

Application of the Passage

What has all this to do with us? This is where we came in. As I said at the start:

Why spend time writing a book on the solemn preaching of a prophet who addressed Israel and Judah over 2500 years ago – preaching that was largely rejected by his own people at the time? What’s the point? What can Isaiah have to say to us today? If his own people in his own generation didn’t listen to him, why should we?

Are these real questions? – asked by a believer, I mean.

If so, the answer is obvious – or ought to be: Isaiah’s recorded discourses – as those of all the prophets (indeed, as all Scripture) – are the very words of God. And, as such therefore, they are always alive and always relevant. In particular, although Isaiah is long dead, Abel-like (Heb. 11:4), he is still being used by God to speak today. And we need to listen to him!

In addition, do not forget the passages I have already quoted; namely, Isaiah 30:8, Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 10:6,11-12 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

So... what does Isaiah 30 have to say to us today? We cannot, of course, simply transfer the prophet’s words to ourselves, to our circumstances, to our time, without making due allowance for the change of covenant from the old to the new. Nevertheless, as the above-quoted passages prove, the New Testament undoubtedly gives us warrant to take the principles of Isaiah 30 and, with due allowance for the change of covenant, make close application to ourselves and our circumstances. Indeed, it is stronger, far stronger than that: the New Testament demands that we do it. It wasn’t just Judah that needed to pay attention to and act upon God’s confrontation through the prophet; so do we. God’s people today are not exempt from God’s confrontation and

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judgment; indeed, we come first! Peter put it in black and white:

It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’ (1 Pet. 4:17-18)

It is the same principle that was active in God’s dealings with the Hebrews in the days of the old covenant:

I begin to work disaster at the city that is called by my name (Jer. 25:29).

That is, Jerusalem.

Begin at my sanctuary (Ezek. 9:6).

That is, the temple in Jerusalem.

In short:

You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2).

Pulling all this together, we can see that, granted the change in covenant, as God was prepared to judge Israel for its sin, so he is prepared to judge the churches for theirs. Most of Paul’s letters, written to correct error and disorder, contain plenty of rebukes. Above all, Revelation 2 and 3 puts the issue beyond doubt.

So let us remind ourselves of what we have learnt from Isaiah 30:

The people of Judah knew they were in trouble.

But they got the diagnosis wrong.

Hence they proposed the wrong solution – going to the world for its help.

In so doing, they were disobeying God’s word; they were going directly against it.

This got them into even deeper trouble.

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There was only one solution: repentance and reformation.

I say that today:

We know we are in trouble.

But many get the diagnosis wrong.

Hence they propose the wrong solution – going to the world for its help.

In so doing, we are disobeying God's word; we are going directly against it.

This will get us into even deeper trouble.

There is only one solution: repentance and reformation.

If not... ?

A brief history

Let me start by going back a few years. In the closing quarter of the 20th century, many thinking evangelicals felt that the most pressing problem facing the churches was the decline in church attendance. The only hope for avoiding extinction, so these evangelicals reasoned, was to devise ways to attract unbelievers into church attendance in order to evangelise them. As a result, starting in the USA in the 1980s, and reaching into the UK in the 21st century, various teachers applied their minds to a radical re-engineering of the *ekklēsia* to accommodate a ‘seeker-friendly’ or ‘deeds-ministry’ evangelism so that ‘the unchurched’ might be drawn into church attendance. Repeating the essence of the error of the opinion-formers in Judah, these *ekklēsia* re-engineers drew their ideas largely from pagans. They went to the world, not (as Judah) for political or military help, but for advice on how best to run the affairs of the church in order to attract and hold pagans in order to evangelise them. How were the worlds of business, entertainment and sport successful? What methods did they use? What were their priorities and strategies? What could we – as believers – learn from them and their success? And so on. Taking and adapting these ideas, the re-engineers (despite their protests to the contrary) came up with a complete system for evangelical churches. They produced manuals on how to set up, run and monitor

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the programmes – ‘How To’ or ‘Cook’ books! Conferences promoted it all. Change one or two words, and this body of work would make excellent material in the boardroom of a bank, the planning department of an advertising agency, a Financial Director’s suite in the business house, the office of a Director of Strategy for the corporate organisation behind any top-class sports team. Naturally! That’s where it came from!¹

This system has largely swept the board, so that most evangelicals now – nearing the end of the first quarter of the 21st century – to a greater or lesser extent are adopting such schemes. Many evangelicals cannot think in any other way. Indeed, most of the under 50s have never known anything different. The remodelers are rapidly turning the church – the *ekklēsia* – into a professional business organisation, an evangelism structured-entertainment and creature-comfort system, where presentation and performance far outweigh principle.² Doctrinal distinctives – where they are thought about at all – are considered ‘unhelpful’; that is, not conducive to attracting and holding pagans in church attendance. In short, the kingdom of Christ and the world are being morphed into one.

I am not saying that modern evangelicals want church attendance – and nothing more. Not at all. They really do hope that by increasing the numbers in church attendance they will maximise their opportunities for evangelism. Nevertheless, church attendance by ‘the unchurched’, ‘the unreached’ or ‘the not-yet-Christians’ (modern evangelicals are fully alive to the need to avoid confrontational and upsetting words like ‘sinners’, ‘unbelievers’, ‘pagans’) is the first and major step in modern evangelism, the top priority of

¹ See my *Relationship; Dilemma; New-Covenant Articles Volume 12*. Much as they might protest against the idea of a programme, this has certainly been the lasting and widespread effect of the re-engineers’ work.

