structures. Consequently the hope which it offers is, hope for the human soul, hope beyond death in a world beyond this scene, of decay and death; it is not hope for the structures of our common life – for industry, for society, for international order.

Even to state the matter this way is to reveal its impossibility. We become and remain human persons only in and through our interaction with one another in a world of impersonal realities. To think of the, human soul in isolation apart from other human souls is to part company with reality. And even to think of human souls apart from their involvement in a world of impersonal realities is to imagine something of which we have no experience. We grow into real inter-personal relations through actions and experiences which involve us in dealing with the world of things, and with the structures which govern relations in the family, in industry, in government, and in all human activities. We are truly human persons as we participate: with others in a common history, a history which includes the whole story of politics, economics technology, and the arts. It is indeed true that here is in man than which transcends this involvement; man is: more than his participation in this history. And at the point of death, or in the anticipation of death, every man faces the mystery of his separation from all of this history in which his life has been involved and in interaction with which he has been formed as a person. Much of religion has been concerned to minister to man at this – point, to give him the assurance that the whole story of his life, of his painfully wrought identity, is not simply snuffed out. This is

a vital concern of religion, but not the whole concern of the Christian faith. The Bible is unique among the sacred scriptures of the religions in that it offers an interpretation of history as a whole, human history and cosmic history, and not just of the life of man apart from this history. Its centre of attention is not, if one may put it so, the possibility of man's escaping out of this world into another; it is the promise of God coming to this world to redeem it and to complete what he has begun.

For this reason, although the classical world into which the Gospel first came was full of religious societies concerned with the offer of personal salvation, the Church never used any of the names by which such societies were called; it described itself by the name of the public assembly to which all citizens are called, the *ecclesia*. The Church was from the beginning a movement launched into the public life of mankind. It never accepted the toleration offered by the Roman Empire to a *cultus-privatus*. Its gospel was not just for the individual soul, but for the world.

But, we have to ask, in what sense, is the Gospel hope for the world? What do we have the right to look forward to? We face here a deep dichotomy: we may fix our hope on the future of humanity and its institutions, or we may fix it on the future of the human person. If we do the former, the human person is marginalised. He becomes instrumental to history, for the individual does not live to participate in the, realisation of history's meaning. The logical end of that road is familiar to us in such fearful experiences as those of Russia under Stalin. If we take the other road and place our hope in the eternal destiny of the human soul, history is marginalised. At best this world is, only a vale of soul-making. The achievements of art, science and technology, the struggles to create a just and free society, are only – so to say – school exercises. They have no final significance in themselves. The end of that road is the cultivation of an individual piety which withdraws from the: conflicts of public history.

This dichotomy, which runs right through our human situation, arises from the fact of death; it arises because each of us is removed, from the pilgrimage before the caravan has reached journey's end. And death – in the biblical perspective – is the fruit of sin. It is the outward sign of the fact that none of our achievements is fit for God's glory. There is no straight road from here to there. We do not build the city of God. Our work is full of ambiguity. Wood, hay and stubble is mixed with gold and silver. Not only ourselves as human persons, but our works in history perish. Even our greatest achievements are eventually buried in the rubble of history. The road which we travel goes down below our horizon, out of our sight.

The Gospel gives us a hope which heals this dichotomy because Jesus has dealt with sin and death. Because of what he has said at the beginning of this chapter, Paul can go on now to speak of hope for the whole creation. Christ has gone before us on that road, down into the grave which is the grave of all our hopes. And he has been raised from that grave. The resurrection of Jesus is the pledge of God's will and power to complete his purpose not only for the personal lives of those who trust him, but for the public life of mankind and for the whole of his creation. But this hope is necessarily bound up with the way that it has been made possible. Only as we share the suffering of Jesus can we also share the hope which he has made possible. The corn of wheat must fall into the ground and die if there is to be a harvest. The work of the builder must pass the test of fire. There must be travail and pain if there is to be a new birth. It is the third of these metaphors that Paul will use in the present chapter. A new creation is struggling to be born, and as we share in the travail, we share in the hope.

