

ALTERNATIVE GROWTH SYSTEMS

A PROPOSAL

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INTRODUCTION

How did all this start?

Did you ever wonder when you were young about what you would choose if you were granted three wishes? We grew up on all those stories about Aladdin and his magic lamp, genies, and variations on them. It always seemed difficult for the person wishing to get the choices right. Then there were the more grown up macabre stories like “The Monkey’s Paw” that allowed adults these wishes. But the results seemed to wind up twisted in some way to the point that the owner would finally wish the granted wishes away.

At a point some years ago, probably at least twelve, I recall a speaker at a morning church service giving a challenge and asking us what we would ask Jesus to give us if we could ask him for anything we wished. And that is what he allows us to do in reality “If you ask anything in my name.....”. I thought at the time, and it did not take me long to frame one. It is still with me to this day. And I do not think it is an unreal request, nor one that is not in line with his purposes. It was “that the world would be reached for Jesus Christ”. Or that I could reach the world for Jesus Christ.

Some time after this I did actually go overseas with my wife and three children to a country where the gospel was not freely heard. Here a very small percentage even knew Christ. Local believers, and some non white looking Westerners, were imprisoned and tortured for being Christians. The white looking Westerners were expelled from the country if they were found to be spreading the gospel, although technically it was not illegal. Here we found people from a large number of denominations and mission groups who worked together as one unit. Church fellowship seemed vital, and there was a depth to other workers about you. There was not a great deal of fruit, but there was real labour to see some. It opened our eyes to a number of issues. We saw what level of support there was for people on the field from people back home. We saw different cultural expectations of sending churches upon those they sent and supported there. We saw how locals regarded with suspicion foreigners living on apparently no or little work and the conclusions they drew (they must be spies or something similar). It raised the issue in our mind of how new local Christians would understand what a “real Christian” was when most of those they came in contact with were “full-timers” who therefore had all that time to “be spiritual”. And it also made us wonder if some workers’ expectations did not become unreal for new believers who must cope with family, job and their new life. We did not stay in the country long, having to return home in less than a year due to stress and some other lesser factors. It seems a failure really. What did we achieve? And of what use was that great upheaval? It had long lasting effects on the whole family. But it had set in motion a chain of thought that has produced this book. It has been a long time in the gestation. The elements of it have been drafted for years. But the full understanding of its possibilities is only now becoming obvious.

To reach the world for Jesus Christ takes some mighty effort for one individual. How can it really be done? Just to live in one city and see the numbers there, their different interests, occupations, concerns, understandings, cultural practices, involvement and then to imagine or see them getting to know Christ takes a mighty effort. But to extend this to whole countries and through the whole world is an even greater feat of imagination. Yet even then, what do we really want to see? Is it the most basic breed of believer who has but a smattering of a knowledge of Christ and who needs weekly if not daily exhortation to keep him from falling back into a common life? Or do we not really want to see something that is spoken of as:

“Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!

For the wedding of the lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.”

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

“Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, “These are the true words of God.””?

Such is our goal in life: to attain to the marriage supper of the Lamb with the multitudes throughout history who have come to know and love him. The bride is to have prepared herself for this. She is supposed to be fit and ready for him to return. A mature bride that has gone through all the preparations of childhood and adolescence and is now ready for full union with the groom who has been held from her to just such a time. This is the ultimate goal of our history, the consummation of the ages, where we have been heading for centuries and millennia. It is not some tawdry half-prepared-for event. And neither will be the bride. She will, as a unit, but also with all the individuals in it, be mature, complete and lacking in nothing. Now obviously the white clothing is supplied. Our righteousness is the Lord's who has supplied all for us. There is nothing we can add to his gift of life purchased on the cross to complete us in one sense. And there is that sense that what we see already is but a glimpse, a foretaste, of the reality yet to be revealed. Yet there is also that maturity that Paul talks of pressing forward to. The author of Hebrews refers to it to as an expected, but not yet seen, quality of the believers he is writing to. There is a depth that is to be achieved in this Christian life that is not often seen. It is something most have within their souls as a longing, a drawing, a deep desire to see evident within themselves and also others.

At this time in history as more and more are coming to know him in the new areas of the world, we find many new believers but not many with a great depth of training and experience. Nor do there seem to be enough courses or trained leaders available to train or care for them. If deep maturity is to be achieved within the church then we need to find a better means of attaining it. There is a need for a structure that ensures that each one those new in Christ has an ability to grow in all aspects. There must also be the means for those who have known him for years to be able to grow deeper in their relationship to and knowledge of him. There needs to be the ability to have true fellowship so that real growth can occur within this area too.

It is possible for one person to achieve a local effect on people about him. It is possible to multiply this, over time, to an even greater number of people and have even greater influence. This is the basis of certain discipling methods. It will over a number of generations, if maintained at the same intensity have an amazing penetration due to the simple effect of exponential growth. But to achieve a deep, widespread effect over a short period of time, it is better to have a system that can be widely adopted and from current levels of understanding. This is similar to the idea of forming a successful business where the business is not an idea or product, but a system that allows itself to multiply.

Such an influence or idea is not unusual in the history of the Church either. Wherever there has been growth in the Church that is phenomenal, this effect is seen. Francis of Assisi founded his new order that had its profound influence on the church for all time in response to a sense of what he felt God desired. It is recorded in stories of his life that the Pope at the time had a dream that the building of the church was falling down and that it was St Francis who was actually holding it up from complete collapse. In more recent times in the Church, when John Wesley attempted to reach the masses with the gospel, he was expelled effectively from the Anglican Church where he had trained and ministered. It shut the door to that established church but opened the way for many to come to Christ. And many feel his nationwide awakening saved the English nation from the risks and excesses that occurred in nearby France with the Revolution. Not long after, William Booth had to leave the Methodist Church to establish his outreach to the people in the streets of London and so founded the Salvation Army.

To prevent obscurity, what I am attempting to say is that for there to be great strides forward in the Kingdom of God often there have been radical changes required to the structure and understanding of the Church at the time in order for this to be achieved. I believe now is such a time.

Or, to go back to my original thought, to achieve the goal of this “wish” that the world should be reached for Jesus Christ, the following book is presented. I strongly feel that if the ideas in it are discussed, worked through, and adopted, we will see this aim achieved. And it will be not just a desire of my heart that is achieved, but one that rests on the heart of many that know Jesus, and has been expressed as the very wish of His heart.

It would have been possible to present a safe idea of simply another structure to be built and to have left it at that. But I believe there needs to be a deeper work, further consideration, that even greater results might occur. That is why I have included the sections on money (one of those taboo subjects in years gone by, but truly essential to be examined) and on outreach (because I believe this needs emphasising too so that we might achieve truly great and lasting works).

In using scripture to back up points, I prefer that there be a number of related texts to reinforce each one. That is that there be “at least two or three witnesses” to each one before I would consider it even valid. And within that it must be within a context that allows it to be used as such.

MEETINGS/GATHERING

THE SMALL GROUP

The first section of this book will examine a proposed structure for future meetings. It is not suggested that it is a totally new concept. The ideas for a number of the elements have been in existence for some while. The newness of it is more in some modifications of existing structures and in combining them to create a total package that should give a maximum benefit. We will begin with the smallest unit of structure, working our way up it, and finally considering some aspects of it from an overall viewpoint.

To have real fellowship and intimate sharing there seems no better structure than that of the small group. Ideally somewhere between eight and sixteen people able to meet on a regular basis at some intimate place where each member can feel supported, able to share and be open with those around them seems to work best. It is used already extensively. There is nothing new in it. It is endorsed at all levels of the church. It has brought about some of the most valuable growth in members. There seems to be some essential dynamic that it exploits that is valued by most who have experienced it.

It is not, however failsafe and has struck problems at times. There is probably never going to be a perfect structure. As long as we have fallible human beings involved there is always the capacity for, shortsightedness, error, foolishness and pride. Also, like any structure, it can become stale and simply become a form with no life. Usually these groups have been comprised of people established at about the same time, with some leader directing them and the others following his/her lead. They can be established simply as a teaching, meeting type group with no expectation of growth. There are those that have been initiated with the intention of growth. Where this has been the expectation it is usually planned so that it will grow to such a size that it will need to divide and form a new group with a person who has been groomed for the position taking over as the leader of it. He or she takes a few members from the previous one, while others from the first one remain with the original leader and both will seek to grow from this point. Once each group is again big enough there will be another split and the group multiplies. Mathematically this concept of growth seems laudable. Each division multiplies at each level. Within a few generations of splitting (actually 29, which if it was yearly, would be 29 years), the membership of these groups should encompass the world's population. Probably for this reason, this method is often the preferred logical choice for growth groups. An examination of our use of logic in forming groups and structures will follow in the final chapter on groups.

A benefit of this dividing structure idea, quite apart from the seemingly laudable mathematical infallibility of it, is that we maintain a certain maximum size for a group. This is important. If the group becomes too large it will no longer engender good sharing and the ability to facilitate true fellowship – which is its aim. There is a certain minimum size that ensures it functions too. A regular group that has too few members runs the risk of not being able to have a meaningful meeting with exchanges of ideas. If not enough people can attend allowing for people being away on holiday, sick etc, the group tends to fold for apparent lack of interest and stimulation.

However at least a couple of problems arise through the divide and grow strategy. Each time the group divides links that have been built within the group have been sundered and people have to build new ones all over again. Maybe this is why the mathematical ideal with the supposed exponential growth of such groups has not yet been seen. The other problem is that as the new groups develop, with new members, there needs to be a starting at the beginning once more, or, at least, a return to a level where the newest member might be. Once again old ground is gone over for the original members. Maturity through development may well be occurring in and with individuals but it is hard to share this at the group level once again.

To overcome these problems it is proposed that the small groups develop a little differently. It would seem best for meaningful and deep fellowship for the same members to remain in a group for as long as they feel comfortable in it. This way long-term relationships and understanding can be built. It is more likely that all members within the group would be at the same level. Therefore sharing would be about similar

problems and experiences and the advice that others can give would be more helpful. Over a long period of friendship with understanding of each other's feelings and full character it will be also more possible to share deeply about issues. We can share more about failings, worries and questions without someone feeling we might be way off line or losing our faith and then dealing with this instead of the concern we have. And it is at this level we need to communicate if we are to really have fellowship and get some meaningful sharing that will enable us to grow. The masks, or reserve, that we have should not need to be in evidence. As well known friends we should be able to broach the most sensitive topics and concerns without fear of rejection or of being misunderstood. The growth when we can share at such a deep level should be much faster and deeper.

For the more mature groups there is no need that all the members should remain in it for all time. There may well arise situations where a member or couple decide they need fresh air or blood and they should be able to step into a new group. The more common scenario would be relocation for job or housing situations that might make a particular group fellowship no longer accessible. There should be freedom to join a new group, or even to straddle one or two for a while until the person or couple is sure the new one is the one they wish to join. As such it mirrors a move to a new town where new friendships need to be established.

To achieve numerical growth it would be expected that interested people (i.e. seekers, those not yet Christians) would explore an established group, or be drawn in to it. Actually church growth research seems to indicate that more new members are likely to come through the association of new Christians. In the past these are the ones who still have had connections with the non-Christians of their recent background. Therefore it is more likely that new groups will form from (or bud off) a newer group than off a really established mature one. There is no reason it could not possibly arise from one that is older though. In fact this new proposed structure should allow much greater contact with people in the local communities rather than being limited to the Christian ghetto collective. Also the members in a new group could arise from new members from several groups. If there was some agency (even something simple like a web page) announcing new members and locations, interests and available meeting times, then it should be possible from people established from several groups to meet to establish their own.

And what of the new group? Will it be too immature to survive? How will it manage to even meet without a mature leader? The benefit will be the similar maturity of the different members. It is a sharing fellowship and not a teaching unit. The function of the latter can better be served elsewhere. People learn best with being put in situations where they have to develop new skills. These will not arise from a vacuum either. There is the clear example of the group they have just come from. If there is a problem in the group getting going with some floundering mistakes, there is no reason that a member from the original group could not be asked to sit in for a time to give advice, or simply to be sought out for comment when the need arises. For groups that might possibly arise outside of that experience, there should be no problem arranging resources for those wishing to start a group. A simple explanation of what is involved, or, if necessary, having people with experience in starting groups being available to attend a few meetings of new ones and offer advice would be a useful way of addressing this scenario. There is the advantage of a group discovering its own identity and forms anyway to best meet the needs of those within it. Some could prefer a simple gathering for talking over coffee or a shared meal. Various ones could have more of a singing/worship approach. Others could be more interested in prayer. Others may want to have a more regular study approach. There are a large number of study materials already available that could be utilized right now. Over years, no doubt, the needs and desires within the group will change and different approaches could be used at different times. This is another advantage of having a group composed of people who have grown with each other over the years and will be at similar stages of development: they are more likely to be wanting a similar approach at a certain time. The people within it are more likely to be at a similar stage of growth, family development and commitments. Energy levels, interests and time available are more likely to mesh with each other. With its history together the group will know what it has tried, what helps and works and what the season of their life would best be helped by. There should not need to be a particular form dictated by a leader or from some outside supervisory group. With the close sharing and caring for and with each other within the group, it should be possible to establish what form would be best for all.