² See below for some historical examples of how this principle is always close at hand.

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church life. For most evangelicals today, getting ‘the unchurched’ into church attendance is the key step in fulfilling Christ’s standing commission for his people (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16).

Although David F.Wells, writing in the 1990s, was commenting on the evangelical scene in America in the last quarter of the 20th century, his words apply generally to the West today:

The market... is affecting both the internal ethos in the church and its external organisation. Internally, it is inclining us to think of sinners as consumers... The market is changing the external structures of evangelicalism, most obviously by encouraging us to think that religion provides us with a field of opportunity.³

And it ‘works’! For most believers, that is. Indeed, as things seem to them, it is the only way.

After all, for most believers today, the measure of a church’s success, the measure of its well-being, the yardstick of its prosperity, is the number of people attending services: the more people coming through the doors, and coming regularly, the more successful the church. Ask how a church is doing, and it is almost certain that numbers will dominate the reply. Ask about the effect of evangelistic efforts, and the answer is often to do with the number of ‘opportunities’.⁴ On this basis, while ‘stick-in-the-mud, traditional’ churches, churches which will not adopt the new methods, are mostly isolated (or exist in small conclaves), stagnant, ageing, withering, many ‘contemporary’ churches, adopting the modern ideas, are in the pink of health and thriving; going like ‘a house afire’ doesn’t come into it!

³ David F.Wells: ‘The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church’, an article drawn from his 1996 The Banner of Truth booklet with the same title. See Appendix 3 for an extended extract from his invaluable article.

⁴ Of course, when talking about evangelism ‘opportunities’ are not to be sneezed at, but nothing less than conversions will fit the bill.

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Isaiah 30 speaks directly to this. Judah was in trouble; in the late 20th century many evangelicals realised the churches were in trouble. Judah forsook God's word to go to Egypt; many evangelicals pragmatically have gone to the world for its ideas. Judah thought it had solved its problem; the same is true for many contemporary evangelicals. Judah was mistaken; modern evangelicals, likewise.

What is the real issue?

Is church attendance the biblical measure of a church's prosperity? And is it the biblical way of evangelism?

The answer to both questions is as plain as a pikestaff. No! Both concepts are unbiblical. The number of church attenders is no measure of the biblical prosperity of a church. Getting unbelievers into church attendance is not the biblical way of evangelism.⁵

In fact, none of this is anywhere near the real issue facing the churches – not remotely! The churches are in a crisis, yes, but not because of falling attendance. That is the reddest of all red herrings. In fact, speaking biblically, there is no such thing as 'church attendance'. I will return to these vital points.

As we have seen, the real issue for Judah in the days of Isaiah 30 was Judah. The real issue for us today is ourselves.

It is not numbers 'attending church'. It never has been. Apart from the very early days in Jerusalem (Acts 2 – 7), we know nothing about the number of believers in the churches recorded in the New Testament; it never speaks of it – it seems to have been irrelevant to the sacred writers. But all the incidental evidence we have in Scripture points to the relative smallness of numbers in the days following that very early time in Jerusalem. Since churches nearly always met in

⁵ See my *Relationship*.

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private houses, it is self-evident that they must have been relatively small.⁶

What is more, biblical teaching on the *ekklēsia* demands it. Manageable numbers are essential for the proper carrying out of the ‘members one of another’ principle in conjunction with the priesthood of all believers.⁷

As I have said, the concept of ‘church attendance’ is, in itself, utterly unbiblical. It is Christendom-speak, stemming from the Fathers. Let me explain. The Fathers went back to the old covenant, took its practices and used them to impose old-covenant shadows on the *ekklēsia*. It was a disaster.⁸ Specifically, while, in the days of the old covenant, the Israelites had to go three times a year to Jerusalem to attend the temple, to keep the feasts, and so on – place, building and dates were vital in the old covenant – none of this comes over into the new.⁹ John 4 is explicit. Talk of ‘church attendance’, therefore, ought to be stopped,¹⁰ along with ‘I worship every Sunday at 11am at So-and-So Evangelical Church’. Worship is 24/7, anywhere and everywhere (take 1 Corinthians 10:31). Confusing this is ‘a drastic error’,

⁶ See the chapter ‘Numbers and their Management’ in my *Relationship*.

⁷ See my *Performance*.

⁸ They also went to pagans: ‘sacraments’, for instance. See my *Pastor; Battle*.

⁹ See my *Relationship; Performance*; and my ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’ and ‘The Temple and the New Covenant’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

¹⁰ Likewise, the ‘church calendar’ should be poleaxed: ‘Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain’ (Gal. 4:9-11). Incidentally, many evangelicals are becoming eager advocates of the church calendar. Naturally! It gives increased opportunities for attracting ‘the unchurched’ into church, ‘carol services’ being number one on the list!

