

The blessing of Abraham in families

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Preface

The gospel preached to Abraham

Victor Hall

Paul's gospel

The apostle Paul was very clear: there is only one gospel. He said that if anyone preaches a gospel other than what he preached, they are to be accursed. Gal 1:8-9. Paul did not receive his gospel from men, nor did he acquire it through scholarship. Rather, he received the gospel of sonship from God through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Gal 1:11-12.

Significantly, following his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, Ananias said to Paul, 'The God of our fathers [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.' Act 22:14-15.

Paul testified that the Father was pleased to reveal His Son, Jesus Christ, *in him*. The Father did this so that Paul could preach Christ among the Gentiles. Gal 1:15-16. The wonder and implications of this revelation staggered Paul. It took him three years to fully appreciate and embrace the implications of this call upon his life. At the end of his three-year

individual journey with Christ, Paul went to Jerusalem and conferred with Peter, remaining with him for fifteen days. He also met with James, the Lord's brother. Gal 1:18-19. After this, Paul went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia, *preaching the faith* which he had once tried to destroy. The fruit of this ministry was that Paul's hearers glorified God in him. Gal 1:21-24.

Writing to the Colossian church, Paul described the stewardship of the gospel that God had given to him. He had exercised this stewardship for their sake, fulfilling what the Father had spoken to him when He said that He would reveal Jesus Christ in him. Gal 1:15-16. Col 1:25. Paul's work was to proclaim the mystery that had been hidden from ages and generations. This mystery, revealed through the gospel of sonship, is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. Col 1:24-27.

The gospel of sonship is proclaimed by messengers of God in whom Jesus Christ is being revealed. As a person hears this word, they receive the faith of the Son of God, enabling them to believe for new birth. Rom 10:17. 2Co 4:13. By this faith, Christ, the Seed of the Father, dwells in their heart. Eph 3:17. When we receive the Lord Jesus in this way, He becomes the hope of our glory. This is a sure hope; it is the certainty that, through fellowship in the offering of Christ, we are progressively becoming the sons of God whom the Father predestined us to be in Christ. 2Co 3:18. 2Co 5:21.

Paul's most succinct statement of the gospel was expressed in Antioch when he publicly rebuked the apostle Peter for his hypocrisy. He noted that Peter would normally eat with the Gentiles. However, in the presence of certain men who came from James, Peter withdrew and separated himself from the Gentiles. Peter did this because he feared the Jews, whom Paul described as 'the circumcision'. Gal 2:11-13. These men claimed to be the heirs of God's promises to Abraham because of their genealogy and their commitment to the cultural practices of the nation of Israel, including physical circumcision.

The highpoint of Paul's admonition to Peter was a summary of the gospel. He testified, 'I have been co-crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but *Christ lives in me*; and the life which I now live in the flesh *I live by the faith of the Son of God*, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.' Gal 2:20-21.

Having recounted this event to the Galatians, Paul reproved them for seeking to be perfected by keeping God's Law. He called them 'foolish', and described their actions as the works of the flesh. Gal 3:1-3. Paul said to them that if they were physically circumcised, Christ would profit them nothing. Moreover, by endeavouring to fulfil this aspect of the Law, they would be obligated to keep the whole law, bringing them under its judgement. Gal 5:2-3.

By pursuing righteousness through the Law, the Galatians demonstrated that they had been deceived by another gospel. As a consequence, they were denying that they had been crucified with Christ. Moreover, they were forsaking the faith of the Son of God as their capacity to believe God's word and live by His life. Gal 2:20. If a person does not live by the faith of the Son of God, Christ cannot dwell in their heart through faith. Eph 3:17. They are not an heir of the salvation proclaimed through Paul's gospel. Paul asserted that Abraham's children, the true heirs of salvation, were not those who kept the Law, but were those who were of the same faith as Abraham. Gal 3:7.

Abraham received the gospel

Paul then spoke to the Galatians about the gospel that God had preached to Abraham. He showed them that it was the *same gospel* that God had proclaimed to him. As we noted earlier, Paul understood that it was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who had chosen him to know His will and to see the Just One, Jesus Christ! Act 22:14-15. Concerning this gospel, Paul wrote, 'And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached *the* gospel to Abraham *beforehand*, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.' Gal 3:8-9.

Paul's first point was that the gospel was preached to Abraham while he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, because the Scriptures prophetically foresaw that Abraham would later receive the faith of the Son of God and become the father of all who believe by this same faith. As we will see, this prophetic call came to pass in due course when the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield [of faith], your exceedingly great reward.' Gen 15:1.

The Lord called Abraham to leave his country, to depart from his family and from his father's house, to enter a land that the Lord would show him. Gen 12:1. This call was accompanied by the promise of blessing. The Lord said to Abraham, 'I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and

make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ Gen 12:2-3.

Let us take a moment to appreciate the significance of Paul’s statement to the Galatians. The Scriptures, which are prophetic, foresaw and foretold that God would justify the Gentiles through faith. *Because of this*, God chose Abraham for the purpose of making him the human father of all the sons of God. These are the sons and daughters of men who are born again as sons of God by hearing and receiving the message of Christ. All the sons and daughters of God, described as the nations of the new heavens and earth, would come from Abraham. In this regard, Abraham was to replace Adam as the head of the nations.

Paul noted that, upon receiving this promised blessing, Abraham went out, not knowing where he was going. Heb 11:8. In other words, Abraham received and obeyed the prophetic direction of the Lord, even though he did not fully comprehend what it would mean for him, or how God’s word would come to pass. Paul also explained that Abraham understood that the land that he was promised represented an *eternal blessing*. He said that Abraham dwelt in the land of promise, ‘for he waited for the [heavenly] city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God’. Heb 11:9-10. Heb 11:16.

Possessor of heaven and earth

Following Abraham’s defeat of the four kings who had endeavoured to establish dominion over the land that God had given to him, Abraham met Melchizedek, the Priest of God Most High. Melchizedek, whom Paul identified as Jesus, invited Abraham to participate with him in an *agape* meal, bringing out bread and wine. Heb 7:1-3. Gen 14:18. He then blessed Abraham, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, *possessor of heaven and earth*; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’ Gen 14:19-20.

Significantly, through Melchizedek’s blessing, Abraham replaced Adam as the heir of the world. Paul explained this point in his letter to the Romans, writing, ‘For the promise that he would be *the heir of the world* was not to Abraham or to his seed through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith’. Rom 4:13. The implication of this blessing is that only those who are the children of Abraham will inherit eternal sonship as citizens of the new heavens and earth.

With this momentous understanding in mind, Paul asked the Gentile Christians in Rome, 'What shall we say then that *Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh*, has found?' Rom 4:1. Significantly, Paul was identifying these Roman believers as Abraham's children according to the flesh! How could they be the children of Abraham if they were not Jewish or directly connected to his lineage? The answer to this question cannot be understood through natural reasoning, alone. As it did for Abraham, it requires illumination through the word of faith.

Abraham believed the gospel

As we noted earlier, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield [of faith], your exceedingly great reward.' Gen 15:1. Through this word, Abraham received the faith of the Son of God as a gift. He was enabled to believe that God the Son would come in the flesh as his Son and Seed. He was also able to believe that the treasure of the Son's life would become his own life and the life of his children. Abraham understood that this is what the Son meant when He said to him, 'I am ... your exceedingly great reward.'

This is the very understanding that Paul received when the Father was pleased to reveal His Son, Jesus Christ, in him! Gal 1:15-16. We recognise that Paul received the same faith that Abraham received so that Christ could dwell in his heart through faith. Eph 3:17. This was fundamental to Paul's capacity to proclaim the gospel to others so that they, also, might become children of Abraham.

Affirming to Abraham that his heir would be one who would come from *his own body*, the Lord brought him outside and said to him, 'Look now toward *heaven*, and count the *stars* if you are able to *number* them.' Gen 15:5. Through Christ, Abraham's Seed, the multitude of sons would be like the stars of heaven in number and in nature. That is, they would be numerous, and would be full of the light of life. Moreover, they would be the citizens of the new heavens and earth. Gen 15:4-5.

The Scriptures record that Abraham, having received the faith of the Son, believed in the Lord, and that the Lord accounted it to him for righteousness. Gen 15:6. This was the moment when Abraham was *justified*. As Paul noted, 'For if Abraham was *justified* by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was *accounted to him for righteousness*".' Rom 4:2-3. Abraham's justification means that Yahweh

accepted Abraham as a participant in His covenant fellowship and dialogue.

Unlike the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, Abraham did not presume to possess the promises of God through his own strength. Instead of saying, as the Israelites did, 'All that you say I will do,' he asked the Lord, 'How shall I know that I will inherit what You are promising?' Gen 15:8.

Exo 19:8. These questions reveal a fundamental distinction between endeavouring to obtain the blessing of God by the works of the Law as distinct from actually receiving them by the hearing of faith. Gal 3:2.

In answer to Abraham's question, the Lord directed him to join, by faith, the fellowship of Christ's offering. This he did, by sacrificing a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon in obedience to the direction of the Lord. Gen 15:9-10. Through his participation in this offering, Abraham was figuratively 'co-crucified with Christ'.

Abraham learned to possess the promises of God through offering and illumination. This was signified by the smoking furnace and burning lamp which passed between the pieces of the offering that the Lord called Abraham to make. His offering was ignited by the smoking furnace, revealing his connection to Christ's acceptable offering. The burning lamp brought illumination to Abraham regarding God's covenant and the means by which he would possess the nations. Gen 15:17-21.

Blamelessness

Some years later, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am Almighty God; *walk before Me and be blameless.*' Gen 17:1. Abraham and Sarah were enabled to fulfil this command as they received new names from the Lord. Yahweh placed an element of His own name in their natural names, endowing them with a remnant of His Spirit. Gen 17:5-6. Gen 17:15-16. Mal 2:15. Furthermore, Abraham received circumcision as a sign of God's Everlasting Covenant. Gen 17:10-13. The birth of Isaac, who was born according to the Spirit, was the fruit of this initiative towards Abraham and Sarah. Gal 4:29.

Paul explained that Abraham received circumcision as a *sign of the faith* that he had received as a gift while he was *uncircumcised*. Rom 4:11. As we have just considered, Abraham received this faith when the word of the Lord came to him in a vision. Gen 15:1. He received the sign of circumcision *so that* he might become the father of *all* who believe,

whether they are of 'the circumcision' or not. In other words, the physical circumcision that Abraham received *signified* living by faith in the fellowship of Christ's offering. Both Jews and Gentiles can become children of Abraham as long as they walk in the same steps of obedient faith in which he walked while still uncircumcised. Rom 4:9-12. This is their participation in the offering and sufferings of Christ.

When Abraham received the sign of circumcision, and Yahweh wrote His name upon him, he became the father of faith. This is the faith through which all men are justified. He was given the capacity, through faith and grace, to walk before God and to be blameless. Gen 17:1. With this capacity came the mandate to instruct his children after him in the way of faith righteousness. Gen 18:17-19.

We are the children of Abraham if we receive this instruction and, by faith, walk blamelessly before the Lord. Gal 3:7. Php 2:15. 2Pe 3:14. We demonstrate that we are children of Abraham when we live by the same faith that Abraham received. It is through this faith that Christ dwells in our heart as an exceedingly great reward.

We demonstrate that we believe by this faith through our daily fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ. In this fellowship, we are able to walk before the Lord and be blameless. Blamelessness does not refer to our own achievement of sinless perfection. Rather, by grace, we have a daily participation in the sinless perfection that Christ accomplished for us through His offering. Through fellowship in His offering and sufferings, we are able to fulfil the works that belong to our sonship, as we are being delivered from our sin. This is what it means to be '*blessed* with believing Abraham'. Gal 3:9.

Understanding what it means to 'walk before the Lord and be blameless' will be fresh for us all. Previously, we may have endeavoured to fulfil the commands of Christ through our own efforts and application. Many have presumed that the Holy Spirit was given to them to enable their fulfilment of God's Law. No doubt, some people have been less concerned about their inability to keep the Law, claiming God's forgiveness of their sins because of Christ's blood that was shed on their behalf.

The truth is that we can only walk blameless before the Lord because we have a daily participation in the finished offering of Christ. In the fellowship of His sufferings, which is *our* death that He made *His* death, we are being delivered from sin and from 'the other law' as the principle of our life. As we are conformed to His death, we are receiving and living

by His life, and are fulfilling the works of sonship that He has perfected for us. This truly is an amazing blessing, which Jesus outlined in the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes

In his Gospel, the apostle Matthew specifically highlighted Christ's ministry of *this blessing*, narrating what is commonly referred to as 'the Beatitudes'. Jesus said, '*Blessed* are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Blessed* are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. *Blessed* are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. *Blessed* are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. *Blessed* are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. *Blessed* are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. *Blessed* are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. *Blessed* are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Mat 5:3-10.

Jesus then described the *culture* of those who were blessed as part of the kingdom of heaven. From a natural perspective, the cultural expectations of the kingdom that Christ was proclaiming far exceeded those of the Old Covenant. For example, He taught, 'You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Mat 5:27-28. In summary, He said, 'Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.' Mat 5:20. Christ's followers are to be perfect, just as the Father in heaven is perfect! Mat 5:48.

