

Looking Elsewhere

I have recently become acutely aware of a worrying tendency. As I think about it, I can see that it has been prevalent for many years and, although I have seen specific instances of it and been concerned, it is only now that I am beginning to see a common thread running through many different personal situations.

The earliest example that I can remember happened probably about 25 years ago. A few years earlier, we had moved to Devon and been befriended and welcomed into a warm and friendly fellowship, especially through one couple about our own age, with similarly aged children. Our friendship had developed and we seemed to find a lot of common ground in our approach to the Christian life, as individuals, as two families and in the fellowship which we were all part of.

I'm not sure what triggered it, but apparently quite suddenly the husband of the couple started investigating different approaches to Christian faith and practice and it was not long before he was acclaiming the well-known book *The Road Less Travelled* by M. Scott Peck. I had a very brief look at it then and have tried to read it again more recently.

Perhaps I should persevere more with reading it, but I have found it a struggle. The author puts forward an alternative approach to Christian faith and I remember asking myself why he bothered. Of even more concern, why on earth was my friend attracted by this strange mixture of philosophies?

What was wrong with the Bible-based faith that had been part of my life since I was converted at the age of 11? Like many, I had been through times of questioning and doubt – one prolonged period when I was only just hanging on – but Jesus had become very real to me as I emerged from that and the Bible had come alive in a fresh way as the Holy Spirit opened it up to me. Now, several years on from that refreshing, it was all still very much alive and exciting and I was enjoying seeing some indication of similar things happening in other people's lives.

As far as I could see, my friend had an even longer history as a believer and had always been part of the fellowship which we had recently joined. Now we were seeing some evidence of the Lord at work in that fellowship as new people were coming to faith and others were growing spiritually. I was encouraged; I thought he had been, too. So why the interest in looking elsewhere?

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Recently, I heard about a speaker at an upcoming conference, and one of his books was also mentioned. I recognised the name and remembered him visiting the previous fellowship where we had been involved, in the outskirts of London before we moved to Devon in 1987. He came from a northern town and was one of the leaders in what were normally known as 'house churches', very similar to the 'house church' that we were involved with at the time.

I heard some years ago that he had left the 'house churches' and was questioning the whole evangelical approach to faith, but I did not know that he had now become a leader in the C of E. I googled him and found the title of that same book was also used as the title of a talk that was available on YouTube. I watched and listened. I read excerpts of the book online. In the end, I ordered a copy of the book!

Here was another man steeped in good Bible knowledge and apparently valid Christian experience, who had become disillusioned and walked away, but then had walked back in and was now trying to re-interpret Christianity in a way that he called intellectually honest. According to his approach, anyone who still held the same convictions that he once held was in danger of intellectual **dishonesty**, blindly clinging on to a naïve faith that could not survive in the climate of the twenty-first century.

But was that me he was describing? If anything, far from becoming more liberal over the years, I have found my understanding of the Christian faith has become more radical, more basic, more Bible-based. Was I being, **am** I being, naïve and intellectually dishonest? Why does he feel the need to look elsewhere but I don't?

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One thing I definitely have in common with both these men is a rejection of the 'system'. It seems that maybe, in becoming part of the 'house church movement', the ex-leader had also embraced the system that went with it, the factor that enables you to swallow things that you do not really agree with, simply because they seem to be part of the accepted norms of the group.

In that regard, any system is as bad as any other. You can have an evangelical system with good biblical theology or a liberal system with biblically questionable theology. I know which theology I subscribe to, but that does not compel me to sign up to any system. In fact, it was the manipulative use of the system within the house church movement that caused us to leave it back in 1985.

In a very real sense, we did not leave the system; it had already left us. The vision to which we had been attracted in 1973 was a vision that we still held, passionately, in 1985. The system of 'covering' and 'submission to leaders' had always been rather dubious but, when it started to be applied in an enforceable way, we knew it was time to walk away. Many called it 'heavy shepherding' – a very apt name.

We were literally asked to sign a letter which said that the leaders were always right. No-one would have dared to write it in quite such black-and-white terms, but that was the underlying meaning. It was a demand for loyalty that pushed personal conviction into a much lower place. For twelve years we had been happy to respond to those in leadership roles because we recognised their gifting and the way that the Holy Spirit was leading them. They themselves had repeatedly taught that the basis of any real leadership authority was exactly this – recognition by those being led.