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stemming from a ‘lack of serious engagement with what the Bible actually says about church’. Those words come from this work by Phillip D.Jensen and Tony Payne:

‘Don’t we basically go to church to worship God...?’... That this view is so common among evangelicals today is testimony... to our lack of serious engagement with what the Bible actually says about church... When we hear evangelicals talking about church being worship, and our buildings being sanctuaries... it is greatly disturbing, not least of all because it is so biblically wrong. All the [old-covenant] language of temple, altar, sanctuary, service, priests and offerings is taken up and fulfilled in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. He is our temple, our tabernacle, our offering, our sacrifice. In him God’s presence is continually with us (through the indwelling Spirit), and thus our whole lives are our spiritual worship as we obey him and do his will. We do still worship in church – but only in the sense that we breathe in church. We don’t go to church to worship any more than we go to church to breathe. The purpose of church is fellowship [for and] with God’s people around God’s word. We worship in every aspect of our lives day by day as we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. To confuse the two, as most evangelicals seem to [do] today, is a drastic error. You certainly won’t find the two confused in the New Testament... [Expressing] these ideas no doubt [goes] somewhat against the grain. [They could say that again!] We have sat, Sunday after Sunday for years on end, hearing our pastor [I let this stand, but see my *Pastor*] say: ‘We welcome you today to our hour of worship’. Yet study the Scriptures and see.¹¹

Quite! Believers do not ‘attend church’, ‘go to church’; they are the church! The church comes together, meets, assembles: ‘When you come together as a church... When you come together’ (1 Cor. 11:18,20). And:

¹¹ Phillip D.Jensen and Tony Payne: ‘Church/Campus Connections’, in D.A.Carson (ed.): *Telling Truth: Evangelising Post-Moderns*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000, pp202-203. I owe this extract to a friend who pointed me to it since I published my *Performance*.

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Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day [of judgment] drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

Many believers think those two verses tell believers to turn up at a special building at an appointed time, and play their designated role (often virtually passive) in a ‘service’. How tragic!¹²

So... what about the advance of the gospel in those early days? First of all, let us remind ourselves of Christ’s directive:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me [Christ declared]. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).

In particular, consider the major steps in the fulfilling of that directive:

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:47-49).

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

There is no evidence that this ever took place within the *ekklēsia*. Nor was it accomplished by the apostles setting up

¹² See my *Performance*.

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a committee to devise a plan of action. Not at all! As for consulting the Greeks and Romans...! As Acts 2, 8, 10 and 16 shows, the advance was through spontaneous conversations, personal witness and preachings (using the word ‘preaching’ in its widest, new-covenant sense) *outside* the meetings of the *ekklēsia*, under the direction and empowering of the sovereign Spirit. Indeed, it could be argued that persecution of the saints was one of the main means the Spirit used to advance the spread of the gospel (see Acts 4:1-31; 5:12-42; 8:1-40, and so on). And all was in accordance with Christ’s promise (I paraphrase): ‘Stay... until you are clothed with power from on high... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and [only after that and in this way] you will be my witnesses’. There was nothing of human planning about it. The apostles did not plan the events of Acts 2, 8, 10 or 16. Indeed, the evidence tells us that the events recorded in those chapters took the early believers completely by surprise.¹³

As just one example, take Peter going to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). This had nothing to do with any scheme or church meeting. There was a plan, yes, but it was God’s plan, and it was secret – until God, working at both ends of the chain, brought the two men together, and sovereignly, and to all intents and purposes as it seemed to them, spontaneously worked by his Spirit in the conversion of sinners under the preaching of the gospel.¹⁴ And when Peter got back to Jerusalem and was interrogated, the sceptical brothers needed to be persuaded of the rightness of it all (Acts 11:1-18). The notion of human ‘planning’ is absurd.

Spontaneity is the word; not professional organisation.

Flying in the face of this overwhelming biblical evidence, the remodelers have taken something which should be, from our point of view, amateur, and turned it into a professional process. By my use of ‘amateur’, I do not mean

¹³ See my *Relationship*.

¹⁴ See my *Dilemma*.

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‘incompetent’; rather, I am thinking of ‘un-designed’, ‘non-professional’; yes, even ‘amateurish’. The root meaning of the word speaks of ‘love’. The early churches, though as far removed from professionalism as can be imagined, were, under God, highly successful in seeing the advance of the gospel by real conversions. Today’s churches, in contrast, are, by adopting the professionally designed system, becoming more and more polished and successful in boosting the numbers in attendance (maybe, though, more often than is thought about, by letting other churches go to the wall) but, I fear, the results will prove catastrophic.

Be that as it may – time will tell – there is not the slightest suggestion that the early believers thought of attracting pagans into their assemblies in order to evangelise them.¹⁵ This is not to say that the church cannot arrange meetings to preach – in the widest sense of the word¹⁶ – the gospel to unbelievers,¹⁷ but the notion of combining this with in-house *ekklēsia* life is incomprehensible in new-covenant terms, and leads to all sorts of problems and complications. The fact is, evangelicals have changed Christ’s ‘Go out’ into ‘Get them in’. In Christendom terms, of course, this makes perfect sense. And that is precisely what is wrong with it. And long-term attendance by the unconverted carries heavy risks; it can lead to hypocrisy among unconverted attenders and ‘coached converts’ who learn the ropes, are virtually ‘roted’ into being able to repeat the lingo, and so on, but remain unregenerate.¹⁸

Isaiah 30 – allowing for the change of externals – speaks directly to this. Judah acted pragmatically and went to Egypt; modern evangelicals are aping the world.¹⁹

¹⁵ See my *Relationship*.

