

Roots & Shoots

1. Seeing and Knowing

- the basis of experience

Perhaps the best way to start is to look at our own experience of God so far and ask ourselves some basic questions, then look at the Bible and check out both the questions and the answers. The more honest we can be, the more useful this approach will be.

So, first question:- *What brought you to the point of personal trust in the Lord Jesus Christ?* You may find it useful to write down and/or speak out the answers to this question. For some it will have been a long process without a very clearly defined turning point. For others, there will have been a very definite time and place at which they can say they changed direction. There is no 'right answer'! Your experience is valid! What was it?

Think about this earliest experience. It probably contained at least some of each of these three components: **fact, feeling and decision**. *How did these things fit together? Which came first? Was any of them missing or an insignificant factor? If so, do you feel that your experience is lacking as a result, or does it make no difference? Are there any other gaps which you would like to have filled?*

The early experiences of the first followers of Jesus also contained these three components. There are many examples, but perhaps these will get us started: **John 6:69**. This is a parallel passage to the one in **Matthew 16:13-20** where Peter confesses that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God". Here in John's account, we look into the process behind Peter's words. He says that they have believed and come to know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. . . a process of growing faith where early cautious trust has developed into a much more solid conviction.

John 7:17. We often say that we want some proof first, before we can possibly commit ourselves to faith in Jesus. Here he makes it clear how it works in practice: choice first (a decision of our will), followed by knowing! Incidentally, it is clear from this that 'faith' in Jesus is not just an intellectual exercise, it demands commitment, which involves our will and our emotions.

The facts are important. We can not 'just believe' and enter a real experience of God. I might get on an aeroplane and believe that it was taking me to Spain, but that would do me no good if it was actually going to Glasgow. It would certainly be very foolish to walk around Glasgow pretending that it was Spain! This again underlines the point that all 3 factors are necessary: fact, feeling and decision. If one of them is missing, our experience will be lacking.

All right, then, but how can we possibly come to faith? Is it just a 'leap in the dark', vaguely hoping that there is 'someone there'? Jesus makes it clear that there is another process going on: God is at work! See **John 6:43**, where he says, "No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him". The initiative comes from him, although at the time it feels as though it is all down to us! It is easier to look back at this early experience and see how really it was God at work in our lives, working through all sorts of different things and especially Christian people.

Paul knew that this same process was going on as he declared the truth about Jesus. See **Romans 10:17**:- "faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" and **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**, where he says that he (and others) have been given the message of reconciliation . . . God using people to reach out to other people.

Does this seem to fit with your own story? Is it true that the beginning of your spiritual experience was really more of a response to God than anything else?

Paul's own experience backs up his teaching. In **Galatians 1:11-17**, he makes it very clear that it was God who revealed Jesus to him, more in spite of Paul's religious activity than because of it. His response was essential, of course, but it was God who called Paul and gave him revelation of Jesus. His responses can be found in **Acts 9:5, 22:8-10, 26:15-19**. (Have a look for facts, feelings and decisions!)

So, if our coming to faith is based on the revelation of Jesus, it should be no surprise to discover that our growth will follow the same pattern . . . let's see what the Bible says about it!

Try reading **Colossians 2:6-7**. Paul wanted the believers in Colossae to grow in the same way that they had begun, not to stay just the same. His illustration is of seedlings; the roots go down and then the stems and leaves go up, but the roots go on going deeper down! If you can find time, try reading the whole of Colossians in one go - it is only a longish letter, not a complete paperback! Paul wants to pass on a lot of information to these folk (whom he has not met), but he wants them to receive it "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (**Colossians 1:9**). He contrasts this way of growth with mere philosophy, traditions and a 'normal' human approach (**Colossians 2:8**).

To be honest, there has been a lot of this second sort of teaching in Christianity down through the years, and quite understandably; for one thing, it is much easier to teach facts and make sure that people have learned them than it is to try to make sure that everyone has received revelation from God. If we know that we are 'supposed' to have some great spiritual experience, we will often convince ourselves (and others!) that we have, in order to be included. It is also very difficult to try to correct someone who claims that God has spoken to them!

But just because there are and have been dangers does not mean that we should ignore the clear message of the Bible! Ongoing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ has the same vital elements as initial faith: **facts, feelings and decisions**.

The **facts** are often familiar. If we have had a 'Christian' upbringing, we will probably have been exposed to some of them from a very early age and often without any understanding at all! This brings its own dangers. The most obvious is that we will think that because we have the information we have therefore 'got it'. But just think back again to that first experience of Jesus; in many cases, the facts were already well known to us, but it took the Holy Spirit to apply them to us personally before we felt any need to make any response.

The Lord Jesus knew this danger. He knew that words on their own were insufficient to achieve God's purposes, but that words **with the power of the Holy Spirit** were totally different and could impart life! See **John 6:63 & 68, John 14:26, John 16:12-15**. The crowd on the day of Pentecost were on the receiving end of that same power through an uneducated fisherman (**Acts 2:37-42**).

The **facts** become powerful when the Holy Spirit brings them into our consciousness; we begin to **feel** something different about them. They are no longer just theories to be discussed and argued over; even the **feelings** themselves can not simply be felt and ignored. There is a built-in demand for a response, a **decision** to be made, maybe many! ". . . what shall we **do**?"

We have already looked at Paul's statement in **Galatians 1:12**. He claims that his faith came by revelation. Easy for him, he had a dramatic experience when he was knocked down by a bright light from heaven? No, he wasn't talking about that, he was talking about the time he spent alone with God after that, hidden away in Arabia (**Galatians 1:11-17**).

