

# Pure Christianity

By

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# 1. Knowing Christ

The basin and towel must have condemned the hearts of the 12 men who entered the upper room that night with the Lord Jesus. None of the disciples were prepared to reach for these objects and perform the humble task of washing the feet of the others. They had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest, so none of them would lower themselves just at that moment. Then a shocking thing happened ...

In a move that seems to symbolize how the Lord laid aside his heavenly glory and stooped to gird himself with humanity, he, their Lord and Master, took the towel and basin and began to make his way around the group, washing their feet. Amazingly, this would become the one recorded moment in the Gospels when the Lord affirmed the disciples' declaration that he was their Lord (John 13:13)! The reality of his lordship, and the glory of his leadership, was revealed in that lowly act of service.

Perhaps it was Peter's guilty conscience that led him to protest against the Lord of glory stooping to wash his feet. Christ's reply was pregnant with meaning: *"What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter"* (John 13:7). That statement drew a fine distinction between two different kinds of knowledge. The sense of the Lord's remark was that Peter could not then perceive by observation the significance of the Lord's action; but, rather, that he would come to know much more of it through experience. 'The only thing wrong with experience', someone has quipped, 'is that it comes at the wrong end of life!' That's probably the impatient view of a generation that wants instant results, but in human experience there can be no instant maturity.

Later in the Bible, when the disciple Peter counselled younger men - in all likelihood younger church leaders - to 'clothe themselves with humility' (1 Peter 5:5), can it seriously be doubted that the upper room incident was clearly in his mind? By then he'd come to know the true meaning of the Lord's breath-taking act which had cut through the sullen atmosphere among the disciples on that, for them, shameful night. By means of the experience of the Holy Spirit residing in him since that first Pentecost, Peter had grown in his relationship with the Lord Jesus, and now delighted in the humble mind of Christ. The Lord's promise about Peter coming to know the significance of the feet-washing that night in the upper room had been fulfilled. This had indeed been something learnt later through experience.

This knowledge that's gained through experience often implies a relationship with the person that's being known; in fact, it's usually a relationship in which the person or thing becomes more and more valued. Peter had certainly come to value that amazing object lesson in humility and applied its significance to himself and others.

In the 7th verse of John chapter 14, the Lord again contrasted these two different types of knowledge when he replied to Thomas: *"If you had known Me (by experience), you would have known My Father (by observation)"*. As we've already commented, the type of knowledge that's gained through experience usually involves a growing relationship with, and a developing appreciation of, the person or thing that's being known. Of course, that's how it's meant to be with our knowing Christ. If the quality of the relationship Thomas and the other disciples had experienced with Christ had been all that it might have been, then the Lord said that they could have clearly observed in him the true character of the Father as faithfully displayed in the Son.

The apostle Paul takes up this idea of knowing from experience and uses it in his Bible letters to capture something of the essence of his deep longing to know Christ. You just need to read one of Paul's letters (e.g. to the Philippians) to see that getting to know Christ better and better - through ever closer experience - was the steady pursuit of Paul's life. For him, Christianity was first and foremost a relationship with Jesus Christ. For each of us, too, the Christian life is to be a rich experience of knowing Christ.

Paul shares with us at a very personal level in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians. He explains that for him, since getting to know Christ, everything else in life had lost its value and had become totally eclipsed by the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Knowledge like this is knowledge of something we've really come to value. For Paul, everything that had once been gain to him or that he'd valued in his life at one time, now paled into insignificance compared with the wonder of knowing Christ. This was the object of supreme value now in Paul's life. This is how he puts it:

*But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. (Philippians 3:7-10)*

This is Paul's pursuit of a lifetime. His longing is to know the heart and will of Christ through close association. For Paul, to be in this relationship with Christ is all about knowing him and becoming more like him. This desire

which Paul has for himself is something he longs that others might share. When he prays for his friends at Philippi, he asks: *that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge.* (Philippians 1:9)

Abounding 'more and more in knowledge' is at the heart of the abundant life Christ came to give us. But it's worth noting that Paul has sharpened things up even further here. This is the word for getting to know through experience, but it's got something else added to it. The added prefix has the effect of implying knowledge that's more specialized and particular. Paul's use of this word, under the Spirit's guidance, hints at a still more advanced knowledge. Recognising this, the translators of our Bibles often describe it in terms of real knowledge or full knowledge or even exact knowledge. There's a famous Bible passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 that illustrates this further difference very well. It's there that Paul contrasts our present partial experiential knowledge with that future time at the coming of the Lord when we'll know then as fully as we ourselves are known.