Attempting to fulfil these words of Jesus is a fundamental error that many Christians make. Some may even believe that the Holy Spirit has been given to them for the purpose of empowering their endeavours to meet these cultural standards. However, the very intention to adhere to Christ's words *disqualifies* a person from the blessing that belongs to the children of Abraham. Why so? Even though they are striving to fulfil the commands of the New Covenant, their righteousness is no different from that of the Pharisees, who sought to keep the Law under the Old Covenant. How, then, can a person possibly be blameless in relation to the New Covenant?

Jesus provided the answer to this question when He proclaimed, 'Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, *till heaven and earth pass*

away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the Law till all is fulfilled.' Mat 5:17-18.

The present heavens and earth passed away when Christ took them out with Him into the eternal judgement of God. This happened between the sixth hour and the ninth hour of Christ's crucifixion. During this phase of His offering, darkness covered the whole earth as the lights of this present creation were extinguished. Mat 27:45. Mar 15:33. Luk 23:44. At the conclusion of these three hours of darkness, the whole of the old creation had been taken out into the sea of God's forgetfulness, and Christ, the corporate New Creation, had emerged from the waters of God's judgement. At the conclusion of His offering, the Lord declared, 'It is finished!' as the law and prophets were completely *fulfilled*. Joh 19:30.

Having brought an end to the old creation, God committed the present heavens and earth to the prophetic Scriptures. Every day, until Christ's final judgement as He sits on the great white throne, has been *fixed* by the Scriptures. Rev 20:11. In effect, the Scriptures have become the source of light in this present creation for the purpose of granting every person time to repent and to join the offering of Christ as part of the New Creation. A person receives this opportunity by hearing what the Spirit is saying from the Scriptures through the preaching of Christ's messengers. Making this point, the apostle Peter said, 'And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed *as a light that shines in a dark place*, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.' 2Pe 1:19-21.

The blessing of life that belongs to the New Creation is found only in the fellowship of Christ's offering. Access to this blessing begins with the ministry of the word by those in whom Christ is being revealed. Gal 1:15-16. A person receives the faith of the Son of God by hearing the word of the cross. Rom 10:17. By this faith, they are able to believe for participation in the offering and sufferings of Christ as a son of God. 2Co 4:13-14. The Holy Spirit, who is given to them by the Father at the request of the Son, enables their daily participation in this fellowship.

Of course, this is how we walk in the faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised. We recall that, by the faith of the Son that he received when the word of the Lord was revealed to him, Abraham participated in the fellowship of Christ's offering. Notably, in the course of this offering,

Abraham fell into a deep sleep, and horror and *great darkness* fell upon him. Gen 15:12. He experienced the fellowship of Christ's sufferings through which the old creation was brought to an end. Yet, in the midst of this darkness, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between the pieces of the offering. As we considered earlier, the smoking oven marked Abraham's connection to Christ's death and resurrection. The burning torch was the light of the prophetic word confirming God's covenant with Abraham.

Our fellowship in this offering is how we obtain the blessing that God promised to Abraham and his children. The most fundamental condition for joining this offering, through which we are enabled to walk blameless before the Lord, is to become poor in spirit. A person who is poor in spirit acknowledges their spiritual *helplessness*. They recognise that they have no capacity within themselves to obey Christ's word. Jesus said that becoming poor in spirit is the first and most basic attribute of a person who is obtaining the blessing that God promised to Abraham and his children. Mat 5:3.

Notably, the Greek word that is translated 'blessed' in the Beatitudes means 'to be fully *satisfied*'. This is not the satisfaction or happiness that results from favourable circumstances in life. Rather, it is the enduring, or everlasting, satisfaction that is only found in the fellowship of Christ's offering. King David testified to the blessing of this satisfaction when he wrote, 'As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness'. Psa 17:15.

In the Scriptures, sleep is often used as a euphemism for death. For example, Paul wrote, 'But now Christ is risen from the *dead*, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen *asleep*'. 1Co 15:20. The blessing of satisfaction that is found by those who awake in the likeness of the Son belongs to those who, by faith, confess that they have been crucified with Christ. Having been conformed to His death, they live by His life. Of course, living by the life of Christ as a son of God is the blessing for which Abraham, the father of faith, believed. We see that the Beatitudes were Christ's explanation of how we obtain the blessing that was promised to Abraham.

Becoming children of Abraham

Earlier, we noted that Yahweh said to Abraham that the heirs of salvation, who are the citizens of heaven, would be the sons and daughters who would come from his own body. Gen 15:4-5. This raises some significant

questions. How do we become Abraham's children according to the flesh if we are *not* Jews? Why did John the Baptist say to the Jews, who *were* Abraham's natural children, 'Do not think to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father".'? Mat 3:9.

When the word of the Lord came to Abraham, he received faith to believe that Yahweh the Son would become his Son after the flesh. This happened through incarnation when Mary, the direct descendant of Abraham, through King David, gave birth to Jesus. Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, was sent as a messenger to Mary, proclaiming that she would bear, and bring forth, the incarnate Son of God. Luk 1:26-38. Gabriel said to Mary, '*Do not be afraid*, Mary, for you have found favour with God.' Luk 1:30. This was the same word, or gospel, that the Lord ministered to Abraham. Gen 15:1. By the faith that Mary received from the word of the Lord's messenger, she confessed, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! *Let it be to me according to Your word.*' Luk 1:38.

The physical body of Jesus was formed in the womb of the virgin Mary once the Holy Spirit came upon her, and the power of the Most High, who is the source of the word, overshadowed her. Luk 1:35. Mat 1:20. The word, as the seed of God that enabled Yahweh the Son to be born as the Son of God, and formed His heavenly body, is the same word that formed His physical body. The seed of God, in conjunction with the egg of Mary, gave to Christ His human body. Joh 1:14. When He was born, He was the natural Seed of Abraham. As the Son of Man, He had received His physical body from the father of faith.

Christ received a mortal body and was made like us in every respect. Paul explained that Jesus did this so that, by offering, He might destroy the devil and release the sons of men, who were in bondage because of the fear of death. Having redeemed the sons of men, He then gives aid *to the sons of Abraham*. Heb 2:14-16. The aid that He gives is His own precious life, which He gives to become their life. His '*zoe*' life becomes for them an exceedingly great reward. How do we, as sons of Abraham, receive the aid that Christ came to give to us?

In the garden of Gethsemane, the Father made Jesus, who knew no sin, to *be* sin for us. He did this so that we might become sons of God in Christ. 2Co 5:21. Jesus Christ became sin when the Father made Adam, and all who proceeded from him through natural birth, members of the body of Christ, who is the last Adam. Rom 5:14. 1Co 15:22,45. This happened when Jesus drank the cup of cursing that the Father gave to Him.

Luk 22:42. By drinking this cup, Jesus, by the grace of God, began to 'taste' the suffering of death for *everyone*. Heb 2:9.

From the prophetic writings of Zechariah, we understand that drinking this cup caused the two-edged sword of God's judgement to be applied to Christ, whose corporate body was the body of sin. Zec 13:7-9. The two-sides of this sword revealed the two outcomes of Christ's offering journey, which Paul called 'the circumcision of Christ'. Col 2:11-12. First, at each stage of His offering journey, Christ was being progressively cursed and cut off from God. As the embodiment of sin, iniquity and transgression, these aspects of the human condition were being ended as He was dying. Significantly, the whole of the old creation, including all the sons and daughters of Adam, were going out with Him into the sea of God's forgetfulness.

At the same time, as His blood was shed through the wounds that He suffered, Christ was being made alive from the death of sin as a corporate New Creation. Heb 13:20. He was pioneering the pathway of every person's salvation, and He was fulfilling the works of their sonship. Heb 5:8. Isa 26:12. Furthermore, the resurrection life in Christ's blood was being multiplied and given to be the life of those who would receive His word and accept their participation in the fellowship of His offering.

Significantly, when the Son of Man's offering journey was complete, *exanastasis* had attained a full perfection and expression in Him. Joh 19:30. His Spirit had gone to the Father, yet His physical body remained on earth. Christ's flesh rested in *hope* as His body lay in the tomb for three days and three nights. Psa 16:9-11. The reason why Christ's body did not decay during this time was because the *exanastasis* life of the Father had *already* been perfected in His physical body. On the day of resurrection, three days and three nights following His death, His body did not need to be changed into a spiritual body. It had already become spiritual through the power of *exanastasis*. When He returned to His body, it was as spiritual as it was material.

The word of the cross ministers the faith of the Son of God, enabling us to confess, 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live.' Gal 2:20. This is the confession of a person who has been joined to the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and recognises that they have been taken out with Him into the sea of God's forgetfulness. They no longer live according to the principles of flesh that were established through the disobedience of Adam. Instead, having been conformed to Christ's death, they are being raised in the likeness of His resurrection. Christ lives in

them, and they now live His life by the faith of the Son of God. Gal 2:20. They are no longer children of Adam; they are now children of Abraham.

Importantly, we are not children of Abraham by association or because of a common system of beliefs. Neither are we his children because of our genetic heritage. Speaking of the resurrection found in the fellowship of Christ's offering, John the Baptist said to the Jews, 'Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I say to you that God is able to *raise up* children to Abraham from these stones [or, the dust of the ground].' Luk 3:8.

We know, of course, that 'the first Adam' was made from the dust. 1Co 15:47. Following the Fall, the Lord said to him, 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.' Gen 3:19. When a person dies, their body decays to dust. The dust of their decomposed body has no genetic distinction from the dust that results from the degeneration of any other person's body. In short, their familial connections and heritage are completely lost.

When John the Baptist said that the Father was able to *raise up* children to Abraham from the dust, he was explaining that only those who die in Christ and are raised in the likeness of His resurrection are children of Abraham after the flesh. This happens according to the word of the Lord. At the end of this age, *all* the dead will be raised from the dust by the word of the Lord, for the purpose of God's final judgement. Rev 20:13. Those who belong to Christ as Abraham's seed will be raised incorruptible and clothed with immortality. 1Co 15:52. Those who do not belong to the new creation will be cast into the lake of fire. The Scriptures call this 'the second death'. Rev 20:14-15.

Only those who are born of God and baptised into Christ are raised to immortality as children of Abraham. Jesus revealed this implication of the gospel to His disciples prior to the commencement of His offering journey. He said to them, 'Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And *where* I go you know, and the *way* you know.' Joh 14:1-4.

When Jesus said to His disciples, 'Let not Your heart be troubled', He was addressing them in the same way in which He spoke to Abraham, saying,

'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.' Gen 15:1. When we are born again, and baptised into Christ, we die, and our life is hidden with Christ in God. Col 3:3. We now live by a completely different principle of life; we live by the faith of the Son of God as the children of Abraham! Gal 2:20. Each day, we progressively participate in the finished offering of Christ, through which He perfected our sonship. Jesus described our perfected sonship as a mansion in the Father's house, which He prepared for us through His offering. It is a heavenly body, in Him, comprising our name, life and glory as a son of God. We progressively attain to this inheritance through our daily participation in His offering and sufferings.

Let us explained further. As those who are made from the dust, we are raised up from the death of sin with Christ through fellowship in His death and resurrection. This is a process through which we are being progressively changed into the likeness of His image. 2Co 3:18. Through fellowship in Christ's offering and sufferings, the life by which we live in our mortal bodies is the resurrection life that was in Christ's blood. Paul called this '*exanastasis*' life. Php 3:11. However, in the *anastasis*, or resurrection to immortality, we will have a spiritual body that is of the substance of Christ's spiritual body. As we have already established, Jesus received this body from Abraham.

Paul addressed this point when he said, 'But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" ' 1Co 15:35. He then explained that our mortal bodies are sown in dishonour. By this, he meant that the flesh of all mankind died with Christ under the judgement of God. However, for those who are in Christ, as part of the New Creation, their body is raised in glory and power; that is, they receive a spiritual body when their mortality expires, and they fall asleep in Christ. The glory of our spiritual body will reflect the extent to which we have attained the perfection that Christ accomplished for us. We attain this perfection, from glory to glory, through our fellowship in His offering and sufferings. 2Co 3:18. Summarising the point, Paul said, 'As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.' 1Co 15:48-49. The image of Christ is not just His nature; it also refers to His spiritual body, the DNA of which comes from Abraham!

The gospel in our mouths

The Holy Spirit has been restoring to us the gospel of sonship. This is the gospel that the Scriptures preached to Abraham, and now must be in our heart and in our mouth. Rom 10:6-10. The Spirit is urging us to proclaim this gospel as a testimony and the expression of our life in every context in which the Father has placed us. We are to proclaim and demonstrate the righteousness of faith that belongs to us as children of Abraham through fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ.

To exemplify and proclaim the gospel, we must be delivered from our sacramental practices and orientations to the word of God. Fundamental to sacramentalism is the belief that we are recipients of blessing through our participation in religious practices that are purported to bestow spiritual grace from God upon us. A life lived in this manner is no different from the foolish endeavours of the Galatians as they sought to obtain the promise of the Spirit through the works of the law. Gal 3:1-3.