What we hope for – in company with the whole created world – is described as the revealing of the sons of God and as the glory that is to be revealed. The glory of Jesus was described as 'the glory of an only Son' (John 1:14), and his work as to 'bring many sons to glory' (Hebrews 2:10). The goal to which the whole creation strives is the freedom, love and joy of God's family. But meanwhile the creation has been 'subjected to futility'. This is a difficult idea - not because we are unacquainted with futility, but because it is hard to see why this should be ascribed to an act of God. I am sure that Barrett is right in pointing out that, the word used here is the word used frequently to describe the false gods. This would bring this verse into line with

Paul's frequent references to the 'powers' which have a real but limited authority over human life. This interpretation is borne out, I think, by the later part of the chapter. Paul uses a great variety of words – principalities, powers, authorities, and 'rudiments', or 'elements' (stoicheia) – to denote entities which have some kind of authority of man's life, but an authority limited by the supreme authority of Christ. Bringing all the relevant passages together one sees that he is referring to such things as the state (e.g. Romans 13), the Law (e.g. Galatians 3-4), religious custom (e.g. Colossians 2) and so on. One could use the word 'structures' to express in contemporary terms the reality with which he is dealing. What he says has both a positive and a negative element. Positively, these structures are created by God and have a necessary role to play in acting and ordering of human life. The Law, for example, is described as a guardian to guide and protect us in preparation for the full freedom of adult sonship. A similar positive role is ascribed to the political order in Romans 13. But there is also a negative element in Paul's teaching. When the 'powers' assume an authority beyond that which is proper to them, they have a demonic character. They are the 'futilities' – the false gods – of the pagan world. And Christ, through whom all these powers were created (e.g. Col. 1:16), has disarmed them in his cross (Col. 2:15). On Calvary the powers (State, Law, Religion, etc.) were ranged against Christ and thought to destroy him, but by this very act they were themselves discredited and disarmed (cf. 1 Cor. 2). They can no longer claim an absolute authority; that belongs to Christ alone. But they are not destroyed; they still have a function to perform. But this function is strictly provisional: it is *pro*-visional – looking forward to that which is still to come. That is the point Paul is making in verse 20. Our subjection to these 'futilities' is indeed the work of God, but it is only a provisional subjection, subjection 'in hope' as he says, looking forward to freedom. This is exactly parallel to the teaching of Galatians 3 and 4, where our subjection to the law is seen as a provisional arrangement, looking to full freedom as adult sons and daughters of God. The difference is that here, very daringly but in line with the whole teaching of the Bible, Paul extends this teaching from our personal lives to the whole life of creation. It is the whole creation which is to be liberated.

It is important for practical Christian discipleship to maintain the tension and balance which is implied in the word 'provisional'. On the one hand, structures are necessary for the maintenance of human life as it is. Christ has not destroyed the powers. Even our personal and family life would be impossible without a framework of custom within which we normally behave. If we had to act every moment in a vacuum, with no structure of custom to guide us, we would soon go crazy. So also political structures are necessary. I think it is necessary to stress this at the moment. In a good deal of the literature that I read about 'power to the people' I detect more than a whiff of unreality. In no circumstances do 'the people' exercise power except through some kind of structure – which can itself become demonic. Anarchism has a respectable history, but Christians are not anarchists, for Christ has not destroyed the powers. But, on the other hand, it is equally necessary to insist that the authority of the structures is provisional and not final or absolute. Christ has disarmed the powers. Christians, therefore, are revolutionaries. They believe that structures can be and have to be changed, and that no structure, even the most venerable (such as the Law of the Old Testament), has absolute authority. Only Christ has absolute authority, and in Christ we are called to keep all structures, under review and to change them when necessary. Here we recall the terrible consequences of the fact that many devout Christians in the heyday of laissez faire capitalism believed that the laws of economics were immutable realities which could not be changed, and that the cruelties inflicted on human beings by the factory system could only be alleviated by charity but could not be prevented by political action. When Christians acknowledge responsibility for the changing of individual lives, but not for the changing of structures, they part company with the New Testament and – in effect – withdraw vast areas of life from obedience to Christ. They become slaves of 'the futilities', the ba'alim, the gods of nature.

We were reminded by the recent correspondence in the press following the Archbishops' 'Call to the Nation' of the futility of trying to define Christian obedience in terms of persons alone, or in terms of structures alone. Yet we are constantly falling into this meaningless polarisation.