With all these shades of meaning available in the New Testament language, and the Holy Spirit's choice being, as we can be sure, a very deliberate one, it can only be helpful to focus on three main passages where the idea of full or exact knowledge is distinctively used.

Paul uses it in Colossians chapter 2, verse 2, when praying for his friends in the Churches of God at Colossae and at Laodicea. He frames his prayer in terms of their finding encouragement in the full assurance of a true knowledge of Christ. Paul seems to be expressing the conviction that there was a particular appreciation of Christ - a particular way of relating to him - that ought to characterize the believers in those New Testament churches of God.

We might ask: "What exactly was that?" Paul expands on this same word in his opening chapter addressed to the Church of God at Ephesus. Again it's contained in his prayer for them: *that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.* (Ephesians 1:17-19)

This particular knowledge is appropriate to those whose relationship with Christ is bound up with an appreciation of God's call, and with God's present inheritance in Churches of God, and with God's great power. This knowledge of Christ, as Paul himself defines it, is a specific revelation of Christ encompassing God's view of the Churches of God, the Church of God at Ephesus being one among them at that time. His prayer for these Ephesian believers was that their evaluation of their place in their local church of God ought to flow out from their particular appreciation of Christ.

All these churches planted or visited or cared for by Paul were integrated into the one community of 'companions' or 'fellows' of Christ (Hebrews 1:9). Companying with and knowing him in the experience of Christian fellowship, was the very core of life in these New Testament churches. Indeed, it was what united them, as Paul remarks in Ephesians chapter 4, commenting on *the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God* (v.13). The fact that the unity existing throughout disciples in the various New Testament churches of God is described as 'the unity of the knowledge of the Son of God' is a very remarkable thing. Their unity was characterized not only by a common adherence to the authentic Faith or body of Christian doctrine - vital as that was - but it was also a unity characterized in terms of their particular appreciation of Christ. The appreciation of specific aspects of a biblical relationship with Christ ought to lead to its valued expression in churches of God. This has never appealed to me more than when teaching on the glories of Jesus as the *'great priest over the house of God'* (Hebrews 10:21) to Filipino friends recently gathered into a Church of God.

## 2. Christian Fellowship

There's a hymn that begins: 'Great the joy when Christians meet; Christian fellowship how sweet'. Many would no doubt echo these sentiments, but when it comes down to it, what do we mean by 'fellowship'? Perhaps the idea of fellowship conjures up the idea of sharing tea and biscuits over a chat. But the qualifier *Christian* fellowship implies that the basis of that fellowship is our shared experience of Christ.

The first Bible mention of Christian fellowship ('koinonia') is in Acts chapter 2. There's a very special and historic reason for our being introduced to the subject there. For that's where we find the record of the descent from heaven of the Holy Spirit. From that point in time, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, the Helper the Lord had promised came to take up residence in the hearts of all born-again believers in this present Church Age.

Having the Spirit of Christ in our lives is essential to any experience of Christian fellowship. We may have been attracted to the company of believers who were demonstrating Christian qualities in their relationships with each other before we ourselves became Christians, but our personal participation in true Christian fellowship can only date from the time in our experience when the Holy Spirit came to take up residence in our lives.

The Bible word which translates as 'fellowship' basically means a joint participation together in something of mutual interest. In a Christian context, those common interests are the interests of Jesus Christ himself (Philippians 2:21). It's those interests which the Holy Spirit advances in our lives as believers.

Having noticed the necessary connection between the coming of the Holy Spirit and the first mention of Christian fellowship, let's turn now to the benediction with which the apostle Paul closes the second of his two letters to the Church of God at Corinth: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all* (2 Corinthians 13:14). The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you, Paul said to the disciples. Where did he expect the grace of the Lord Jesus to be displayed? In the disciple lives of his Corinthian friends surely: by their gracious conduct with each other. Paul's spiritual wish was also that the love of God might be with them. How would God's love be evident? Once again, it must have been the apostle's expectation that this would be shown in the lives of the disciples. Finally, Paul expresses the longing that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit might be with them. It doesn't seem reasonable that this should be translated as 'fellowship with the Holy Spirit'; but since the subject of the benediction was the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, this also properly refers to the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And it was to be demonstrated in the same way as the grace and love, that is in the lives of the disciples as they fellowshiped together with each other. Their joint participation in things of mutual interest would derive from the Holy Spirit himself.