He wanted the same for other Christians. We have already seen his concern in Colossians and Galatians. He says it again in **Ephesians 1:17 & 18**. (Read these in the context of the whole passage, **verses 15-23**.) He emphasises it again in **Ephesians 4:17-24, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6** and **1 Corinthians 2:6-16**.

We have thought about how we receive the facts. Now we can look at what those facts are:

Which facts has the Holy Spirit made real and 'alive' to you?

Please do not just give the 'right' answers! Don't worry if there are apparently basic Christian doctrines which are still just theory as far as you are concerned. Ask the Lord to make them real to you in his best time (making sure that you are not deliberately evading him!) and thank him for the things he has revealed to you. They are probably very simple things - so much the better! Find out their basis in the Bible. Take time to tell the Lord what you know he has done for you.

"Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him." (Luke 8:18)

2. Listening

- hearing and recognising the voice of God

Our Christian experience started with revelation - the Holy Spirit took hold of some aspect of Jesus and made him real to us. After that initial experience, it is sadly very easy to think that we have to 'go it alone' and that we cannot expect to go on hearing from our Father. Sometimes well-meaning Christians will tell us not to expect too much in case we are disappointed. **The good news is that we can go on hearing from God!**

In **John 10**, Jesus has much to say about his 'sheep', those who follow him. When sheep were grazing, they did not have nice secure fields with fences and hedges, but the shepherd took them out into the open country and kept them together through day and night. As he took the flock to pasture, they would constantly hear his voice, calling them (by name!) and directing them. The result is plain in **John 10: 3,4,5,8,14,16 & 27** . . . his sheep learn to recognise his voice and to reject the voice of anyone else. As far as Jesus is concerned, this is a **normal** condition for his followers, and not just those who followed him physically there in Judea (see **verse 16**).

But is this sort of thing practical for us in the present day? Can we really expect, as 'normal' everyday people in the twenty-first century, to be in touch with the living God? Unfortunately many folk, including too many Christians, have decided that this is all too much to believe and have settled for the sort of faith which depends solely on believing that the Bible is true. As A.W. Tozer wrote:

"Nothing can take the place of the touch of God in the soul and the sense of Someone there. Real faith, indeed, brings such realisation, for real faith is never the operation of reason upon texts. Where true faith is, the knowledge of God will be given as a fact of consciousness altogether apart from the conclusions of logic."

This is dangerous-sounding stuff, and we might find it easy to dismiss if it were not for the fact that the Bible (and the New Testament in particular) backs it up one hundred per cent. Peter makes it clear in his second letter that, just as the scriptures were **written** under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they need to be **read** and **interpreted** by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. See **2 Peter 1:19-21**. At the very least, we need to begin to read our Bibles differently!

Peter is not alone; he learned well from his Master. Jesus was just as blunt in **John 6:63** and **John 8:47**. It seems plain from these passages (and several others) that it is only by the Holy Spirit that we can have any hope of really hearing what God is saying. There is no hope of natural wisdom being the key to unlock God's mysteries . . . we need to rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal them to us. Read the whole of **1 Corinthians 2**. We would probably all do well to read this chapter several times and allow ourselves to be really honest. Are we prepared only to

know what God the Holy Spirit has made real to us? Look again at two passages we looked at last time: **John 14:23-26** and **John 16:7-15**.

Perhaps it is getting clearer; our Father really does **want** and **expect** that we will go on hearing from him, even in our very different present-day world. I find this constantly amazing; it certainly removes biblical Christianity from the routine of religious activity and going to meetings. God is actually 'there', and we have been brought into contact with him through Jesus!

Such a relationship brings responsibility. Going back to **John 10**, it is understood in all that the Lord Jesus says that when the sheep **hear** his voice, they will **obey** him. It is clear that the sheep respond to his leadership (**verse 3**), and in fact the whole shepherd – sheep relationship would not work otherwise.

Why does Jesus want us to hear and recognise his voice? So that we will know what he wants us to do **and do it!** If we are in any doubt about this, try reading **Luke 8:21**, **Luke 11:28** and **Luke 6:46-49**. We all know the parable, but do we see what Jesus was saying? He is talking about foundations, and they do not depend on just hearing what he says, but on acting on his words. A bit practical, isn't it?

So, do we want to grow? Do we want to learn to hear and recognise God's voice? If our answer is yes, then we are saying that we want to learn to be obedient! Perhaps we feel that if we had the same sort of experience as Paul or some other famous Christian, we would be certain to respond in total obedience. Perhaps we need to re-examine the roots of our experience of God in Jesus - we have the same basic relationship that they had; Jesus calls us by name just as much as he called them. Perhaps, like Naaman in **2 Kings 5**, we think that we would do something dramatic if the Lord told us to, but cannot be bothered to obey what he is already telling us to do.

Have a look at **Hebrews 3:7-19**, which contains quotations from **Psalms 95**. The Israelites went wrong when they were travelling through the wilderness with Moses. It should have been a relatively short journey but, because they 'hardened their hearts' in refusal to respond to God's words, all but two men out of a total of more than 625,000 died and never made it across the Jordan into the promised land. They heard the word of God all right, but they chose not to obey.

So, right at the heart of the question is a paradox: *If we want to hear God, we must obey him, but how can we obey him if we have not heard him?* We need to establish first of all whether we are currently hearing his voice or not. This is not a matter of boasting or spiritual pride, as very often our sharpest awareness of his voice is when we know that we have stepped out of line!