We are thankful that the Lord has come among us with eyes like a flame of fire to confront our religious, sacramental practices. This has brought reformation to our communion gatherings, publicly and house to house. However, the Lord is addressing other aspects of sacramentalism, particularly in our families, so that we are able to walk before the Lord 'without spot and blameless'. Although initially confronting, we are rejoicing that the Lord is establishing us in fellowship with Him. This is His love towards us and the confirmation that we are indeed the children of Abraham.

Walking blameless before the Lord

The culture of Christian marriage

Victor Hall

In His letters to the seven churches, Jesus called believers in every generation to hear what the Spirit is saying. Rev 2:7. The Spirit has been revealing to us the things that are about to take place in the earth as we approach the end of this age. Joh 16:13. Foreshadowing these times, the apostle Peter asked us to consider what kind of people we ought to be in holy conduct and godliness. 2Pe 3:10-12. In answer to this question, he exhorted us to be found by Christ 'in peace, *without spot and blameless*'. 2Pe 3:14.

The apostle Paul, similarly, commanded Timothy to eschew the desire for riches, which gives rise to many foolish and harmful lusts, and to instead pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience and gentleness. He urged Timothy to 'keep this commandment without spot, blameless *until* the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ'. 1Ti 6:11-14. Paul himself laboured as a messenger of Christ so that his hearers would 'become

blameless and harmless, children of God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation'. Php 2:14-16. Evidently, blamelessness is a quality of a son of God.

Many Christians maintain a deluded belief in their own capacity to walk in the manner instructed by Peter and Paul. Their failure to acknowledge their inability to fulfil this command reveals that they believe in their self-righteousness. This is great darkness, because they presume that their self-defined works are acceptable to God. Mat 6:23. Mat 7:21. The absence of enduring peace in their lives, particularly in seasons of hardship, is a telling marker of this fallen religious culture.

Other people will be acutely aware of their personal shortcomings. For them, blamelessness will seem like an impossible or, at least, a daunting proposition; perhaps one that is not even worth attempting! In the absence of understanding that comes by the Spirit, they may presumptuously continue in their sin, claiming to be covered by the shedding of Christ's blood. However, this also is not blamelessness.

The first point to note is that blamelessness is *not* a state of acceptability with respect to God's Law, through either our good works or because of the shedding of Christ's blood on our behalf. We note, for example, that Paul testified of having been blameless in relation to the Law. Yet, he likened this point of confidence in his flesh to *refuse*. Php 3:4-6. He counted it as *loss* in order to know Christ, the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, and to be conformed to His death. Php 3:9-10. Paul's testimony revealed that blamelessness is not a state of sinless perfection; it is a culture of life that is realised through fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ.

In summary, to be 'blameless' is to walk in the light of the finished offering of Christ. Through His offering, Christ has already suffered the judgement of each one of us and has accomplished our sinless perfection. The light of this finished work, which shines from the face of Christ, is the light of the knowledge of our sonship in Him. 2Co 4:6. If we walk in this light, we have fellowship with the Lord and with one another, and the blood of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness. 1Jn 1:7. Moreover, we are able to *become* the righteousness of God in Him. 2Co 5:21. This means that we are sons of God who are fulfilling the Father's will, in Christ.

Beholding Christ in this way has a lifechanging effect on the way in which we live and relate with others. We accept that our sufferings are our

fellowship in the sufferings of Christ, because He has already experienced them by the grace of God. Heb 2:9. Acknowledging this reality demonstrates that we have been co-crucified, or cursed, with Christ. Gal 2:20. In the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, our self-righteousness is being removed from us. As we leave our self-righteous perspectives in the sea of God's forgetfulness, we are able to cease from our sin and from the judgements that we make about ourselves, our lives, and others. 1Pe 4:1. These judgements, sourced from the other law within us, are the cause of conflict with our brethren. Rom 7:23. Jas 4:1-4. Because we are being delivered from this fallen principle of life, our contributions to these conflicts progressively cease. We are able, as much as it depends on us, to 'live peaceably with all men'. Rom 12:18.

Having been conformed to Christ's death, we are made alive in the likeness of His resurrection. Php 3:10. Rom 6:5. This is because we are living by Christ's life, which is becoming our life. Gal 2:20. The evidence of this transaction is that we are being changed from glory to glory, into the likeness of Christ's sonship. 2Co 3:18. We are being delivered from the motivation to live for ourselves and, like Christ, are compelled by love to lay down our lives for others. 2Co 5:14-15. These are the works of our sonship which Christ has already perfected for us.

A practical example of this motivation will be our desire to participate with our brethren in the *agape* meal. We recall that Jesus said to His friends, including those who would deny Him and betray Him, 'With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Luk 22:15-16. Likewise, those who are part of Christ's kingdom will desire to eat this meal with Him and with their fellow brethren in His body. That is, they will be motivated to share testimony with one another and to pour out on the sacrifice and service of others. This activity is characteristic of one who is a blameless and harmless son of God. Php 2:14-16.

The very first exhortation to be blameless before the Lord was given to Abraham, the father of all who believe. The Lord said to him, 'I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.' Gen 17:1. As we will consider later in these notes, this was a specific initiative of the Holy Spirit toward Abraham and Sarah. Receiving new names, and baptism through the sign of circumcision, were fundamental to their capacity to obey this direction. Significantly, this marked a fundamental change in

their marriage covenant and culture, which was necessary in bringing forth the child of promise, who was born according to the Spirit. Gal 4:29.

The point for us to note is that our capacity to walk as blameless and harmless children of God until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ involves cultural reformation in our marriages and households. This is an ongoing process that is possible only as we walk by the Spirit in the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings. By this means, we are able to obtain the blessing that the Lord promised to Abraham when He said that all the families of the earth would be blessed in him. Gen 12:3. Gen 22:18.

The father and mother of those who believe

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord directed the sons and daughters of God, saying, 'Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I *called* him alone, and *blessed* him and *increased* him.' Isa 51:2. The lessons learned by Abraham and Sarah, as the Lord met them during their lives, reveal the way in which their children obtain the promises of God contained in the Everlasting Covenant. Abraham's children are those who have received, and live by, the faith of the Son of God. This is the faith that Abraham received when the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield [of faith], your exceedingly great reward.' Gen 15:1.

Isaiah's prophetic statement reveals three key initiatives toward Abraham: He *called* him; He *blessed* him; and He *increased* him. Paul, similarly, identified three responses that are fundamental to a person's participation in the Everlasting Covenant. He introduced these implications of the gospel by reminding the Corinthians of the covenant which God made with Abraham. 'As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people".' 2Co 6:16. Gen 17:7. Paul then wrote, '*Therefore* [1] "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. [2] Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. [3] I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty".' 2Co 6:17-18.

Abraham experienced three distinct seasons of visitation from the Lord. These correspond with the three responses that are necessary for obtaining the promises contained in the Everlasting Covenant. Let us now summarise these initiatives of the Lord towards Abraham, and by implication, towards us.

Meeting the Son

The first initiative towards Abraham was from the Son. This is chronicled in Chapters 12 to 16 of the book of Genesis. Paul referred to the events during this phase of Abraham's life as 'the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had *while still uncircumcised*'. Rom 4:12. The primary focus of this initiative was the *call* for Abraham to leave his country, to depart from his family and from his father's house, to enter a land that the Lord would show him. Gen 12:1. With this call came the promise of blessing. The Lord said to Abraham, 'I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' Gen 12:2-3.

During this phase of his pilgrimage, Abraham was *illuminated* to see the land that God had promised to give to his descendants as an inheritance. This call was instinct with grace from God, enabling Abraham to *overcome* the world as he walked the length and width of the land. Gen 13:14-17. Gen 14:1-17. Also, during this phase, Melchizedek blessed Abraham with a share in His inheritance as possessor of heaven and earth, by giving to Abraham a *participation* in the *agape* meal of Yahweh. Gen 14:18-20. This season of visitation culminated in the word of the Lord coming to Abraham. As the Word, the Son delivered Abraham from his fear of failing to obtain God's promises, and He became Abraham's faith. By this faith, Abraham was enabled to believe that Christ would become his Son in the flesh. Gen 15:1-2. Righteousness was imputed to Abraham because he believed God's promise of sonship. Gen 15:5-6. God established His covenant with Abraham by joining him, in type, to the fellowship of Christ's offering on the cross. Gen 15:9-21.

Meeting the Spirit

The second major initiative of Yahweh towards Abraham and his household was the priority of the Holy Spirit. This is recorded in Chapters 17 to 21 of the book of Genesis. It involved a significant reformation of Abraham and Sarah's marriage covenant, through baptism (signified by circumcision), and by receiving a remnant of the Spirit (signified by new names). The fruit of receiving this ministry of the Spirit was the birth of the promised son, Isaac, whom Paul described as having been born '*according to the Spirit*'. Gen 21:1-7. Gal 4:29.

The focus of this phase of Abraham's journey of faith was receiving blessing through sanctification by the Spirit. Isa 51:2. 2Co 6:17. 2Th 2:13.

They were called to be *blameless* before the Lord. This involved being delivered from the unclean, fallen ways of relating which had resulted in the birth of Ishmael. Paul noted that Ishmael was 'born according to the flesh'. Gal 4:23. Abraham and Sarah each received a new name, indicating that they had received a remnant, or portion, of the Spirit. The Lord gave them this portion of His own name because He desired godly children. Mal 2:15.

Circumcision, which Abraham received as the sign of God's Everlasting Covenant, symbolised a new culture in his house. Consequently, the Lord said of Abraham, 'I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.' Gen 18:19.

Meeting the Father

The third initiative towards Abraham was from the Father. This is documented in Chapter 22 of the book of Genesis. God called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Abraham's faith did not waver at this command. Instead, he believed in the resurrection life of God, testifying, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.' Gen 22:8. Abraham figuratively received Isaac back from the dead when the Angel of the Lord stayed his hand, and a ram was provided for a sacrifice in Isaac's stead. Heb 11:19. Gen 22:13.

Because of Abraham's faith, and Isaac's obedience, God reaffirmed His Everlasting Covenant with Abraham, declaring, 'By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.' Gen 22:16-18. Through this oath, Abraham obtained the promise that he had been patiently waiting for when, having been illuminated regarding the divine sonship of his children, he believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Gen 15:5-6. Heb 6:14-15. Jas 2:21-23.

There are many essential lessons to be learnt from the pilgrimage of Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of all who believe. In these notes, we focus on the recovery of Christian marriages to the order of

headship. As we noted earlier, this was a key implication of the Spirit's initiative towards Abraham and His household.

The initiative of the Spirit

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him, saying, 'I am Almighty God; *walk before Me and be blameless.*' Gen 17:1.

Evidently, the way that Abram and Sarai had previously walked was not blameless. The Spirit was calling them individually, and as a married couple, to something *new*. We noted earlier that the command to be blameless was not an imperative to live a more righteous life. We know that God had already imputed righteousness to Abram when he believed God's word. Gen 15:6. 2Co 4:13. Rather, this was an initiative of the Spirit to deliver Abram and Sarai from their fallen ways of living and relating with one another, and to equip them with grace for their participation in the fulfilment of God's will.

In the same way, the Lord calls every Christian couple to 'walk before Him and be blameless'. This requires us to apply ourselves, by faith, to the cultural reformation that is found on the ground of new creation. Before we begin to consider this process further, let us first be clear about what is *not* specifically involved in this reformation conversation.

This is *not* a conversation concerning the familiar cultures within families. We deal with these cultures by putting them off when they are illuminated to us through the ministry of the word. Sometimes, they may even require exorcism because of the demonic oppression that these familiar ways invite into an individual's life or into a family. Likewise, this conversation is *not* focused on the temperamental differences between spouses in relation to shame or to the impact of aging. We know that as people grow older and their processing capacity slows, their temperaments narrow and polarise. This may result in the escalation of bickering between a couple, which can be addressed through awareness, understanding and patience. The cultural reformation that the Spirit is calling for is also *not* an initiative to deal with a person's genetic predispositions or identity frailties which may impact upon a marriage relationship. These require healing and regeneration through the washing of the water by the word.

What, then, is the initiative of the Spirit in relation to the covenant of marriage? It is the establishment of headship on the ground of new creation. Through restoration to this order of fellowship, the couple receives a remnant of the Spirit, enabling them to cultivate and multiply

the blessing of the divine nature within their household. Unless a Christian couple lays hold of, and cultivates, this unique portion of the divine nature in their household, their children will be 'unclean'. 1Co 7:14. That is, they will be like Ishmael, being born and raised according to the principles of the flesh. Gal 4:23.

Falling from the image

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed fellowship with Christ each day, at the tree of life. Accordingly, their marriage was established on the ground of headship. The Father was the head of Christ, Christ was the head of Adam, and Adam was the head of Eve. 1Co 11:3. While they remained connected in this order of headship, Adam and Eve were able to exercise headship over the whole creation. Because of this, all living things were in harmony and at peace.

Adam and Eve fell from fellowship with Yahweh when they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve desired to be 'like God'. Gen 3:5. She wanted to be the source of her own image and works, and to create a context for the multiplication and nurture of life, in her image. Adam desired to retain the capacities of wisdom and power within himself in order to exercise dominion and rulership over creation. Both Adam and Eve viewed the forbidden fruit as being good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable for wisdom to enable their deluded aspirations. Gen 3:6. The desire that drove them to eat the fruit became the basis for the expression of their identities, affecting how they viewed themselves and related to one another. Paul called this principle by which they now lived, 'another law'. Rom 7:23.