So mutual interest in the things of Jesus Christ, an interest stemming from the Holy Spirit within each disciple, would lead to their joint participation in these things in a harmonious way. This kind of unity is once again what Paul describes at the end of Philippians chapter 1 and the beginning of Philippians chapter 2 - the very section in which Paul again mentions the 'fellowship of the Spirit' (2:1). Spirit-produced fellowship brings about unity between Christians.

The fellowship of the united churches of God that's so amply demonstrated in the New Testament is listed alongside the apostles' teaching in Acts 2, verses 41 and 42 - the earliest believers being said to continue steadfastly in *the fellowship* and in *the apostles' teaching*. The relationship between them is perhaps brought out most clearly by the apostle John in the first of his letters. He writes to the end that believers might enjoy fellowship with them: that is, with the apostles who had been companions of Christ. As a basis for that fellowship, John says he's sharing 'what we have seen and heard'. This was what he and the other apostles had seen of and heard from Christ - in other words the Person of Christ and his teaching which he had delivered to the apostles, and which they had made their own. This experience of Christian fellowship was based on something more than the shared understanding of Christ's teaching ('what we have heard'). It was based also on a communication of their appreciation of Christ himself ('what we have seen'). So the apostles' fellowship was linked to the apostles' teaching *and* to their real experience of Christ.

These were things they wished others to share in: 'so that you may have fellowship with us', John the apostle writes. This offer is, of course, still open by virtue of what the Holy Spirit caused the apostles to record in the New Testament Scriptures: Scriptures that're full of Christ and his commands. The apostles shared these things so that others might have fellowship with them - so that others, including ourselves today, might participate jointly in the interests of Jesus Christ.

'The interests of Jesus Christ' is an expression drawn from the Philippians' letter. Paul was writing disappointingly of believers whose chief concern was their own interests, he says, not the interests of Jesus Christ. But, he tells us, Timothy was different. He had Christ's interests at heart. This was said to be demonstrated by his concern for the

welfare of those in the church of God at Philippi (2:20,21). From this we can learn of the deep interest of Jesus Christ in churches of God as we find them biblically defined in New Testament times. Our sharing fellowship with the apostles is a sharing fellowship with the Father and the Son. John says, *so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son*. This fellowship can be richly experienced by all who, like Timothy, enter into the active interest Jesus Christ had in churches of God. After all, this is what the apostles, at the Lord's command, devoted themselves to furthering.

As we've noted from First John, the apostles' fellowship was a fellowship of Christ - sharing what they'd seen of and heard from him. The call to every Christian is a call to be a 'fellow of Christ'. Certainly, that was the calling of Hebrew believers, Jewish Christians, in the first churches of God. The writer to the Hebrews, in the first chapter, describes the Lord Jesus as being anointed with the oil of gladness above his 'companions' or his 'fellows'. But who were these fellows of Christ? One Bible scholar (W.E. Vine) has deduced from scripture that being a fellow of Christ marks an even closer relationship than being a brother of Christ. Christ is not ashamed to call all members of his Church 'brothers'. How special is that! And yet it's suggested that to be a fellow or companion of Christ is something even closer in terms of relationship.

In the early days of Christianity, believers like those mentioned, found themselves in churches of God. But the time came when, under the pressure of persecution, some Jewish believers were considering turning back or falling away from their new-found Christian identity in churches of God and going back to the old ways of Judaism. A lot of the language of the Hebrews' letter is aimed at pleading with its first readers to hold fast and not to fall away. But they couldn't fall away from the relation of being a brother to Christ (one of his brethren). Nowhere, when rightly understood in context, does the Bible teach our eternal security in Christ is ever in any doubt. In contrast, the first letter to the Corinthians makes clear that an immoral brother was put away from the local church of God fellowship at Corinth. The Hebrew Christians too, were in danger of losing their place in the fellowship of the churches of God.