If we are not currently conscious of hearing God's voice, there are two possibilities:- The first one is that we are already aware of something that he wants us to do, but we are hedging. It is just not worth it! There is no point in saying that we want to grow if we refuse to obey. (Perhaps, sadly, that may be the chief reason for a lack of spiritual growth in the Church.) The second is that we are

genuinely unaware of anything that the Lord wants us to do, but we still do not seem to hear from him. Our course of action in either case is the same: to open up to him and ask him to show us what he wants us to do. If we become aware of our own disobedience, we will need to admit it as sin and receive forgiveness through the power of Jesus' blood (**1 John 1:5-10**). Then we are ready to echo Paul in **Acts 22:10**: "What shall I do, Lord?"

The answer we receive may be very simple and not at all dramatic, like the direction Paul gave to the believers in Thessalonica in **1 Thessalonians 4:11**. If we ask the Lord what he wants us to do, and make it clear (by actions as well as words) that we are really prepared to obey whatever he says, we will not miss out on what he wants to say to us.

The position of our **will** is important, as the Lord Jesus made clear in **John 7:15-18**. In this particular case, he was being challenged regarding the source of his teaching. His response made it clear that anyone whose **will** was in line with the Father's would respond to his own teaching. We may be very aware of our own failings, but at least we can say to our Father "however much I fail and let you down, you know that deep down I really want to follow you; please go on speaking to me". His great grace meets us there and takes us on to discover more of our inheritance as his children, to hear his voice and learn to respond to it in obedience.

The rest is down to experience! Sooner or later we will be faced with the need to step out and do something on the basis of what we believe the Holy Spirit is saying to us. It will probably be very hard the first time, and we may feel as though the Lord is backing us into a corner so that we have a direct choice between obeying him on one particular issue or dropping out of the Christian walk altogether. We may get it wrong - in fact we are sure to, sometime! But we need to take from those early experiences some basic awareness of what it was like when we **were** clearly led by the Lord, and when we clearly **weren't**! This awareness gradually builds up, so that we learn to recognise the voice of God more readily. This applies to hearing him when he is revealing truth to us from Scripture, when he is speaking to us through another Christian, and even when we feel that he is saying something to us 'direct'.

In every case, we will want to check it out to make sure that it really is God speaking to us. This is especially true if we feel that he has given us something to pass on to others, the gift of prophecy. We need to be ready to be subject to Scripture (God is not inconsistent!) and our brothers and sisters in the Church. If it is from him, the word will stand without our arguments. If it is not, no arguments we can put forward will help it! See **Deuteronomy 18:14-22**.

3. Appreciating

- meaningful personal worship

Worship is a much-used and little-understood word, so let's start with some definitions: The Concise Oxford Dictionary quotes the archaic use of the word to mean "worthiness, merit, recognition given or due to these, honour and respect" and the more modern uses as "reverent homage or service paid to God, ..." and to "adore as divine, pay religious homage to, ...". The origin of the English word itself apparently lies in the old English word "weorthscipe", a combination of "worth" and "-ship". There are many words used in the Old and New Testaments, but the commonest ones are the Hebrew "shachach", meaning "to bow self down", and the Greek "proskuneo", meaning "to kiss (the hand) toward".

Although the dictionary definitions include things that people do as worship, it seems clear from them all that worship is **more of an attitude than an action**. The Bible words are strong expressions of recognition of one who is supremely great and of immense personal value and importance. The combination of bowing down in humility and kissing in adoration is very powerful. *Is this the sort of relationship we have with the God we call our Father?* It is perhaps closely linked up with an appreciation of his fatherhood - he is one who, like a father, is both above his children and intimately close with them.

Unfortunately, many of us (especially, it seems, many men) suffer from a very weakened and distorted picture of fatherhood. It is hard to say what is cause and what is effect, but many of today's fathers have an almost useless role model to follow; their own fathers were either too remote and hard or too soft and indecisive - no wonder we have to re-learn what our Father is like and learn by the Holy Spirit how to respond to him !

In **John 4:19-26**, the Lord Jesus begins to open up the Father's heart, his intense desire for worshippers. This is not a megalomaniac God looking for a company of boot-lickers, but the living God searching for those who will enter this Father-child relationship. Jesus makes it clear that this relationship of appreciation is based on spiritual reality: **"in spirit and in truth"**. We need to explore what this sort of worship is intended to be; it is obviously more than a few songs and prayers on a Sunday morning !

"In spirit" - what does that mean? The opposite is "in the flesh", i.e. with natural qualities and ability. In **Philippians 3:3**, Paul contrasts Christians with Jews. The Jews had been God's people, they had the physical sign of circumcision and all the trappings of very detailed religious practice. (Paul goes on to list some of these in the following verses.) But, says Paul, now we Christians are the ones with whom God is dealing. Instead of following a complex religion, we worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. When Jesus said those words in **John 4**, he was talking to the Samaritan woman in the context of the 'religious' question she had asked him. So we are coming back to what we

have already been looking at in the sessions so far: a relationship with the living God that reaches right into the core of ourselves, an appreciation of God through Jesus which touches us in real life.

That brings us on to the next part: "in truth". We often use the word truth in a more theoretical way than Jesus meant it here. His sort of truth means reality, something really happening, as well as there being no deception or concealment. If we are learning to worship 'in spirit', there should be no room for deception, especially self-deception, but sometimes we try to fool ourselves (and others) that we are really spiritual. The little phrase "in truth" is a constant challenge to us to remain in down-to-earth reality in our appreciation of our Father!