Christian obedience is necessarily concerned with both: In this present chapter Paul holds both firmly together. He begins by speaking of that transfer from an old to a new jurisdiction which we usually call conversion. But this leads him immediately into the affirmation that this transfer of jurisdiction places us in the midst of a cosmic struggle, the end of which is the liberation of all creation from the power of that which is not God.

When we talk about the liberation of the creation from bondage, what are we talking about? Let me approach that question with three snapshots from history.

- (a) Jesus, on the Sabbath day, heals a crippled man. The Sabbath is the day when the Creator rested from his work, the foretaste of the day when we shall share his rest. Jesus defends himself by saying: 'My Father is working still, and I am working ' (John 5: 17).
- (b) King Philip II of Spain wanted to improve communication for the inland areas of his country, and proposed that a river should be deepened to make it navigable. A commission was appointed to make a feasibility study. After the necessary research the commission reported as follows: 'The project is not feasible, since if God had intended this river to be navigable, he would have made it deep enough when he created the world.'
- (c) The Churches in Madras undertook to equip 48 of the worst slums in the City with modern sanitation units, as a pilot project for the whole city. While the work was in progress, one of the slum residents challenged one of the Church workers: 'What are you doing this for? Have you come to convert us?'

Healing a cripple, deepening a waterway, building a latrine – and let us extend the list to cover all our activities by which we undertake to alter the face of the world in order to make it the sphere of a fuller human life – how are these related to the work of God in Jesus Christ? What have they to do – if anything – with what God did for mankind in the dying and rising of Jesus?

There are two wrong ways of answering this question: the first is to say that they are not intrinsically related at all. They belong to a world which is passing away. It does not matter to God, and therefore it does not matter ultimately, whether they succeed or fail. What matters is the love and sincerity with which we undertake them. That is what God cares about: In themselves these activities have no eternal significance.

The second wrong answer is a simple identification of these activities with God `s work of salvation in Christ. This is to make them carry more than they can bear, and the end is disillusionment. Universal medicare is not the Kingdom of God. The seeds and the fruits of corruption are present in even the best social order we can devise. When we invest in a programme of political or social action the commitment which belongs properly only to Christ himself, we move from enthusiasm through fanaticism to despair.

The true meaning of these activities is that they are – or may be – signs of the reign of God, and the word 'sign' has to be given the full meaning that it has in the Gospels. They are, or may be, signs in the sense that the works of Jesus were signs, signs which can be understood and so lead to faith, hope and love, or can be stumbling blocks which lead to unbelief (Luke 7:18-23). They are made possible by what Jesus has done in his dying and rising. ("Greater works than these shall you do, because I go to the Father.") They have the character of first-fruits, like the resurrection itself. They point forward to the full liberation of which they are a small foretaste. They are, so to say, reverberations of the resurrection. They are therefore, also the foregleams of the new dawn. They are tokens of the fact that this created world is not a piece of lifeless staging on which the human drama is played out. The creation itself is involved in the drama. Man and nature form one interlocking reality, and it is as part of created nature that man is called to be God's workman in the completion of his created work. So the works of the new man in Christ are part of the story of salvation in the sense that they are – or may be – signs and foretastes of the end to which the whole creation – including man is called. Creation itself is to share in the glorious liberty of the children of God – as it shares in the travail of the struggle towards that liberty. For indeed

we know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

The road to the new creation is not a smooth incline. The metaphor of childbirth is, one of, those frequently used in the Bible to express the relation between the old and new. Others (as we have seen) are those of the corn of wheat which is apparently lost in the earth, and the fire which must test all our works. But the assurance that this radical discontinuity is not the last word comes from no metaphor, but from the death and resurrection of Jesus. He himself had used the metaphor, of the travail of child-birth to interpret his death and resurrection (John. 16:20-22). The new creation is not just an extension of the old. There is travail, pain, death. We are in the midst of this travail. But we have now, already, the foretaste of that which is to be. We have the Spirit, who is the first-fruit, the arrabon that assures us that the new creation is no dream, the aperitif which both refreshes us now and assures us that the messianic banquet is already prepared. Thus in the midst of pain and travail, at the point of confrontation between the old world and the new, we are full of hope. This is not the weak kind of hope which popular speech so often implies a desire for some future good which may or may not be granted. It is a hope which is both eager and patient because we have already received the arrabon which both quickens our longing for the full reality and assures us that it will be ours.