When the writer wants to impress on them something of the enormity of such a backsliding decision, he contrasts Israel's Old Testament calling with the Hebrews' New Testament calling. The call of God to his people Israel was an earthly calling - one which called them to an earthly country and a sanctuary of this world. The New Testament call described in Hebrews is, by contrast, a heavenly calling. These Hebrews in the early community of Churches of God in the first century were, Hebrews chapter 3 verse 1 says, 'sharers or fellows of a heavenly calling'. How could they even consider not holding fast to the privilege of being companions of Christ and being sharers of that better heavenly calling?

Verse 14 of chapter 3 in Hebrews impresses on these early Christians the vital need to hold onto their Christian confidence if they were to avoid losing this relationship of being 'partakers or fellows of Christ'. If they chose to exit from obedience to the apostolic Faith, if they gave up on continuing steadfastly in the New Testament churches of God, then they would fall away from this close relationship. This danger of falling away is time and again brought before the readers of this Bible letter. Again we say that it's made abundantly clear in many ways throughout the New Testament that we can't fall away from the Body of Christ; but there's evidently something we can fall away from. We can fall away from the fellowship belonging to God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As fellows of the heavenly calling, they had been called into the fellowship into which disciples began to enter in Acts chapter 2 verse 42. In churches of God patterned after the first Church of God at Jerusalem, they all belonged to the overall fellowship belonging to God's Son (1 Cor.1:9). The theme of the Hebrews' letter with its stress on 'fellows of Christ' is that of a worshipping people, a kingdom of priests on earth which serves God with a heavenly calling by entering the true holy place in heaven to worship now through Jesus as 'great priest over the house of God' (Hebrews 10:21). That's where this subject of fellowship leads us to!

### 3. Christlikeness

It's possible that the upper room setting for Jesus' final teaching session with his disciples was a room with a view over one of the valleys surrounding Jerusalem. But as his followers filed into the room on the evening before he was due to die, they may well have wondered what their future prospects would be, especially when the Lord began to make plain to them the fact of his immanent departure. We can imagine how they would react to that news. They'd left everything behind to follow him; they'd become so dependent on him day by day; and now he was leaving them. So why wouldn't their outlook appear bleak? Perhaps, this wasn't a room with a view after all?

To address their fears that evening, the Lord opened various 'windows' for them through his teaching ministry. The things he taught them gave them a view of what it would be like for them after he had returned to heaven. One of those 'views' which I'd like us to consider, was the prospect of Christlikeness; that is, the prospect of followers of Christ actually becoming like Christ.

Here are some of the Lord's words to his followers that evening in the upper room (from John 17). Notice how they open a window for us onto the idea of being like Christ:

*"Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are."* (v.11)

The very first thing we can see from this is that by remaining together as his followers they'd be sharing likeness to Christ in unity. More was to follow as Christ continued in prayer for them:

*"But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves."* (v.13)

Christ's request here makes it very clear that his left-behind followers were to experience joy - and that joy was to be his very own joy. Jesus' joy on earth had been to do his Father's will. Now they, too, were to share likeness to Christ by doing God's will on earth with joy. Then the Lord continued further in His prayer to the Father:

*"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."* (v17-18)

It was the Lord's desire that their sending out in mission work was to be modelled on his own sending: when his Father had sent him into the world. They were to share likeness to Christ in consecrated commissioning. Finally, the Lord prayed:

*"And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one."* (v.22)

So his glory was to be seen in them. In the Lord's plan, they were to share likeness to Christ in glory, glorifying God in all their service for him.

It's really exciting that this is God's plan for us, too - exactly the same! It hasn't changed. The Lord's view from the upper room was a long view, right down the corridors of time. The far-sighted Saviour also had twenty-first century disciples in view. He made that clear in verse twenty, when he said, *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word."*

The Saviour saw his followers spreading out into all the world after his death and resurrection, taking with them the Christian message. He looked forward to his own likeness becoming apparent in every place where New Testament Churches of God came into existence. They would be all linked to each other, just as long before in the days of Moses individual curtains had been linked together to form a special tent of curtains, known as the Tabernacle, in which God lived among his people's tents in the desert.