So, how can I learn to worship in this way? We need to start **where we really are**, not try to jump into an unreal world of 'worship', where people seem to use emotional and super-spiritual language. This is why it is important for us to start with an appreciation of **the revelation we have received**, maybe just one fact about our Father and the Lord Jesus which has become alive to us and has probably become central to our life in Christ. When we know this, we have something to work with, **we have an appreciation of God to offer back to him**. Have a look at ***Psalm 116: 12-13***. Here the psalmist wants to have something to give back to the Lord for all he has done for him; what can he possibly offer? **"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."** He had nothing to offer except what God had already done for him. All he could do was to 'lift up' to the Lord what that same Lord had given him, in appreciation and adoration. **We can start in the same place**. What has he done for me in Jesus? What do I **know** of Jesus by the revelation of the Holy Spirit? These are the things which I can start to 'lift up' as my first steps in worship.

In fact, worship is really a spontaneous response to any appreciation of what God is like. It goes further than praise, because praise usually stops at an appreciation of what he has done. The response of worship is personal: **". . . and he has done it for me"**.

It follows, therefore, that worship is not something that I can 'do' unless the 'doing' is a vehicle to express something which is already true. It is also something that cannot be done corporately unless it is happening personally. We cannot 'have a time of worship' unless there is a living, Holy Spirit-inspired appreciation of God to fuel the flame.

But how can I rekindle that appreciation when it seems to have gone flat? Do I have to pretend? Surely this is not worshipping 'in spirit and in truth'? This is where reality starts to bite, and sadly where many Christians give up. Some are honest enough to refuse to pretend, but find that there are not many other Christians who will admit to the same problem or accept it in others, so they drop out. Many of the rest just go along with the crowd and go through the motions, all the time aware that they are lying to themselves and repeating words that may have once held meaning for them, but do so no more.

There is an alternative! Let us go back to the revelation that we started with, to the **facts** which the Holy Spirit has made real to us, and **thank God for what we know is true!** If there are only one or two things that we can think of, start with them! My own experience is that speaking to him out loud and alone is the most helpful; also being prepared to say much or very little, but to concentrate on what I know he has made real to me. Those who exercise the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues can find it helpful in allowing the pouring out of their spirits without having to find the words, but do not restrict your worship to tongues-speaking. There is a very real value in exercising our minds as well as our spirits in appreciation of Jesus. See **1 Corinthians 14:13-15**.

All this is to do with the 'how' of worship. As our appreciation of our Father grows and we become more aware of all that he has done to include us in his master-plan, our hearts will turn to him in worship more readily and spontaneously. As we allow ourselves to be reminded by the Holy Spirit 'bringing to mind' what Jesus has done for us, and as we respond, we will learn to worship "in spirit and in truth". Those wonderful passages in **John 14:26** and **John 16:7-16** are again a key to this sort of response. **The Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us and makes him real to us.**

We have looked at 'lifting up the cup of salvation', offering back to our Father what he has given us. Look at **Romans 12:1** again: here is worship in spiritual reality! Our response to the growing reality of new life in Christ results in a growing reality of expression in which all our physical attributes are **not just offered but presented** as living sacrifices.

The word for 'sacrifice' in the Greek means 'a slaughtered thing', closely linked with the word 'to kill'. Paul has already reminded his readers in **Romans 6:11** that they are to count themselves 'dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus'. The word translated 'present' (or 'offer' in NIV) means 'make to stand by'. Here Paul is saying that our spiritual service in worship is to be available to God as those who are dead to the old life and alive to him in Christ Jesus. The revelation we have received, that we are dead to sin and alive to God, will enable us to present our bodies to him. We will need to do this repeatedly, as a result of both fresh revelation and recent failure, one giving us an opportunity for fresh appreciation and so fresh response, the other as a way of getting 'back on track' with Father when we have experienced his forgiveness after stepping out of line.

No wonder Father looks for worshippers who will worship in spirit and in truth! They are the ones who are learning to appreciate him and what he has done and will make themselves more and more available to him. **He wants you and me!**

4. Asking

- prayer in perspective

An amazing mythology has built up around prayer, which has led to it becoming regarded as the Christian equivalent of magic, a strange process by which fallible human beings are supposed to be able to manipulate the will of the Almighty God in order to obtain what they want, even if it was not exactly what he originally had in mind. This bizarre idea has led well-meaning folk to jump mentally through all kinds of hoops to explain away the times when it did not 'work' and to put forward wonderful theories to predict the times and ways in which it will. We should do well to go back to the Bible, and seek to learn in humble experience as we listen to the words of Jesus.

John 15:7 contains one of the most amazing promises ever made. It seems to imply exactly the same as the 'faith as magic' theory, that we only have to ask and God will fulfil our every wish, like some genie from a lamp!

But we need to look at this promise in the perspective of the context; not just the immediate verses each side of it in this chapter, but the whole passage in which we find it, that great long 'teaching session' which Jesus had with his disciples, just before "his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem". It extends from **John 13:12** to **John 16:33**, and is all in the context of that departure. We have already looked at two passages from this section, teaching of the vital role of the Holy Spirit in bringing us revelation and so true knowledge of Jesus. Here in **John 15**, it seems that we see the very centre of the relationship of the disciple's relationship with the Lord. It was **a new way** of knowing Jesus for the eleven; it is **the only way** that we can know him now, the way of **shared life**.

All that we have learned since becoming Christians can so easily be tucked away in convenient compartments: prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, witness, guidance, and so on. We see others apparently doing much better than us at all or many of these, and seek to improve. We think that if we can only do better at one or more of these, we will be really making progress, and if we really excel in one of them, that might become our 'ministry', the special way in which we can be fruitful. Not so, says Jesus! Read **John 15:1-11** (or the whole chapter!). No vine branch can survive except by being joined to the whole vine, and we cannot survive except by being joined to him, let alone bear fruit! Jesus' life on earth was lived in much the same sort of dependence on his Father as he now offers to us - see **John 5:19-30**. The relationship of Jesus with Father shows how it is meant to be with us; Jesus makes that clear in **John 15:10**. The key is **abiding in Jesus**.