How would these groups look? And what would they be doing? Essentially they will be the primary fellowship and caring unit. The needs for these elements should be supplied within it. In other words, if there was need for visitation and extra care, the group would be best to be initially involved. There is the natural growth, family-like link that makes such care a mere extension of normal fellowship. Knowing each other well, it is more likely such care would be appropriate and helpful. Beyond this in such areas as heavy financial concerns there will be a bigger link too through the wider network that is envisaged through this new system. With families and maturity likely to be at a similar level, there will be peer support and advice about how other members in the group handle particular situations. There is less likelihood of unrealistic expectations of the various members. At different stages of our lives there are varying amounts of time and energy available for different tasks. It is reassuring when this is understood and communications embrace these positions.

It would seem that if someone felt called to missions from a group like this that the group would retain them as their particular prayer responsibility. We are not talking of financial support here (more will be explored on this later in the chapters on finance and the review of the group ideas). The main need of people in the field is that of concerted, informed prayer support that is responsive to daily or weekly changes of fortune. With Internet communication these days needs can be near instantly shared around the world. With a group that meets weekly or regularly, there is more likely to be a ready group available to share and pray for these concerns. The worker is well known to the group as an old member of it. The particular personality and concerns of the worker or family will be more accurately known. Also for a worker back for a home visit there is a well-known group that can be related to which is known to really share the dreams and concerns of the worker. It is less likely that on return an overseas worker will encounter a whole new fellowship as often happens in churches these days. There should be a ready facility to relate to other small groups with a similar interest in its members. It will be likely that other people from the same country will be overseas pursuing a similar goal. With the modern communications abilities, it should be possible to link these groups with returning members, if it was helpful, to share experiences from a slightly different perspective. At least the group members would already have an established interest in this country or area through its own member. Some of these country-wide networks for specific fields are already being set up.

The venue for the meetings would be best in local homes. They could be moved from home to home. This would share the responsibilities and any extra work or time it involved. If needed they could be held at some other venue. Some might even prefer meeting at a restaurant or small conference room. Also meeting times and frequencies can be better managed in these small associations. With the ever-changing pattern of people's work lives these days it is important that times for meetings should be more responsive to these. The bigger the groups involved, the more inflexible these of necessity tend to be. With a small group it should be possible to come to a mutually agreed time for everyone. This does not need to stay fixed but can be adjusted as needs change. Again the small numbers make this a simpler proposition. It is likely over the years too that people's best meeting times will change. Flexibility is important to enable the group to continue to function.

EDUCATION GROUPS

There is an obvious need for some depth to these fellowship groups. Each person will need to progress through a level of training and knowledge acquisition. This should be done in the most efficient way possible.

A new Christian will need an initial period of training that would be very standard. There may be some variation in what is considered necessary to be included in this type of package. With the structure that is proposed here however, it would seem best if there is some depth to the preparation to ensure that such a person is able to stand on their own probably more than we expect now. It could be that this would be best achieved by a series of grades. There might be an initial one covering beliefs, regular practice of prayer and Bible reading,, then a more in depth one to progress to more detailed prayer and study methods, with maybe a final one that equips the new believer in sharing his faith. Such a tiered structure would build on foundations established in each grade.

With a clear heart change and very thorough grounding, the new Christian should not need continual monitoring and extensive feeding. The training in study methods should introduce him or her to methods of feeding him or her self. This will involve different ways of studying the Bible (such as book, topical and thematic studies) to allow the most benefit to be derived from this. With an overview of it, best covered at the earliest stage, to enable the believer to have a framework to base further study on, it is more likely that this will be built on a secure foundation. Other important helps for the new believer in this regard will be in knowing where the different other instructional groups meet and what they cover. Some suggestion of what might be appropriate for early stages would be ideal. Beyond this other types of education would be a progression from here. It would seem best that there be a recognised structure to the early groups to progress a person through – a sort of “stage I” level. Then once one has attained a certain basic scope in training a free range should be allowed that is determined by the individual’s needs and desires. Likewise lists and advice about books to read including biographies and instructional books would be very helpful. A thorough approach should mean that all possible avenues for future growth would be available to the believer. As well as this it would probably be necessary to have an additional occasional class that enables people with questions or concerns arising from it to come back to – a sort of “alumni” meeting. Alternatively having contact numbers for the people who took the classes might be enough.

The beauty of this form of training is that it should be more thorough than currently is achieved. With the opportunity to have this as a stand-alone programme it should be possible to thoughtfully examine a large number of issues. By being established across a city, or a large area within a larger one, it would be easier to have such groups running frequently and people running them becoming increasingly able at their task through repetition and feedback.

At a similar level could also fit very well groups for youth, from the early school age to high school. It may not be that there is a real need for this sort of activity. Many times, with well-established people there may not be the call for extra training of the children. Certainly this has been the practice in the centuries gone by. It was D L Moody who saw a need for young children to be taught the gospel. He started his Sunday Schools. From there it seemed to blossom. Now it seems almost inconceivable that there should not be such an organisation. Quite a number of parents feel that having their children attend such a programme is vital and may constitute the sole reason they attend a church themselves (at least for that busy period of life). Consequently, if it was felt necessary, it could be pursued. It would seem unreasonable to have a daily programme, as some like to establish for the youth, seeming to fear that if their time is not used up they will get involved in some sort of unsavoury activities. Organisations like scouts in the past have managed with meetings weekly and produced some very effective results. Also with the whole package of this new system it is likely that the parents within it will be more able to handle the various questions and challenges that arise in the young person’s life without frequently having to resort to outside help.

The aim for groups beyond the initial “stage I” level would be to provide up to a tertiary level education in theology embracing all possible disciplines. Why should it not be that each individual should be enabled to reach a level that we have previously left to pastors, ministers, priests and other full-time workers? The aim in the past seems to have been that the professional have all the training which he or she is then

supposed to impart to others over their lifetime. This goal has not been achievable in the past as we have needed to constantly start people over again from the same point. Depth is lost. The professional remains an elevated theologian that no other can attain to. However for the individual Christian, by his very nature, there is a call to know as much about his or her new position in the government (or kingdom) that he has been translated into as possible. A Christian as a believer in God would want to study as much as possible about the object of his belief and desire. He is by his newborn nature a theologian.

Therefore to cover the broad field that is possible one would expect a wide range of groups. These can cover all the aspects that a regular theological course would cover as well as those such as traditional discipleship programmes have aimed at. Also there should be the ability to provide the sort of “feeding” that people have supposedly been getting from their weekly sermon attendance.

One could imagine courses in church history, missions, biblical studies from broad scans to individual book studies and exegetical studies. Those particularly interested in prophecy and eschatology can pursue this to the level they wish. Those teaching the courses will tend to have special interests in those areas and will be able to keep up with the latest developments in their area. With two thousand years of thought and history, it should be possible to conduct in depth study benefitting from all these insights. We have the advantage of all that has gone before us and should surely use it to our profit.

Practical courses could also be run. These could cover aspects such as raising teenagers, finances and sexuality. With the deeper base that people will come from in this structure it should be possible to have groups that seriously look at the outworking of these areas, producing some newer more helpful input for us all. There are a lot of useful outside groups dealing with some of these areas already. To glean their ideas and produce something effective and new would be extremely helpful, if not exciting. It will be important to have a range of teaching style options available from the purely didactic to the more interactive ones. Interaction should enable room for growth in understanding of established or new areas as ideas and extrapolations of them are considered.

It is still conceivable that there would be residential courses available for those who wished to do these and cram such information into a shortened time frame. Always such structures will be limited in the full range and depth of matter that can be taught within such a time-limited course. Therefore those who have followed such a route would still have areas that can be extended through the courses in the community.

With this pattern there is not the need that everyone be doing courses all the time. There would be times when only the small fellowship groups would be the main input for individuals. This would be more adaptable to family and work life. Also, because they would be available across city or suburb areas there would be a larger pool of such topical studies than is available now.

The benefit would be that people would achieve a deep personal level of understanding. Having a good knowledge of church history should prevent excesses and tendencies to become deflected from major doctrines onto minor issues. With a large number with this understanding it is less likely that a group would be able to draw a number off into some tangent. And any programmes and ideas should be able to be undertaken with a thorough background in past movements, successes and pitfalls.

For venues something like local school buildings, community halls and such would be ideal. The size would be determined by the demand. There would be a levy on participants to cover the fees for such a use. This would benefit both the users and the community organisations from which they were rented. The former by having to pay for only what was used. And the latter by the extra income generated to maintain its facilities.

THE LARGE GATHERING

Beyond the first two structures a larger gathering is envisaged. This should be a city (or for very large cities, at least suburb) wide gathering in a place large enough to cater for it. Here people from a wide range of backgrounds would gather for mainly corporate worship, prayer and celebration. It would therefore be best to be intermittent, maybe once a month, to allow for it to be more of a special event. The idea behind it is more of a corporate expression. It would be limited by its size in what could be achieved. As such, and because of the diversity of people that would be involved in it, it would be difficult to imagine preaching and such activities. Such input can be better achieved in the teaching groups and aimed at specific aspects and ideas. If something like a city wide evangelism gathering was required or felt desirable, it would be best done outside of this structure. It is conceivable that a major world figure might be in a city for specific teaching or sharing. In such a case the venue could be used but the gathering itself would be outside of the usual meetings as outlined.

It would be anticipated that there would be some leading of the general celebration, but also some significant time to allow spontaneous involvement. The strength of such a large number and cross-section of people being present should be that it would allow a “cross-fertilization” process of ideas and culture. This should enrich the whole gathering and facilitate the emergence of new forms and ideas. With this exposure as well as then exposure to similar events in other countries there should come about a greater benefit of the body of Christ being a more universal structure where the parts are nourishing or benefitting the whole.

There should be freedom to allow different people to experiment in worship and to be open to different forms. If there is to be a city-wide meeting of people there will be a wide variation in experience and understanding of how God can use a time like this. But if there can be a more relaxed attitude on the part of all the participants, then it should be possible to experience the beauties of a whole range of expressions which as a unit should benefit the whole and expand our understanding of God and his body. To do this should free us from the shackles that seem to keep worship, even when it has become more free in areas, from become bogged down in other new rituals. With such a large number of people it would mean that only a limited number of participants could share at any one meeting. If it is left free from a particular group asserting authority on its flow each meeting, there should be variation in approach and content each time. Really a rotation system will be needed if segments of the gathering are going to assume responsibility for a major part of the meeting.

Continuing from this idea is that of a blessing from such an enrichment. Only as we open ourselves to all that God is saying across the world will we truly be benefitting from a “whole counsel” approach. It allows a more efficient functioning of the body as such. Not only on this more human level, but also from a divine perspective, there should be a greater blessing experienced. God does desire to bless his people. There is evidence in scattered outpourings that He longs to do this. It would seem from biblical history that He can do much more and his word tells us He expects we will do greater works than that of Jesus (John 14:12). However there is little real evidence of such a massive release of power so far in history. It is like we see the “gracelets” that He bestows, but not the full blessing. By coming together in openness and cooperation one would expect much more likelihood of greater blessing. This is not to say that all the believers need to say and believe exactly the same thing. This is the imposition that has been made of being unified by being in unison. Nature shows us the diversity that exists naturally in it, with, for example, all dogs being identifiable as dogs and yet the multitudes of breeds representing incredible variety in size, shape and temperament. Real unity accepts and rejoices in the differences amongst us knowing that we should all be tuned by the same master musician to produce a harmonious expression rather than exactly the same note.

To achieve such a meeting would require a large stadium or hall. Especially if this new structure should bring in a greater number of people, this is more likely. Where would one meet? With meetings proposed on an irregular, maybe monthly, basis, a structure set aside for only this would seem very wasteful. It would be better to use an existing stadium, or if this was unavailable, to look at the establishment of one in the area that could be used not only for this but also for other city or suburb wide events. Some may see this as not ideal or may want to see such a facility used for certain purposes only (a “sanctified sanctuary” idea). Maturity should enable people to see this should not be necessary. In fact the idea behind this extended new structure should free up some business people in the group to establish such a facility as a

commercial venture. They would be serving the needs of the local Christians as well as the whole community. In such a venture the meeting should make a contribution in line with commercial rates (or possibly something at cost, if felt appropriate) for the use of the venue. With the low yearly rate of use this should not be onerous, and would probably be best supplied as a small levy on all those attending. More of this idea is explored in the section on money.

AN EVALUATION

Such a structure does involve a rather radical change to the way things have been done. But it is not without historical precedent. One could look really at the early church which met house to house, had the synagogue (at least in the very earliest stages) for Old Testament teaching, and also met at the temple in a larger group, for a parallel with what has been proposed. At various times throughout church history various elements of those mentioned above have been used. The letters to early churches were certainly addressed to believers within a city. We have taken on the idea of the “local church” as the sort of structure we have now. Such an opinion is highly debatable in its accuracy. Besides this the aim of such a structure is not to say adamantly that this is the one and only way one could and should meet. Rather it is a progression of where things have been headed and a response to our current community structures. It is proposed as a method to achieve real growth, not as a systematic theological statement. It is a wineskin proposal (Matthew 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:38).

As mentioned before, the next section will examine the area of money and the church, which has some relevance to these proposed changes. But for now let us consider more the simple idea of structure.

Historically the less structured of the churches movements seem to fall by the wayside as time marches on. One has only to look at someone like John Bunyan of “Pilgrim’s Progress” fame to see someone who has blessed the church (and society) for centuries with his work, yet was part of a group of “meeters” in a non-establishment group that no longer exists nor is particularly remembered. One can look at the Anglican or Episcopal Church that existed at the time and continues to this day, maybe decreased in numbers, but still a powerful economic force. Those denominations that persist seem to have a more structured, and usually hierarchical arrangement. There has often been the concern though that the established structures go on even if there is little or no life within them. In fact throughout history there have been constant renewals of church life, but usually these have had to be achieved through people who, while coming from within the established church, have had to leave its structure to follow the leading they were feeling from God.