Now leadership was being codified into a structure, something that had initially been forcefully resisted but had started to creep in in recent years.

We were never going to become a denomination; we had avoided taking names for our groups; we had emphasised relationships and there had been little or no structure. Then headed notepaper appeared with a new name for the group. Many were surprised that I objected to that on principle – what could possibly be wrong with it? My reply – that it undermined fundamental principles that we had all espoused for many years – was greeted by bemused denial, even ridicule.

When that was followed a little later by the letter to confirm that the leaders were always going to be right, I went to see the main local leader and challenged him, saying that it cut right across all that we had subscribed to for years, all that he had taught and practised over

that time, all that he had apparently believed. “You have never believed that, have you?” “Yes, I do now” was his shocking reply.

At that point, I knew that we could no longer be part of this system that had emerged and swallowed up the loving and responsive fellowship that we had become very much part of. We had moved house to be closer to the ‘hub’ of things in the fellowship, in preparation for them sending us out and supporting us as we planned to go to live and work in India, something that had been on our hearts since returning from there in 1972. I had even made a preliminary ‘recce’ visit in late 1981, to start to see how our little family might fit in with what the Lord was doing there.

The house move had taken longer than we had hoped, but we had spent about two and a half years in our new home and had got to know more folk in the fellowship. We were feeling (fairly!) ready for the big family move to India, though hiccups like the ‘headed notepaper’ question had given us some pause for thought.

Now it was all on the line. We were told in no uncertain terms that, if we were NOT prepared to sign the letter, we would no longer be considered as part of the fellowship and there was no way that they would be ready to send us out and support us to live and work in India. Thirteen years of waiting to return there, which had recently begun to seem so imminent, now hung in the balance.

Embrace the ‘system’ and see the fulfilment of our dreams? Very tempting, but there was never any way that we could follow that option. We would have been living a lie, shelving our reservations in order to get something that we dearly wanted. So we did not sign and instantly found ourselves outside the circle of Christian friends that had been our ‘home’ for twelve years. Devastating. Deeply disappointing.

This leaving process was much more traumatic than our earlier experience in 1973 when we had left the group which we had been part of in India and the UK. Again, a similar process had taken place. What had started as a very informal (but not disorganised) grouping of young Christian people who wanted to learn to be effective in Christian service, had started to change into a mission organisation. We had each joined it in 1967 when it was still quite young but by 1973 it was already becoming a system. It remains a large and respected group in world missions today but its character has changed from those early days. Inevitable, perhaps.

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I have gone into a little detail to illustrate, albeit personally and painfully, just a small fraction of the power of the ‘system’ in Christian life and work. It seems to me that both my friend in Devon and the ex-house church leader from the North found themselves in systems and felt the need to escape, one from the grip of an old orthodoxy and the other from the demands of a newer one.

No problem! Very necessary moves. But it is what accompanied those escapes that really worries me. Along with leaving their respective ‘systems’, these two also seem to have abandoned many fundamentals of their faith, as if the systems and the fundamentals are inseparable.

They are not.

I was a believer before I joined the mission group, and also before I found myself to be part of the house church movement. My walk with the Lord, though obviously affected by those

circumstances, was not dependent on them. It was in fact the major factor in deciding to both join and leave each one. So why should these two men leaving their systems find it necessary to apparently abandon their walk and the fundamentals of faith upon which it rested?

I have considered this long and hard and can come to only one conclusion, and it is not a comfortable one. Surely it must mean that their previous walk with God, and those fundamentals that went with it, were not sufficiently their own, but rather merely part of the system which they had either been born into or had later embraced? So that, in leaving the system, they automatically felt themselves to be leaving someone else's theology behind and needing to find something which was personally their own.

They would each probably argue that they did not abandon their walk, but did leave some of the previously accepted fundamentals. To me, that makes little sense because my walk with God is based upon the fundamental realities of the gospel. To abandon those fundamentals would mean a radical undermining of my walk with God.