Let's stay with that thought for a moment, for it illustrates for us the kind of unity Christ was praying for among his followers. Those curtains which were linked together to form God's house on earth long ago were all made to the one identical design and pattern - which you can read about in Exodus chapter 26. It's biblical to think of God's house on earth today being made up of disciples in churches of God. There's no doubting that was the case in New Testament times when churches like the Church of God at Corinth and the Church of God at Jerusalem and the Church of God at Ephesus formed one interlinked church Fellowship which was where God lived on earth in and through his Holy Spirit. Those individual churches were like the individual but identically designed Tabernacle curtains. What's more, the curtains of the Tabernacle were made to be like the veil which was hung up inside it. And the letter to the Hebrews informs us that the veil pictured the Lord Jesus himself.

So that's interesting, for as the curtains were to be like the veil, we now find Christ praying that his disciples might be like him, the true veil. As disciples, we're to be like Christ in our attitude (Philippians 2) and in our behaviour (1 John 2:6). You may say: "How can we do that?" The Bible counsels us to 'put on Christ' (Galatians 3:27), and talks very specifically of 'learning Christ' (Ephesians 4:21); obeying Christ; 'abiding in Christ' (1 John 2:6); and 'imitating Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1). By way of these disciplines, in Bible-based communion, our characters are

to be transformed through the Holy Spirit's work (2 Corinthians 3:17,18), making us to be meek and lowly in our attitude just as Christ was; and forgiving and loving in our behaviour too.

By sharing likeness to Christ in unity as disciples, it's also God's desire that we share likeness to his Son in the joyful fulfilment of divine purpose. That his own joy might be fulfilled in us was the Saviour's own longing for us that night in the upper room - sharers of his joy, in that way becoming like him. It's beautiful, isn't it? Christ's joy was in doing his Father's will, no doubt about that. The line of the hymn captures the challenge for us: 'Our joy to do the Father's will'. The apostle Paul later linked joy with 'progress in the faith' (Philippians 1). Going forward in obedience to Christ's teaching – which was given through his apostles - is to be a pathway to increasing joy in service.

The joy of Christ as the Sent One is something we can experience in a real way as we share likeness to Christ in his consecrated commission. It's his expressed desire, expressed as we've seen in the upper room that night, that we be sent out into the world by him, in the same way as he was sent by his Father into the world. As with the Master, so it has to be with the servant. But how was he sent? Let's allow the Bible to answer that from John chapter 10 (v.36). He was the One *"whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world"*.

So, how was he sent? As One who was sanctified or consecrated: in other words set apart to the will of God in his life. As we share likeness to Christ in consecrated service, we too are to be sanctified by the Word of God. Our mission and our ministry are to be Bible-based. One reason why Christ went to the cross was to consecrate the biblical pattern for how we serve God together unitedly as Christ's disciples.

When we do things God's way, he's glorified. It's the final way we can think of sharing likeness to Christ, for his entire life of service glorified God. God's glory was seen in that house of curtains long ago. In the same way, the heart of God is looking for biblical churches of God today, linked together in the way he designed and consecrated so that he may be glorified as he lives down here on earth among united disciples. May our paths be ordered as Christ's were, ordered in a divine unity to the glory of God. It's a unity associated with glory - his glory. What a prospect from the upper room window after all! What a prospect to share likeness to Christ in glory, in mission, in joy and in unity!

## 4. The Way of Love

Among the ruins of ancient Corinth today - and popular with bus parties of tourists - stands a marble block known as St. Paul's Polyglot bearing the 'Inscription of the Hymn of Love'. On it are engraved the words of the first eight verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It's a nice touch, linking the geographical location of the first century Church of God at Corinth with these words which were written to it.

Let's remind ourselves of this ancient 'hymn of love' which is from First Corinthians chapter 13:

*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

*And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

*Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,*

*does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;*

*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away*

*But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (NAS)*

I'd like us to look into the whole of the first letter Paul wrote to Corinth to see if we can find out why in particular he wrote to them in this way about love. At the end of the previous chapter he declared he was about to show them 'a still more excellent way'. A more excellent way than what?

I'm sure many of us have seen these words about love overprinted, not on marble perhaps, but on a photo-poster depicting a beautiful sunset, nature shot or possibly a sentimental or even romantic image. That's not, however, the biblical background for these words found in First Corinthians 13. Their context in God's inspired Word can be traced to the competitive and divided condition of the Church of God in Corinth.