The full church (as a true body) has not been in unified consensual existence since the early split into East and West. Apparently the Orthodox (eastern) Church has not made any significant changes in its theological statements since this time due to its conviction that it is only the whole worldwide body that can meet and decide such significant ideas. As there has not been that communion since the split, they remain committed to what has been decided up to that point. There seems to be a good logical basis to this. The western arm has broken many times. Before it did though, one can recall St Francis of Assisi who felt God calling him out to a life of poverty and servant-hood. The established church did not understand then. A dream given to the pope at the time instructed him that it was St Francis who was stopping the church falling down. That is, the thrust that he was pursuing was good for and protective of the church.

The great Catholic/Protestant split is probably the one great event we readily recall in relation to church changes. Again this was based on understandings that were developing within the church at the time, but could not be tolerated by the leadership. Since Constantine all major church structures seem to become part of the political establishment. Changes within therefore seem to threaten the political structure and are responded to politically as well.

Within the Protestant Church too though there have been the many denominational splits. Some well illustrate the same principle. The Methodist Church came about through the Anglican Church refusing to recognise the ministry of John Wesley, although there are those who contend that he saved England from something like the blood bath that was the French Revolution. Having been touched by God after his return from a missionary enterprise, as an ordained Anglican cleric, in America, and establishing a study group with like minded friends, he felt the masses needed to hear the Word of God. As he went about conducting these open-air meetings, the church felt threatened and closed its doors on him ministering in the churches. General William Booth of the Salvation Army was forced to leave the Methodists when they refused to allow him to pursue his outreach to the poor of London. Although the need was acknowledged, the gathered ministers did not feel it was the time to allow him to conduct such work. After raising the issue on a number of occasions and getting a negative response, he felt he had to just begin, ministering to a need that was clear to him. In this case the Industrial Revolution had changed the structure of the cities of

England, as it did over time about the world. New methods were required to reach out to city people. At other times some emphasis on a particular doctrine has caused a sundering that then produced a new denomination. This is probably by far the greatest producer of these divisions. But in relation to the approach of this book, the changes produced by Wesley and Booth are probably more relevant.

The problem seems to be man's ability to grasp what God is doing when the scope of his understanding is limited by structures that exist. These structures are capable of holding movements together through times of weakness and loss of vision. But they also stifle real life from arising and renewing them. Later when the benefit is realised, the new thrust brought about is recognised as mainstream. One can readily see this in the use of the hymns from the various movements being embraced by the older denominations.

There are biblical analogies to this too that act as instructive parables for these events. In the Old Testament there is the story in the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt where Moses' father-in-law comes to see him in the desert. He becomes concerned at how Moses has to attend to all the people for their every dispute. They wait in long lines for him to see them. Believing Moses will wear himself out doing this he suggests Moses adopt the scheme of having leaders for tens, hundreds, and thousands who will hear the people's complaints and bring only the more difficult ones they cannot decide to him for judgement. Moses adopts this. From a purely human point of view it sounds a very reasonable scheme. It does parallel the sort of organisation we put in place in our religious and secular structures. Later, though, we hear of God anointing the seventy elders to help Moses. One cannot help but wonder if this was the real divine way of handling the previous problem.

In the New Testament is the story of the replacement of Judas. The disciples, before the events of the second chapter of Acts with their endowment of power from on high, decide that as one of the original twelve disciples is now missing it would be proper to elect another one to the empty post. Again this sounds humanly reasonable, if one believes there should be twelve as Jesus originally selected. Very reasonable criteria for the choice of the replacement are put forward. Only those who have been with Jesus through his whole ministry, like the remaining eleven, are considered. Two names are put forward satisfying this. And through the lot system Matthias is chosen. He is never heard from again though in all the rest of the New Testament record. And one is left wondering whether the real replacement that God had on his mind was not Saul, later Paul, a chief among sinners, one who persecuted the church and who regarded himself as the least of the apostles, who was initiated into the intimacies of Christ by special revelation. Again here is a divine ideal in contrast to human system.

Even at the time of Jesus' ministry there were questions as to why his disciples behaved differently from the Jewish religious people and even from John the Baptist's disciples. They did not fast and follow rituals the others did. Jesus replied in a number of ways, but one of the main reasons, as he related was given in the metaphor of the wineskins. New wine (which we have taken as the New Covenant that Jesus established mainly) needed new wineskins to hold them. Older wineskins, or structures, which were by nature drier and less elastic, would burst as the new wine was allowed to mature in them. But it also applies to new moves of God and has been endorsed by Him in moves such as those illustrated above.

There seems no doubt that the human systems have persisted. The real test though is whether there has been maximal eternal benefit or effect. Human structures we design to remain when even the central core to them has gone. Whereas the frailer God-initiated ones seem likely to fall at a puff of wind, on the death of the one who humanly initiated the change, or at the full fruition of the idea.

One can also look at the establishment of the Christian Church. Jesus himself did not humanly come from the line of the priesthood, although he was to be our high priest. As Hebrews (6:20b-7:18) expounds he was, like Melchizedek, in the Genesis account to be a priest unto God with no recorded priesthood lineage. Even his disciples, built up to continue his new movement, were not chosen from established leaders, but from the poorest and more despised segments of society. Paul expands on this idea in I Corinthians (1:26-30).

What limits God's full expression of power today? Where did the power flow? What of the 3,000 and 5,000 converted in one day? Yes, there was the base of Jesus' teaching and miracle ministry before the

day of Pentecost to build on. But we have people saturated in hearing about God, the gospel etc, and being able to hear and see about it through so much media today, but without such massive results. What also of the lack of similar powerful workings of God in miracles and signs of power to confirm his word? Apart from a dispensational understanding, surely we would expect at least as much validation these days. Sometimes it is explained as a problem with our worldview. Raised in a Western scientific framework we look for and explain things differently from societies that expect more interaction with and display of the spiritual realm. However we do see some demonstration of this supernatural power at times. It seems unfortunately rather spasmodic and arbitrary. Is it because we are not doing it his way? Or is it because our structure limits his power?

Beyond these considerations though, is the simple reasonableness of having a structure that will achieve the growth of all believers while still allowing all the necessary elements of what has been considered essential for growth in the past. Fellowship, teaching and worship are all combined.

Not only this, but also there is the decreased cost of running such a structure, the ability for it to rapidly grow, and the free time that the ordinary believer (and this will really be all of us in this structure) will have to devote to work, family and community. It should be possible for Christians to really be the preservative salt in society. With more time available it is more likely that Christians will be involved in government, community administration and areas of influence. By being involved at this level there is more chance of ensuring better governing and laws that will not conflict with or oppress believers. There is less likelihood of a “ghetto mentality” occurring.

Also it is admirably suited to areas where the church is growing rapidly. It assumes that there will be the need of intensive input into the lives of believers. There is a fellowship network that does not require a fully trained pastor to run. Teaching groups can be arranged from outside initially until those arise who understand the topics and can take them on. By being responsible for limited areas of instruction, there is less time involved to achieve the necessary depth of understanding that is currently required of graduates from theological colleges and similar structures. With other groups teaching different areas, the new teachers can attend other groups themselves to build their understanding over time. Existing structures for meeting should be able to be used. With a less threatening structure from the outside there should be less state interference. And because of its more open network type of structure, if interference does occur, it is less likely to result in the closing down of the church. It is likely to grow around an area that is attacked.

Also with this looser network it should be possible to receive people from different areas of the world to share their experiences which should then enrich the whole body worldwide. Some of the benefits of this sort of cross-pollination have been seen in years gone by. Different areas of the world seem to have a better grasp on a particular element, say worship, and in sharing it with other countries, have enhanced the fellowship in other there.

There is also the extension of the New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers, which seems to have been God’s aim in the Old Testament with the children of Israel, and might well have been, if it had not been for their stubborn and rebellious hearts. There are the Old Testament prophecies that talk of each person receiving a heart of flesh that will be responsive to God. In the New Testament Jesus in his ministry is keen encourage us to call no man Rabbi or teacher, but to be a brother or sister to all. This fulfils again Old Testament prophecy where it mentions “they shall all be taught of God”. And again Jesus word in the Last Supper with his talk of the Holy Spirit who “will lead us into all truth” and “remind us of things taught us”. It is consistent with the talking of Christians being a body where all are elements of each other and the consideration that there is and can be only one body. There are not to be thousands of little bodies running their own little programmes around the world. This seems to be a current problem in church administration and structure where the individual church building is felt to be a body with all its various function. Possibly it might be a cell in the body, but it is hardly likely to represent everything. In such a situation we often hear talk of unity “where brothers dwell in unity there God commands a blessing”. However even in this there is a problem in understanding. There is the feeling that unison is what real unity is. That is, as long as we are all saying and doing the same thing, we are exhibiting unity. However real unity is more to do with hearing and obeying the same Lord, who may well be telling different people to do totally different things, but in its result there is a beautiful cohesion or multiplying of effect. More like an orchestra or band

where the various instruments will play different parts with the overall sound being of greater effect than any one part. Again throughout the world and through all time we are to be a (one) building unto God where each of us is a stone or brick in it.

Certainly it is worth protecting the church from the errors that come from one man or small groups of them thinking they have enough (near infinite) understanding that they can determine what is appropriate for both doctrine and belief in the church. How often this has occurred. No finite person can establish truth that needs infinite resources to really ensure an insight or viewpoint is the right and only one. By having a more collegial system as we were built to have there is less risk of error. Even so there needs to be an awareness of our limitations and planning from that understanding.

There are those that will have reservations about such a structure on the grounds that it has not enough of a definite form and will be therefore difficult to measure in its growth. There has been a parallel in the Japanese church from quite a number of years ago when a new Japanese Christian asked his missionary friends whether they would not send him to the USA to acquire more learning. The missionaries at the time felt this should not happen. The young man was disappointed. He founded a movement where men will come together for studying the Bible before other meetings. Their number is not counted in the register of Japanese Christians. They would be difficult to quantify anyway. There seems a parallel here to the numbering of Israel by King David. We are not to slavishly accept Old Testament concepts and practices for New Testament living. But these stories from this time are there for our learning, as warnings and examples (I Corinthians 10:11). The concern was in putting an exact number on the people when God had not required it and when He had promised that the number of Israel would be like the sand on the seashore. Also the true fulfillment of God's promise had not yet come about. Or, from a New Testament understanding, our new citizenship is a heart based one that is not based on visible physical marks (as circumcision was) or attendance at some building, or club membership. Parables such as that of the crops and weeds, where both grew together and at the harvest were then sorted into the fruitful crop to be gathered and the weeds to be burned (Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43), illustrated Jesus understanding of the mix that would occur. Other similar illustrations are given in the parables fishing with a net (Matthew 13:47-50) and that of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus was relaxed about this process which appears very untidy to our orderly demands. What he seeks is a reality that will stand the final shaking (Hebrews 12:26-29, Matthew 24:29-30), and not some beautiful man-made structure for the moment. The Old Testament tabernacle and temple, which were an earthly representation of a heavenly plan, have been replaced in the New with the temple made in heaven that is comprised of all believers from all times.

MONEY/GIVING

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In polite society there have traditionally been a number of subjects one did not talk about: religion, politics, death and money. These have not been such taboo subjects in recent years as in the past. However, the church, lagging behind, as it is wont to do, still has been rather slow to talk about money, except in requesting that we should “give more”, “tithes to the storehouse”, or support this that or the other. It is generally not slow in seeking money. But examining at any depth the legitimate or biblical basis behind such demands seems to be avoided. There are some proof texts and large chunks of Malachi offered. With such a dynamite topic though, we need more. We certainly need more than one proof text: we need it reinforced at a number of occasions and taken in context. It is as if there is no difficulty talking about what should be given to keep the church going. But there is a reticence, even an embarrassment, in talking about money, how to get it, and certainly about having any large amount of it.

There is certainly a wealth of information about money matters in the Old Testament, probably more than in the New. And its teaching does have a major bearing on the way we think about money and what is the right or spiritual way of dealing with it.

Riches are generally regarded as a reward for hard work. It was not a sin to be wealthy. The righteous would be blessed with riches. Job was a righteous man who was greatly materially blessed. The initial test for him, where he lost all his wealth, had no effect on his attitude to God. It was more the continued personal suffering followed by the slurs and misunderstandings of his friends that broke his spirit. When he was healed and restored again, he was noted to have twice as many possessions in flocks and cattle as he had before. It again was a mark of God’s favour. There are many other references to this in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 8:18, I Chronicles 29:12, Psalms 112:1-3, Proverbs 8:18, 10:22, 13:21, 14:24, 22:4, Isaiah 61:6). Here wealth is noted both as a reward and as a protection from harm. Although the wealthy man may be at risk from attacks on his wealth, he at least can buy protection and will be readily surrounded by a large number of friends. Poverty is noted for its ill effects (Proverbs 10:15b, 14:20, 18:23, 19:4b, 19:7). There are things that are noted to be of more importance than wealth (“It is better to live in a corner of an attic than with a contentious woman” Proverbs 25:24, “Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife” Proverbs 17:1, “Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse” Proverbs 28:6). If anything the poor are noted to be so at times through injustice (Proverbs 13:23), but also through sloth (Proverbs 6:9-11, 10:4, 19:15, 20:4, 20:13, 24:33-34). Hard work to earn money is recommended (Proverbs 12:11, 13:11, 14:23, 21:5, 28:19). But at the same time we are reminded that God gives his beloved their due rest (Psalm 127:2). We should not lose sleep unnecessarily to get wealthy (Proverbs 23:4).