Once Adam and Eve fell from fellowship with the Lord, their eyes were opened and they realised that they were naked. Gen 3:7. Adam confessed that he was 'afraid' because of his nakedness. Gen 3:10. Their nakedness implied that they were now vulnerable to time and chance. They had no covering or defence, other than their own capacity to live through the use of their knowledge of good and evil. Significantly, Adam and Eve's nakedness was their disconnection from the word of their predestination as sons of God.

Ashamed of their fear, Adam and Eve hid themselves and sewed fig leaves together to conceal their nakedness from the Lord and from one another. Gen 3:7. The fig leaves symbolised projections of themselves, fashioned to mask the shame of their failing self-defined image. These projections replaced the kingship and priesthood that belonged to the

expression of their sonship under Christ. They became the basis of relational engagement in every marriage, including the marriage of Abram and Sarai.

Without reformation in response to the initiative of the Spirit, a married couple can meet one another *only* through these relational mechanisms of shame, based in the exercise of the other law, which they have inherited through the fall of mankind. Their marriage will be a sacramental project based on the pursuit of fulfilment or empowerment. Fulfilment in life will be sought, for example, through romance; through religious ministry activity; through the pursuit of wealth; through cultural status. Where the life agendas of the couple are compatible or shared, the marriage may become a fortress to which the word of truth has little access. Where the life agendas of spouses compete, their marriage relationship will likely be pressured and volatile. Neither marital state is blessed of God; however, both result in the dystrophy of a person's identity.

Disenfranchising identity

As individual identities, we can become disenfranchised in our marriage, ministry and secular employment when our 'end' is not in the obedience of Christ. This is because we feel as though our initiatives and perspectives are not being adequately acknowledged or valued. Let us now consider what this may look like for a husband and a wife in the best *religious* marriage covenant.

In this instance, the woman's submission to her husband is her initiative to forgo or to subvert her own life agendas or ministry aspirations in order to facilitate the initiatives and directions of her husband. Although this has the appearance of submission, in reality, she is recrafting her own image and is redefining the conditions of their romance. By this means, she becomes a benefactor to her husband as she endeavours to facilitate his success, which is critical to the viability of her image. By implication, the man now 'proceeds from her'. 1Co 11:8. Describing this fallen, and often religious, response, the Lord said that the woman's desire would be for her husband. Gen 3:16.

The wife will feel demeaned and disenfranchised when her initiatives to facilitate the work of her husband - including her 'good' ideas and activities - are not accepted or valued. She feels this way because her initiatives are driven by identity verification. When her initiatives are not appreciated or her husband responds with morose indifference, she feels

as though her identity is not valued. The dystrophy of her identity demonstrates that the end of her endeavour is not in Christ as an extension of His obedience. Rather, its end is in her knowledge of good and evil in the marriage.

A man who endeavours to rule in his house, demanding obedience in the name of headship, is *not* operating as an extension of the headship that is found in Christ. The Lord described this fallen marriage principle as the man 'ruling over his wife'. Gen 3:16. Identity verification by this kind of relational engagement is counter-productive for the man and for the marriage relationship. It is evident that his end is not in the obedience of Christ, because his endeavours do not produce the good fruit of fellowship in his house. Instead, they produce reaction and conflict, which are the fruits of thorns and thistles in himself and in other members of his household. Gen 3:18. This causes him spiritual, and even physical, fatigue, and to withdraw from relationship.

A new name and baptism

A person's identity can only be verified, or truly expressed, according to the name that the Father predestined for them as His son in Christ. This is fundamental to the reformation of every marriage, and requires our recovery to the ground of headship. As each person is delivered from their deluded endeavours to verify their own identity, and receives the grace of God inherent in the word of their name, they are free to express their identity in Spirit and in truth. Abram and Sarai received this grace through the initiative of the Spirit.

Abram received a new name

Following the command to 'walk before Him and be blameless', the Lord said to Abram, 'Behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for *I have made you* a father of many nations.' Gen 17:5. The Lord made covenant with Abram, changing his name to Abraham. He did this by placing an element of His own name (YHWH) within Abram's natural name, indicating that Abraham had received a portion of the capacity that belongs to the name of Yahweh. Abraham's new name was not merely an appellation; it was his *share* in the inheritance that belongs to Christ. Heb 1:4. Rom 8:17.

Circumcision

Abraham then received circumcision in his flesh as a sign of God's Everlasting Covenant. Gen 17:7. Gen 17:10-11. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul explained that true circumcision is baptism into Christ. It is a believer's fellowship in the death and resurrection of Christ, through which they are able to put off the sins of the flesh and to be raised with Christ to walk anew by His life. Col 2:11-15. Rom 6:3-4.

Figuratively, Abraham had already been baptised. Paul explained that circumcision was a *seal* of the righteousness of faith that Abraham had previously demonstrated while *uncircumcised*. Rom 4:11. Prior to Abraham's circumcision, the highpoint of walking in his baptism was participation in Christ's offering, which was symbolised by the sacrifice of a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. By this means, God established His covenant with Abraham. Gen 15:9-18. However, the command to walk blameless before the Lord represented a further implication of baptism for Abraham.

As we just noted, circumcision is a *seal* of the righteousness of faith. It is a mark of having been built on Christ, the solid foundation of God, through recovery to the order of headship. Notably, Paul explained that the seal on this foundation is, ' "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity" .' 2Ti 2:19. We can only know the Lord by turning to Him in response to His word and meeting Him face to face. As we do this and accept our participation in the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings, we are delivered from our iniquitous ways of living and relating with one another, which we have inherited through the fall of mankind. Importantly, we are able to receive the word and grace of our name from the Father. 2Co 3:16,18. 2Co 4:6. This describes our recovery to the order of headship. The Holy Spirit is the *seal of promise* who enables our participation in this process which is fundamental to being blameless before the Lord. Eph 1:13-14.

Through the circumcision of Christ, we are delivered from our fallen relational customs, which were established through disobedience, and we are joined to the obedience of Christ. The faith of the Son of God was demonstrated when He gave Himself for us in obedience to the command of the Father. Gal 2:20. Joh 10:17-18. He did not consider equality with the Father a thing to be grasped but, rather, He made Himself of no reputation, humbling Himself, and becoming *obedient* to the point of

death, even death on the cross. Php 2:5-8. In this way, His 'end' was in the hand of the Father. Because of this, the Father highly exalted Him and gave Him the name which is above every name. Php 2:9.

Most significantly, the Spirit enables *our end* to be in the obedience of Christ as He pours the love of God into our heart. Rom 5:5. Jesus said, 'As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.' Joh 15:9. This is where our name is found! It is written and given to us on a white stone. As Jesus Himself promised, 'To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no-one knows except him who receives it.' Rev 2:17. This name, which we can know, is the definition and glory of our identity in Christ. We obtain this name in the same way that Christ obtained His name - through the obedience of faith in the fellowship of Christ's offering. The alternative is to take initiatives where the endpoint of these initiatives is in our own knowledge of good and evil.

Not only did Abraham receive circumcision in his own flesh, but he was directed to also circumcise all the males in his household. Gen 17:10-13. In other words, the culture of Abraham's whole household was to reflect the implications of circumcision, or fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ. There was to be a change in the way that they lived and related with one another. Abraham was to instruct his household in this way.

Sarai received a new name

The Lord then gave Sarai a new name. Notably, she did not receive her name directly from the Lord but, rather, through the word of the Lord to Abraham. In this way, the Lord gave Abraham the mandate of recognising his wife's predestination in relation to their house. The Lord said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.' Gen 17:15-16. Through this word, the Lord instructed Abraham to give Sarai the same portion of the name of Yahweh that he had already received so that her new name would be Sarah. Together, they received a remnant of the Spirit, which is necessary to bring forth godly seed according to the word of God. Mal 2:15.

The meaning of the name 'Sarai' is not readily apparent in the Scriptures; nor is the etymology of her name obvious. Several scholars have

proposed that the Hebrew word for 'Sarai' is derived from another Hebrew word meaning 'to fight'. With this in view, they have proposed that 'Sarai' means 'she that strives'. This would certainly accord with her nature prior to the cultural change in Abraham's household following his circumcision. Sarah endeavoured to establish her home on the principles of the world or her own religion. She did this when she gave her maid, Hagar, to Abraham so that she could conceive a child through a surrogate. In short, she endeavoured to fulfil the word to Abraham regarding a multitude of sons, through her own good ideas and undertakings. Evidently, her end was not in Christ; it was in herself. It was in her knowledge of good and evil.

Interestingly, other commentators have suggested that the name 'Sarai' means '*my* princess', whereas 'Sarah' simply means 'princess'. Again, this would reflect the change in the marriage relationship of Abraham and Sarah. Before they received their new names, Sarai was Abram's princess within the romance of their marriage covenant. He subverted the headship of Christ in his life by *servicing* Sarai's agenda when he received her direction and strategy for obtaining the blessing of God.

By naming Sarah according to the word that he had received from the Lord, Abraham *redefined* the basis of their marriage relationship. She was no longer *his* princess. Abraham's face was now turned to the Lord as he was being delivered, through circumcision, from his former fleshly relational propensities. Sarah received her share in the inheritance that belonged to the name of Lord through Abraham. In the authority of her own name, she was then free to proceed *from* Abraham to become the mother of nations. This was her expression as a princess, or woman of high rank within the order of headship, according to her name in Christ. King Solomon described the demeanour of a woman who has received this grace, writing, 'Who is she who looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?' Son 6:10. Through the redefinition of their marriage covenant, Abraham and Sarah were now heirs together of the grace of life! 1Pe 3:7.

Marriage in God's covenant

When a Christian man and woman marry, the Lord meets them with His word to make them one by giving to them a remnant, or portion, of His Spirit. Mal 2:15. This portion of the Lord's Spirit is a dimension of the divine nature that uniquely belongs to them, and is the reason why the two can be made one. Deu 6:4. The Lord does this through the process

that the Holy Spirit revealed to Abraham. We have previously described this process as the 'bonding' phase of courtship. Once married, a couple are to continue to cultivate and multiply this grace as a culture in their house, by walking blameless before the Lord.

Of course, every person who is born of God receives the divine nature. 2Pe 1:3-4. Furthermore, through the Holy Spirit, the sons of God are made one with the Lord and with the other members of the body of Christ. 1Co 6:17. Eph 4:4. However, something *more* of the divine nature, which is unique to the covenant of marriage, established by God, is given to a believing couple so that they can be 'heirs *together* of the grace of life'. 1Pe 3:7.

Their oneness as a married couple is different from the oneness of the members of the body of Christ. God gives this unique portion of His Spirit to a Christian couple because He seeks godly seed. Mal 2:15. These are children who are born and raised as spiritual, or holy, sons of God. 1Co 7:14. This was signified in the lives of Abraham and Sarah when their names were changed by receiving a 'remnant', or portion, of Yahweh's own name. The Lord did this for them so that they could bring forth Isaac according to the Spirit.

Having been made one, the woman then *proceeds from the man*. This principle was foreshadowed when Eve was formed from the rib of Adam. Gen 2:21-23. Moses explained that this oneness is the reason why 'a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'. Gen 2:24. The apostle Paul further elaborated, saying, 'Man is not from woman, *but woman from man*. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.' 1Co 11:8-10.

The married woman proceeds from her husband with the divine nature, and becomes the mother of a family. She then proceeds to be a grandmother and, in this way, she becomes the mother of 'a multitude', like Sarah. Gen 17:16. This is a *culture* of motherhood, rather than being simply the natural capacity to bear children. Once a believing wife receives the divine nature, she is able to demonstrate the culture of faith that Sarah demonstrated in her marriage to Abraham. Her faith works by this dimension of the divine nature, which is love. Rom 5:5.

This culture of faith belongs to a Christian woman who is 'a daughter of Sarah'. Describing a daughter of Sarah, the apostle Peter wrote, 'Do not

let your adornment be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, *as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.* 1Pe 3:3-6.

In this passage, we note Peter's reference to the divine nature with which a married woman is to *adorn* herself. It is the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. We know that these are the qualities of the divine nature because they are 'incorruptible' and 'very precious'. 1Pe 1:4. 1Co 3:12-13. The holy women of faith adorned themselves in this way *through* their submission to their husbands.

A Christian wife's submission to her husband demonstrates the faith of the Son of God, which she receives by hearing the word of God. Gal 2:20. Rom 10:17. The faith of the Son of God, which belongs to a godly woman, becomes the same faith in her children as she cultivates its expression in her house. This heritage of faith was exemplified in the life of Timothy. Paul said to him, 'I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.' 2Ti 1:5. Faith was cultivated by Lois in her daughter Eunice, and then by Eunice in her son, Timothy. It became his faith, which was the expression of his life as a son of God.