¹⁶ See my *Sowed*.

¹⁷ See my *Gadfly*.

¹⁸ See my *Dilemma*.

¹⁹ Take the media. Investigative journalism is being replaced by ‘news for entertainment’. Likewise, I see the gospel being adapted to accommodate pagan sensibilities.

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As I read the times, this pragmatic approach is fast becoming the very hallmark of modern evangelicalism; more and more churches are turning to man, his ideas, his way of success, taking the world's system, adapting, adopting it, accommodating it, applying it to the life of the *ekklēsia*. Indeed, the modern evangelical church does all it can to satisfy pagan desires,²⁰ offering pagans a chance to enjoy the rites of their pagan deities. 'Eat All You Can', 'Coffee Refills Free' just about sums up much of it!

As for using carnal bait to attract and hold pagans in *ekklēsia* life, words fail. My GP (physician) does not put on carnal attractions to get me to attend the surgery (office), nor does my dentist, even though they could both argue that by getting people in, by whatever means (the end justifying those means), they could reach many more and engage them in preventative medicine, dental care and necessary life-style changes. But they don't demean their work by such shenanigans! So why does the church think of doing it? Why do we cheapen Christ and his gospel by our side-shows, schemes drawn up in consultation with the world in order to attract sinners?²¹

No *ekklēsia* in the New Testament did it. The New Testament is adamant that the *ekklēsia* and the world should be – must be – distinct and separate. The world hates God and his law (Rom. 8:7), and we are told not to love the world (1 John 2:15) since, as James thundered:

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4).

We are in the world but not of it; we have to have contact with it, but avoid its contamination; we are not to be captivated by it, incorporating its ideas, practices and

²⁰ See my *Mistaken*.

²¹ I remember an old deacon saying to me more than sixty years ago: 'The gospel isn't cheap. It's free!'

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marketing techniques into the *ekklēsia* to complete a task the Lord never gave us. Christ, in his great prayer as Mediator, praying for his people, expressed it thus:

The world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18).

No wonder James could say:

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord (Jas. 5:10).

And, of course, Christ could not have been more explicit:

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:11-12; see 2 Chron. 36:16; Matt. 23:37; Luke 11:50; Acts 7:52; 1 Thess. 2:15; Heb. 11:33-40).

The early church certainly experienced persecution right from the start. It began in Acts 3 – 5, Stephen was martyred (Acts 7), Paul met it at Damascus (Acts 9) and almost everywhere else throughout the remainder of his life, as the rest of Acts shows. And as we come to the end of the canon in Revelation, we find John in exile: ‘I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’ (Rev. 1:9). And it was not just John who was persecuted (Rev. 2:10,13; 3:10, and so on).

Oh yes, faithful prophets and preachers – faithful believers – always have me and always will meet opposition, and worse. The world hates their separation.

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Separation is such a prominent biblical principle, I must say a little more about it.

The key factor: separation

As we have seen, in the days of the old covenant, Israel, right from the exodus, had to be separate.²² Consequently, just as Judah, by calling upon Egypt, was, in effect, reversing the exodus, so modern evangelicals who adopt the new system, are reversing Galatians 1:4. Galatians 1:4? Yes, indeed. God, in Christ, has redeemed – delivered, rescued, separated – his people from this present evil age, and yet churches are going back to that age and adopting its very principles! By encouraging unbelievers into church attendance, they are disobeying the plain apostolic command:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.²³ For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty’. Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1).

I am bound to wonder if the ‘re-engineers’ feel uncomfortable when – if, these days – they sing Robert Robinson’s hymn:

²² See my ‘No Mixture’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

²³ In my limited experience, opening the Lord’s supper to all and sundry (with or without any warning) is becoming more common. Churches and their elders cannot evade responsibility for this.

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*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love.*

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to invent a ‘better’ way.*

The biblical reality

So if ‘church attendance’ is not the biblical measure of the health of an *ekklēsia*, what is? The yardstick is entirely spiritual.

Let’s start with an attempted definition. Scripture speaks of ‘a church’ in terms of a local group of believers – saints – who are committed to one another,²⁴ believers who have engaged themselves to mutually encourage one another²⁵ to live in obedience to the law of Christ, as befits those who belong to the people who are known as the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’.²⁶ A ‘saint’, in brief, is one who is separated from the world by the Spirit – he is positionally ‘sanctified’ in Christ, and is being progressively ‘sanctified’.²⁷

The *ekklēsia* exists for the glory of God in the mutual edification of the local believers united in obeying and serving Christ. Using this measure, is the local church thriving? What is the spirituality of its members? More, is that spirituality increasing? How vibrant is the exercise of the priesthood of all believers within the *ekklēsia*?²⁸ Does the principle of ‘members one of another’ govern the church, in attitude and action? How biblical, how powerful, how convicting, how edifying is the preaching/teaching?²⁹ Is the church seeing additions by means of conversions from the world (including, of course, baptism) (as in Acts 2:41,47;

²⁴ An *ad hoc* group of believers is not ‘a church’.

²⁵ There are 59 examples of ‘one another’ in Scripture, showing its vital importance to *ekklēsia* life.