Are there noted problems with wealth? The main cautions are in riches obtained quickly, by underhand means and in those who are not generous with their wealth (Proverbs 11:24, 13:11, 15:27, 16:8, 20:17, 20:21, 21:6, 22:16, 28:8, Isaiah 61:8). Also there are warnings about relying on money to protect from calamity (Psalms 49:12, 52:5-7, 62:10b, Proverbs 11:4, 11:28). It is noted that it does give a buffering from hard times (Proverbs 10:15, 13:8). But also it is noted that it can be rapidly lost (Proverbs 27:24).

Some of the background for this attitude about wealth being a blessing can be attributed to the time of the Fall. Previously Adam and his wife could simply help themselves to the luxurious fruit of the various plants in the Garden of Eden. There was no apparent effort involved, but just a simple enjoyment of the produce of the field. After they were banished from the Garden, they were told that the ground would yield its fruit only by the sweat of their brow.

To be successful, when one has had to work hard to wrest one’s living from the ground, therefore, is a sign of favour and blessing. One can achieve these things if effort is applied. And it may be more simply obtained if one is righteous and then blessed in one’s effort because of this. There comes about a partial reversal of the curses of the Fall. And certainly if one is righteous, then one should not expect as much chance of people seeking your money back through legal actions arising from sharp practices.

Many of the cautions in the Pentateuch are to do with the maintenance of property and the paying and proper care of labourers, the poor and the destitute. The latter (the poor, the widow and the alien, living among the children of Israel) were allowed to glean the remnants in the fields (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:19-22). They still had to work to obtain their daily food. But there was a generous and caring spirit supposed to exist in their fellow, more blessed compatriots.

One of the elements of money that has consumed vast amounts of attention, is that of giving. Once one has received all these material goods, what is one to do? There is the wisdom of storing up goods to be able to cope with lean times (Proverbs 21:20). A wise man will store up wealth for his children (Proverbs 13:22). At the same time there are warnings about excessive hoarding (Proverbs 11:24b, 11:26, 21:13). Also there are many exhortations to give to those in need, including one's enemies (Proverbs 14:31, 19:17, 22:9, 25:21-22).

There are the frequent references to the tithe. Beyond this there are a number of other gifts that are prescribed that are at times referred to these days and at other times ignored. These include thank and fellowship offerings, first fruits and gifts associated with the festivals at the beginning and end of the harvest, that are the responsibility of the individual people. And there is the whole system of offerings that was part of the duties of the priests involved in worship in the Jewish tabernacle and temple too. There are daily offerings to be presented as well as the special festival ones.

In examining the tithe, it is interesting to look at the references to it. One of the first references is in Genesis with Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:20), referred to also in Hebrews (Hebrews 7:1-10). Prescriptions for the tithe are noted throughout the Old Testament, sometimes identifying it as a tenth of one's wealth. The more detailed references, which seem to be often ignored, are found in three passages in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12:5-18, 14:22-29 & 26:1-15). Here the tithe is identified as a tenth, but interestingly there is a different method of its use or distribution from that which is commonly understood. Two out of three years the money of the tithe is supposed to be brought to the tabernacle and then converted into food and other items that the family bringing them can use to celebrate before the Lord. They were supposed to feast and enjoy themselves with it. On the third year they were supposed to give it to the priests, the poor and the widow for their use. The priests received support and food from other sources such as parts of the other offerings. They also ran their own cattle and sheep on fields assigned them. But the most interesting aspect is this prescription of two thirds of these tithes being used specifically for the enjoyment of the people bringing the tithe. It is not used for the priests, the tabernacle or the temple (Deuteronomy 12:4-14, 17-19, 14:22-29, 26:1-15). That this was usual practice and not just a practice that could be construed from one book is backed up by a confirmatory reference in Amos: "Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years" (Amos 4:4b).

First fruits are also another commonly recognised duty (Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Proverbs 3:9). This was given to the priests (Deuteronomy 18:3-5). The commitment of the first born animal and the redeeming of the first born child (given to the Lord – Exodus 13:15, 34:18-20) were other aspects of the first fruits idea. The giving related to the first born child, in excess of the number of the Levites who took their place, at the time of the exodus was at a set rate, regardless of one's personal wealth (Exodus 3:40-51). Later redemption was at a set rate too (Numbers 18:15-16). Here the people showed their trust in and thankfulness to the Lord by giving the initial produce of their fields and labours. It was designed as a commemoration of the Passover time in Egypt with the preservation of the Israeli first born when the Egyptians lost theirs.

The thank, or votive, offering represented general gratitude to the Lord without any specific requirement, except that the gifts were not to be damaged goods (defective fruit or animals – Leviticus 3:1, 7:11-12).

One then has references throughout the Old Testament to tithing in various forms. The words in the references relate to a root word for a ten or multiple thereof and can therefore be understood to be used (and is translated at times as such) as a tenth. In Genesis 28:22 Jacob pledges at Bethel, that if he returns safely to Canaan with God having watched over him, he will give him a tenth of all God gives him. Leviticus 27:30-33 notes that a tithe can be redeemed at a premium price. In Numbers 18:26-29 the Levites are instructed to give a tenth of the tithe they receive from the children of Israel to the Lord as their tithe.

We have the references already noted in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12:5-7,11-14,17-18, 14:22-29, 26:12-13) along with the one from Amos (Amos 4:4). King Hezekiah in his reforms instructed the people to begin giving tithes again, which they are noted doing joyously (II Chronicles 31:5-8, 12). In a similar way on the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, there is the reinstatement of the tithes and references to them in Nehemiah 10:37-39, 12:44, 13:10-12. Then Malachi 3:8-12 brings the idea back in focus at the end of the Old Testament books.

Another incident of note is the people's giving of money for the repair of the temple in both Hezekiah's and Josiah's times. This was a specific project that needed to be addressed. From the history we read of these times there is no doubt that general gifts, offerings and probably even tithes had fallen away to allow the temple to fall into such a bad state of disrepair. The only way to restore it in a limited time was to raise extra cash. This has parallels with the establishment of the tabernacle at the time of the exodus. In that case people were able to give articles, gold and silver obtained from the Egyptians when they left after the firstborn were all struck down. They were donating effectively plunder from their spoiling of the Egyptian riches. Again in Josiah's time people gave freely, at this time from their own generated wealth.

In line with the above is the main message of the book of Haggai. On return from exile in Babylon, the people set about rebuilding the city and the temple. But there were interruptions in this. The Lord questions the people about their putting so much of their energies into their lovely houses while His house, the temple, is in disrepair (Haggai 1:8-9). A Christian era parallel to this is found in St Francis' call to build the temple of the Lord. His response is shown in his repairing the local chapel of San Damiano. But more than this, especially when one sees what effect his response to his call was, one can see that God was ensuring he looked after or repaired his temple of the Church (the temple, or bride of Christ), keeping it from decay and bringing new life into it.

In the post-exilic period there is an intense turning towards observance of the law. We see in Nehemiah (13:12) where Nehemiah commands that tithes be brought back into the Lord's house in order to look after the priests and Levites who have been neglected. This is immediately after his return from Babylon when he noticed that the priest Eliashib had allowed Tobiah to occupy rooms in the temple that had been set aside for storing the offerings (Nehemiah 13:4-11).

Then there is the great "tithing book" – Malachi. It is to be remembered that this is a post exilic book to the Jewish nation with all the emphases that were there at this time to establish a pure worship of the Lord, to move beyond their pre-exilic tendencies to worship other gods, and to emphasise their special calling. There are examples in this time of excesses with the extreme reactions of people like Ezra in his expectation of no intermarriage with people of the surrounding tribes, which is not a thrust of earlier scriptures. But it became a major plank of the people of this time. The extreme self-righteous attitudes that existed at this time had to be exposed by Jesus when he came. But from one point this separation was like a preparatory time for his arrival.

There is much more to Malachi than the simple issue of money and tithes. Its whole thrust is relating to the lack of honour the people and the priests bestow on the Lord. Their heart is far from Him and he is crying out in wooing them back (Malachi 1:6). When he calls for the whole tithe to be brought into the storehouse, the Lord is talking about much more than a tenth of someone's earnings. He is talking of hearts and attitudes and worship. Then He will pour out a blessing that they would not be able to contain. It could still have some direct application to money. But certainly that is not the whole story. This is echoed in Micah Chapter 6 where the Lord brings some questions before the children of Israel. He asks what he has done to the people that they are so wearied of Him (Micah 6:3). Then he comes to the point of offerings and questioning with what His people should appear before Him. The ideas of sacrificial offerings are listed. And then he gives an answer: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:6-8)

Money, property, stock and houses were certainly important to the people who survived the exodus and the later deportation to and return from Babylon. Also, in a very volatile area of the world, even as it is today, with various trade routes and the many tribal kingdoms seeking supremacy, such things are counted dear.

They have a direct link to people's heart and security. To offer a portion of these things was to show a trust in the one who supplied and maintained them and also a show of thanks for them. They directed the heart back to the source of all gifts that there might be a remembrance of the Author of it all.

The gifts were used as a funding for celebration by the people, surplus to provide for the poor and the widow, and generally allowed the priests to maintain their service initially in the tabernacle and then the temple. It allowed for the ongoing maintenance and repair of the structure. And the plan is a reflection of what exists in heaven. But it was to be a pattern that was to be superceded. It was kindergarten for the real school that the fullness of the promise to Israel was to reveal.

An interesting aside to all this is the incident in I Samuel 8, where the children of Israel have requested a king to lead them (like all the other nations). Samuel is reluctant to do so. But the Lord instructs him to heed their request and to grant them a king. The request for a king had been anticipated even at the time of the exodus with regulations for the way he should act being laid out in the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 1:14-20). But in granting the people's request, Samuel is told to warn them what having a king would be like. He will take all their best goods, men and women and demand a tenth of all their goods. The people have effectively rejected God as their leader – they cannot see Him. They want a visible head of state. They are granted one. But the head will now require that same worship in goods and services that was formerly the Lord's domain. And yet it is a more severe levy. It can be more arbitrary, seeking the best of the people as the king's. And at least under the tithing system in place with the temple two out of three years the people could personally enjoy the direct benefit of it. Now it all goes to the king. A human institution will exact a heavier price than ever God did! This is certainly a caution we should take to heart. It holds obvious parallels with the history of the church as will be outlined.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There are quite a number of references to money in the New Testament. Much has been taken in many quarters to mean that wealth and riches are a problem: that maybe it is blessed to be poor. Jesus certainly said that the poor were blessed, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. The rich are supposed to be unable to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In James we have references to the rich being instructed to mourn and weep. Is there a change in attitude towards wealth and riches in this portion of the Bible?

There was the problem of the Pharisees love of money that Jesus was keen to expose. They put such great store by it that He had to warn them strongly about their involvement with it. The rich young ruler in coming to Jesus to ask what he should do to be saved was instructed to sell what he owned, distribute it to the poor and then to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:16-24, Mark 10:17-25, Luke 18:18-25). Others approached Jesus too. Yet he it is not recorded that He made the same request of them. But as with healing people of their diseases, his response to them was determined by their individual condition. With the wealth this young man had obviously limiting his ability to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus touches the one thing he must relinquish in order to really be saved. It is interesting to see the comment in Mark 10:21 where it is noted after the man's answer that he had kept the law from his youth, that Jesus looked at him and loved him. He really felt for this man's heart desire to please God. The primacy of money would appear to be the heart of much of the problem with the Pharisees. That and their reliance on their own righteousness established according to laws they had further defined.

A similar problem is the phrase Jesus used about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. The comment was used after the disciples' reaction to Jesus' treatment of the rich young ruler. So often this seems to be interpreted as meaning that because someone is rich they will not enter the Kingdom. But in context it is recognisable that the disciples mean that if even a rich man cannot get into the Kingdom, then how could anyone? This is understandable too when one remembers the messages about wealth in the Old Testament as being a sign of God's blessing and a reward for righteousness. And Jesus response is to show how difficult it is for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God including the rich. It is not possible to buy your way into the Kingdom, no matter how great your wealth. There is a much more fundamental change that must occur for us to even sight this.

As far as the poor inheriting the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3, Luke 6:20) goes, it is clear that all those born into the Kingdom are to receive their portion of it. They are all heirs of the king. They are all kings and priests to God. Therefore those relatively poor should not despair as they have a whole kingdom that is theirs. It is true we can take nothing with us. We will all be on a par as far as our previous wealth goes in the New Kingdom. It would seem there might be some differences in the way we are rewarded according to how we lived. Still the main message is that we have all been freely redeemed by grace and through no works of our own.

The parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-9) has been a difficult one to understand for some people. Here a man is accused of theft by his master and told he must leave his employ. In order to establish contacts and a possible job for himself when he leaves, the man arranges with his master's debtors to pay less than they owe to write off their debts. Jesus explains how the children of this world are wiser than those of the Kingdom. He instructs his subjects to use money to build openings for the gospel. Riches are to be used wisely to create openings for the spread of the gospel. He is not condemning riches here. He does give a caution at the end of this parable (or, it is placed here by Luke). Here Jesus deals with no man being able to serve two masters. He clarifies it as it not being possible to serve both God and money (Luke 16:13). The Pharisees immediately take exception to this and sneer. Jesus deals with this. He declares that the Pharisees seek to appear right before men (Luke 16:15). As always Jesus is more concerned about our hearts (our main motivation) rather than outward appearances. Our acts and appearance may reflect something of what is deep inside us very well, but the crucial thing is our inner motivation.