If they felt liberated by leaving some of the theology behind, it is sure confirmation that it was never really their own. Or, perhaps, that they once thought it was but later discovered that it was not.

When we escaped our 'systems', we definitely felt liberated to leave the systems behind but took with us our passionately held convictions and beliefs, if anything made stronger by the fact that we had seen through some of the man-made structure and found the realities of a walk with God more real and compelling.

So again I ask, why the need to look elsewhere? And, if you start to look elsewhere, will you find what you need? Maybe you have not found it in the biblical good news *as presented by the system* which you have left, or want to leave. The answer does not lie with trying to find another system!

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As far as I know, my Devon friend and my house church acquaintance both started out with a very real spiritual experience which was based on what Jesus had done for them, in terms of personal forgiveness and a fresh start in life – 'new birth' as they would all have said at the time or soon after. My initial experience was identical.

If that early experience has degenerated into a perception that simple biblical faith is prescribed and judgmental, then evidently something has gone very wrong.

The purveyors of the various systems, instead of building on that early spiritual awareness with encouragement to learn to hear and respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit (with all the attendant dangers!) have usually chosen, it seems, to codify what was once real faith into a series of formulas, usually expressed in selected phrases which are constantly repeated. Those phrases then become an acceptable jargon, to the extent that anyone who uses the right words must be OK, whereas anyone who doesn't is at least a little bit suspect, maybe worse.

As a young believer, I certainly fell into that trap. Probably the commonest piece of evangelical jargon at that time was talk of 'a personal relationship with God', which you entered into by 'accepting Jesus as your Saviour and Lord'. I am not knocking it; it was true. At the age of eleven, I **had** entered into a relationship with the living God and it **was** as a

result of my response in faith that the death and resurrection of Jesus were effective for my forgiveness and rescue and yes, I **did** want to follow him as my Lord.

The words were not empty but they soon became a formula. Who would lead me on, so that my initial experience was firmed up and enlarged upon? Who would show me more of what God had done for me in Jesus? Who would encourage me to share in fellowship with those who shared that same new life?

Sadly, very few – if any – in those early years, and precious few in later years. Many would teach me about the responsibilities of being a believer in Jesus. Many would encourage me to read the Bible, pray and ‘witness’. For me, Bible reading was actually quite interesting but the **obligation** to do it regularly was strangely limiting. Praying was supposed to be ‘talking to God’ but it still had its own formula to be followed, it seemed. Witnessing was just plain scary! What could I say to my school classmates that didn’t make me sound like a religious nut? I kept pretty quiet. And, of course, felt quite guilty about it!

It took the writings of a Chinese Christian leader (Nee To-Sheng of Foochow, known to the western world as Watchman Nee) to begin to open my eyes, not now to my obligations as a believer but to a fuller appreciation of what God had already done for me in Jesus. I think it was in his book *The Normal Christian Life* that I first found the fact that I was **in Christ**, that God had included me in the life of his Son.

This was no system, no group to join, no doctrinal statement or constitution to sign up to. Simply a clear Spirit-led exposition of biblical truth which, as it always does, had the effect of enabling faith in me. Here was some of the instruction I had needed from the first day, to build upon and enlarge my initial response in faith to the simple message I had heard and received, that forgiveness was mine through the death of Jesus.

Why had it taken so long for that message to reach me? Why had I been pulled into a system of evangelicalism instead of being taught how to live in Christ? Could it be that those around me were also unaware that there was more than just being forgiven and born again?

To be fair to them, I had also been taught the ‘secret’ of refreshment through forgiveness. In other words that, when I failed, there was room for me to admit to my failure and find fresh forgiveness through the power of the blood of Jesus. The apostle John writes about it in his first letter. That was precious, keeping me from the worst of self-loathing at my repeated failures.

Apart from that, though, it seemed that the ‘Christian life’ consisted of things to do – and **not** do. As I grew a little, there were also challenges to respond to, projects to take on, special interests to follow such as various aspects of mission work. Competitive? Well, perhaps just a hint of self-congratulation that I was a really keen Christian . . .

Yes, this was a system and I had been sucked into it, but that does not mean that everything in it was invalid. As I look back on that time now, I don’t reject the truth I was taught or the challenges which I responded to. It was largely good but it was not enough, as I was to discover later.