What does abiding mean? How can I learn to do it? The word simply means 'stay', and has the same extra meaning as our word when we say that we are going to "stay" with someone; to "take up residence". "Stay in me" says Jesus. There is both a passive and an active side to this.

The passive side seems easy: don't move, don't get up and walk away! Why should we? . . . but we do, just like a dog who is being trained to "stay" but gets tired of it or distracted. And when we have wandered off, how can we possibly come back and try to obey the command to stay - we haven't stayed, have we? It feels as if we have 'blown it' almost before we start!

The active side is more than merely a command to avoid drifting away, just as staying in a house is more than merely avoiding changing street address. It involves a process of adaptation to new surroundings, of discovering the benefits of our new home, of enjoying the security and outlook - and getting to know our neighbours. After a while, we begin to feel that this is our home, where we really belong. In the same way, says Jesus, "stay in me", make me your home and your base.

This is easier to do with a house than with Jesus! When you wake up in the morning in your new home, even if you may not feel as though you have moved, your eyes and ears and other senses soon remind you of the fact: you are in a new place! We need to allow ourselves to be reminded of our new spiritual home. Look at **1 Corinthians 1:30** and see who has made sure that you have moved in! Try looking through **Romans** and **Ephesians** for the little phrase "in Christ"; that should give us a few fresh appreciations of where we are! Then feed it back to our Father in worship!

Now we have the perspective, what about prayer? Can we really experience "ask whatever you wish" ? **James 5:17** quotes Elijah as being "a man just like us", who prayed earnestly for both drought and rain, and saw his prayers answered. We could hardly ask for a more dramatic example! Look back to the story in **1 Kings 17 & 18**. There is no mention of praying for rain and drought here! What does the example mean, then? Elijah spoke the word of the Lord as he had received it. Then he had to pray! After he had spoken out in **1 Kings 17:1**, he must have prayed very earnestly for the Lord's word to be fulfilled - Ahab would gladly have disposed of him! In **18:1** it is clear that the Lord gave him the signal for the return of rain. In **18:41 & 44**, he is still forecasting rain. But look at **18:42-44**. Elijah had received the word of the Lord and had acted in faith, but still had the agonising wait for the answer he had prophesied - we would have been praying very earnestly!

Elijah is a good example. When did he do his praying? In the sense of the specific prayer for drought or rain, he seems to have been praying only **after** he had received the word of the Lord. In the sense of generally keeping in touch with the Lord, he must have been praying for much of the time to have been able to receive that word in the first place.

Paul tells us to "pray continually" (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**). This is the 'staying in touch' variety, but the Greek word contains a strong sense of desiring and wishing. This is the most commonly used word for 'pray' in the New Testament. In experience, we probably do this already in our private times with the Lord, as we tell him about the things we would like and ask him why situations are as they seem to be. Do we sometimes think that this is not 'proper' prayer, that we ought really

to be praying great prayers of faith all the time and seeing amazing miracles as a result? I have no doubt that this sort of prayer is something that our Father God wants us to exercise, but we will not arrive at it instantaneously. We need the desiring and wishing process, and to share those desires and wishes with him, in order to gradually learn from him what he wants to do. As we become more convinced of his intentions, we find ourselves more able to ask for them to be fulfilled, in the growing certainty that they will be! Like Elijah, we may still be fighting a battle, but it is a battle of holding onto what God has said to us in the face of all our doubts and discouragements.

Going back to **John 15:7**, Jesus says that we need to take up residence in him and allow his words to take up residence in us. To do that, we will need to be listening to them, 'hungering and thirsting' for the word of God. We will need to be checking things out with him, telling him how we feel and learning to hear and recognise his voice. We will make mistakes, but **we will gradually learn to pray in the will of God**. This is the obvious recipe for success, as John points out in **1 John 5:14&15**. It also begins to make sense of **Mark 11:24** where Jesus seems to be telling us to try pretending that what we are asking for has already arrived!

Praying 'in the name of Jesus' begins to take on more reality, too. If we are increasingly aware that we really are in him, and if his will and his words are increasingly in us, we will be more able to use his name, not as a recognised formula to tack on the end of prayers in meetings, but in realisation that **what we are asking for is actually what he wants!** This is what he chose us for - see **John 15:16**.

It is definitely time to take ourselves off the hook! For too long we have felt that our 'prayer life' (whatever that is!) is sub-standard because we have not been regularly going to God with a specific shopping list and getting every little thing we ask for. We have allowed ourselves to be pressurised by the apparent success of others whom we have read or heard about. If we look behind any of the genuine successes, we will find men and women who have had to go through a very real learning process with the Lord to come to where they are. As we know ourselves, there is also a lot of self-deception that goes on in the name of 'answered prayer'. To grow in experience of God in prayer, we need to **decide early that we want reality at any cost**, and to be ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. Paul was still learning - see **Romans 8:26-27** - we all need this!

A final suggestion - try talking to Father out loud; perhaps not every time you pray, but often. Jesus did not bow his head and mumble, he lifted up his eyes, head and voice!