This eager and patient hope is the distinctive mark of the presence of the Spirit. It is the distinctive gift which the Church can bring to every situation. In reading the reports to the Nairobi Assembly on the work of the various departments of the WCC during the preceding 8 years, I was much struck by one point in the report of the Churches' Commission on International Affairs. The CCIA staff are professional diplomats not much given to either rhetoric or sentiment. In their report they remark that they have often asked themselves whether there was any distinctive contribution that the Churches could make to the immensely complicated and delicate business of international diplomacy. They conclude that there is indeed one distinctive contribution – namely the creation of possibilities to act hopefully in situations which are without hope.

"In this hope we were saved." This is what salvation means. Its distinctive character is that it gives us both a real present and a real future. Part of the pathos of our time is that so many young people (not to mention others) seem to be trapped in a dilemma: one can either believe in a future and accept the fact that the present is a desert; or one can look for satisfaction in the present and dismiss thoughts of the future as irrelevant. In the first case one sees nothing worth cherishing in the present. It is just the rotten system, and the sooner it is destroyed the better. Somehow out of the return to chaos a new world will emerge. It is a short step from this to a really pathological nihilism. In the second case one gives up the struggle for a different kind of world and chooses one of the many recipes which are offered for finding significance in the present moment – all the way from an austere existentialism, through religious pietism, to yoga and transcendental meditation. Roger Garaudy has, I think, put his finger on the crucial point when he says that for Marxism the infinite is absence and exigence, whereas for the Christian it is presence and promise. 'Presence and promise' exactly describes the distinctive gift which the Christian can bring to every situation. He comes as one who has been saved in hope. There is a real presence – the living active presence of the Saviour who is Lord of all. But the present does not exhaust the experience. The Saviour has promised much more, nothing less than the liberation of the whole creation. Therefore the very texture of the present experience is that it is hope for the future, patient, but also ardent – because of the goodness of what is already given and enjoyed; ardent but also patient – because he who has both given and promised can be trusted and is faithful.

Here is indicated, then, the role of the Church in the midst of the struggle for a new world. On the one hand the Church is not an end in itself. It does not simply exist in order to attract new

members to itself, to become large and powerful. Nor, on the other hand, is the Church merely an instrument for some purpose beyond itself, merely an agency: for carrying through certain programmes. When it falls for the first temptation, the Church becomes a selfish body putting its own advancement above the good of the community as a whole. It thus becomes a contradiction of the gospel. When it falls to the second temptation the Church spawns a clutter, of projects and programmes which often compete in an amateurish way with the work of secular agencies, and loses the capacity to offer the one gift that it has to offer – the actual experience of an accomplished liberation. Rightly understood, the Church is the body of people who – united with Jesus in Baptism and Eucharist – share with him in the groaning and travail which must mark the birth of the new creation in the midst of the old, but share also through the presence of the Spirit in the first-fruit of the new world, so that their acts and words become signs pointing forward to that liberation which God has presented.

It is because the Spirit is himself the first-fruit of the new creation that the Spirit is the witness. The words and works of the Church only become signs of the new world insofar as the Spirit takes them and uses them. When the acts (like building latrines in a Madras slum) are looked at as things in themselves apart from the congregational life from which they spring (that is apart from their relation to baptism and eucharist) they have little value. In relation to the vastness of the problems they seek to tackle their effect is miniscule. But it can happen that the Spirit uses them as signs which enable those who accept the sign to be turned round and to become themselves bearers of hope. This is what 'conversion' really means. We are afraid of the word because we have used it in less than its full biblical context. We have used it in connection with the model of the Church as an end in itself, in which context conversion is apt to mean only a change from one selfish religious concern to another. Truly understood, conversion is being so turned round that one becomes a bearer of hope, an agent and witness of God's purpose to liberate the whole creation. The answer which was in fact given to the question in the Madras slum was "Yes, of course we want to convert you; you don't think we want to leave you as you are – do you?" That is the right answer if the meaning of conversion is understood. But when a total dichotomy is allowed to develop (as often happens) between the ordinary congregational life of the Church rooted in baptism and eucharist, and the programmes of social action which it promotes, then the word 'conversion' becomes unusable. For that man in the Madras slum it meant becoming involved in the social changes which were needed for the whole community, and in the midst of that coming to learn the secret which sustains the struggle to change.