²⁶ See, for instance, my *Battle*; *Infant*; *Relationship*; *Pastor*; *The Priesthood*.

²⁷ See my *Positional*; *Fivefold*. See also my *Performance*.

²⁸ See my *The Priesthood*; *Pastor*; *Sowed*.

²⁹ See my *Preaching*.

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4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7; 9:31,35,42; 11:21,24; 14:1,21; 16:5; 17:12)?³⁰ What of the spirituality of those who are converted? How strong is the discipline (1 Cor. 5; Gal. 2:1-14; 1 John 2:18-29; Jude)? How rich – *spiritually speaking* – is the demonstration of ‘love’ among us? And so on.

In all these areas,³¹ the grim state of many contemporary evangelical churches is only too obvious.³²

And as for evangelism, things have got to such a low ebb that I detect a growing unwillingness among evangelicals even to talk in terms of regeneration leading to conversion – the biblical concept of both, that is. Indeed, I fear a growing number of evangelicals are rapidly losing the biblical sense of both.³³ As I have said, there seems a reluctance to speak of unconverted sinners, unbelievers, pagans; the modern lingo concentrates on ‘the unchurched’, ‘the unreached’, ‘the not-yet-Christians’. I am not nit-picking. Words have meaning. And the principles behind these words matter. The fundamental aspect of gospel preaching – confrontation of sinners and their culture – is, at best, muted. Divisive, discriminating preaching – discriminating between believer and unbeliever – has largely disappeared. The note of judgment is, at best, muted. The ‘feel-good’ or ‘self-esteem’ factor has taken its place.³⁴

³⁰ With second-generation Christianity, of course, the children of believers came into the picture. The Fathers soon got to work on that, and came up with infant baptism! And look at the eternal damage that has caused for millions.

³¹ The last stated, perhaps, is an exception to my indictment. But do not miss my emphasis.

³² See my *Performance*.

³³ See my *Mistaken*. I am struck by the seeming growing ignorance of – and lack of curiosity about – regeneration.

³⁴ See my *Dilemma; Mistaken*. D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: ‘Sensitivity about self – is this not one of the greatest curses in life? It is a result of the Fall. We spend the whole of our life watching ourselves... The whole trouble in life is ultimately a concern about self’ (Iain H.Murray: ‘Some Convictions of Lloyd-Jones in

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Again, in most churches, the concept of the priesthood of all believers is relegated to a token statement in the confession, and, for all practical purposes, has become a museum piece.

Preaching verges on the powerless: lectures (often boring, often titivated by PowerPoint and slide-show) are the order of the day,³⁵ while real preaching is at a premium. Surely I am not alone when I say that I have witnessed congregations which only come to life when the coffee and biscuits (or, increasingly, far richer goodies) are wheeled in, or discussion of the latest sport or entertainment starts.³⁶ If not that, and if ‘the means of communication’ are used in a lively manner, then many congregations are being reared on a carnal diet designed to encourage its sense of ‘well-being’, ‘feel-good’, ‘self-esteem-ism’.

Then again, right across the board, there is a signal lack of curiosity among believers about spiritual matters – scriptural doctrine in particular. Indeed, in modern churches, doctrinal distinctives do not count for much; they get in the way of the ‘real business’ of evangelism.³⁷ Especially is this lack of curiosity noticeable among the young, specifically among

‘Miniature’ in *Lloyd-Jones – Messenger of Grace*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2008, p223.

³⁵ One of the many curses about PowerPoint is that it ruins the eye contact which is essential to preaching. The hearer (please note, not spectator) has his eye drawn to the screen and not the preacher, who now cannot look the hearer in the eye, and thus, as Asahel Nettleton, into his soul. See my *Preaching*.

³⁶ See my *Preaching*.

³⁷ In the 16th century, because the Turks were at the gates of Vienna, the Pope wanted Luther to drop his criticism of Roman doctrine and practice. The pressure is on today for some kind of unity where many distinctives are dropped in the interest of evangelism (however loosely defined). Take the justification for co-operation in evangelism by strange bedfellows expressed in 1994 in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*. J.I.Packer was a signatory. See Iain H.Murray: ‘Is the Reformation Over? A Review’ in *Lloyd-Jones – Messenger of Grace* p263.

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the young men – those young men who, in a few short few years, will be the leaders of the *ekklēsia*. This, to put it mildly, does not bode well for the long-term prosperity of the cause of Christ.³⁸

What is more, if churches do attempt discipline, too often the church down the road will receive the offended party, no questions asked, thus nullifying any sense of discipline.

If my assessment is right, then many of today's evangelical churches are approaching a terminal condition. We are entering a period of judgment, if not already there. Many, I know, would take the opposite tack: attendance is booming, the activities are over-subscribed, the sun is beaming down out of a cloudless sky. All is well!

True enough, numbers may be on the up and up, buildings being extended to cope, but spiritually speaking? It is far from being merely a question of evangelism. The church itself is suffering from a fatal disease. God is sovereign, yes, but, as with Israel and Judah of old, his sovereignty ensures that disobedience leads to judgment. The same goes for the new covenant. Revelation 2 and 3 could not make it clearer: Christ is willing to remove candlesticks. Church history verifies it again and again. Take the early churches of North Africa, and the thousand years known as the Dark Ages, as but two examples. It can happen again. It can happen to us! Islam is waiting in the wings, poised to grasp the opportunity that beckons by our weakness.