There are some strong references to wealth in the book of James. Here the rich are called on to mourn and weep as their riches rust (James 5:1-3). Is this condemnation of wealth here? He goes on though to talk about how the rich people he is railing against have not paid their workers and similar problems (James 5:4-6). In other words it is wealth acquired unjustly that is the problem. As a consequence of this and texts

that say the love of money is the root of all evil (I Timothy 6:10), there are those who feel wealth itself is wrong. In context, though, it would be difficult to argue this. To set it above God Himself (as the ultimate reality or value) though is what is recognised as wrong.

An extension of this understanding can be seen in Jesus rebuke of the Pharisees for putting the tradition of men above the teachings of the Law (Matthew 15:1-9, Mark 7:1-13). They had devised a tradition that if a person had set aside some money or property to God's temple the person was not liable to look after his parents when they were in need, in violation of the law to honour one's mother and father. Here is an example of money dedicated to the service of God (surely a worthy cause), making it thereby inaccessible to regular people, in this case those closely related to the person. Jesus points out the idolatrous level that money was held in by the Pharisees. Similarly he points out their wrong attitudes to oaths that are made on the altar etc (Matthew 23:16-22). The Pharisees set more store by the physical gifts (wealth) that were associated with these things than with the greater (eternal) wealth and reality that was represented by the altar etc.

What of giving?

There is reference to the temple tax in the gospels, where Jesus asks Peter really whether he should pay it being part of the ruling family (Matthew 17:24-27).

In the Acts there is a notion of people giving portions of their wealth so that all the (especially poor) believers could profit from this (Acts 2:44-45, 4:34-35, 6:1). The dealing with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) was not really so much about the issue of money. It was a heart attitude problem, where they attempted to look as good as others who had freely given money for this purpose, but actually kept some of their sale money but made it look as if they had given all the proceeds. The problem was one of lying. And that right in the face of a mighty working of God.

Likewise in Acts there is the story of the coming famine that would affect a large region of that world, where other churches decided to send money to help their fellow believers in Jerusalem where they might not be so well off (Acts 11:27-30). The references in Paul's letters have a lot to do with this. These include those references to putting aside at the beginning of the week some of what they had been able to make the week before (I Corinthians 16:1-3, Romans 15:25,27, II Corinthians 8:1-5,13-15, 9:1-5,12-13, Galatians 2:10). There is no reference made here to a particular value – only that it should be in proportion to ones income (I Corinthians 16:2). The tithe is not mentioned.

The tithe is mentioned in Hebrews, but in reference to Abraham and Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1-6). The context it is in is not to do with money. It is relating to the fact that the blessing God was talking about was in a new order that He initiated with Jesus Christ. This was a better order than that established by the Law and the sacrificial system. Here even righteous Abraham gave gifts to one who was a type of this new order, thereby indicating its higher value.

Money is spoken about freely in the New Testament without direct condemnation of it and without specifying that the old systems of giving were still to be continued under the new covenant administration. We will explore these aspects further in two chapters from here.

A LOOK AT HISTORY

In the early church writings there is little reference to tithing. Within the records of the Ante-Nicene fathers, Clement's "The Stromata, or Miscellanies", Chapter 18 mentions it in relation to the looking after the poor and the sharing of good things with others (II p 366), and the "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles", Section II 29, talks about first fruits and some limited amount of tithing to the priests, with the majority to be given to look after the poor and widows (VII p471). There is generally, though, much concern about looking after the poor and there being an equal share amongst believers. Another concern is for the coming spiritual home that will provide for all, to the extent they have set their hearts on it. The sorts of pressures this early church lived under (the persecution and misunderstanding they lived with and the lack of social welfare type structures) determined a lot of the attitude to wealth, looking after each other and giving. Initial converts from out of Judaism and Emperor worship, would be economically disadvantaged as they embraced their new faith and were cut off from their old societal supports. Considering what seems to be the understanding of the teaching of the New Testament, the response at this time seems consistent: they were using wealth to deal with perceived, current needs.

The church over time became more organised, acquired and built structures for its services (early on taking over old temples that fell into disuse, and later establishing their own new structures) and began to levy its members to sustain this. Such changes could occur readily once Christianity had become an established state religion. We are aware over time of abuses that occurred with church wealth and money. There are the records of decadent upper levels in the Church that lived very well, as long as they seemed to have neglected their spiritual roots.

Later, at the stage of the monastery establishments, a new method of provision occurred where the monastery usually was self-sufficient growing its own food and raising stock etc. This was at a period when the organised church was not as strong and was competing with invading forces that disrupted a lot of the established social networks. Once this period settled, the church continued its expansive programme of building with some of the most spectacular cathedrals begun at this stage.

Even in the Reformation we see an emphasis on giving. Part of Martin Luther's awakening had been in observing the abuse of selling indulgences. These pieces of paper could be bought for sum, which went to the church. In return, the buyer was supposed to be able to receive forgiveness for the sin or sins the indulgence was purchased for. Luther saw this as in serious conflict with scripture. However, once established, the Lutheran church still required money to operate its system, including full time ministers. Even today in the Lutheran church states such as Germany, there is a church levy that is raised by the state to support church functions such as provision of its social services.

There seems to be some indication that one of the contentious issues that sparked the French Revolution was the church's (in this case, Catholic) oppressive levies. Seeking its share of the people's earnings continuously grew irksome. This was obviously not the whole problem. But if money is required from a people, and then seems to be used ill advisedly, or even to sustain oppressive or uncaring systems, there will be some reaction. The response in France was a violent rebellion against all restraining forms. Today, although some 68% of the French population would call themselves Catholic, this number is shrinking, and the great majority would consider themselves rather nominal.

There seems to have been a varied understanding in the English churches. In his autobiography, Hudson Taylor (founder of the China Inland Mission, later OMF) relates his discovery of giving. He decided to give a tenth of all he received based on his understanding of the teaching of tithing in the Old Testament. It was his mission organisation that is credited with founding the "living by faith" principals embraced by a large number of missions in the decades following. This did not occur in a vacuum but was also strongly influenced by the practice and writings of George Mueller. George Mueller was keen to show that God would provide for His work. He established a number of orphanages in England, and, over time, supported a number of missionaries through his giving. He published yearly reports detailing receipts and expenditure with the aim that these should serve to illustrate the bountiful generosity of God, purely in answer to prayer (all his requests for monetary requirements would be addressed directly to God through prayer). The volume of the monetary response was staggering. In spite of the fact that he sought God

directly for the money, though, there were boxes for people to place gifts inside churches throughout England. These no doubt served as reminders to people as his organisation grew.

These days, within “mainline” churches one usually finds a low level of regular giving with a large number of people offering a few cents to the odd dollar, presumably to be seen to be giving something, but not wishing to be too inconvenienced. Within all these churches there will be those who feel inclined to give much more generously and do so. Often too the state’s or country’s laws on tax deductibility for donations will have a major influence on how much people feel free to give.

There is a contrast to this in some of the borderline sects. Here we find a major emphasis on giving with an apparent readiness of its adherents to do so. There seems no limit to the money these groups have available for their various projects and expansion. But for beliefs that emphasise a religious duty to give that may well determine one’s fate in the next world, one would expect a ready commitment to such practices.

Not only these borderline groups but also strongly evangelical, pentecostal groups place a heavy emphasis on this practice. The teaching is that it is biblical, that one is “giving to the storehouse” and that one is New Testament bound to support your local church. The money is then used for the various programmes of the church such as a multitude of staff (justified as it is growing and takes a lot to maintain), buildings for meetings, possibly schools etc, and for continued expansion, which may or may not include some sort of missionary endeavour. The latter though is more usual to be limited by its other activities. And certainly the more that is given the more there is that seems to be consumed.

As part of the latter groups’ teachings there has arisen the doctrine of prosperity theology. And if a group is seeking to grow and requires money to do so, then one of the easiest ways to achieve this is for its members to be earning more so that they will have proportionately more to give. Elements of the more traditional church view such teaching with horror and hold up the concern they see the church should have for the poor. A number of these branches that do so though are looked at by outsiders who see the valuable real estate these churches hold and question their commitment to caring for the poor. Beyond this is a whole understanding of who are the poor, why they are poor, and what is the best way to deal with their problems. And as long as one is not at peace with one’s understanding of biblical attitudes to wealth one is readily going to feel guilty one way or the other depending on which viewpoint is being presented.

It is instructive too to see the contrast in principles and practice between the recipients of the Old and New Testaments. Jewish people with their training have frequently been involved in businesses. They have managed money well and have prospered at times. By contrast, Western Christian people have had a rather ambivalent attitude to wealth. They often feel uncomfortable with it. From this sort of attitude, along with the history of the emergence of Christianity from Judaism and the event of Jesus death being demanded by the Jewish high priest at the time, has arisen some of the intense prejudice of Christians towards Jews. This is visible from Elizabethan times in the Shakespearean character of Shylock the moneylender in “The Merchant of Venice”. In more recent times it has produced the anti-Semitic attitudes that were rife in Europe in the early half of the twentieth century and reached their fruition in Germany in the Holocaust. Even today there are some fringe groups still talking of the great Jewish conspiracy.

It is interesting to see the parallels between the state of the Jewish faith at the time of Jesus’ ministry and that of the church today. It is possible identify groups today that would fit with the Sadducees: connected to the civil power, not believing in angels, life after death and similar miraculous things (“and so they were Sad You See!”). There are those who would fit well with the Pharisees with their strict adherence to religious observance and believing in life after death, angels, convinced that their careful observance of religious rituals and nit-picking, will ensure their entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. There were other groups about these who crossed boundaries a little, such as the Zealots wanting to rid the nation of the oppression of Rome. It is interesting to note the parables then that Jesus relates to those in religious power. He is concerned to expose their extreme adherence to rules that ignore wider issues and at times conflict with other written codes. When one considers the parable of Dives and the beggar at his door (Luke 16:19-31), it illustrates some important issues. The rich man lives well all his life. When he dies and gets to the afterlife he goes to hell or Hades. He sees the beggar who lived at his door in heaven being consoled by the father. Here is a parable one could take in relation to riches hidden in the church in its buildings,

programmes etc while there are those living and dying in ignorance and poverty. And it is placed just after the Pharisees sneered at Jesus for his caution about money displacing the primacy of God in one's heart (Luke 16:13-14). Not only that but this admonition of Jesus is given after he endorses the use of money to win people to the Kingdom (Luke 16:9).

Attitudes and responses to wealth have varied throughout church history too. The early church had a mixture of people from a wide range of backgrounds, as it has no doubt had at all times really. There were a few wealthy or influential people such as Joseph of Arimathea, Herod's steward etc. But many were from the poorer and less influential people. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians notes that there was a paucity of well off or high born people in that church "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth" (I Corinthians 2:26). This remained for some time and probably only altered significantly when Constantine made Christianity the state religion. Then it was advantageous to advancement to be in the church. Numerically, no doubt, though, there were still only a few who were of great wealth or influence.

There were hermits and recluses who forsook the comforts of life in order to attain deeper spiritual enlightenment. People like St Francis of Assisi founded orders too that embraced poverty, or the lack of material possessions as one of their main tenets for their members.

At times and places where the church seems to be growing numerically, there are often many new converts from poor backgrounds. The majority of members in the early Methodist church, the Salvation Army and other new movements similar to this, were from poorer backgrounds. Samuel Logan Brengle, who became a major speaker and writer in the Salvation Army, was initially discouraged from joining by General Booth as he came from a privileged background. Even in these days the more actively growing arms of the church, the pentecostal and related movements, seem to bring in more people from economically poorer backgrounds. It has been noted that as these new movements mature, that socioeconomic status of the their adherents seems to improve (or tends to be higher). Some of this will no doubt be to an increase in the average age of the members. But more than this there seems to be an establishment in economic advantage with probably a better savings attitude and also less waste on areas that consume money such as gambling and excessive drinking. People of good character will also attract the better job opportunities.

Over time these people, who formerly had no problem with an attitude to money (they had so little that whatever they had they were grateful for), now begin to become unsure about what they should be doing with their wealth.

WHY THIS IS NEEDED

A reason this area of concern has been examined is that it really is so important to people. It affects how they cope with their daily lives, what they have to live on and how they can plan for their future including their retirement, which is becoming a more pressing concern as, in the West, there is arising an increasing aging population. We will live longer and have more of our non-earning lives where we need to support ourselves. And probably there will be bigger medical bills. Technology always has a cost to it. So there is a practical reality that will become stronger as time goes by.

Also there really should be a more objective look at money to enable us to see it considered in the best possible way. There often seems to be a mental separation where one is either so spiritual (or concerned about spiritual matters) that one does not talk about or mention money, or else one becomes more or less totally secular and thinks of money from this perspective. These attitudes, even if we deny them, are strongly molded into our psyches through years of sayings and proverbs. Even biblical verses are catalogued in our minds according to this background conditioning. Therefore we have people who say they do not really care or concern themselves about money, but always seem to be suffering from a lack of it, or expecting others to be giving it to them. Then there are those who seriously seek it and are looked at as money-grubbers, ruthless, or cold-blooded individuals. If one is wealthy it must be because one was just lucky, or was born into it, or is very likely to have obtained it illegally. We have a lot of expressions and sayings in our culture too that express a denigration of money. “Filthy lucre”, the “filthy rich”, “money is the root of all evil”, “can’t buy me love”, etc.