But it is essential to insist that the agent is the Spirit himself. The strategy is in his hands, not in ours. I recall an occasion when I was bishop of a rural diocese in South India. I received a call from a village of which I had never heard; asking for baptism for 25 families. I found that the village was over the border in the neighbouring diocese. I wrote to the bishop of that diocese, assuming that he was in touch, and passing on the request. He replied that no one from the Church in that area had had any contact with the village. I visited the place myself and slowly learned the following story. A Christian engineer had visited them and helped them to dig a well and fit a windmill pump. He was a sincere Christian but a somewhat poor communicator. He left behind simply the impression of a good man. Some months later one of the villagers, visiting a neighbouring town, bought a copy of Mark's Gospel and brought it home. He began to read it, became interested, and started to read and study it with a group in the village. More months passed. An independent preacher passing by left behind a tract with a startling title: "If you die tonight, where will you go?" The villagers decided that further investigation of this matter was needed. They sent word to a village some 5 miles away where there was a Christian congregation. "Please tell us", they said "what you know about the Christian religion." It happened that one of the members of that congregation had had an accident and was unable to do, his usual field labour. The congregation decided to send him in answer to the enquiry, to tell them what he knew about the Gospel. The result of some weeks of this instruction was the request to me for baptism.

My point in telling the story is obvious. If, the engineer, the hall porter, the evangelist and the labourer had been summoned to a symposium on evangelistic, methods, they would

undoubtedly have differed violently. Unknown to any of them, the Holy Spirit had used their bits of faithfulness to accomplish his own purpose. The strategy and the achievement were his. This cannot be said too strongly. It has two obvious implications. The first is that my own work is only a small part of a web of activities of which I only know a very small part. The second is that conversion is not my responsibility. My responsibility is to act and speak in faith, love and hope as each situation requires. It is the Spirit who, in his own sovereign freedom, uses what he will in the way he will.

vv. 26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how, to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

This hopeful patience and patient hope, which is the work of the Spirit, arises right out of the heart of our God-forsakenness. Here there is a parallel with many other passages in Paul's writings – for example the great passage of II Corinthians 4 which speaks of our life as bearing about in the body of the dying Jesus. The life in Christ is a life in which – paradoxically – life is given in death, victory in suffering, hope in perplexity. The very pain and perplexity which we cannot put into words becomes the bearer of the Spirit's prayer and thus in the midst of the struggle for a new world we are taken up into the life of the Triune God himself. And this is not a purely inward or subjective experience, for

v. 28.

we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

Because Christ has disarmed the powers, all things in the created world co-operate for good to those who love him. This verse gives us the counterpart of what is given in the two preceding verses. As through the work of the Spirit we share in the Messianic suffering, in the God-forsakenness of God, we are brought within the very life of God in his triune being. The created world, of which we are part and in whose travail we share also works for the fulfilment of that which is pledged to us and to the whole creation in the resurrection of the crucified. The classical world interpreted human events in terms of the conflict between 'virtue' and 'fortune' – between that which men can bring of personal courage, skill and wisdom to the struggle, and the external force which blindly resists and in the end must conquer. The Gospel brings this way of thinking to an end, and the triumph of the new way of thinking over the old was wrought out in the doctrine of the Trinity. According to this doctrine the Father who is the source of all things visible and invisible, and the Son who is the presence of his active word in creation and human history, and the Spirit who works in the hearts of men for the fulfilment of his purpose, are not three but one God. History itself, with all its travail and agony, is seen within the being of God. And as through Christ we share in the struggle we have not only the assurance that God is at work within our hearts to sustain and guide our prayers, but that he is also at work in the world of nature to co-operate in the fulfilment of his purpose. The dichotomy between inward and outward is healed.