Sadly there were divisions in that Church. How can Christians hope to witness to the unity of the Church which is Christ's body when different Bible teachings are set aside by each different group? Paul emphasized that unity in churches of God was an important reflection of the unity of the Body of Christ itself.

Perhaps the most serious of all divisions that existed at Corinth was the division between some of them and the apostle Paul himself. There seems to have been a false sense of 'spirituality' among some of the folks at Corinth in those days.

From Paul's opening words in this chapter it seems that when they used the then current gift of tongues; they believed they were actually speaking with the tongues of angels! It's even been suggested by those who take this to be a fair assumption that it explains why some of them had written to Paul expressing their low view of marriage as well as a disturbingly casual attitude to physical relations. Angels, we recall, neither marry nor are given in marriage (Luke 20:35). So anyone taking angels as their model of spirituality might be tempted to undervalue the sanctity of marriage. This might also have been linked to their denial of the fact that believers will be raised with a transformed physical body - which triggered Paul's brilliantly reasoned defence of the truth of bodily resurrection in chapter 15. In those days there was a heresy known as Gnosticism and, like these heretics, some of the Corinthians probably considered things to do with the body as being immaterial as far as their spirituality was concerned. That, of course, became a licence for shocking behaviour - just like the behaviour of some at Corinth.

It would be hard to prove anything, but it's at least possible that this was the kind of pagan spirituality that may have governed the mentality of some at Corinth. It's very interesting because the idea of what constitutes a person as 'spiritual' is again a huge area of debate today. It throws up about as many weird and unbiblical notions now as were once found around the docks at ancient Corinth. Some Christian factions emphasize certain experiences or techniques. Others argue that one doesn't need to be a Christian in order to be spiritual, although it might help! The reading of certain texts regarded as sacred; the participation in mind and body exercises; chants, vows, meditation and mantras are all increasingly popular, it seems.

But all that is background to our subject of 'the more excellent way of love' - trusting that it will throw some light on why this corrective is now applied by Paul. Chapter 13 with its 'hymn of love' certainly comes in by way of being a corrective against the abuse of tongues-speaking in Corinth, but more than that, we suggest it was also a corrective against some there who were claiming that they possessed a superior kind of spirituality. This claim

was promoting individualism and competition among them. No wonder Paul lays down the challenge, *if anyone thinks he is spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment* (14:37)! From chapter twelve through chapter fourteen, Paul outlines his view of spirituality. He sees it as having to do with cultivating relationships with fellow-disciples of Christ who have been led to building each other up in local church settings. Now, that, he says, is an expression of genuine Christian love.

The beginning of chapter 14 connects with the end of chapter 12 and so chapter 13, the 'hymn of love', forms a very relevant digression aimed at showing that it is love that edifies. Chapter 13 itself seems to fall into three parts dealing with: the necessity of love (vv1-3), the character of love (vv4-7) and the permanence of love (vv8-13). Let's take them in that order through the chapter.

The first three verses concentrate on the necessity of love. It's here Paul begins to describe the way that's beyond comparison. He begins with a reference to where their problem lay. Was true spirituality even then measured by tongues-speaking or the gift of the miraculous, or faith, or knowledge? No, says Paul, spirituality is about walking by the Spirit of God and the main ethic involved is loving one another: to be toward others in the same way as God in Christ has been towards us. In other words, such signs as mentioned at the head of the chapter are not evidence of true spirituality, but Christian love is.

Verses 4 to 7 which follow, deal with the character of love. Love is characterized here by no less than 15 verbs, all explaining what love is and what it's not. Love is both patient and kind: both passive and active, as seen in God's own forbearance and intervention. It seems from the twelve preceding chapters in this letter that the negative things listed at this point are precisely what they'd been guilty of at Corinth. Love doesn't envy - remember their strife and rivalry at Corinth (3:3); as revealed by their divisions in following the different personalities? Love doesn't boast - yet they had a preference for the showy gifts. Love isn't proud or puffed up - but they had been arrogant in the face of gross sin. Love isn't rude or shameful - but the 'haves' among them at Corinth had been shaming the 'have-nots' at their love-feasts. Love isn't self-seeking - but some of them had been stumbling others by what they ate. How wrong! - when seeking the good of others is truly the hallmark of Christian love. Love is not easily angered - they needed to learn to forbear, and not drag each other off to the law-courts; it would have been better to suffer the wrong done to them than do that! Love doesn't keep a record of evil, doesn't bear grudges; and it doesn't delight in evil - so no gossiping about the misdeeds of others either, and no gladness when someone else stumbles and fails. Yes, this is the Spirit's analysis of the spectrum of 'agape' love, which is the Bible's special description of divine Calvary love that puts up with everything. There's nothing it can't face. For it perseveres, having a tenacity buoyed up by trust and hope which enables it to pour itself out on behalf of others in every circumstance. Truly, God is love!