We need to objectively and biblically understand wealth and giving so that we do not respond from guilt. So often this is what does motivate many sincere believers in this realm. We either give from guilt, or we tend to sabotage our efforts to earn wealth because we consider it probably unspiritual to seek it. We can accept a certain level of affluence. But as it tends to increase we question our fitness or right to it. In doing so either through our attitudes, or through our actions, we begin to dismantle the very structure we have established to achieve it. And even if we can allay our guilt by examining ourselves closely to see that there is no wrongful action we are responsible for, there is this niggling mismatch of our current situation with our years of conditioning in these areas. Failing to look at the real root of it all we can make some bad choices that will affect us for years. And not only us but also those around us who may have benefitted from us and our business. And these ingrained attitudes tend to also affect our political behaviour. In many cases our responses to public policy is strongly affected by our unexamined core beliefs in these areas. Or our later established beliefs are founded on a base we have not carefully examined.

One basic verse, and almost subconscious thought, that influences our behaviour so very strongly is the part verse: “money is the root of all evil”. Taken as such the quote is actually incomplete. The text is in a section of I Timothy 6:3-10 dealing with false doctrines. The verse itself is: “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” The essential aspect is the “love of money”. Jesus emphasised this when he told the parable of the unjust steward mentioned two chapters ago. After telling the tale, Jesus then says: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money’. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.” (Luke 16:13-15). A mark of the last days is that people will be “lovers of money” (II Timothy 3:2). The writer of Hebrews in his final exhortation instructs his readers to “keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...” (Hebrews 13:5). A church overseer is supposed to be “not a lover of money” (I Timothy 3:3). The essential ingredient in all these quotes is not the money itself, but the love of it. And the word used in the Greek is “philarguros” from the Greek word for love “philos” meaning beloved, dear or friendly, and “arguros”, the word for silver. These are people for whom silver (not gold?) is beloved and dear to them. Jesus tells us we cannot be dear or friendly with both God and money. In other words, only one can have primacy in our heart. And this is God himself. He is to have that prime place. He has called us his friends (philos, John 15:15). As friends with him we cannot allow another friendship to usurp his place of affection. This thrust is similar to the admonition by Jesus when many people started to follow him that unless they hated their father and mother, their wife and their children,

their brothers and sisters and even their own life, they could not be his disciples (Luke 14:26). And the word used here “miso” from “miso” was the general word for hate. It was not the idea that they should specifically hate these relatives and their lives (as other texts show the idea rendered as to love Jesus more than these). But, in comparison, the love they had for such things would be so much less in strength, depth and power than the love they had for Jesus that this love would appear as hate.

To confirm this, there is a contrasting attitude we can have that Jesus highlights strongly. In the parable of the talents (in both Matthew 25 & Luke 19) the master of the story castigates the man who hid his master’s money in the ground when it was given to him because he feared that his master was a hard man who took things from areas he had not even worked in. He is rebuked for not even putting the money in the bank where at least the master would have earned some interest on his money. And he is punished for his attitude. No doubt this parable deals with more than just money. But is interesting the context these two similar parables are placed in each book. In Luke it is related immediately after Zaccheus, the chief tax collector, becomes a follower of Jesus and people about begin to grumble that he is a “sinner”. In Matthew it is placed after the parable of the ten virgins, with five wise ones bringing extra oil for their lamps so that they can cope with waiting extra time for the bridegroom. They had made arrangements which helped them cope with extra delay. Straight after this too comes the separation of the sheep and the goats who are judged according to the way they helped those who had been hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison. The principal of money has more to do with our heart attitudes. There is a real need for it in order to live our day to day lives. But it is there that we may do the work we have been called to do in the Kingdom and in order that we may have enough to keep going until He comes.

With this approach to wealth or money and the tale of the unjust steward, it is apparent that money is a necessary commodity for us to trade with. Also we are to use it for furthering the kingdom. We are to see it (as well as other gifts we have) grow. And our primary love is to be the Lord. Our safest attitude to it is to see all money as God’s gifts to us to be used in trust. From the earlier examination of the New Testament attitudes to giving and wealth, all we have is God’s to be used as needed. This should free us from concerns about earning and seeking it as long as our central heart attitude is correctly focused.

For most of us to cope with earning, saving and using money without false guilt, it would be well to attempt to bring to the surface all our attitudes to money and wealth. There is a host of them. Not only do we have these Biblical injunctions, but also we have both societal and family sayings and attitudes that affect both our feeling about and the way we seek to earn it. There are sayings such as “money does not grow on trees”, “money isn’t everything”, “can’t buy me love”, “we can’t afford it”, “waste not, want not”, It would be well to write all these down and examine the truth or otherwise of each one, its limitations and the ways we could turn it around to be more positive and helpful for us in our daily lives. This assumes a healthy attitude to money and a desire to use it as a tool in our daily lives that we might more justly develop this added “talent” we have been given to use.

One thrust that would seem ideal from the above proposed church setup is that it should be a relatively cost effective structure to run. Home meetings should not be too taxing to maintain. Group instruction meetings run at local halls and similar structures should not be expensive. The people using the facilities will be paying for them. And the expenses for doing so should be only in proportion to the actual cost of maintaining that building for the period of time it is being used, with some small amount of profit likely to the body that is leasing it. The large meetings will be infrequent, and again, should involve costs proportionate to the time it is used. There should not be the excessive cost of running buildings that are not used for significant periods of time. Doing this would produce a simple user pays system that is lean and very cost effective. There should be less people in full time (church) work (and this will be examined more closely in the next section) with less money again being required to support this.

With less money required for support of this structure there should be more for outreach type of work, whether it be a missions type of idea or support for those less well off. There should be more money for the individuals within this sort of structure too. What will this achieve? It should enable a larger number of people to achieve financial independence. At the least it should mean that this structure should not be a burden to those involved. Where there are communities with barely sufficient means to live extra stresses should not come upon them for their involvement. This will probably take a mind shift for people to feel

relaxed about. There needs to be an exploration of whether this is good and how benefits from it can best be maximised.

Hopefully many people will more quickly be able to own their own homes, stopping waste of resources in interest payments. Then various investments should enable more income to be produced to take the load off unnecessary work. People are more likely to be free to pursue areas that of real interest and benefit to them rather than following the time worn rat race. This will allow people to be involved in teaching units, as well as being more involved in society, becoming salt through the community. This will be explored more in the following sections.

Re-education in money matters will be necessary. This can readily be achieved in the smaller teaching groups ideas already investigated. Then ways to constructively build wealth can be examined, taught and expounded. Even William Booth in establishing the Salvation Army had the attitude that one had to first clothe and give a man shoes and food before he would be willing and able to listen to spiritual truths. It should be the same with us. The less we have to be concerned about earning our daily bread (to be more like “the lilies of the field that neither toil not spin”) the more we are likely to be able to think about and work towards greater end, including the improvement of our communities. The more we have been trained to effectively earn the money we need to live, the less we will need to concern ourselves with it. It is a reverse to the way we have treated the lilies of the field passage in the past. Here we are saying that by thinking accurately and constructively about how to earn, the less we will be concerned about it. And if our heavenly father is concerned to feed and clothe us, the more sure we should be that we will achieve these goals.

MISSIONS/GOING

THE CHURCH'S BASIC CALL

Once the ideas above have been put into practice, where should we head from there? If we have managed to establish a lean structure that enables continuing growth of its members and more free time to achieve other things, what should we be achieving? This question is crucial as the failure to focus on it could lead to a real loss of potential for the structure. There is every possibility for it to become another self-serving system that commands attention simply through being there and nothing more.

The core benefit from this change should be to equip believers maximally and endow them with more time for other activities. As mentioned at the beginning, the aim is to see a mature bride ready for her groom. The bride is not yet fully revealed either in maturity nor in the full number we are to expect. The church is to be comprised of people from every tribe and tongue upon the earth (II Peter 3:9, Revelation 7:9-10, 15:4). There still is a lot of work to be done with about 1700 people groups (the ethnic groups now felt to best represent the Greek "ethnos" translated as nation in Matthew 28:19 and other references in the New Testament) still to be reached with even the most basic gospel message.

We recognise the Great Commission of Jesus to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations as his last great command. It was composed of his last words recorded as being said to his representatives on the earth. It is like his last will and testament request. It should be our main focus wherever we are.

So often though, in the past and in these days, the Great Commission has been listed as one of the things we should be seeking to achieve and not, as it should be, a central role for our time here on earth. To look at how central it is to God's plan it is helpful to briefly delve through an overview of the Bible and its central theme.

There is the story from a couple of centuries ago now of the life of the great evangelist D L Moody. He had been successful in his home country in his meetings and then went to England where, although he initially met with skepticism, he was embraced joyfully by many. While there a young man approached him. He said he felt God wanted him to share a message from Moody's pulpit. Moody was not particularly impressed, but gave the young man an olive branch by saying that if he managed to get to the USA at some time in the future he could present himself to Moody there and that he would be allowed to share. He felt he never would be able to make the journey. Sometime later this young man presented himself to Moody in the US. Moody arranged for him to take a series of meetings. After the man had taken a couple Moody went along to see what was being shared. The man was sharing on the love of God. Moody asked others at the meeting what he had shared on the other nights and was told that he had been covering the same topic each night. People were bringing their Bibles and following along with the passages shared. Moody began to listen to the young man's message. What he heard transformed the way he continued to share in the remaining years of his ministry.

What comes through the Bible from the beginning of the Old Testament through to the New is this great theme of God's immense love. If one reads the Bible from cover to cover and takes a highlighter marking the number of times there is a reference to God's love, what one finds is the amazing number of references to His love. There has been a common misunderstanding in society that the God of the Old Testament is a vindictive and angry God and that when Jesus came we got this compassionate understanding heart of God appearing. Nothing is farther from the truth.

The act of creation itself was one of love with man being formed with the ability to be creative and have moral choice. There was a great deal of risk involved in doing so. But the possible benefits were so high that the risk was apparently considered worth it. The same tension is seen these days with inventions and understandings that have the possibility for great good, but also the possibility for great harm. The small equation $E=mc^2$ showed a way to greater benefit for us all in the unleashing of near limitless reserves of energy. But it also paved the way for harmful destruction in the fission and later fusion bombs. This is no different from an understanding of holiness. So often we treat holiness as merely an absence of wrong, or

sin, or evil. More accurately it is the doing of something in that perfect way that God intended. And sin is not some opposite force or event. It is a distortion or missing the mark. It is not creative but imitative. But it is so in a way that will result in harm and misery and death. The act of the creation of man was one with real potential for great good and enjoyment, motivated by love.

When Cain is found guilty of slaying his brother, it is reported that God put a mark on him to prevent others from killing him and so bringing even greater harm (Genesis 4:13-15).

In love God began preparing a redemptive path for us that is visible from at least the time of Abraham (the father of many). Not only was he the father of many as in the number of nations that could be attributed to his subsequent generations (Genesis 17:5). He was also the one through whose seed (as explained in Galatians 3:16 – Jesus) all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3, 18:18). This concern to bless all men was being expressed from centuries before the birth of Christ with a careful plan to bring it into being. Even here God shows his love not just for a few people, but for all nations.

In the story of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers there is the intention that he should go ahead of them to store food. Consequently, not only they, but a large number of people in that region of the world could be preserved from the effects of a disastrous famine. It is recorded that the brothers intended it for evil. But that God intended it for good (Genesis 45:4-7, 50:19-20).

When Moses is called by God at the burning bush, The Lord tells him that he has decided to rescue Israel because he has “heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering” (Exodus 3:7). He has therefore decided to rescue them from Egypt.

David talks a lot of the love and kindness of the Lord. He reports that God’s love is better than life (Psalm 63:3), that “all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful” (Psalm 25:10), and in his psalm of thanks recorded in Chronicles he relates how the Lord “is good; his love endures forever” (I Chronicles 16:34). This is reiterated in Psalm 136 having the constant refrain of “His love endures forever”.

In both Isaiah and Jeremiah there are references to the love and kindness of the Lord. In retelling the history of Israel, it is related “In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (Isaiah 63:9). And in speaking of the restoration of Israel, Jeremiah remind the people with: “the Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness’” (Jeremiah 31:3).

There is the interesting tale of the prophet Jonah, widely known from Sunday School times, were we all remember he runs from God after he is instructed to go and prophesy to the people of Nineveh that God is going to destroy them. We remember he is swallowed by a giant fish (the whale of stories), that he spends three nights in the fish, then is vomited up on the beach and finally goes and prophesies as he has been instructed. These are the bare bones of the story. The nation of Nineveh was a powerful one that ruled over the surrounding tribes and nations very harshly. Punishment for those rebelling against their rule was harsh and cruel. A lot of nations in this region used the simple punishment of impaling the victim through the anus on a sharpened pole and leaving them hanging there to die over several days. Here Jonah is told to go to this aggressive city to tell the population they are going to be destroyed. Such a traitorous call should be severely punished, particularly by a people who did not even acknowledge the God in whose name Jonah had come to speak. He does share through the city, proclaiming that in forty days it would be destroyed. There is a general turning in repentance. The king, when he hears the word, orders that all the population is to don sackcloth, fast of bread and water, and beg God for mercy. Even the dogs, cattle and sheep are not to eat or drink and are to be covered in sackcloth (Jonah 3:7-9). The next verse relates how God had compassion on the people. He did not bring the destruction Jonah had predicted.