vv. 29-30

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

We have been thinking of the present as it is filled with the promise of the future. Now, with dramatic suddenness, we are asked to turn round and to remember that we are speaking about a cosmic purpose which had its origins before time began. Perhaps Paul's thought is turned in this

direction because of the phrase which he has just used: "those who love God". This is not a common phrase in Paul or in the Bible as a whole, for the stress is always on God's love for us rather than upon our love for God. It is his love, the love of one who 'first loved us' which is the great primal reality. From start to finish the Bible is, concerned with God's initiative. His love is the origin and source of everything that is, and our love for him can only be something secondary and derivative. 'It is his decision for us which is the presupposition and basis of our decision for him. Predestination – God's decision for us before all time began is basic to the whole biblical story. If we are Christians, it is not because we decided for him, but because he decided for us – and this decision is 'before the foundation of the world'. Even creation itself is within this decision that 'God is for us', and therefore the liberation of creation itself is involved in the fulfilment of God's primal decision. The purpose of this decision is that Jesus should be 'the first-born among many brethren'. The being of the Godhead has from all eternity both Fatherhood and Sonship as its reality, and to bring many sons to the glory which was revealed in 'the only begotten Son' (John 1: 1 4) in and through the glorifying of the Son: on the Cross, this is the decision of God before all time.

The doctrine of predestination has been misrepresented and misunderstood in such a way as to make it abhorrent to many Christians. If it is truly understood it will be seen to be utterly central and essential to the whole of the Gospel. Predestination is not (as the Westminster Confession seems to say) something before and apart from Christ. The New Testament explicitly teaches that predestination is only in Christ. Man was predestined for sonship in Christ before he was created through Christ. And as Christ is not for himself but for all men, the Saviour of the world, so those who are predestined in Christ are predestined not for themselves but for witness and service to Christ's universal purpose. The biblical teaching has been monstrously misconstrued to imply that those who are chosen are chosen for themselves; in truth they are chosen to share in Christ's universal purpose, for the salvation of all. And what of those who are not chosen; who are rejected – is the unbelieving Jews of Paul's time seemed to be? It is precisely to this deeply perplexing question that Paul immediately turns in the following chapters (9-11). One should read them continuously with this 8th chapter. The end of that long argument is this: that even the rejection of the Jews is for their ultimate salvation. Why this must be so must be the subject of another bible study, but the outcome is clear. 'God has shut up all under disobedience that he might have mercy on all.'

Predestination is the ground of God's calling. We are called, summoned to become that which we are not yet. He who summons us is he who raised Jesus from the dead and 'calls the things that are not as though they were'. That is the ground of our hope; the hope is implicit in the calling. God is faithful who calls you. 'He who calls also justifies. He who raises the dead to life can also put the unrighteous in the right, and that is what he has done in Christ. And the end is glory – the glory of sonship, a participation in the glory of the only begotten Son (John 17: 22f). This is the end for which all creation waits – 'the glorious liberty of the children of God'. What God has determined before all time, he can and will complete.

vv. 31-39

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it written,

For thy sake we are being killed all day long: we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

One hardly dares to comment on this wonderful passage. It brings to a shining focus the whole message of the chapter. Right in the very midst of tribulation the utter adequacy of what God has done shines with a burning light. As Luther put it, he has given us all, forgiven us all, promised us all, and we lack nothing – except the faith to believe it. If the centre of our attention is and remains Jesus Christ, Christ who died, who rose again, and who reigns, then tribulation itself is the occasion for absolute assurance. ‘We are more than conquerors through him who loved us’. The classical understanding of the Cross was that it was above all a mighty victory over the principalities and powers. The earliest representations of Jesus on the Cross show him with head erect; he is the mighty victor fighting the battle through to the end. The mediaeval crucifix, portraying Jesus as a painedrenched, drooping and defeated figure has deeply misinterpreted the cross. Jesus, says Paul, has disarmed the principalities and- powers and. made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the Cross (Col. 2: 15). Because of that, we are more than conquerors. The powers are still there. They have been disarmed, but not destroyed. But they are on a leash. They have no final authority. Christ is their master, and they must serve him till their time is up. Meanwhile they may oppress and harry us, but they can never break the bond that binds us to him. For he alone is Lord.

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