Meanwhile, I continued in the system while also beginning to discover a little of the truth that I was ‘in Christ’. In general, the system won. I could not adequately express the truths I was beginning to see and besides, no-one else was talking in the same terms. Not my Christian friends, not speakers I listened to, and hardly any other authors apart from the Chinese man that no-one else seemed to have read, and just one or two others.

Time went on, I continued to respond to challenges – and found myself as a trainee on the ‘mission field’. I really wanted my life to ‘count’ for Jesus, to be as ‘sold out’ for him as I could possibly be. I threw myself into the work of evangelism alongside the school of discipleship which was generated by living as part of a team of like-minded young men.

But even that was not enough! I wanted more. I began to desperately ache for a more real experience of the living God that I talked about with colleagues and contacts, to live much more of the kind of life that I had read about in those many biographies that I had devoured over the last eleven years. Yes, I still very definitely believed in Jesus and was still determined to follow him, but I needed something that I could not find.

Perhaps at this point I also could have walked away, rejecting the system and dismissing all my supposed experiences as bogus self-deception. Some young people in the same group seemed to go that way, apparently suffering psychological disorders which removed them from the ‘field of battle’ and left them scarred for years to come. Most of those left the group and returned to their homes, and the general feeling was one of failure. That was probably unjust; they had most likely been failed by the system more than they had failed personally.

As I struggled on with my own lack of ‘reality’, those around me took notice and tried to help. Looking back on those months, I think that some of them at least were trying to assess whether I was another one who was heading for some sort of breakdown. Evidently, they didn’t think so. I was not recommended for treatment of any sort (whether or not I would have accepted it!) and they sent me back into the team to just keep on going on.

Reality, when it hit, was simple in the extreme. A simple, fresh ‘revelation’ of the fact that I had begun to see some years earlier: that God my Father had joined my life to the life of his Son! I was **in Christ**, and that was the solution to my immediate need.

The years since that day have been very different.

There has been no need to espouse any system whatsoever, though of course I have been involved with people in various frameworks, as I have already described, and have also felt the need to become uninvolved when the system threatens to become more important than the life.

But, as for ‘looking elsewhere’, why should I? What possible reason could there be for me to look at some ‘new’ system, some ‘fresh way to think and feel about the Christian faith’, as put forward by the erstwhile house church leader from the North? There is certainly no need for me to look for a so-called ‘road less travelled’ which would take me away from the steadily growing appreciation of my inheritance in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The sad fact is that the road that I have been on since that day in 1969 seems to be one that is very little travelled at all, certainly much less than the alternative routes advocated by those who might brand my faith as naïve and simplistic.

In those long months when I was seeking so desperately, I thought that those around me who did not have the same agony were already ‘in the good’ of the reality I was seeking. Their encouragements and reassurances seemed to imply that they had already found what I was looking for. I thought I was the one who was lagging behind, who had somehow missed out when everyone else was doing OK. So, when at last I came out of that long dark tunnel, I fully expected them to welcome me into the light and share with me the great joy of exploring our inheritance in Jesus.

It took some years for me to discover that most of them apparently did NOT share the same appreciation. When I would talk about being 'in Christ', too often eyes would glaze over and the nods of agreement became automatic rather than enthusiastic. Perhaps they were saying to each other "there he goes again, off on his pet theme . . ."

Whenever I have the opportunity, I still pass on what I can of this different sort of Christianity, but I continue to get the feeling that many Christians I talk with think that it is all just a lot of high-sounding theory which cannot possibly work in practice. There are the veiled comments about 'super-spirituality' which, once they are stripped of their own form of words, usually amount to advocating some form of trying to please God by our own efforts. What a travesty of the really good news of what God himself has already done by placing us in his Son!

This new way of living hinges on **the experience of truth**. Not dead, dry, academic truth and not wild, unfettered experience, but very real experience based on personal appreciation of solid truth. Both of these stand the tests of close scrutiny and deep questioning; they are not blind. Yes, there is the personal, subjective response of faith which makes the revealed truth 'mine' in a way that no doctrinal theory could ever achieve, but the facts are plain for all to see, enshrined in the pages of scripture which has itself been subjected to pitiless analysis over many centuries.