Recovery to the image

In this season, the Lord is calling *every* Christian husband and wife to walk before Him and be blameless. Fundamental to our response to this call is a commitment to cultural reformation in our marriages. As we do this, we are able to appropriate and cultivate the remnant of the Spirit that the Lord uniquely apportions to us as a Christian couple, or spouse, in Christ. Through the expression of this grace in our households, our children are able to be brought forth as spiritual sons of God.

As it was for Abraham and Sarah, the relational culture within a house, particularly as it is expressed by the children, will reveal the culture of a marriage. We note that before Abraham and Sarah received grace from the Lord, and applied themselves to the process through which they were able to be blameless before Him, the fruit of their fallen marriage culture was Ishmael. He was born according to the flesh. The fruit of the flesh

within a family will be evidenced by conflict, disobedience, scorn and derision among those within the household. This is not a house of peace.

Importantly, a married couple do not possess a remnant of the Spirit simply because they are Christians. Neither do they obtain this unique portion of the divine nature through the content of their marriage vows. Presuming to possess the blessing of God on these grounds is sacramental. A sacrament is a Christian rite that is said to endow a participant with divine grace. It is an outward, visible sign or activity that supposedly conveys, or bestows, an inward spiritual grace from God. Such an approach to Christian marriage may rob the couple of the true blessing that God desires for every family. It can become the basis of a religious, romantic culture that aspires to be spiritual, but is, in reality, carnal.

To obtain the blessing of the divine nature, which is necessary for bringing forth children who are born according to the Spirit, a couple must respond in repentance and faith to the word of the Lord that calls them to walk before Him and be blameless. This is the word of the cross, ministered by the Holy Spirit, which first addresses each *individual*. 1Pe 1:11-12. The word calls them to forsake the ways of living and relating which are sourced from the principles of the flesh and mark their rejection of Christ's headship.

We recall that following the fall of mankind, the Lord came looking for Adam who, with his wife, hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God, among the trees of the garden. The Lord called to Adam, saying, 'Where are you?' Gen 3:8-9. Likewise, Christ comes looking for each of us, seeking our restoration to fellowship with Him and with one another, in Him. This fellowship is the context of life through which a married Christian couple are able to meet, and to participate in the fulfilment of God's covenant will for their lives individually, and as a couple.

A husband or a wife can only be recovered to a marriage covenant that is blessed with a remnant of the Spirit, if they *forsake every other covenant* that they have made. For some couples, this may be the sacramental or romantic covenant that they made when they were first married. For others, it will be the secret covenants that they have made through the lusts of the flesh. We note, for example, that Jesus said, 'Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Mat 5:28. It may be the latent covenants of former relationships that have not been disclosed or properly ended.

According to the Scriptures, a covenant can only be annulled through a death. Rom 7:1-3. The word of the cross comes to join us to the death of Christ so that we are able to renounce and forsake all other covenants. Unless a person is joined to this process, which involves the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and being conformed to His death, the restoration of their marriage on the ground of headship will be impossible.

The effect of receiving the word of the cross is that a hearer, under the influence of grace and supplication, is caused to look upon Christ. They see the effect of their fallen relational practices that are at odds with God's order of headship. The head of a family and his wife must mourn *alone*. Zec 12:12-14. A husband cannot mourn on behalf of his wife; nor can a wife mourn on behalf of her husband. Each is given the opportunity to respond to the word of the cross and to mourn for their own rejection of Christ's headship.

The Holy Spirit helps a repentant hearer by turning their mourning to a travail in the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings. Rom 8:26. This is a *personal* connection, by faith, to the process through which they can be delivered from their fleshly relational practices. Unencumbered by these fallen ways of relating, a husband and wife are able to meet one another on the ground of headship, according to their name in Christ. That is, they can meet truthfully, having despised the shame of pursuing their own agendas for life, and having been made one Spirit in the Lord. Their ongoing *conversation* with one another on this ground of truth demonstrates their faith for reformation in their marriage and family.

It is important to note that grace can be multiplied within a family or household through the obedience of faith of one spouse. While the Lord is calling for the cultural reformation of both a husband and a wife in a Christian household, He honours the faith obedience of each person. This is why Paul said, 'For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.' 1Co 7:14.

On this point, it is helpful to remember that the conversation of faith that is foundational to the recovery of marriages can equally be understood as the reformed *conduct* of a hearer. Even if there is no opportunity to converse with a spouse on the points of reformation that the Spirit is illuminating, the transformed conduct of one person can minister grace within the household. The apostle Peter made this point when he wrote, 'Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the *conduct*

of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear'. 1Pe 3:1-2.

A husband's response

The foundation of marital reformation for a husband is to turn his face to Christ and receive the light of the word that shines from Christ's face through the ministry of His messengers. This requires humility as the man accepts that his natural strength and capacity to know and fulfil God's will as an individual, as a husband, and as a father, is a fallacy. He is only able to fulfil God's will by the grace that God gives to the humble in the fellowship of Christ's offering. Jas 4:6. Heb 4:16.

Looking into the face of Christ will also require a husband to cease from looking into his wife's face to know himself through her reflections, observations, affirmations, adjustments and directions. The tendency for a man to know himself in this manner reveals that he *doubts* the word of Christ as the source of definition and direction for his life and family. His wife has become the face of God to him. Other men will react in anger against the expectations of their wives. They will either withdraw from relationship with their wife or will endeavour to exert dominion over her. Gen 3:16. This anger, or *wrath*, reveals that they are also bereft of grace because of their disconnection from Christ.

It is notable that Adam hid himself from the face of the Lord among the trees of the garden. Gen 3:8. Furthermore, both he and his wife clothed themselves to hide the shame of their nakedness from each other. Gen 3:7. The trees of the garden were the context of Adam's work, or employment. Gen 2:15. For many men, their application to their work can become a means of avoiding the light of fellowship with their brethren in the Lord, and of eschewing the conversation with their wives that is necessary for cultural change in their marriage.

Although they may appear diligent in their secular employment, they are in fact lazy in relation to the ground of their marriage and family. This is the only context in which they can obtain the blessing of Abraham. Act 3:25. King Solomon described a man who is lazy in this manner as 'devoid of understanding'. Pro 24:30. As a consequence of a man's laziness, the walls protecting the ground of his household are broken down. It becomes overgrown with thorns and covered with nettles. Pro 24:31. Evidently, it is bereft of eternal blessing, even though they may be successful in the context of their temporal employment.

A man who looks into the face of Christ is being restored to the headship of Christ. He is able to receive the word of grace that proceeds from Christ, his head. The indication that he is receiving this word is his initiative to speak, by the Spirit, in the fellowship of the Father and the Son. 1Jn 1:1-3. The first context for this speech is *prayer*. We note, in this regard, the exhortation of the apostle Paul who said, 'I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.' 1Ti 2:8. Lifting up holy hands demonstrates that a man is being sanctified to his name within his house as he submits to the lordship of Christ. His angry reactions to the desires and provocations of his wife cease; he is without *wrath*. Having been delivered from *doubting*, the man no longer seeks direction from his wife for his life and family, because he receives and believes the word that comes from Christ.

A husband who is being established in the order of headship will give himself to speak by faith with his wife. He does this wholeheartedly because of his commitment to Christ. He knows that through his obedience to the Lord, he is an heir of the divine nature that God has promised to every family in Christ. Col 3:23-24. The apostle Peter exhorted every believing husband to this conversation, writing, 'Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honour to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.' 1Pe 3:7.

To 'dwell with understanding' means that a husband gives himself to meet and relate with his wife *by offering*. It does not mean that he compensates for any of her real or perceived relational idiosyncrasies; nor does he endeavour to overpower her by demanding her compliance to his directions. Rather, he initiates a discussion with his wife in the meekness and gentleness of Christ. 2Co 10:1. He speaks from the basis of his fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ, which will include the sufferings associated with the relational disharmony that will, at times, arise in their marriage and family. The husband understands that the pain inherent in these conflicts is where grace for healing and relational recovery is found.

Irrespective of his wife's response to this initiative, the man maintains his focus on the Lord, and on what He is saying to him and his family. Being constrained to the obedience of Christ in this way, he forsakes arguing with his wife from the basis of his own fleshly perspective. 2Co 10:5. Furthermore, he is not drawn to respond to the compelling expression of

her knowledge of good and evil on matters. Instead, he frees her to her own accountability to respond to the word and direction of the Lord.

A Christian man honours his wife as the weaker vessel by acknowledging that, through her participation in offering, she is the vessel of multiplication. Her weakness is not some physical, or natural, inferiority that he accommodates. The weakness of a godly wife is her capacity to multiply life in the family through her fellowship in Christ's offering. As she relinquishes her claim to equality in relation to the direction of the household, she is established in the obedience of Christ. Php 2:5-8. She is strengthened by grace in the weakness of her fellowship in His offering. By this grace, which is unique to her name as a wife and mother, she is able to multiply the life and culture of God in the house. She is able to do this 'without a word', which means without the imposition of her own knowledge of good and evil. 1Pe 3:1.

Honouring his wife as the weaker vessel is the means by which a man 'names' his wife in relation to the word of God to himself and to his household. Naming her does not mean that he defines the works of her sonship for her. Rather, it means that he lays down his life for her in the same way that Christ laid down His life for the church. Eph 5:25. As a man applies himself to the word that he is hearing, and continues in the fellowship of Christ's offering, he receives grace, or a portion of the divine nature, for his unique expression as a husband and a father in his house. This is how a Christian man nourishes and cherishes his sonship. As one who loves his wife in the same way that Christ loved the church, he invites her to devotionally consider the word *with him*. Through this conversation, her sonship is likewise being nourished and cherished. Eph 5:28-29. She is able to adorn herself with the remnant of the Spirit that the Lord is giving to them as a couple.

A wife's response

The grief that a woman experiences when her initiatives within a family are treated with indifference by her husband indicates that her end is still in herself. By this, we mean that who she is, and how she expresses herself, are based upon her own knowledge of good and evil. There is no doubt that this is a point of real pain and distress for her. It is part of the sufferings experienced by the whole world, under the curse of sin.

Gen 3:16. Christ has already experienced these sufferings, having tasted death for every person. Heb 2:9. As Jesus suffered this pain, our sin was being taken away and destroyed, and the resurrection life that was in His blood was being multiplied and given to be our life.

At the point of pain, as a wife acknowledges that she is crucified with Christ, she is able to recognise, and to put off, the desire to cultivate life in her own image. Her confession is, 'It is no longer I who live.' Gal 2:20. The works of her self-righteousness are no longer the basis for the verification of her identity. Having been conformed to Christ's death, her end is no longer in herself. She now lives by Christ's life, and her end is in His obedience. Gal 2:20. Php 2:8.

Instead of striving for equality through the exertion of her natural strength and capacity, she humbles herself in the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings. She is able to receive the word and direction of the Lord in submission to her husband, even when the circumstances in her family remain less than ideal. This is the context of weakness in which she is able to obtain grace and adorn herself with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. 1Pe 3:4. This is the unique portion of the divine nature that belongs to her name as a wife and mother in the house. Her faith, which she receives by hearing the word, is enabled by this capacity of love which is poured into her heart by the Holy Spirit. Rom 5:5. Her motivation is no longer to reveal herself and her own will but, rather, to reveal her husband and Christ in the context of the home.

The Lord's strength is made perfect in her as she offers in this manner. She is able to stand up in the freedom and authority of her name, and to multiply the life that has come to her from the headship of Christ through her submission to her husband. The psalmist described such a woman as 'a fruitful vine in the very heart of her house'. Psa 128:3. Her motivation, as one who abides in Christ, is to reveal her husband and to multiply the culture of faith in her children, by being poured out on the sacrifice and service of their faith. Php 2:17. This is what it means to be 'a daughter of Sarah'. 1Pe 3:6.

An ongoing conversation

The apostle Paul directed husbands to love their wives in the same way that Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. Christ gave Himself for the church so that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word. He did this in order to present her to Himself as a holy bride without spot or blemish. Eph 5:25-27. Paul said that, because Christ loved in this manner, 'husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself'. Eph 5:28.

THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM IN FAMILIES

The washing of the water by the word is essential in a Christian marriage relationship so that a husband and wife may be presented to Christ as chaste and pure as part of the church. It involves an ongoing conversation, or discussion, based in the word that proclaims the culture of God's covenant. This is the word that reveals the fallen, fleshly mechanisms that were fathered within mankind by Satan when the other law became part of our nature, and we were separated from the life of God.

Christian couples who are committed to the culture of marriage intended by God will give attention to identifying and putting off the mechanisms of the Fall in their lives and relationship, and will pursue the restoration of the true culture of marriage through dialogue and devotional commitment to His word. Commitment to this cleansing and sanctifying activity is necessary in cultivating the divine nature in their children. The testimony of a Christian father or mother who has remained faithful to this process will be, 'Here am I and the children who the Lord has given me!' Isa 8:18.

Chastening in a covenant house

Andrew Hay

Parenting and the divine nature

On the basis of Abraham's faith and obedience on Mount Moriah, the blessing of God was confirmed to him, his household, and his descendants.

'By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son - blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.' Gen 22:16-18.