Lastly, in verses 8 to 13, Paul turns to the subject of the permanence of love. Love is more enduring than faith and hope. It must define how all spiritual gifts are employed in the present. The Corinthian emphasis on tongues being evidence of their false spirituality was wrong. It came from people who weren't exhibiting the one truly essential mark of the Spirit, namely Christian love. This is the love which God is by nature, which he has for the world and which his Spirit produces in us so that we show love to the Lord by keeping his commands and love to others by acts of Christians helpfulness and witness. Faith and hope by definition are not for the future - love will outlast all. It is the greatest thing because of its ability to edify others and to truly seek their good. This is the way of love. It is beyond all comparison. This is the essence and mark of Christian spirituality.

## 5. The True Vine

The usual biblical metaphor for our relationship with Christ is that we're members of his Church which is biblically described as the body of which he is the head; but let's explore another metaphor in which Christ pictures himself as the vine and calls on us to abide or remain in him just like branches do in an ordinary vine.

What does it mean to 'remain as a branch in Christ, the true Vine'? Perhaps we can think in terms of our 'drawing spiritual sustenance directly from its supernatural source amid the daily-ness of our lives' and our 'staying deeply rooted in spiritual reality'. Surely, the imagery is one of 'spiritual aliveness' (as opposed to spiritual dryness). We face plenty of distractions, but putting the matter of 'abiding' in those terms, I feel, helps us to realize we can realistically be 'alive to the presence of God wherever we are'.

When Christ spoke those words at the opening of John chapter 15, "*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine-dresser*", he was talking in terms of the potential fruitfulness of our day-to-day relationship with himself. The point is so graphic: apart from the vine, a branch can do nothing but shrivel; and equally, if we live apart from Christ day by day, we can't be what God wants us to be as Christians.

Our lives as Christians are not inevitably or automatically going to be fruitful for God. "*Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away*" or "*lifts up*" (v.2a, NKJVM), the Lord said. One modern vineyard owner remarks: 'New branches have a tendency to trail down and grow along the ground. We lift them up and wash them off ... they don't bear fruit down there ... [they] get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed.'

I suggest that could be the best way to understand what the Lord's saying here. The same word is often translated as 'lifts up' in our Bibles. And so the picture becomes this: in the same way that new branches have a natural tendency to head off in less productive directions and require **re-directing**, so do new - and not so new - Christians sometimes need to have their energies channelled in more productive directions.

The Lord Jesus next focused his attention on branches – or believers – who were producing some fruit, when he said: "*Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit*" (v.2b). I looked up some interesting background in a Gardening Report which told me that: 'Grapevines can become so dense the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form'. It seems, left to itself, a grape plant will always favour new growth over more grapes. From a distance, luxurious growth is an impressive achievement, but up close, it's nothing but an underwhelming harvest. Maybe, like me, you've been saddened to observe an experienced Christian whose life when viewed through a crisis experience seemed to display little evidence of an intimate relationship with Christ.

Isn't it, sadly, our human tendency to keep up appearances, to project an impressive image, to display the leaves of our accomplishments? But the Lord comes up close, scrutinising our lives, seeking fruit. There's always the real possibility that any one of us can have seasons of abundant foliage but underneath that outward show there's little fruit. As in Eden, the leaves are a cover-up. This will only be a problem if we don't recognize what's happening and react to the action of the divine Gardener.

The Gardener's action is to cut away unnecessary shoots, because the purpose of the branch is to bear grapes. Gardeners tell us that: 'because of the grape's tendency to grow so vigorously, a lot of wood must be cut away each year.' So the dedicated grape-producer has, once again, to go against the plant's natural tendency.