Here, yet again, the history of Israel and Judah stands as a signal warning to us – as Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:1-13). The old-covenant people of God strayed from their

³⁸ Recently, I asked an intelligent young man, a member of a Reformed Baptist church, what he understood by ‘justification’, ‘regeneration’ and ‘propitiation’. His inadequate answers were not the worst of it; he showed no curiosity about why I had asked my question, nor why I had picked on these words.

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covenant, went to the world, and thus ended up in captivity. I am convinced we are witnessing a replay of this in our day.

The fundamental point

Idolatry was the issue for Judah, and so it is today.

Wait a minute! We are not idolaters!

Oh yes, we are! Idolatry is the fundamental sin of all men, without exception. So what is this idolatry? We must not confine our idea of idolatry to ‘primitive man’ bowing and scraping before a god he has made out of wood, stone or precious metal. Such *is* idolatry, of course, but the concept runs far deeper and wider than that! Self is the greatest idol of them all.

On the personal level, as natural men, born in sin, self becomes our god. As I have already said, this is so all-embracing, and so strongly has this principle captured the high ground that the drive is on for sermons to amount to little more than a boost for the hearers’ sense of self-worth, significance and well-being.³⁹ Consumerism is not merely about ‘stuff’, remember; it is concerned with ‘self-image’, and this is idolatry, pure and simple.

On the corporate level, any turning to man, any invented ‘worship’, any copying the world, any adoption of its ideas and practices, any incorporation of such into the *ekklēsia*, the taking of any step towards the adoption of the gods and principles of the age, is idolatry. It is the principle that counts; principle must rule, not pragmatism. Today’s evangelical churches may not be guilty of crass ‘primitive’ idolatry, but God does not warn us – warn us, in the days of the new covenant – against idolatry (1 Cor. 10:7,14; Eph. 5:5; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 John 5:21) for nothing! Idolatry did not die out with ancient Greece or Rome! We, today, so blatantly show that we are practising idolaters – not having gods of stone, but gods of the mind, gods of the heart, gods of pagan

³⁹ See my *Mistaken*. Rom. 1:18-32 could not be clearer.

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reasoning, gods of carnal principles and practices, and the like.

And it is more than a danger; too often it is becoming the norm.

Note how God opened his law to Israel with detailed commandments against idolatry, forbidding Israel to have any truck with it. But Israel repeatedly descended into idolatry. So much so, God, time and time again, mocked the pagan practice (Ps. 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Isa. 44:9-20; 46:1-7; Jer. 10:6-11).⁴⁰

And what of the new covenant? Are we, today, free of idolatry? Paul did not write the following for no reason. He was spelling out the idolatry we are to expect throughout this age, and what we are to do about it:

Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Note that ‘the love of self’ is an idol, the first to be mentioned, along with ‘the love of pleasure’. Remember James’ blunt address to believers:

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (Jas. 4:3).

The love of novelty is a god:

The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn

⁴⁰ See my discourse: ‘Do You Get The Joke?’ on my sermonaudio.com page

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away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

As Timothy Keller put it:

Our contemporary society is not fundamentally different from these ancient ones [the Greek-Roman culture of New Testament times]. Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its ‘priesthoods’, its totems and rituals. Each one has its shrines – whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios or stadiums – where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life, and ward off disaster. What are the gods of beauty, power, money and achievement, but the same things that have assumed mythic proportions in our individual lives and in our society?⁴¹

Grievously, many evangelical churches are rapidly becoming places where such a religion is fostered. Let me repeat an earlier observation. The modern evangelical church bends over backwards to satisfy pagan desires,⁴² offering pagans a chance to enjoy the rites of their pagan deities. ‘Eat All You Can’, ‘Coffee Refills Free’ just about sums up much of it!

As I say, the principle is far from new. A man-made solution leads to a man-made religion, which is idolatry. ‘Man-made’ is the phrase:

The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you. And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, *the work of human hands* (Deut. 4:27-28).

I [Moses reminded Israel] turned and came down from the mountain [Sinai], and the mountain was burning with fire. And the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the LORD your God. You had *made yourselves* a golden calf.

⁴¹ Timothy Keller: *Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down*, Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., London, 2010, xi-xii. But see my *Mistaken* for my very serious critique of what Keller makes of this.

⁴² See my *Mistaken*.

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You had turned aside quickly from the way that the LORD had commanded you (Deut. 9:15-16).

...they were not gods, but *the work of men's hands* (2 Kings 19:18; see also Isa. 37:19).

Their idols are silver and gold, *the work of human hands*. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who *make them* become like them; so do all who trust in them (Ps. 115:4-8).

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, *the work of human hands* (Ps. 135:15).

You have rejected your people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of things from the east and of fortune-tellers like the Philistines, and they strike hands with the children of foreigners... Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to *the work of their hands*, to *what their own fingers have made* (Isa. 2:6-8; see also Isa. 17:8).

We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, *an image formed by the art and imagination of man* (Acts 17:29).