In the book of Acts, Peter explained that Yahweh's blessing to the nations is specifically to and through Christian families. The apostle Paul called this promise 'the blessing of Abraham', and explained that it is 'the promise of the Spirit', which belongs to every family that is in Christ, the Seed of Abraham. Gal 3:14,16. A person who has received the promise of

the Spirit has been born of His Spirit and is, therefore, truly a son of God and a possessor of His divine nature. Joh 3:5-6.

In highlighting the reality that every family in Christ would receive this blessing, Paul taught, 'for the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy (or, *of God*)'. 1Co 7:14. The implication of Paul's teaching is that a child who is born into the household of at least one believing parent is a recipient of the promise of the Spirit. On account of the faith of one or both of their parents, the child is born of God and is part of the body of Christ, just moments after they are conceived. At birth, they are already a son of God and are joined to the fellowship of Christ.

This precious truth has many implications for families. Christian parents have been given the grace to have children and to nurture the divine nature of God within their children. As heirs together of the grace of life, it is the work of godly fathers and mothers to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Eph 6:4.

Scripture explains that Abraham, through his fellowship with Yahweh, received understanding and capacity to establish his household in the ways of the Lord. We know this because Yahweh said of Abraham, 'I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.' Gen 18:19.

Carnal parenting modes

There are many Christian parents who do not understand this vital truth. Rather than seeking wisdom and grace from God to nurture and train the divine nature in their children, they simply raise their sons and daughters as seems best to them, in the hope that, one day, their child will hear the message of the gospel and be born again through their own personal response of faith.

The book of Hebrews describes this mode of parenting as *fleshly*. 'Besides this, we have had *earthly fathers* who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? *For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them*, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.' Heb 12:9-10.

The point that the writer made is that it is a carnal action to raise covenant children in the mode that seems best to us. Christian parents must register that the grace and capacity to nurture and admonish their children in the fear of the Lord is not inherently in them because they believe - it must be sought.

'Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.' Pro 2:3-5.

Another common error occurs when Christian parents treat sound doctrine teaching and present truth word as mere reference points to help inform their good parenting decisions. Fathers and mothers must guard against thinking that they can synthesise worldly parenting ideas, historical family practices and various biblical principles to achieve an outcome that *works for their family*. Joshua, in addressing this cultural mode in the nation of Israel, noted that such an adulterated approach would become 'a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes'. Jos 23:12-13. Rather, Christian parents engage the Lord Himself in the training of covenant children, through a properly sanctified approach in their houses. They do not simply hope to get it 'right'; rather, they receive, through His word, the faith of God to establish their family's culture in Christ.

Circumcision is not chastening

It is also important to understand that chastening the new creation, and circumcising the flesh, are two very different matters. When we come to Christ and join the fellowship of His offering and sufferings through baptism, the judgement that we deserve on account of our sin is commuted to a process of chastening. However, chastening is not how the flesh is circumcised. That which is cursed with Christ cannot be nurtured or trained to a better response; it must be cut off. Consider the common example of a child tantruming uncontrollably in a shopping centre. They may be tired and hungry and the outing may be taking longer than anticipated. In spite of these mitigating factors, the tantruming attitude must be circumcised. Redirecting, negotiating or excusing simply deflects the disrespect and defiance, to emerge in a different guise at a later date. In this we also recognise that circumcision is not primarily concerned with managing naughty behaviour. Rather, it is a process by which our heart is transformed to love the Lord. 'And the

Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live.' Deu 30:6.

Developmental stages of nurture and training

While the Scriptures identify various stages of cognitive and social development in children, it is essential that parents understand that all of the principles of chastening should be in place by around six years of age. Through nurture and training, Christian parents actually establish key principles of understanding and obedience that become foundations for the whole of life. What is missed in the chastening of children simply manifests itself in poor adult behaviour. It is an unfortunate reality that many who have not been properly chastened will have to learn from God as an adult, what they should have learned from their parents during childhood. The words of Solomon confirm this truth. 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.' Pro 22:6.

It is also critical to understand that the key markers of chastening are built on one another. For example, a child must learn to respect external constraint in order to be able to engage with the 'yes' and 'no' of the word of their parents. In turn, these foundations will enable them to learn how to receive correction and appropriate physical chastening. This means that it is impossible to bypass a developmental stage without stalling at that point.

Finally, it is not the intention of this paper to be a Christian child-rearing manual. Rather, it is offered as a word of present truth to equip and strengthen believing parents as they prayerfully establish a sanctified culture of obedience and faith, in their homes.

Conception and gestation

Children born in a covenant family are a heritage from the Lord. Psa 12:3. They are named by God and fashioned in the womb according to His predetermination. David wrote, 'For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb'. Psa 139:13.

As such, while it is a joyful exercise for parents to consider a name for their baby, the truth is that the child is already named. In fact, the Scriptures record various instances where God intervened sovereignly to ensure that a child received the name that He had given to them.

'So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." But they said to her, "There is no-one among your relatives who is called by this name." So they made signs to his father -what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marvelled.' Luk 1:59-63.

In spite of this truth, an enormous amount of anxious and expensive parental nurturing and training (both Christian and secular) is based on the parents' hopes and expectations for their children, quite apart from whom the Lord has named them to be. The opportunities that we afford our children in this world cannot make them more or other than what the Lord has named for them. In fact, where parents do not resolve this truth, they will miss the mark in relation to raising their children according to the Lord's naming of them, giving rise to frustration and confusion. Like the heavenly Father, Christian parents are ministers of the Spirit who understand that each child is born with different abilities, capacities, appearances, dispositions and emotional characteristics. They must guard against a fleshly mode that balances everything and everyone and rather, nurture their children according to God's plan for their lives. One obvious application is that parents themselves need to continue to have their carnal approaches dealt with so that they are being renewed day by day in the Spirit.

Amazingly, twelve weeks from conception, all of an unborn child's body parts are formed. This means that they are participants in the fellowship life and devotion of the Christian home, while in the womb. They have the Spirit and are possessors of the divine nature. Their awareness, personality and mood are also seen as they interact from within the womb.

'And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.' Luk 1:41.

As we consider the Lord's engagement with children in the mother's womb, the question of miscarriages and congenital issues merits some consideration. First, we note that the effect of sin and corruption in our world means that nearly every person is impacted by minor physical or mental abnormalities. Approximately 1.7% of the Australian population, however, are born with major health concerns that have significant

repercussions. In this regard, it is helpful to recall the scriptural example of the man born blind.

‘Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him”.’ Joh 9:1-3.

This man’s blindness was not a result of his or his parents’ sin. The point that Jesus made to His disciples was that the man’s defect would not limit his capacity to bring glory to God. In other words, he was no different from any other person. Our unique identity, regardless of impairment, is the context where the works of God are to be revealed. In this man’s case, it would begin with a miraculous healing and conversion and would continue throughout the course of his life as a disciple of Christ. So, for those who understand that the Lord overshadows all of our ways, even the grief of a late-term miscarriage or still birth can result in a most precious time in the comfort, hope and love of God, knowing that these little ones have actually run their race and entered into the joy of their Lord.

However, the Scriptures also speak of visiting the sins of the fathers upon their children. Exo 20:5-6. Exo 34:6-7. Num 14:18. In the book of Malachi, this judgement was pronounced on ministry families that were presuming to live and shepherd the Lord’s people in an unsanctified and disobedient manner.

‘If you will not hear, and if you will not take it to heart, to give glory to My name,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, because you do not take it to heart. Behold, I will *corrupt* [lit] your descendants and spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your solemn feasts; and one will take you away with it.’ Mal 2:2-3.

This is confronting. We would like to think that all congenital birth defects are ‘nobody’s fault’. If we are Christians, however, we believe that everything we have is from the hand of God, whether blessing or cursing. God is not a benevolent benefactor who gives us what we want. He is a God who is jealous over His people, for ‘He seeks a godly seed’. Mal 2:15. Of course, through Christ this curse can be turned to blessing through the reformation of our family cultures and covenants. Even so, God does not deliver us from our accountability or from the fruit of our works.

Is this unfair to these children? It is certainly devastating to think that it could be a parent's fault that a son or daughter might go through life disadvantaged because of their parents' sin. However, we should also remember that God has called every covenant son to their predestination, with a walk that is specifically tailored for them. Like any son of God, those born with a congenital birth defect can know the grace of life and can fulfil their destiny as a son, quite apart from the sins of their fathers.

Newborn - infant

According to developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, an infant will form trust only if the parent is responsive and consistent in meeting the child's basic needs. His developmental theory, upon which every Western education, hospital and aged-care system is founded, suggests that a newborn's need for care and food must be met with *comforting regularity*. He asserts that through this positive experience, an infant will form trusting relationships with parents and caregivers and learn to trust themselves in other relational contexts throughout life.

This child-centred parenting approach has spawned a number of common child-raising practices. Most modern literature, for example, encourages parents to respond immediately when a baby cries. Advocates of this approach argue that it is developmentally *impossible to spoil a baby*. It is also recommended that mothers feed their babies 'on demand' and sleep next to or with their infant children. For their part, fathers should give diligent attention to developing attachment and trust through their involvement in all aspects of nurturing the baby. While the motivation to develop trust and security is central to these practices, every Christian parent should recognise that there is a vast difference between fleshly wisdom and spiritual wisdom in relation to fostering a culture of trust.

The Scriptures teach, for example, that the training of children begins in infancy. Pro 22:6. The apostle Paul wrote that fathers *provoke* their children to *wrath* if they do not raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Eph 6.4. Children are 'provoked to wrath' when our families function by the culture of the other law *in our members*, rather than by the Law of God. The Scriptures identify this mode as 'drawing disciples after themselves'. Act 20:30. In such an environment, discipline and nurture involve following a set of anxiety-driven *good principles* rather than obeying the word of present truth and sound doctrine that is proclaimed in the fellowship of Christ.

Firstly then, it is obvious that a newborn child does not know what it wants. They have been born into a loving household, but they do not yet understand that they are not 'in charge', so they will panic. The child needs their parents to secure them. In this, they are being taught through the constraint of regulation. This is the first foundation for their participation in the life of the family.

For example, we remember that the Scriptures note that immediately after His birth, Jesus was wrapped in a swaddling cloth. Luk 2:7. This is a cloth that is used to wrap an infant securely. This practice is often discouraged in modern literature, yet we know that by wrapping a baby securely before putting them to bed, a parent is securing the infant in what is needful and is teaching them how to respond.

Parents also need to consider their management of their child's feeding and sleep during infancy. Unless there are feeding issues or growth concerns, parents can teach their children how to drink enough milk for food and then to settle to sleep. In this, parents are training their children to learn a program that includes times and routines (e.g. the two o'clock feed). They are learning to trust their parents as the reference point for their life.

Toddlers

Around eighteen months of age, infants begin to demonstrate a strong desire for independence and for control over themselves and the world around them. They want to decide what they will wear, what they will eat and what toys they will play with. Psychologists endorse this growing independence and recommend that parents engage children by applauding their choices while redirecting any potentially harmful preferences (e.g. wanting to play with a knife).

Children also begin to enjoy engaging with people. They delight in reading stories and singing, and have a rapidly growing vocabulary. At this age, toddlers also begin to experience strong emotions such as frustration, guilt, embarrassment, possessiveness and excitement.

Christian parents understand that this is a season for their children to begin to learn the meaning of 'No'. Furthermore, they need to understand that 'No' does not need a reason. It is 'No' because mum or dad say it. For example, children may resist going to sleep when mum says that it is time for their nap. A wise parent will hold them firmly until they stop resisting, understanding that this is not a matter for punishment. Rather,

in such interactions, the child is learning that their emerging will is subject to and overseen by, their parents. In this, the child is not just learning 'Yes' and 'No'. Rather, they are engaging with the first lesson of the cross. The Scriptures teach that all the promises of God in relation to who He has named us to be are 'Yes and Amen'. 2Co 1:20. The implication is clear: 'Yes' is 'Yes' and 'No' is 'No' because God said it is so. Importantly, sons of God also learn that God's 'No' actually precedes His 'Yes'. In other words, if children do not learn to hear 'No', they will be unable to hear His 'Yes and Amen'.

We might also think of learning 'Yes' and 'No' in relation to Jesus' comments about a slave 'not knowing' what his master is doing. Joh 15:15. Regardless of 'not knowing', a slave is called to obey his master. The key point in relation to Christian parenting is that understanding does not come first - obedience comes first, and afterwards comes understanding. In this regard, we recall that Jesus 'learned obedience' as a slave of righteousness. Children who are raised in a covenant house should not need a long explanation about the positive benefits of their obedience. Neither should they be allowed to react angrily when they hear 'No', remembering that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they could not *bear to hear His word*. Joh 8:43.

So it is that this learning of 'No' and 'Yes' becomes a foundation of chastening for adult life as well as being the context in which the young child learns practical life skills. For example, in the case of submitting to *nap time*, the infant learns to settle quietly before falling to sleep.