5. Sharing

- purposeful fellowship

So far we have looked mostly at our individual working relationship with God through Jesus. There is enough in the New Testament to convince us that a personal trust in Jesus is essential, and that the result is a new relationship with God and a life that is being transformed. The 'one-to-one' basis of such verses as **John 3:3** and **2 Corinthians 5:17** is unmistakable. **We need a personal link with God.**

But there is more. The New Testament has much to say about 'the church', but we are often slow to hear it. The vast organisational 'church' which Martin Luther challenged had robbed ordinary people of the good news of personal salvation and tried to claim that it alone held the truth. No wonder that there has been a reaction against such control ever since! So strong has been the emphasis on the individual, especially amongst Bible-believing Christians, that much of the Bible's teaching about the church has been ignored.

First of all, what is this 'church' we are talking about? The Greek word 'ekklesia' means 'that which is called out' and refers very clearly to the fact that those who belong to Jesus have been called by God out of the world system and into the kingdom of God. See **Colossians 1:13, John 17:14.** It is a body of people, not just a collection of individuals, but still not just an organisation. The church in the New Testament is never a physical building nor a particular grouping of one set of believers as distinct from others with slightly different beliefs or practices. If we are to adopt the understanding of 'church' as used by the Lord Jesus, Paul and the other New Testament writers, we need to be prepared to re-examine some of our assumptions!

Another Greek word we need to consider is 'koinonia', translated 'fellowship' and meaning 'sharing', 'partaking with' or 'having in common'. **1 John 1:1-10** has much to say about the way this is intended to work in our double relationship with our Father and each other. It is clear that both these relationships depend heavily on having and maintaining openness ('walking in the light') with God and man, and that this openness cannot work without the personal experience of forgiveness through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is right at the heart of fellowship. It goes beyond a 'one-off' experience of forgiveness, perhaps when we first came to faith in Jesus. John is talking about **ongoing relationships**; he says that they are possible and how to maintain them. Before we try to go any further into discovering fellowship and church life, we need to make sure that we are experiencing this basic level of practical relationship with God and fellow Christians. It is ours by the grace of God, made available through Jesus!

1 John 1 makes it very clear that our fellowship, our sharing, is with those who also have this same working relationship with the Father through the blood of Jesus. Obviously, the basis of that relationship is what we 'have in common', and we cannot enjoy this same sort of fellowship with those who do not have the same relationship. Experience supports this; if we try to build our fellowship with others on the basis of going to the same building on a Sunday morning or on liking the same sort of hymn music, we find ourselves in a denomination or a choral society, but **not the church**. If we base it on a shared relationship with God through Jesus, we discover that the family of God has different boundaries, and that they often cross the other ones!

Unfortunately, not only is there division between groups of Christians but also within those groups, when we refuse to be open to each other. This usually because we are not prepared to admit our own failings and accept God's forgiveness. See also **Matthew 18:15-22** and **5:23-24**. A determination by each of us to deal with relationship problems according to these passages and **1 John 1** would make the biggest possible impact for true Christian unity.

What is fellowship intended to achieve? Perhaps one of Paul's most concise descriptions of real working church life is in **Ephesians 4:11-16**. If this passage is not easily understandable, try reading several translations of it. As far as I can see, the central theme here is that, **when every part is working properly**, the church ('the body of Christ') builds itself up to become more and more like the Lord Jesus. Although Paul talks elsewhere (**Colossians 1:28**) about each one being mature (or 'perfect!'), here he emphasises that we are to be mature together, growing up together into "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." There is no expectation that any one of us as individuals can expect to attain to this fullness in all aspects, so that we would become fully like the Lord Jesus - even the thought of claiming that sort of perfection in this life is totally foreign to all that we read in the Bible as well as being repulsive to us - hopefully we know our weaknesses enough for that!

However, there are at least two different aspects to the sort of 'perfection', maturity or completeness which is our inheritance in the church together; one is future and one is present.

We are probably familiar with the future one, at least as a theory, and it has strong implications for the present as well. This passage in **Ephesians 4** makes it clear that we are heading towards a time when we will be (corporately) like the Lord Jesus as a result of the process of each part of the body working properly to promote the growth, development and well-being of the whole. **1 John 3:3** tells us when it will be complete: when we see him! It also implies that when that time comes, it will be the final completion of a process which is already under way: a process of 'seeing him'. John makes it plain that the reason we shall be like him is that we will see him as he is. The clear conclusion is that we can grow more like him by 'seeing' him more. We are not talking about physically seeing Jesus any more than we were about physically hearing his voice. Once more, it is a case of receiving revelation, of **allowing the Holy Spirit to make Jesus real to us**. The exciting message of **Ephesians 4, Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12** and **1**

Corinthians 14:26 (and other passages) is that our Father intends us to each contribute to each other and thereby to the whole body of the church. In other words, he wants to use us to bring revelation of Jesus to each other. This may help us to get spiritual gifts into focus and proportion - they are one means towards this end.

This process links closely with another aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. Read **John 14:12**. What does Jesus mean? Has anyone ever fulfilled this statement? Certainly not that we have heard of! But he gives the reason that makes it possible: he is going to the Father, and will send the Holy Spirit. The church, as a unit, is intended **to represent Jesus in the world**. Individually, we fail; we know that! In spite of individual failure, though, the 'body of Christ' is just that: Jesus' physical presence on earth, as each of us learns to function together in relationship with him. **Colossians 2:19, Ephesians 2:19-22** and **Ephesians 4:15-16** make it clear that the whole body grows as a result of each part's connection with Jesus, the head. The purpose is that the church is to be **an active demonstration of the wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10)**.