An extract from a Horticultural Bulletin runs like this: 'The ability to produce growth increases each year, but without intensive pruning the plant weakens and its crop diminishes. Mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yields'. There we have it - the painful reality - also for us as believers: the more mature, the more cutting! But then it's grapes, grapes and more grapes! The Lord wants us to build that kind of fruitful relationship with himself - and so he uses the testing of our faith - the season of the pruning shears.

If the newer, fruitless branch needs **re-directing**; then the more mature, partially fruitful branch needs a **reduction** (of self). Living 'after the Spirit', and not 'after the flesh' will ensure we have more spiritual fruit, and less branch visible.

Still the Lord was not finished. He who came that we might have life in all its fullness, added, "*He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit.*" This is the point at which the Lord introduced the vital matter of our 'abiding' or remaining in him as the true vine. This contains the idea of our 'spiritual aliveness' - being 'alive to the presence of God in our midst wherever and everywhere we are'. As David could say in the psalms: *I have set the LORD continually before me* (Psalm 16:8). Surely abiding is all about the crucial connection which is the meeting of branch and Vine. The branch with the largest, least-obstructed connection will have greatest potential for fruit. The branch is totally dependent on the vine through that point of meeting. Fruitfulness is fundamentally about our relationship with him - if we're abiding, we will be fruitful.

So far, the Lord has taught us: If the newer, fruitless branch needs **re-directing**? and the more mature, partially fruitful branch needs **reduction**, then the branch aspiring to be abundantly fruitful needs to **rediscover** relationship

with him as the primary source of satisfaction in the Christian life. Our energies may be channelled in the right direction, our worldly ambitions may have become moderated, but is there the same dependence as in earlier days? We ought never to think we can outgrow that need for total dependence on Christ. The Lord emphasizes the point again and again by raising the issue of 'abiding' no less than ten times here in John 15.

It's on this matter of abiding that an interesting thing happens: the onus for spiritual fruitfulness in our lives now shifts from the Gardener to the branch itself - to us. It will be in the measure we get ourselves out of the way and allow God's Word to get to work in us. Paul wrote to his Colossian friends and spoke of *the word of truth, the gospel bearing fruit and increasing in you? since the day you heard it* (1:6).

When the Lord spoke of 'abiding in him' he twinned that expression with 'his words abiding in us' (John 15:7). It hardly seems possible we can experience the one without the other. Earlier in John's gospel the Lord Jesus gives us a clear description of what it's like when people fail to allow his words to abide in them. He said to the Jews: *"And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."* (John 5:37-39)

In complete contrast, the Lord opened up to Emmaus-bound disciples *the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*. The Holy Spirit will do that, as we come daily to our Bibles in our quiet times. He takes of the things of Christ there and declares them to us (John 16:14). When we experience communion like that regularly, when the Spirit of God enables us to really believe the Bible's testimony about Christ, it's then we hear God's voice behind the sacred page – even as the Bible says, *today if you hear His voice* - and it's then we experience the reality of God's Word is abiding in us.

Branch-like intimacy and dependence develops through Bible reading and prayer that changes our desires so that they become His desires (vv.7&10). Then the longings we express in prayer align with God's will, leading us to expect to see answers to our prayers (v.7). When the praying is in relation to the Lord's work we're engaged in, this links up with aspects of fruitfulness for God in our lives (v.5) and so our heavenly Father is glorified (v.8).

This subject of abiding in Christ really starts in ch.14 when the Lord said: *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments if anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."* (John 14:15-23).

And the apostle John reserves his last recorded word on the topic of abiding for his second letter later in our Bibles: *Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son*. And in case there should be any doubt that the teaching of Christ - the commandments he had left for his disciples to keep - was what became known as the apostles' teaching, the very thing that defined the New Testament churches of God, John also said: *Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we [the apostles] have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward*. (2 John 1:8-9 NAS) Any reward in a future day when we stand before Christ will be adversely affected if there has been a lack of enthusiasm on our part to devote ourselves to the Apostolic Faith as the first believers did in Acts chapter 2. But the supreme motivation for that kind of devotion is our desire to be found abiding in Christ and being alive to his presence every moment of every day of our lives.