Initiating a code for behavioural growth - 3 to 6 years of age

The capacity for long-term memory in a child leads to the development of moral agency. That is, they have the ability to discern right from wrong and to be held accountable for their own actions. American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg famously identified six stages of moral development that he arranged sequentially in successive tiers of complexity. In Kohlberg's ideal scenario, an individual would mature through these stages to become a positive moral agent by upholding and contributing to the common morality of society. This principle is identified in the Bible as 'every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes'. Deu 12:8. This is also called 'the way of a fool'. Pro 12:15. It is the way of the fool because it presumes that an individual can identify, develop and function by their own taxonomy of 'goodness'. As Solomon noted, 'A child left to himself brings shame to his mother'. Pro 29:15. So it is that children will only

mature emotionally and spiritually as they are properly joined to their parents in a program of chastening.

Of course, child psychologists also believe that fathers and mothers have a vital part to play in their children's moral development. They suggest that parents should promote *moral understanding* by providing 'domain appropriate and developmentally sensitive reasoning and explanations about the child's social world, which may stimulate the development of more mature moral thought'.¹

Unsurprisingly, the Scriptures identify a very different model. The wise man wrote, 'Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him'. Pro 22:15. In this regard, it is vital that Christian parents establish a clear code of behaviour and chastening when the faculty for moral agency begins to emerge in children from around three and a half years of age.

Some feel anxious about the appropriateness of physical chastening. Christian parents must understand, however, that physical correction is scriptural and is an essential part of the nurture and training of the Lord. Solomon wrote, 'He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly'. Pro 13:24. Paul wrote a similar thing in the book of Hebrews, noting that the Lord chastens us because He loves us and because we are His sons. Heb 12:6.

Plainly, then, physical correction is not harsh punishment meted out by an angry adult. Neither should parents think of it as a last resort option when their children's behaviour is intolerable. Rather, physical correction is the 'painful' element of the process of loving chastening that 'yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it'. Heb 12:11. Moreover, it is the particular aspect of the chastening process that deals with the other law. As Solomon taught, 'Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. *You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.*' Pro 23:13-14. At a societal level, it is also interesting to register that the Australian government's Institute of Family Studies explains that 'it remains lawful for parents in all jurisdictions (States) to use "reasonable" physical correction to discipline their children'.²

1. Journal of Moral Education 28(3):311-321.

2. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/corporal-punishment-key-issues>

First, parents need to establish in their homes a clear strategy for behavioural correction and change. Obviously, some misbehaviours demand more attention than others. We might think of a sliding scale that is 'one for this', 'two for that', 'three for something else', escalating to reflect the severity of relational breaches, such as lying, answering back and defiance. Such a predetermined approach will be a new thought for many who have only experienced discipline and training in an *ad hoc* manner, where each situation is addressed in a way that seems *right* at the time. So it is that physical chastening should occur in a deliberate, rather than emotive way and should come to a definite conclusion that secures the child to an obedient response.

This behavioural code becomes the central pillar in the fellowship of chastening. A wise parent, for example, will discuss a breach with their child in order to walk them through the process of repentance. This conversation is nothing like the lengthy monologues that some parents inflict on their children, where emotionally charged explanations give rise to shame and ignominy without leading to a point of repentance and chastening. The apostle Paul described this approach as 'exasperating' and ultimately, discouraging for the child. Col 3:21. In this, parents must recognise that there is a massive difference between nurture and admonition as a fellowship at the tree of life and a fleshly exercise in assessing the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So it is that through their conversation during a chastening event, the Christian parent gives their correction its proper relational context. After repentance is agreed upon, the parent can bring the appropriate correction, mindfully measuring its intensity to the level of penitence. In this, it is important to register that repentance does not substitute for physical chastening, as though repentance grants us an escape from the accountability for the 'mess' of our sin. Rather, chastening is the discipline that *accompanies* repentance. The Scriptures, for example, record that after David's godly remorse over the murder of Uriah, Nathan the prophet said, 'The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.' 2Sa 12:13. Nevertheless, the Scriptures also note that the Lord continued to chasten David through a painful 'sword' that would never depart his house. 2Sa 12:10.

Living within the lines - a culture of respect from 6 to 13 years of age

The term 'landmark' is used in the Scriptures in two different ways. First, it refers to physical markers; usually a cairn of stones that designates the

boundary of a person's property. Second, the expression describes the foundational cultural and spiritual practices of a covenant house.

The nurture and admonition of the Lord is one of the *landmarks* of a Christian family. It is a *spiritual marker* that identifies the lines of sanctification for a home. In referring to these cultural markers, the prophet Jeremiah exhorted the families of Israel and Judea to 'set up signposts, make landmarks; set your heart toward the highway, the way in which you went'. Jer 31:21.

David also wrote that 'the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With Him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.' Psa 16:6-8.

A clear code of chastening establishes a Christian household as the *pleasant place* where children are receiving their spiritual inheritance. Such a house *cannot be shaken*. Children know that they are accepted and they understand where the behavioural lines are and how they are to respond. This means that parents can answer the various crises of each age and stage of maturing.

For example, between the ages of five and six, children will be filled with a growing sense of social and cognitive confidence. They will react strongly against the constraints of chastening and will attempt to redefine the terms of their engagement with their parents' discipline. Psychologists refer to 'the feisty five and a half year-old' and describe 'oppositional behaviour' which may include defiance, manipulation, lying, and even petty stealing.³ At this point, 'holding the line' means insisting that the child receives the appropriate correction, regardless of their physical and emotional reactions. As a son of God, they are learning the truth that 'reproofs of instruction *are* the way of life'. Pro 6:23.

Submission to chastening is the point. Right through to their last encounter with physical correction somewhere in the early teens, children should know how to meet and engage with their parents' discipline. Of course, this does not mean that Christian parents will manage the process perfectly. Some matters will be missed, blame will be apportioned wrongly and correction given that was not deserved. However, we understand that the Lord is with us and that what is 'missed in the swings gets gathered up in the roundabouts'. Children who are

3. <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/the-feisty-5½-year-old/>

trained in the Lord's admonition know that chastening is a fellowship rather than 'a court of law'. They have learned an important secret: that God's love is ministered to them as they receive their parents' chastening. Heb 12:6.

Faith for participation

At this time, the Lord is teaching us how to be joined to the fellowship of His life in one Spirit. He wants to sup with us at His table, where His banner over us is love. This means that in the first instance, He is coming to every house with 'eyes as a flame of fire'. These eyes of love are confronting the fleshly cultures and practices that have become familiar to us as *the ways that seem right to a man*. Pro 14:12. He wants to teach us His ways and to write them on our hearts so that we are joined to Him in the fellowship of His life.

In this, we remember the words of Moses. 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. *And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart*. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.' Deu 6:4-7.

There will be a range of responses to this message of present truth. A number may feel challenged, and believe that the right thing to do is to immediately set about implementing a better chastening model. Plainly however, we *cannot* obey God's word through the power of our strong conviction. We recall the example of the children of Israel who, despite their best efforts, failed repeatedly to keep God's ways by the exercise of their will. 'Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and be obedient".' Exo 24:7.

Other people may be less hopeful, and see no possibility for reforming the culture of chastening in their house. In fact, a number may already be experiencing crises in these very matters. We know, however, that the Lord does grant sovereign opportunity to those who cry out to Him in humility. 'If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.' 2Ch 7:14. We can be confident that, when the Lord speaks a word, there is grace for *all* who have an ear to hear. Scripture teaches that He

can deliver us. 'Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.' Gal 1:3-4.

It is vital, then, for believers to understand that transformation and renewal is the outcome of walking each day in the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings. As the word of present truth is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit grants us the capacity to hear and in hearing, the faith of the Son of God is given to us as a gift. Through *His* faith, we can know the power of the gospel, for reformation. We can walk by the Holy Spirit each day in the riches of Christ's grace. Rom 5:2. So it is that the first activity of Christian parenting is for parents to receive the chastening that the Lord is bringing to *us*. In repentance, we pray and seek the leading of the Holy Spirit who pours the love of God into our hearts. Faith can then begin to *work* by love as the word of God is sanctified to the unique circumstance of every house.

In this way, His word is in our mouth and in our hearts as our confession and testimony. We are not seeking someone to bring Christ down for us, nor do we hope for benefactors to beseech Christ on our behalf so that we do not suffer. Rather, we are those whose response to the word is to entreat fellowship. We recall the example of Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus road, who implored Christ to remain with them so that they could continue to receive His teaching. How their illumination multiplied as they shared communion together with the Lord! So it is that Christ is continuing to teach us how to fellowship in one Spirit in our families, as brethren together and with specific messengers, so that the light of the gospel of the glory of God shines 'ever brighter unto the perfect day'. Pro 4:18.

Embracing the Lord's chastening

Luke Pomery

The chastening of the Lord is an expression of His love and delight toward us! As we read in the book of Proverbs, 'My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord *loves* He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he *delights*'.

Pro 3:11-12. The psalmist described a person who embraces the chastening and instruction of the Lord as 'blessed'. Psa 94:12. We are blessed because the discipline that we receive from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit enables us to grow and mature as a son of God. Evidently, chastening is essential for our inclusion in Their covenant purpose.

In this season, the Holy Spirit is particularly drawing our attention to the chastening of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit is teaching us how to receive and embrace this initiative of the Son toward us. Receiving and embracing chastening is not our natural, or 'default', response. This is because discipline is painful! As the apostle Paul explained, 'No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful.' Heb 12:11.

However, when we are illuminated to see the love that God has for us when He chastens us, we are able to receive the Lord's instruction and to learn the lesson that He is teaching us. Heb 12:5-6.

Judgement commuted to chastening

Paul noted that every person, whether they are a believer or not, experiences suffering. It is 'common to man'. 1Co 10:13. This is because suffering is an implication of the fall of mankind. When Adam disobeyed God, mankind fell from fellowship with Yahweh. As a consequence, the whole world was subject to futility, or time and chance. Ecc 1:14. Ecc 9:11. Rom 8:20-21. The impact of the present worldwide coronavirus pandemic is a poignant example of these sufferings that are common to us all.

When the Father made Jesus an offering for sin, He, by the grace of God, began to experience the sufferings of death that belong to every person. Heb 2:9. This included the sufferings that we experience as a consequence of time and chance. Jesus Christ made all of our sufferings to be His sufferings. As He died our death by the grace of God, *the judgement upon Him was commuted to a chastening and a circumcision.*

Through baptism into Christ, we are joined to the fellowship of His offering and sufferings. In this fellowship, the sufferings that we experience under the judgement of God are commuted, or changed, to a chastening. Through chastening, we are being delivered from our sin and are learning the obedience that belongs to our sonship in Christ. The apostle Paul expressed it this way, 'But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.' 1Co 11:32. However, for every person who is not born of God, these sufferings have no spiritual benefit whatsoever. In fact, they are a foretaste of their eternal death.

The need to be spiritually minded

In order for the chastening of the Lord to be effective in our lives, we need to be *spiritually minded*. Why is this so? Those who are spiritually minded will appraise the fellowship of Christ's offering as the *only* context for their participation and expression as sons of God. In this regard, the apostle Paul taught that to be spiritually minded is 'life and peace', whereas to be carnally minded is death. Rom 8:6.

A person who is spiritually minded will be motivated by the love of God. This is a key outcome of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He pours the love

of God the Father, and the affection of Jesus Christ, into our hearts. Rom 5:5. Php 1:8. The love of the Father and the affection of Jesus Christ then become the motivation of our life, enabling us to live and walk as new creation sons of God.

By the love of God the Father, we are able to participate in the fellowship of the Father's offering. The apostle John spoke of our participation in the Father's offering when he wrote, 'In this the love of God [the Father] was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him'. 1Jn 4:9. We demonstrate the love of the Father by living as the sons of God whom He predestined us to be in Christ.

The affection of Jesus Christ compels us to lay down our lives in the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings. The evidence of our fellowship in His offering is that we cease from living for ourselves. In other words, we do not seek to 'find' ourselves through what we do or how we are received by others. Instead, we live to reveal Christ and the members of His body. 2Co 5:14-15.

Inasmuch as a spiritual person lives by love, they will also have the mind of Christ. 1Co 2:16. To this end, the apostle Paul exhorted us, saying, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.' Php 2:5-8.

To 'have the mind of Christ' is to walk in the obedience of Christ. We have no capacity within ourselves for obedience. However, by hearing the word of God, we are able to receive the faith of the Son of God. Rom 10:17. By this faith, we participate in the offering and sufferings of Christ. In this fellowship, our self-righteousness is being removed from our heart. We are receiving and living by Christ's life, and thereby fulfilling the will of the Father in Him.

Learning through offering

Sons of God who are joined to Christ's offering are 'a new creation'. 2Co 5:17. As new creation sons of God, we are *learning* our obedience through our fellowship with Christ in His offering. This is the main point for us to understand: *we learn and mature through offering!* The chastening of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is made effective in our

lives when, through our participation in Christ's offering, we are learning that which He learned for us. He learned the obedience of *our* sonship! For 'though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.' Heb 5:8-9.

In the first chapter of the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, he described the process by which we learn and mature as a spiritual new creation. Php 1:8-11. Paul explained that our spiritual maturity depends on receiving 'the affection of Jesus Christ'. Php 1:8. The affection, or love, of Christ compels us to remain connected to Him in the fellowship of His offering. 2Co 5:14. In the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings, we 'abound in knowledge and all discernment'. Php 1:9. This means that we are able to discern and approve that which is 'excellent'. This refers to 'the more excellent way' of *agape* love. 1Co 12:31. It is the pathway of our fellowship in the offering of Christ.