As we look in the New Testament, we can find no hint of more than one representation of the body of Christ in any one place. In **1 Corinthians 1:10-13**, Paul is outraged that there should be any divisions in the church in Corinth. "Is Christ divided?" he asks. "NO" is the answer! He makes it very clear in **1 Corinthians 3:1-9 & 21-23** that the church in Corinth demonstrates its unspirituality by division, and in fact jeopardises its opportunity to receive really useful spiritual food. Little wonder at the condition of the church in most of our communities, perhaps especially in the western world!

So, we have some clear responsibilities as members of the church, the 'called-out' ones:-

1. To be in a real relationship with God through Jesus.
2. To maintain that relationship by confessing our sin and taking hold of forgiveness through Jesus' blood.
3. To maintain an open, 'walking in the light' relationship with every believer with whom we have contact. This may also involve confessing to each other.
4. To grow, by allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal more of Jesus to us. The main block is disobedience!
5. To ignore man-made divisions and state by our words and actions that we are joined together in Jesus.

If we begin on this road by the grace of God (and there is no other way we can make it!), we will start to see more of the purpose of God for the church, actually being worked out in practice! It may not be easy, but it will be personally fulfilling, because:

"God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." (1 Corinthians 12:18)

6. Expanding

- church growth & multiplication

It is essential that we have some idea of God's purposes for us individually and in fellowship with each other before we get involved in working towards lasting growth and multiplication in the church. The history of Christianity is littered with the results of misguided good intentions, and some of the results are with us today, in the shape of the wrong sort of church multiplication - the multiplication of disunited groups and denominations!

Paul went on learning more and more of God's plan as he continued to serve him. Perhaps he, more than anyone else, can best illustrate **the 'how' of church growth**, church planting and church multiplication.

He started the right way! Right at the beginning of his life with Jesus, he **asked the Lord what to do**. See **Acts 22:6-10**. It is clear from **verse 14** that the Lord very definitely wanted Saul/Paul to know his will, right from the start. From reading on in **Acts 22** and **Galatians 1:11-2:10**, it seems that the foundations of the message he would proclaim later were laid in a time of apparent 'inactivity' after his conversion. These days, we would probably have pushed him into preaching, sent him to Bible college and assumed that the Lord was definitely calling him into "full time work". Yes, he lost no time in giving his testimony (**Acts 9:20-30**) but it was not long before he was sent away to Tarsus. We can only guess that he 'did nothing' until Barnabas went to find him! It seems that the Lord used that time to make Paul's message really his own.

His potential was recognised. What was it about the young Saul that made Barnabas go and find him? He had obviously seen that the work of God in his life was genuine (**Acts 9:26-27**), but he had not immediately pressed him into service. It was some time later that Barnabas, having seen the situation which was developing in Antioch, left to go and look for Saul in Tarsus and then brought him back to what was to become his home church. Somehow the Lord had made it clear to Barnabas (still very much living up to his nickname - son of encouragement) that Saul and Antioch were right for each other. Saul came in as the apprentice to Barnabas, saw God establish the church there on the foundation which he and Barnabas laid, and it was there in Antioch that **the Holy Spirit confirmed through the church** that he was to be commissioned as an apostle, a 'sent-out-one'.

Here, perhaps, are the first requirements if we are looking to the possibility that the Lord might want to use **us** in some way in church growth and multiplication:-

- 1) a measure of fruitfulness in our local church situation;
- 2) recognition by the local church of the work to which God has called us;
- 3) confirmation of God's timing, again by the local church.

The Holy Spirit will have to work in us and the rest of the church in order to see this happen. These are not rules, but guidelines. After all, Saul does not seem to have followed this pattern when he left Tarsus to work with Barnabas!

We need to leave Paul for a moment to look at the role of a local church in the growth and multiplication of the church in general. To save repetition, please look again at the basic responsibilities we have as members of the church (see last week's notes). If we are beginning to fulfil God's purposes as Christians together in the locality, in real open relationship with the Lord and each other, we will not only grow individually and corporately but also provide an ideal working environment for a fledgling 'Saul' or 'Barnabas' who might be sent out. We will have benefited from their ministry and they will have developed in fellowship with all of us. ***Ephesians 4:11-16*** again!

We do not have time or space to delve deeply into a study of apostles, but the word 'apostolos' turns up, translated differently, in a couple of places which may surprise us. In ***Philippians 2:25***, Epaphroditus is named as a 'messenger' (NIV) of the church at Philippi, evidently **a man whom the church had sent out** to accompany Paul as a "brother, fellow-worker and fellow-soldier". The following verses (***26-30***) show how valuable he was to Paul and how much he sacrificed "for the work of Christ".

In ***2 Corinthians 8:23***, Paul refers to some unnamed brothers as 'representatives' ('apostles') of the churches, who were working with him and were 'an honour to Christ'. Perhaps some reassurance that apostles do not need to be carbon copies of Paul or the twelve to be sent out by churches!

As well as being a training ground and home base for apostles, the local church has a marked effect on the area around. ***Acts 19*** tells the story of the impact of both Paul and the church in Ephesus on the Roman province of 'Asia' (a large part of western Turkey). See especially ***verses 10 & 26***. No specific mention is made of any visits by Paul or other apostles to any other parts of the province but, by the time John is on the island of Patmos in ***Revelation 1***, there are seven churches in this same region. Not a coincidence, I think! The same thing went on in Thessalonica, allowing Paul to say that he did not have to say anything about it, as other people were telling him! (***1 Thessalonians 1:4-10***).

We have looked a little at apostles, sent out for a purpose, to be at least part of the process of laying the foundations of new local churches. But what about evangelists? They are different from apostles, as ***Ephesians 4:11*** makes clear, but what is the difference? We only have very limited guidance in the New Testament, but the word itself means "one who announces good news", so that is a good and simple start.