The way that scripture 'works' for us on the 'receiving end' is the companion to the way it was first generated. As Peter so simply states, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." (**2 Peter 1:20,21**) In other words, it was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and needs his inspiration and interpretation in order to be received. In the words of the hymn, "God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain." Or, as the Lord Jesus himself said, "when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you." (**John 16:13-15**)

This experience of truth is completely different from a merely mental or emotional response. Yes, of course it includes a mental grasp of facts and the wealth of emotion that follows from realising that this 'truth' (which I may have known about for years) is actually **real and true**, but the effect cannot be dismissed as 'merely' mental or emotional.

Perhaps we tend to miss the distinctly personal work of the Holy Spirit that the Lord Jesus is talking about here. If he had said that one of the disciples (Peter, perhaps) would 'take of mine and disclose it to you', then we would expect to see Peter diligently 'taking' some truth from Jesus and declaring it to the other disciples, in such a way that it would be real and relevant and alive to them. He would not be content to simply pass on information but would want to ensure that the facts made personal impact. How much more does the very personal Holy Spirit 'take' and 'disclose' more of Jesus to us in an even more diligent way, applying the truth to our own lives and circumstances. If we (consciously or unconsciously) demote the Holy Spirit to thinking of him as some sort of vague force instead of the vibrant Person that he is, we will misread Jesus' promise of personal revelation!

I believe that this personal experience of the Holy Spirit's 'disclosing' of truth sits right at the heart of the question of 'looking elsewhere' that we have been examining. When truth has moved from being merely factually correct to being something that is real to us and is a vital part of our relationship and response to the living God, then how can we possibly move away from that and look for something different? Our response to this sort of revelation is often

“oh, now I **see** !” When this has happened to us, it is very hard (maybe even impossible?) for us to ‘un-see’ truth that has made such an impact.

When Jesus is talking with the woman at the well (**John 4:10-14**), he suddenly throws in a reference to ‘living water’ and goes on to say that those who drink it will have an inner source which will go on springing up into eternal life. There could hardly be a clearer reference to the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer but, if it needed any emphasis, Jesus enlarges on that statement in **John 7:37-39**, when he promises not just a spring of water, but rivers! And, in case there was any danger of not understanding what he meant, here John spells it out for us: he is talking about the Holy Spirit.

The point of ‘living’ water is that it goes on bubbling up, and that is what the Samaritan woman will surely have understood from Jesus’ words. If you have ever looked down a deep well, you may have seen a continuing movement of the water, caused by the constant flow of fresh water into the depths of the well. Seen or unseen, that flow is essential or else the well will dry up and people will go thirsty.

Do I need to draw the analogy? Jesus is speaking about constant supply, continuing refreshing, not only for our own needs as individuals but sufficient to overflow. With provision like that, why do we ever allow ourselves to get drawn into ‘systems’?

Systems do not satisfy. If they have any ‘water’ at all, it is stored water, held in a man-made tank not freshly drawn from the created spring, and certainly not enough to start ‘rivers of living water’. No wonder that we soon become dissatisfied and look away from even the finest system, knowing that ‘there must be more somewhere’.

There is. But we may not have realised that it may be found in that same simple source where we started, new life in Jesus, and specifically in the fact that our Father has joined our lives to the life of his Son. Let me re-phrase that: He has joined my life and your life, individually, to the life of Jesus. As a result of that **individual** joining, we share together. It is that way round. We will not become joined to Jesus by being joined to each other. How easy to join a system because it seems to offer that false promise!

We may not be surprised to discover that this problem, this tendency to ‘look elsewhere’, is not new. Time after time in the Old Testament, we find the heart of God is broken because his people have abandoned him in favour of some other supposed ‘source’. Their earlier devotion and desire to hear his voice has been superseded by their own man-made provisions.

“What injustice did your fathers find in Me,
that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness and became empty?”

“ . . . Those who handle the law did not know Me.”

“ . . . My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.”

“ . . . My people have committed two evils:

they have forsaken Me,
the fountain of living waters,
to hew for themselves cisterns,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

Jeremiah chapter 2.

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