The following chapter brings about an interesting response. Here we find the reason that Jonah really fled from God to not preach the message he had been given. In verses 2-3 of chapter 4 we have a Jonah angry at God’s change of heart. He said “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger

and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

God replies with the question about whether Jonah had the right to be angry. Jonah made himself a shelter east of the city and waited to see if his word would come true. He did have a problem as a prophet. One of the tests given in the Pentateuch was that the people would know a real prophet by whether his words came true or not. With God having reversed his decision to destroy Nineveh, Jonah’s prophecy becomes unfulfilled and he becomes a charlatan. But there is more to the story. God causes a vine to grow up to give added shade to Jonah in the hot sun. Jonah is glad of the vine and the shade. The next day a worm chews through the vine and it withers. Not only that but the next day there is a scorching easterly wind and a blazing hot day to the point that Jonah feels faint and wishes to die. God asks him if he has a right to be angry about the vine. Jonah replies that he does and that he is angry enough to die. God then asks him (Jonah 4:10-11): “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

The book of Jonah ends there with this final question. The whole thrust of the book is this great love God has for people on the earth. He is not keen for their destruction, but that they should have real life. Not only is he concerned about the people, but also about the cattle. Jonah’s reason for fleeing was his understanding that God was like this and could reverse his servant prophet’s prediction nullifying in effect His word for the sake of His great compassion.

When one understands this thrust of the Bible, whole areas come with a different force. In Malachi we read God asking his people “A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due to me? If I am a master, where is the respect due to me?” (Malachi 1:6)

The book of Hosea is related as a parable. The prophet Hosea is instructed to marry an adulterous wife. She bears him children, then leaves him. He is instructed at a later date to go and buy her back from a slave market and take her once again as a wife to himself. She is not to be a prostitute again. The manner of his dealing with his wife is to reflect God’s dealing with the Israelites. There are many passages relating God’s love for his people. Some words at the beginning of chapter 11 are taken. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them” (Hosea 11:1-4). “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused” (Hosea 11:8)

But was this love just for Israel? We see the illustration above that dealt with Nineveh. This city was not a part of Israel and if anything oppressed it. We have from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the story of the call of Abraham. When Abraham is called by God while living in Haran (in modern day Turkey), where his father had taken him and his nephew Lot, God says to him: “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those that bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:1-3).

In relation to this blessing and the attitude towards other people or nations, it is interesting to note a particular development through the Old to the New Testaments. In Deuteronomy we read of the instructions about a couple of tribes that opposed the Israelites before they entered Canaan after leaving Egypt. Israel is instructed not to allow certain people to enter the assembly of the people up to the tenth generation (about 300 or more years). These were those born of a forbidden marriage (possibly illegitimate offspring, or maybe just marriages with the people named afterwards), or Ammonites and Moabites and their descendents (Deuteronomy 23:2-5). The Moabites had tried to destroy Israel with curses through the prophet Balaam (Numbers 22-24). And when this was unsuccessful they attempted to deflect them from their purpose by seduction through their women (Numbers 25, Revelation 2:14). The Ammonites did not

offer food and water to the children of Israel on their exodus from Egypt and came out to battle them when they requested this (Numbers 21:21-24, Deuteronomy 2:26-35). The Edomites also refused to allow the children of Israel to pass through their land and came out to prevent them doing so but did not fight them (Numbers 20:11-21). They were related to Israel through Jacob (called Israel by God) as brothers. They were allowed into the assembly by the third generation. And the Egyptians, who had treated Israel so badly in the time leading to the Exodus were supposed to be allowed into the assembly from the third generation of their children.

Yet we read in the book of Ruth how Naomi with her husband and two sons went to live in Moab during a time of famine in Israel. Here the two sons married a Moabite woman each (Ruth 1:1-5) after Naomi's husband died. The sons also died. When Naomi heard that the famine had ceased in the land of Israel, she returned to her home. She urged her two daughter's-in-law to remain in their own land as they had lost everything as she had. But Ruth determined to remain with her and went back. While there she married a family kinsman, Boaz, as the tradition was, and bore a child, Obed, who became the grandfather of David, the great Israelite king. King David therefore was the third generation only from a Moabite woman. And yet he was the one of whom God says "Here is a man after my own heart", who wrote so many of the great psalms, who restored the worship of the tabernacle, and who would have built the great temple in Jerusalem. As it happened it was his son (the fourth generation) who finally built the temple. David instituted a great deal of preparation for it.

It is through King David that the real King of Israel, the Messiah, was expected. And in human lineage it was through him that Jesus did arrive. The rather boring genealogy that begins the New Testament in the first chapter of Matthew is full of men's names. This person is the father of this who is the father of this one. Within this list are the names of three women. Rahab is noted as the father of Boaz. Rahab was noted as the prostitute who hid the spies from Israel when they came to look over Jericho before it fell. There can be some debate about her occupation. But in the record there certainly seems to be acceptance that this woman had at least a doubtful reputation. The next mother in this lineage to David is Ruth, from the despised, foresworn Moabites. The other woman, apart from Mary, mentioned in this list, is the wife of Uriah. This most beautiful woman over whom King David committed his worst acts, became the mother of the chosen and blessed Solomon, who also was a direct ancestor, humanly, of Jesus. This woman who was taken by David through arranging the murder of her husband, bore a child through whom God's purposes were established.

In relation to the passages we have been looking at too, we see in Deuteronomy 23:1 that emasculated people could not enter the assembly of Israel. It was through a eunuch the traditional Coptic church in Egypt was established as noted in Acts 8:26-39.

This understanding of the openness of God's purpose does not seem to have struck the people of Israel. There were problems with the people from other nations enticing them away from the worship of the one God. Even Solomon is recorded as having fallen due to this: his many wives from various nations are supposed to have deflected his worship of the one true God in building altars to the gods of his various wives. From the return of the people of mainly the tribe of Judah from exile in Babylon, the nation became extremely xenophobic. One reads of the breaking up of marriages of Israeli people who wed those from other nations (see Ezra 9 & 10, Nehemiah 10:28-30). In contrast to this though, we read of Esther who, as a Jewess, became a queen of the Babylonian king Xerxes, and in her time saved the Jews from being annihilated.

Generally, though, the attitude of the Jews to those from outside of the direct Jewish lineage was that they were not to be mixed with. The blessings of God were for the Jews. The attitudes to the inhabitants of Samaria were handed down from this time. Those living in Samaria were people introduced by the Assyrians at the time of their conquest of the Northern Kingdom as well as some of the poorest people that had dwelt there before. They had their own scriptures which have been used as some of the comparative textual references for Old Testament passages. Yet they were despised and regarded as "beyond the pale" by the returned Jews in the Southern Kingdom.

We have the story in John 4, after the great illustration of the principles of salvation in chapter 3, of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well. The comment is made about how the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans (John 4:9). And yet Jesus freely approached her and related to her deep truth to enable her to come to a knowledge of the truth. Here was a woman outside the Jewish enclave, and also with doubtful morals as well (John 4:17), who was specifically sought out by Jesus, and believed in him, which extends the dealings we have seen in the Old Testament record of God's extraordinary choices. The disciples were amazed at his approach. Not only was this a Samaritan, but also she was a woman. As if to emphasise this further, Jesus stayed two days at the town when the rest of the inhabitants wanted to know more. The parable of the good Samaritan that Jesus related when asked by a Jew who was his neighbour reinforces his attitudes towards them again.

But during his ministry Jesus went further than this. He healed the servant of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13), one from a people totally unrelated to the Jewish people and their ancient history. It is also instructive, as others have noted that passages where Jesus teaches about laws related to ritual uncleanness that the Jews observed are linked with Jesus dealing with the Greek woman from Syrophenicia. Jesus illustrates the problem that the Pharisees have with their show of outward cleanliness while having hearts that are far from the purposes of God. Having dealt with this we are brought right into the story of this woman who comes seeking healing for her daughter. The disciples had sought clarification from Jesus about what he meant in his dealings with the Pharisees. And he explains how God is concerned with man's hearts rather than an outward appearance. From there he goes directly to the area about Tyre and Sidon, away from the main Israeli settlements. Here this Greek woman approaches him. Jesus appears to ignore her. There is a very reasonable contention is that this is really a test of his disciples' understanding and that it is not indicative of any hardness of heart towards the woman's plight. Jesus makes the comment that it is not right to take the bread from the children's table to give it to the dogs. She responds by saying that even dogs are able to feed on the crumbs under their master's table. As expounded this way, either we have a very hard-hearted Jesus who needed strong urging to heal the daughter, or He was attempting to make a point to His disciples. He heals her in compassion. He had already helped the centurion's servant. This was a simple extension of that act.

The Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples is recorded too as instructing them to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Also it is recorded in Mark that they were to "Go into all the world" (Mark 16:15). Luke records that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47), and in Acts that the disciples would be Jesus "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Jesus chose his disciples from outside of the mainstream of the Jewish establishment. It would seem that the youngest of the twelve, John, was known to those in the high priest's house as noted in John where he gets entry for Peter to the courtyard at Jesus' trial (John 18:15-16). There was also Simon the Zealot who was more politically connected. But the rest were poorer, non-establishment, or despised members (Matthew the tax collector) of society. Jesus himself went openly to those outside the realm of better society, feasted with them, and was noted by others to be doing so. This just extends the principles we noted before in God's purposes. In spite of this careful choice of those outside the establishment, and his careful illustration of God's love and purposes outside the people of Israel, the disciples still seemed to have trouble grasping the breadth of Jesus' purpose.

The church had to come under persecution after the stoning of Stephen before the message seemed to be taken by the young church much beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8:1&5, 11:19). Here we have the story of Philip going to Samaria, and later talking with the Ethiopian eunuch, who seemed to have been practising the Jewish faith.

Peter had to have a vision given to him three times where he is instructed to eat food that was ceremonially unclean to Jewish people before he would go to the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:9-21). Even when he got there he felt impelled to relate to these people God has sent him to how contaminated he is by being with them (Acts 10:28). God showed his concern for the people though and baptised them with his Holy Spirit and Peter was persuaded. He had to argue strongly with the other

disciples when he got back to Jerusalem about why he went into a Gentile house. They rejoiced with him and acknowledged that “God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

The persecution drove people into Cyprus, Phoenicia and Antioch. Initially they shared with Jews only. But some coming from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to share with the Greeks there (Acts 11:19-21). A great number believed. The church in Jerusalem heard and sent Barnabas, who was related as being glad and encouraging the people. He went to Tarsus to obtain Paul that he might help with teaching the people. And it was Paul who established the greatest recorded expansion into the Gentile world. Even then there were problems in the early church as to how these Gentile believers should live. There were those who wanted them to practise all the elements of the Jewish religion. It took the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) to establish what the requirements should be for these new believers. Even after this though Paul related how Peter allowed his behaviour to be affected by those who still thought a more Jewish practice should be the norm (Galatians 2:11-14). This pull of Old Testament practices at times still has its influences within the church to this day.

There are the traditional stories of others of the early disciples going to other regions to share the gospel, such as Thomas going to India and John being established at Ephesus.

It did seem, that it took the early church a while to realise the scope of the mission their Lord had given them to carry out. Peter in one of his letters, though, comments about how it is God’s will for all men to repent and come to a knowledge of the truth (II Peter 3:9). And this is the assignment for the church. It is its reason for being. The whole thrust of scripture is this intense love of God for all men from all backgrounds and the costly lengths he went to enabling Him to bring them into relationship with Himself. Obviously the greatest demonstration of all is that of sending his son to live amongst us and die in order to accomplish this. Beyond this is the reality that the church is the continued embodiment of His son on this earth and is here for the very same purpose as the son – the redemption of the world. Our acts are supposed to exceed those of Jesus (John 1:12). We need to be about our Father’s business (Luke 12:42-44).

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

With this great heritage what have we done? There has been the thrusting growth of the early church. It began as a small group of despised sectarians, grew to a people who turned the world upside down, then to a threat to the Roman Empire and emperor worship, until finally it became the state religion, under Constantine, administered from Constantinople. There have been many who felt the church lost its impetus under the Christian Empire. And no doubt it would. Once the Christian point of view becomes that of the state, a number of perverse forces begin to operate on people's wills. There becomes a ceremonial reason to embrace Christianity rather than a deep acknowledgement of truth. Also the state can then by force impose Christianity. Even if the state in its expansion was intending a purely secular conquest, the reality is that the ends and means can become very confused. Also once this mighty secular edifice is attacked and broken, what becomes of the church and the message of Christianity? The break of the church into the Western arm and the Orthodox branch dates from problems associated with this confusion and the consequent seeking of power by different factions. A church that was founded as a single body of Christ to be manifest on this earth became a dismembered distortion that has continued to split again and again throughout history. Each split has to have its reason for separating. These reasons need to be maintained for continued existence of the separating factions. And a great deal of energy is invested over these issues as opposed to the central mission for which the church was born into the world. There are legends about what obscure issues the church in Constantinople was debating when it was overthrown by the Ottoman Turks, originating from Asia, embracing Islam as they did so, and sweeping most of Christianity before them. Certainly such a reversal should have been a clarion call to Christians that something was deeply wrong with the Church at that time. Centuries have past since that change and Islam remains one of the toughest obstacles in spreading the gospel at this time.

The mission of the church was obviously not just that of spreading a message. Yet it is mainly this with many other effects arising as benefits from this.

It is instructive to see how missions have been achieved in the church over the centuries since the time the Biblical record finished. There are far more detailed books and references that give extensive background for this particular chapter. But the idea for this is to give a thumb-nail sketch.

It has been pointed out that the current pattern of missionary endeavour is a relatively recent phenomenon. Missionary outreach as such is not a recent thing. The way it is supported and structured, though, is.