Apart from Paul encouraging Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" (***2 Timothy 4:5***), we have only one other direct reference to an evangelist, Philip, in ***Acts 21:8***. Like Stephen, Philip was chosen for the Jerusalem 'meals on wheels' service in ***Acts 7***, but actually blossomed into a very effective evangelist in ***Acts 8***, where he was the first one to take the good news of Jesus to Samaria, before he had that

famous encounter with the Ethiopian. He was still operating fairly locally, and needed the backup of the local church for his ministry to be fully effective (**Acts 8:14-17**). Perhaps this is a useful guideline?

There were also those who were scattered after Stephen's death, who went out and told any and everyone about Jesus, and "the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (**Acts 11:19-21**).

And so back to Paul! He makes it clear that his message came "by revelation from Jesus Christ" (**Galatians 1:12**). He emerged from apparent obscurity when Barnabas fetched him from Tarsus to Antioch, and it is then that his foundation-laying ministry begins to shape up. From being just a group of a few Jews and Greeks who had heard the good news, under the ministry of Paul/Saul and Barnabas they grew into a most effective church, who responded obediently and immediately even when the Lord told them to send out their main leaders! Whatever else apostles may be, it seems to me that laying foundations is one of their main functions. Paul and Barnabas had certainly laid some in Antioch - now the time had come (in **Acts 13**) when they needed to be sent out to lay some more elsewhere.

For more on the subject of apostles and foundation-laying see **Romans 15:18-20**, **1 Corinthians 3:10-15**, **Ephesians 2:20** & **Revelation 21:14**.

When Paul and Barnabas went out to lay foundations, how did they go about it? There are many examples in **Acts**; try reading them! They did not have a fixed pattern of working, but some principles seem to stand out:-

- 1) They declared the good news of Jesus openly and fully.
- 2) They approached all groups of people, religious or not.
- 3) They followed up initial declaration of the good news with teaching, both in public and in small groups.
- 4) They made sure that they left the believers with some home-grown leadership.
- 5) They kept in touch and encouraged, and remained available for advice and teaching, though leaving the local leaders to lead.

To take one 'case history', try following up the church in Ephesus, from its beginning in **Acts 18:19 - 19:41** to **Acts 20:17-38** where Paul says goodbye, the whole letter of Ephesians and the aftercare expressed in **1 Timothy 1:3-4** and **2 Timothy 4:12**.

It is refreshing to see that Paul did not set up any human 'insurance' to make certain that his work survived. He actively opposed any suggestion of a 'Paul-centred' church. His desire was clearly expressed in **Colossians 1:24-28**. He wanted to give himself for the growth of the church and the individual.

Like his Lord, he was consumed with zeal for the house of God.

Roots & Shoots

As a supplement to "Roots & Shoots", this chart and list of Bible references are added here to give an overall view of **the facts of what Jesus has done for us.**

Allow the Holy Spirit to make these facts real to you!

WHAT HAS JESUS DONE FOR ME?				
THE DEATH OF JESUS		HIS	HIS	HIS
HIS BLOOD Shed for me	HIS BODY Broken for me		RESURRECTION From the dead	ASCENSION To the right hand of God
FORGIVENESS OF SINS REDEMPTION	FREEDOM FROM THE POWER OF SIN AND LAW	UR I A L	ETERNAL LIFE NEW LIFE PLEASING TO GOD	THE HOLY SPIRIT POURED OUT ON ME/US
DEALING WITH MY PAST DEALING WITH MY GUILT	NO FEAR OF DEATH ESCAPE FROM THE POWER OF TEMPTATION NO LONGER A SLAVE		MY B A P T I S M	VICTORY OVER SATAN DIRECT ACCESS TO GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT LIVING IN ME

THE DEATH OF JESUS - His Blood Shed For Me

Romans 5:9 "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"

1 John 1:7 ". . . and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Revelation 7:14 ". . . They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Revelation 12:11 "They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony."

Hebrews 9:14 "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

Revelation 1:5 "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . ."

1 Peter 1:18-19 ". . . you were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ . . ."

Ephesians 1:7&8 "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace, that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

Romans 3:24 ". . . and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

THE DEATH OF JESUS - His Body Broken For Me

Hebrews 2:14&15 "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

2 Corinthians 5:14-17 "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Galatians 2:19&20 "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Romans 6:6&11 "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. . . In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin . . ."

Colossians 2:20-23 "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' ? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."

Romans 7:4,6 "So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in

order that we might bear fruit for God . . . But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

Colossians 3:3 "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

1 Peter 2:24 "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness

HIS BURIAL - MY BAPTISM

1 Peter 3:21 ". . . and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God"

Romans 6:4 "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Colossians 2:12 ". . . having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

HIS RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

Romans 6:5&11 "If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection . . . in the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Romans 8:2 ". . . because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

Galatians 3:26-28 "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Romans 8:11 "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

Ephesians 2:18 "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

2 Corinthians 3:18 "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

HIS ASCENSION TO THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD

John 7:39 "Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

John 16:7 "Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Acts 2:33 "Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."

Romans 8:16 "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Romans 8:26 "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

1 Corinthians 12:4 "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit."

1 Corinthians 2:12 "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has given us."

1 Peter 1:12 "It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."

1 Corinthians 1:30 "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

Ephesians 1:17-19 "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

2 Peter 1:3 "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

2 Corinthians 3:18 "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect (or contemplate) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

1 John 3:2 "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Ephesians 3:14-19 "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted

and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God."

Dave Taylor October 2000

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