The work of human hands, of course, starts with thoughts, ideas, plans, schemes, in the mind of man. Such thoughts, such ideas, are but a vapour, a vanity, useless:

Learn not the way of the nations... The customs of the peoples are vanity, a mist or vapour (Jer. 10:2-3).

The household gods utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies; they tell false dreams and give empty consolation. Therefore the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted for lack of a shepherd (Zech. 10:2).

As Charles Wesley expressed it: 'The arm of flesh will fail you'. Attempting God's work with man-made tools is worse than useless.

Modern churches are making the same mistake as Judah in the days of the old covenant: Ahaz sought aid from Assyria

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(2 Kings 16), and as a result brought back to the temple a copy of the Assyrian altar. And so on. God does not dwell in man-made temples (Acts 7:48; 17:24), nor work through man-made schemes. Using such ‘remedies’ only exposes lack of confidence in God – as Judah was roundly told:

In that day you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest, and you saw that the breaches of the city of David were many. You collected the waters of the lower pool, and you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall. You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool. But you did not look to him who did it, or see him who planned it long ago (Isa. 22:8-11).⁴³

The harvest for the adopting of such schemes will be dire. It was for Judah:

All you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches! Walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled! This you have from my hand: you shall lie down in torment (Isa. 50:11).

They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns; they have tired themselves out but profit nothing (Jer. 12:13).

Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land (Jer. 17:5-6).

Do not forget that when the prophets spoke against idolatry, their real target was not the idolatry of the pagan nations, but the way God’s people copied pagan idolatry, adopted their ways, incorporated pagan ideas into Judaism:

My people have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods; they made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient roads, and to walk in side roads, not the highway (Jer. 18:15).

⁴³ They were looking to man and not God.

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The churches are always tempted to use the world's tools to do the task Christ laid out for us. And it always ends in disaster. Going to the world means the world infiltrates the church; its principles begin to rule the roost. This is toxic.

It is the hidden cost to all this remodelling; indeed, from the church's viewpoint it is an example of the so-called 'law of unintended consequences'. But from God's viewpoint, it is not: when the *ekklēsia* looks to the world, calls on the world, then the world infests the church.

Nothing is more evident today. A growing number of churches are rapidly becoming akin to business houses, fast-food outlets, shopping malls, social clubs, entertainment centres, fun palaces. Even where churches have, thus far, avoided the worst excesses, a growing number of them are allowing the principles to affect their practice and preaching. The consequences must be obvious. How can the church confront the world and its culture when it buys into the world's system in order to make itself and its message attractive to the world? The world – as Egypt with Judah – demands its price, and it has to be paid. And that price is? The sanitising, the dumbing-down, of the gospel, the paring away of its 'rough' edges – rough, that is, in the eyes of the re-engineers who are making the attraction of 'the unchurched' into church attendance their priority.⁴⁴

Satan wants the world in the church. If the church will not play ball, he will use the world to frustrate and oppose the church. Israel met this principle after the exile when the pagans tried to interfere with the re-building of the temple by the Jews after their captivity (Ezra chapters 4 and 5).

Following the common misdiagnosis of our plight, the modern panacea⁴⁵ for getting out of our troubles can be

⁴⁴ See my *Dilemma*.

⁴⁵ Its leading advocates deny they are setting out a panacea (Evans p10, for example), but the entire ambience contradicts their claim. It strikes me as something like the small-print statuary health-

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summarised as ‘accommodate the *ekklēsia* and the gospel to the current culture’. I call it ‘modern’, but the truth is there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9-10); it has all been tried before. It is simply an old principle kitted out in a new frock. And, as before, it will again prove wanting – and worse. When the church goes to the world and accommodates or incorporates its culture, the law of unforeseen consequences kicks in.⁴⁶ The church in its naivety might like to think it is calling the shots, taking what it wants from the world, and steering clear of contamination, but, if so, it is fooling nobody but itself!

As just one example, take René Descartes (1596-1650) who tried to convince men of God’s existence by philosophical and scientific reasoning. It backfired. As Alister McGrath points out:

To his critics, Descartes merely managed to show that, by his own criteria, God’s existence seemed rather unlikely... The very modest success of these proofs led many to wonder if God’s existence was quite as self-evident as they had once thought. A well-meaning defence of God ended up persuading people that the case for God was surprisingly uncertain... Descartes and his colleagues proposed that a perfect being was the best explanation of the universe. Yet by doing so, they opened the way to the response that the universe was perfectly capable of explaining itself, and they also heightened awareness of one of the Christian faith’s greatest vulnerabilities – the problem of evil. If God is supremely perfect, why do suffering and pain exist, causing such distress to humanity? One of Descartes’ most significant achievements [therefore] was to make what had hitherto been a practical issue of Christian spirituality (how can I cope with suffering?) into a dis-confirmation of the

warnings we see everywhere today – we see and usually ignore. Everybody is satisfied – the authorities get their box ticked, and the majority carry on undisturbed.

⁴⁶ I will return to this.

faith[!]. How could anyone believe in a perfect divine being, when the world was so clearly imperfect?⁴⁷

Other ideas have been tried. At one stage in the 19th century many hoped that it would be possible to harmonise Higher Criticism (which treats the Bible as an ordinary book, denying the supernatural) and Scripture. In D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones' day, some flirted with intellectualism, hoping that acceptance by academe would bring success, and though he spoke strongly against it, some continue in that vein. Nowadays, many accommodate Scripture to Science, talking of 'Intelligent Design' instead of a direct assertion of God's creation of the universe as recorded in Genesis – in particular, the creation of man – as opposed to evolution.⁴⁸

Let me say a little more about the price those who crave academic respectability have to pay to academe. Take a couple of modern examples.