We are able to demonstrate love only as we are delivered from the drive to live for ourselves, which is the expression of 'the other law' within us. Deliverance from this fallen motivation is a fundamental implication of fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ. As we have just considered, the fruit of this fellowship is that Christ lives in us. His life is the life that we now live by the faith of the Son of God, which we receive as we hear His word. Gal 2:20. Rom 10:17. The apostle Peter described the dimensions of Christ's life as 'the excellencies', or 'virtues,' of Christ. 2Pe 1:5-8.

The virtues of Christ are learned in, and from, our participation in the fellowship of His offering. This is what it means to be 'filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ'. Php 1:11. 'The fruits of righteousness' refer to the dimensions of life that belong to our sonship. Through our conversation and conduct as sons of God, we show forth the fruit of the excellencies that belong to Christ. 1Pe 2:9. 2Pe 1:5-8. The result is that we are found to be sincere and blameless before God. Php 1:10.

Contrary to the 'wisdom of the world', new creation sons of God are not simply learning as an outcome of the mistakes that they make within the old creation. That is, our maturity as sons of God does not principally happen as a result of 'learning from our mistakes' or from our life-experiences or from the consequence of a painful event. Learning this way is a principle of the world. In contrast, as sons of God, we recognise

that we can *only* mature through fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ.

Three aspects of chastening

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit each rebuke and chasten us in specific ways and with particular purposes in view. Deu 8:5. It is important for us to embrace the Father, Son and Holy Spirit when They bring correction to our lives. The chastening of the Father teaches us *sonship*. The chastening of the Son teaches us *discipleship* and *priesthood*. The chastening of the Holy Spirit teaches us to *walk according to the Spirit*.

In love, *God the Father* chastens us because we are His sons. He chastens us for our profit, so that we may know the truth of our sonship and become partakers of Christ's holiness. Heb 12:10. Hebrews Chapter 12 teaches us that we are to patiently endure seasons of the Father's chastening. Heb 12:7,11. The word of the Lord, ministered to us throughout the season, is essential for our training because it grants to us faith and illumination. Heb 12:5. By faith, we readily submit ourselves to the Father's chastening hand, and honour Him as the Father of our identity. Heb 12:9.

Although we have been born again as new creation sons of God, there still resides within us the propensity to revert to the flesh. Rom 7:23. The *Holy Spirit* chastens us by frustrating our self-righteous activities and initiatives, in order to teach us to walk according to the Spirit. Gal 3:3. As we embrace the fellowship of the *Holy Spirit* and His chastening of us, we are enabled to *walk by the Spirit* and to have a spiritual mindset toward all the matters of life that we encounter.

Having briefly summarised the chastening initiatives of the Father and the Holy Spirit, we will now focus in more detail on the initiative of the Son. The reason for this particular focus is the imperative of the Holy Spirit, who has been impressing upon us the need to embrace the Son when He chastens us. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to learn what the Son is desiring to teach us in this season of His discipline and instruction.

The chastening of the Son

Christ rebukes and chastens us as our High Priest. Col 1:18. The letters written to the seven lampstand churches are an expression of the rebuke and chastisement of the Son as He ministered and spoke among them as their great High Priest. In His letter addressed to the presbytery in

Laodicea, Christ was, in fact, speaking to *all seven* lampstand churches. He said, 'As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent ... he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' Rev 3:19, 22.

Jesus Christ speaks to us in this same way. He addresses our need for repentance in relation to our disobedience, particularly when we deviate from the pathway of salvation that He has pioneered for us. Heb 5:8. It is incumbent upon us to quickly heed and repent when the Son speaks to us in this manner.

Through His rebuke and chastening, Christ identifies our *deeds* which are inconsistent with the culture of Yahweh's fellowship. Yahweh lives by offering. Each Person of the Godhead lays down His life in offering to reveal the Other. Any other culture, or way of living, is an offence to the Lord. For this reason, Jesus expresses His personal displeasure at our deeds, which are in opposition to the culture of offering. Rev 2:15. When the nature of our deeds is exposed by the word of Christ's rebuke, we are able to repent of our deeds and to be established in His culture of offering.

In relation to this current season, it is sobering to realise that Christ has been 'walking among us' in judgement. 1Pe 4:17. Rev 1:13. He has spoken firstly to overseers, and then, through overseers, to every person, exposing the sacramental nature of our practices as a lampstand church. In particular, Christ has rebuked us concerning the nature of our communion and our need to return to the tradition of 'the *agape* meal' that was established by the apostles. Christ hated our former sacramental communion practices because they were a violation of the culture of His offering. In love, Christ has confronted our disobedience, and has endeavoured to provoke in us a zeal for repentance. Rev 3:19. Our response is to turn to Him with fasting, weeping and mourning so that we may embrace His chastening upon us. Joe 2:12-13.

Christ addresses our fallen humanity

Although Christ is walking among us in judgement, this is *not firstly* an expression of vengeance or wrath upon us. Rather, in His love, Christ speaks to us truthfully and in simplicity. In so doing, He exposes what is of the truth, and what is of a lie, within our lives. 1Jn 2:8. The Scriptures explain that nothing is hidden from *His sight*. Heb 4:13. Christ looks at us in love. Through the light of His word, Christ *brings to our attention* the

matters that He is addressing and calls us to respond accountably. Eph 5:13.

When Christ comes among us in this way, He calls us by name. He addresses us in our humanity and exposes the darkness of our ignorance, sin and disobedience. If we refuse to turn in repentance when we are judged by the Lord, we remain in darkness. This means that we remain enslaved to the lusts and projections that belong to our fallen humanity. If we continue in this state, which is our natural condition, we are unable to come to the knowledge of the truth. Joh 1:5. It is the blindness of this condition that causes us to become offended at Christ's chastening upon us and to regard His correction as being 'too harsh'.

The word of Christ's rebuke *firstly* exposes our personal sense of *rejection and failure*, which stems from our own righteousness. In demonstrating this principle, we recall the rich young ruler's response to Christ's rebuke. Jesus addressed him in love and exposed the false riches of his self-righteousness. 'Then Jesus, looking at him, *loved him*, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me".' Mar 10:21. We note that the rich young ruler became despondent when Christ explained to him that his lifelong pursuit of self-righteousness had yielded no eternal reward.

Secondly, the word of Christ's rebuke exposes our *ignorance* by illuminating our loyalty to false doctrines. As individuals within a Christian community, we have actively chosen to adhere to various beliefs and practices that we have inherited from our religious history. These practices have their origins in variant doctrines that are *inconsistent* with the scriptural teaching of the New Testament writers. Christ rebukes and chastens us, even in our ignorance, because we willingly chose these beliefs and practices. We did so, believing that they would provide us with some kind of spiritual benefit.

The *third* aspect exposed by Christ's rebuke is our *failure to take heed* to His word. We recall that Peter, on two occasions during the night of Christ's offering, did not believe what Christ was saying to him regarding the inadequacy of his self-motivated zeal. However, under pressure, Peter was not able to sustain his own zeal and determination to suffer alongside Christ as His disciple. It was later, during the second and third wounds of Christ's offering, that Peter remembered the words of Christ. Luk 22:61. He then understood, at a personal level, his *failure to accept*

and to take heed to what Christ had said to him. At this point, Peter found grace to begin to mourn and to repent.

Responding to the word of Christ's rebuke

The word of Christ's rebuke and chastening is 'full of grace and truth'. Joh 1:14. How is this so? His word is an expression of His judgement and is, therefore, full of *truth*. Also, His word gives to us the *grace* to mourn and to repent; this is described in Scripture as 'a spirit of grace and supplication'. Zec 12:10. Through the rebuke of the Son, this grace is being poured out as a blessing upon us. Through this grace capacity, we are able to mourn with godly sorrow and to repent of our sin. 2Co 7:10.

As the presbytery heeds the word of Christ's rebuke, spoken to them by those with ascension gift grace, they are able to mourn with godly sorrow, and to turn in repentance from their disobedience and ignorance. As they are obedient to repent of their former conduct, they obtain from Christ the capacity to shepherd the church as a presbytery of overseers, elders and deacons. 1Pe 5:2. This capacity is demonstrated as they call every believer to embrace the chastening of the Son, through godly mourning and repentance.

Initially, it is confronting when the Son chastens us. However, as we receive His rebuke and meet Him personally, we are illuminated by His immeasurable love toward us. Eph 3:18-19. The love of Christ compels us to embrace His chastening and the fellowship of offering that He is revealing to us. 2Co 5:14. We embrace the chastening of the Son through our godly mourning and repentance. 2Co 7:11. As we read in the book of Psalms, 'Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. *Kiss the Son*, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.' Psa 2:11-12. These verses exhort us to honour and worship the Son by embracing Him when He chastens us.

In response to Christ's discipline, we confess, by faith, that He is our 'Lord and Teacher'. Joh 13:13. Submission to His *lordship* is demonstrated through our *obedience* to repent, when we are chastened by Him. Submission to Him as our *Teacher* is demonstrated as we *learn* from Him concerning the work of our priesthood. Through His instruction, we are enabled to join the fellowship of His obedience as He offered Himself for our sake. We are then able to offer ourselves to care for others, in our service of priesthood.

The recovery of the apostle Peter's faith

Peter the 'zealot' learned the value of faith during the second and third chastening events that Christ endured on His offering journey to Calvary. At the last supper, Jesus explained to Peter that He had prayed for him so that, in the midst of the coming events, Peter's faith would not fail but would, rather, be strengthened through grace. Luk 22:32. 1Pe 5:10. As a result, Peter's faith and relationship with Christ would be recovered from his own denial of Christ.

Peter's denial of Christ in the court of Caiaphas' house was the outcome of a number of factors. These included Peter's underlying misunderstanding of the prophetic Scriptures that relate to Christ; his cultural heritage as a Jew; his struggle with the prejudice of the religious and secular leaders of his nation; and the spiritual fear and terror generated by Satan during this season of spiritual conflict and warfare. Jesus described this period of spiritual unrest as '[their] hour and the power of darkness'. Luk 22:53. Eph 6:12. In that season of spiritual warfare, Christ was the conquering Saviour. He was taking away Satan's dominion and power. Joh 12:31. Heb 2:14-15. Also, He was taking the entire human race, who had been in bondage to Satan's dominion, captive to Himself. Eph 4:8.

In the court of Caiaphas' house, Christ was abused by the Jewish leaders. It was during this abuse that Peter's faith began to fail. He recoiled, and drew back from fellowship with Christ because of the pressure that was being exerted upon him as a follower of Jesus. Peter began to curse and swear, denying that he knew Christ. This happened on three separate occasions as Peter was confronted regarding his relationship with Christ. Joh 18:17,25-27.

Peter was in the midst of a fiery trial. This was a trial of faith. 1Pe 1:6-7. Christ joined Peter's failure to His offering by *looking* at Peter. Christ's eyes were as a flame of fire. Rev 1:14. Christ's gaze turned this fiery trial into a precious event in Peter's life. It became a season of purifying for Peter. His faith was being purified and was becoming more precious than gold. 1Pe 1:7. Under the fiery gaze of Christ, this offering event became a crucible in which the dross of Peter's 'other law', which was the source of all of his carnality and denial, was being purged from his life.

The gaze of Christ also *imparted understanding* to Peter's spirit, renewing his faith, and reconnecting him relationally to Christ. Peter's weeping was a response of faith, sowing to his future as an apostle of Christ. We note that this same principle was expressed by the psalmist when he wrote,

'Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy'. Psa 126:5. The fruit of eternal life was established in Peter's life because of his fellowship in these wounding events of Christ's offering journey.

Chastening made effective

We will now consider how we walk through 'the trial of faith'. Through His Melchizedek priesthood, Jesus was fully acquainted with the experiences of our humanity, and has joined all our failures, sin, trouble and pain to His offering on the cross. Heb 4:15. By the capacity of Eternal Spirit, Jesus suffered all of these aspects of our experience, which belong to 'our death', and He reconciled all of humanity to His one offering.

Since Christ has already suffered the experiences of our humanity, they are no longer the reference point for that which we are learning. *Rather, His offering is our reference point.* The Holy Spirit gives us the capacity of Eternal Spirit, which strengthens and enables us to join Christ's offering. As we participate in the fellowship of Christ's offering, His chastening is made effective in our lives. He brings us back from the death of our sin by the resurrection life that was multiplied to us through the shedding of His blood.

The various sufferings and seasons of spiritual warfare that we encounter are trials of faith in our lives. Through His word, Jesus engages us with eyes as a flame of fire, so that we are illuminated by His love. The hope of our sonship does not disappoint, because the love of the Father and the affection of Jesus are poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Rom 5:5. This love compels us to appraise the pathway of Christ's offering as 'the more excellent way', and to appraise all the matters of our life as being already joined to His offering.

Helpfully, when under the chastening hand of the Lord, we can entreat the Lord and learn what He is teaching us. Through our participation in Christ's offering, the chastening of the Lord aligns us to the sanctification of our name, works and ministry as sons and priests. Peace is the result. Isa 53:5. As the apostle Paul wrote, 'Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ'. 1Th 5:23.