Iain H.Murray, replying to John Brencher's criticism of Lloyd-Jones and his 1966 discourse at the meeting of the Evangelical Alliance, and subsequent events in which he was involved, made the key point; namely, that if Brencher wanted to show he was right in what he alleged about Lloyd-Jones:

...he should have proceeded in his thesis [for a doctorate] to examine whether Lloyd-Jones' theology was true or not according to Scripture. That he did not do this was surely due to the fact that the academic world, whose approval his doctoral thesis required, allows no such final appeal to Scripture.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Alister McGrath: *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, Doubleday, New York, 2004, pp31-32.

⁴⁸ See D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The Weapons of our Warfare*; 'Knowledge – False and True' in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987, pp30-31.

⁴⁹ Iain H.Murray: 'The Universities and the Church – "Athens" or "Jerusalem"' in *Lloyd-Jones – Messenger of Grace* p196. The entire section (pp193-198) should be read. Lloyd-Jones met heavy

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Again, do the canons of academe allow evangelicals to speak of ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ or confine their remarks to ‘Jesus’?

Compare the early church. Greek and Roman culture in those days would have had little objection to believers speaking of the Lordship of Christ, Christ as God – as long as they did not insist on his being the only God, and as long as they allowed him to be one among the many gods they worshipped. But the believers insisted that Christ is unique: that was the stance the early church adopted (Acts 4:12; see also John 6:68; 14:6). In other words, the first believers directly and deliberately confronted the hostile culture on the issue, and did so head-on. And that is only one issue.

This illustrates, yet again, that our task – it is Christ’s appointed task for us – is to confront the world, confront the culture which surrounds us, doing so in the way the apostles did, not accommodating the gospel to that culture, but demanding, calling for, urging, beseeching, seeking to persuade, commanding sinners to forsake the culture, repent of their sin, and trust Christ.

In short, the New Testament makes it clear that believers are to stand apart from the culture, to confront it, to assert the truth by proclaiming the gospel, not to accommodate God’s word to worldly, pagan principles and practices. We may no more use or combine pagan thought with Scripture than add the least pinch of strychnine to the water supply. There can be no syncretism, no amalgamation (or attempted

flak for his stance in the evangelical division over ecumenism in the 1960s. His point was that the gospel itself was at stake. Murray is arguing that Brencher, challenging Lloyd-Jones’ stance, failed to explore the issue biblically because of the constraints of academe. The application of this principle goes far wider. Alas, many Reformed teachers deal with questions on the law, for instance, not by Scripture but by a Confession. See, for instance, my ‘A Breath of Fresh Air Wanted: A Brief Review of McGrane on NCT’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

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amalgamation) of different cultures or schools of thought with Scripture. God made it clear to Israel in the old covenant (Deut. 4:1-2); the same goes for the new (Rev. 22:18-19).

Paul had to face the issue. He was pressed to compromise. He could have done it: the Corinthians wanted him to adapt his approach to the prevailing opinions in Corinth. And we know how he responded. In the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, he bluntly dismissed the Corinthians' appeal, ridiculing the cultures of his day: he did not dream of any compromise with them! Compromise? He confronted them!⁵⁰ In response to the pressure exerted upon him by the Corinthians, the apostle was adamant:

I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:2-5).

And it is not just in a verse or two that the apostle makes his point. See the entire context of the surrounding chapters.

A friend gave me this quote from Steve Lawson: 'The problem with preachers today is that nobody wants to kill them any more'. The truth is, the problem with preachers today is that so many of them are not saying anything that makes anybody want to kill them any more.

The way forward

What can be done about it? What is the solution? What did the people of Judah have to do? Isaiah told them:

In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength (Isa. 30:15).

⁵⁰ See my *Confront; Dilemma*.

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We need to be clear. This is not ‘Let Go and Let God’! Nor is it fatalism.⁵¹ This is not the prosperity gospel – no penny-in-the-slot here!⁵² Do not miss the ‘in returning’. Judah had to retrace her steps, get back to where she left the road, get back to Scripture; in other words, Judah had to repent and reform by obeying Scripture. Jeremiah put it this way:

Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls... Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet! (Jer. 6:16-17).

Alas, Judah refused (Jer. 6:16-17; 7:25-27). But the only answer then was the old biblical answer – a return to Scripture. The only answer for us is a return to Scripture; in particular, a return to the New Testament, the new-covenant pattern for the *ekklēsia*. We need the sovereign power of the Spirit through the scriptural preaching of the gospel, and its application to all aspects of *ekklēsia* life, using ‘preaching’ in its widest new-covenant sense.

And that takes us to the conclusion.

⁵¹ In my experience, Arminians are most prone to use the ‘God is sovereign’ mantra, and do so at the drop of a hat. Of course God is sovereign. And his sovereignty – as he showed with Israel and Judah, and with the seven churches of Asia, and so on – includes judgment.

⁵² See my *Beyond*.