One can look back to the initial early church spread as it occurred with both expulsions from sensitive areas, as at Jerusalem, to the trip of the Ethiopian eunuch, to the deliberate choice as with Paul to reach out to specific areas. At this stage one can see churches readily growing and being established. Paul is recognised as the original tentmaker. His occupation has given the name to the missionary who supports himself financially either partially or completely on the field. It has been commented by some that Paul probably spent a large proportion of his missionary time in the self-supporting mode. With the situation of the time he was away from his sending church to the difficulties of transporting any financial support about the Empire, the only possible way to survive was to work. He comments in his letters how he laboured night and day so that his ministry would come at no cost to those who heard it (I Thessalonians 2:9, II Thessalonians 3:8).

The centuries after Paul were full of journeys by a multitude of people spreading the gospel throughout the nearby world. Initially this was through the Roman Empire. But even beyond these borders, people such as the Germanic tribes were reached before they later invaded the empire. Even as the Arab invasions began, outreach was actively occurring from Britain to the countries to the north and into Western Europe. At the same time Eastern Europe and Russia were being reached from the church in Constantinople.

In the later church times we hear of St Francis who was keen to spread to the light of Christ beyond his native country. His first two forays, to Syria and then to Morocco, were frustrated by storms and ill health respectively. Receiving help from the Crusaders, he made his way to Syria once again, reaching it, and continuing on to Egypt. Here he met with the Sultan Malek el Kamel, the Muslim ruler. Spending some time there, but finding that the Sultan could not understand him, he returned home once again.

From here it is some time before we see further trips. The Jesuits travelled extensively usually supporting themselves with the crops they raised and the education they could provide. Their record is quite staggering both with the travels they undertook and the numbers they influenced. Even with conservative estimates from today of the numbers that say Xavier reached, his results would compare favourably with any modern worker.

In Protestant circles the earliest record of any major thrust was that by the Moravians. Although beginning as a movement in the mid fifteenth century originally from the teachings of Jan Hus, the actual missionary outreach period began in the early eighteenth century. The awakening that began this occurred through a Kristian David, who, stirred by the German Pietist awakening, undertook a journey to his native Moravia to contact families identified with the original movement. Under his leadership a group of these settled at Herrnhut. Count Graf von Zinzendorf undertook to organise those who settled in this area. From this the more modern and influential Moravian movement began. As the missionary ideas began to influence the community, people did anything they were able to reach out to those about them. Some sold themselves into slavery on galleys to reach those in that situation. In their trips there was no support from the church at home as far as finances went. There was support by the prayers of the faithful prolonged prayer meeting established by their home group. Beyond that they had to manage to provide for themselves in the situation they ended up. The Moravians had a major influence on the Protestant Reformation generally and in particular in missionary endeavour. John Wesley was strongly affected by contact with them.

William Carey, the so-called father of the modern missionary movement in Protestant circles, had no banks to forward him money from home. Leaving for India late in the eighteenth century, he established a long-term work in India, using funds from the English Baptist Missionary Society, which he helped found, for the first year of his work only. He had become the superintendent of an indigo plant in Bengal. With this and other work he supported himself from this time on. Later he was forced to move from British controlled areas largely through the influence of the East India Company. The extent of his work in teaching, translation, both of the Bible into a number of Indian languages, and with others of the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, is staggering. And this especially when one considers he was self-supporting.

It was at the time of the China Inland Mission with Hudson Taylor and his fellow missionaries that a structure akin to today was born. Here the Shanghai and Hong Kong Bank was present to forward remittances from England. With the faith support principle and the idea of full time service, a new breed of missionary was launched. The results were spectacular. This may not however represent a victory for the method. Rather timing and effective outreach may have been the keys.

There is some variation in the way missions are administered and supported at the moment. There are those that are linked to mission societies with varying lengths of history and size. These can be denominational or interdenominational. The workers tend to be encouraged to come from some established church structure that will be responsible for at least a significant part of the prayer and financial support and backing. The attitude on how these finances are to be arranged varies from society to society. Some have a "faith" policy meaning that they feel God will supply the worker's needs, although there is usually an acknowledged amount that it is felt each worker will need for the job. Others have a budget type policy where the worker, or the society, will list pledged support. A certain amount of the expected cost of the venture will have to be pledged before the worker is considered ready to go. Whichever way a society works there is no guarantee that moneys required will be available for all the time the worker is on the field. In both types of structure there can be a falling off in support over time. Other workers are managed by individual churches which wish to stamp something of their identity on the planted new church or feel a closer link with the missionary in doing it this way.

Currently it is generally taken as given that the best way for missions to be furthered is for there to be full time workers sent to the target countries and for them to be employed actively in the most fruitful areas. Even this is not always possible as these areas need to be evaluated, which takes time, and then there needs to be a means to be able to live in these areas. The number of countries where it is possible to work as a full time missionary (with this at least stated as your occupation) has fallen dramatically. Even those areas that were considered open for this sort of work have closed or are closing their borders to labelled

missionaries. In such situations missionaries may adopt a job to enable them to get a visa to remain in their country of choice. Usually it is stressed this needs to be for the minimum number of hours possible in order to have the free time to engage in ministry. Generally it felt that if too much time is involved in work, there will be no energy or time to do active outreach. This is not to say there is no one involved in full time work in some countries. It is already happening and has been for a time. But the feeling is that this is definitely less than ideal. Such a person is felt to be probably not as effective as some one engaged in full time ministry. Though the change is there it seems to be adopted somewhat reluctantly.

There are culture-sensitive issues too as far as the current beliefs of the people. Politically and socially there needs to be great care and sensitivity shown. This is not an insurmountable problem and is being handled by most mission agencies in various ways.

Beyond this, though, there are other issues. People have limited times on certain fields due to a number of factors. It can be the climate is not suitable. The schooling for children needs to be considered when they get to an age where that becomes an issue. There may be significant local opposition to foreigners living in certain areas. This can be exacerbated by the degree of secrecy with which the workers need to operate either due to established laws of the countries or due to the way it is enacted. Secrecy can be interpreted as due to the worker undertaking clandestine government or other work (spying).

Personal factors can arise within the team. Where people are present as full timers there is a great deal of interaction with each other. It is like working for the same business. With less exposure to other areas of work than occurs for those in regular jobs, the differences can show and result in loss of workers through the attrition of conflicting personalities.

The cost of maintaining a family on a foreign field is high. Not only are there the usual living expenses of any family in day to day living, but also there is extra money needed to pursue whatever ministry is intended and the return flights home for the family at a rate that is felt necessary to maintain home contacts. With the rapid turnover of people in churches, often due to changing locations for jobs and housing, people quickly lose track of their missionary. More frequent home leave is probably necessary than in times past due to this. Then when people start considering these costs they begin to analyse who should really be there. Western Christians seem to be so expensive to maintain. Surely it is better to utilise those from non-Western backgrounds who seem to be able to live more simply. This is rather an indictment on us in the West. But even this suggestion seems to ignore the rapid socioeconomic changes that are occurring throughout the world. Many countries now live more and more near these Western standard of living levels.

WHERE TO NOW

With such a new and radical structure (as proposed in this book), there is the possibility of dramatic growth without the concerns there have been at the immaturity of the new believers and concerns about leadership. It should be possible to aim at the maximum rate of growth in the most efficient way.

There is no problem with people from any nation going to do this work. It would be best though if those overseas managed to seek the cooperation that can occur with those from many countries to achieve their ends. Then people would truly see our heritage by our love for one another.

The world has changed dramatically in recent years. More and more it is becoming a unit that people can move around in. It is possible to regard the whole globe as a job and selling market. Why do not we use this? It is not unusual to see migrants from many different countries living amongst us having taken opportunities to seek a new life away from their home country. There is usually the need for any long term ones to have been processed through immigration fulfilling whatever are the latest requirements stipulated for them. Also there are many multinational firms establishing bases in various countries seeking a wider market for their goods and services. Economically this is seen as a good process. It should benefit both the company and the country it is working within. There has been debate about the value of this at times, and there are some examples of exploitation. But this seems to be where the global market is headed.

In the past people have drawn attention to these migrants from the point of view that they are being brought from other cultures to our doorstep as a ready field to evangelise. There is truth in this. We should certainly use every opportunity that presents itself. Likewise mission is not just about overseas countries, but about the unreached people (the white fields) all around us. But deeper than this it presents us with the challenge for us to do similarly. Why cannot we pursue jobs and opportunities in other countries to open bases for evangelism? We have the metaphor of Christians supposed to be salt in the world. Salt seasons and preserves. It is distributed evenly throughout the cooking. Some have used this metaphor saying how this is supposed to be the ideal method of distribution, as opposed to us being in discrete huddles like piles like manure and creating only a stench!

There have been strong opponents of such proposals. Principally they see secular jobs as distracting attention away from the work that needs doing. People are supposed to become so busy doing their jobs that they have no time to undertake evangelism and teaching. But for those who have been on the field it is possible to see another side to such claims. Those who operate as “full-timers” have so much involvement in a lot of other administrative tasks that they have little time for other duties either. There is still the need for support. And local people, especially in countries that do not openly receive missionaries, wonder what these people are able to do that enables them to stay so long in their country without work. They usually do not appear particularly as well off as one would expect of those who would be able to live without work. It creates suspicion as to what work these people are actually engaged in. And natural opportunities that appear from working with local people do not arise. Also those that seek to become Christians have this model of what a real Christian is. He or she obviously does not work. Or at least, they should be engaged in full time service. And the workers begin to have unreal expectations of new Christians. Those who work do have limited time for meetings and other activities. If the missionary is engaged in work just as those he is reaching out to, he will shape activities around these sorts of schedules. If he starts to feel tired with all the things he is trying to do, then he will realise that the locals probably are too.

From this point of view, it would seem actually preferable for workers overseas to be engaged in normal work in the country they elect to go to. Those who are there supported from outside should be few if any at all. With a real job too, as opposed to a mere front, it should be possible to earn enough to support the whole family, without any supplement from home, and even have enough to return from time to time to one's own country. The suggestions contained in the section on wealth should give some encouragement along these lines that this really is possible. Access to other countries then is only limited by our ability to generate job ideas within them. Our families would grow up with natural links to the countries. And both the spiritual and the economic work we bring should benefit our host country.

An advantage of this method of establishing workers in target countries would be the relatively low cost of doing so. If workers were in jobs that supported the family fully, then there would be effectively no limit to the number of workers that could be in a field. The numbers therefore would be greater and the onus on those there would be less. With effective jobs questions such as schooling for the children becomes less of an issue. International schools and boarding options are possible. Those who wish could still access the local school system. If more overseas people are present then there is more need for international school places and more choice becomes possible. With the chance of more international type schooling opportunities, more families can opt to remain longer on the field as their children require more specialised education. Also, for the parents, when families do return to their home countries, there are work skills that have been used all along that make the finding of reasonable jobs back in one's own country much easier.

The more workers there are the more contact locals are going to have with Christians. The more the exposure the higher is the chance of getting an accurate picture of them. Small numbers of people seen infrequently are more likely to result in rumours and misunderstandings. When such problems have arisen overseas, locals who have been in contact with workers have been able to see the falsehood of unfounded allegations. The more contact like this that occurs, the more obvious a false slur is going to be. Pastoral support and encouragement for workers on the field will be much easier with the larger numbers. More of the target country can be accessed. In the early stages as the structure for the new church is being established there will be more people available to undertake the various teaching jobs. This will also give local believers a more accurate picture to build on. They too do not need to establish a few highly trained people to run the church. The job can be shared by many. If some believers are interned or other problems like this arise, then there is less disruption to the church as a whole. It would simply need to establish replacements that would not need extensive training to fill any gaps.

Some will argue that it is not possible to access some poorer nations with this type of approach. Firstly the area of greatest need in the world is the so called 10/40 window (that band in the northern hemisphere between latitudes 10 and 40 and embracing that east to west Asian region and North Africa). Most of the countries are quite developed or are developing rapidly. All such economies can readily absorb skilled workers and business enterprises into them. There are those that work already actively at second language work. For the foreseeable future there will always be a need for such work. There may well need to be some care to ensure that the remuneration will be enough for the worker to live adequately particularly if they have family to support as well. Businesses have that great asset of being able to expand and not be limited by a salary's upper bracket, as occurs with an employed person. Even in those countries that are relatively poorer, there is no need to assume that a successful business cannot be established. Such businesses that stimulate the economy of the host country will be of immediate and future benefit to the country's development. Ideally these should be the sort of business opportunities that are sought there.

Having established businesses in these countries should enable help to be arranged for nationals who in the past may have lost jobs when they became Christians. It has not been an uncommon problem in a number of countries. Loss of a job can create enormous hardship for the believer (as it would for any of us) and his extended family. If other jobs can be established in the new businesses it should be possible to absorb such unfortunate people. There will be those who see the problem of "rice Christians" seeking benefits of being associated with the wealthy foreigners and therefore feigning Christianity to achieve this. There will always be problems with any system that will be tried. However it is possible to overcome most of them if they are seen and appreciated as risks. It should be possible to establish jobs associated with the new businesses but not necessarily directly part of them. Also if the businesses are established with due thought they should in themselves stimulate the economy and produce spinoffs in other job possibilities.

OVERVIEW

Overall this system should enable a speedier penetration of the world by the gospel. More people can be spread about the world as salt to achieve a deeper and more widespread change. Believers should be more secure in themselves to enter all facets of society and thereby refresh and renew it. Economies should be stimulated by creative approaches to access. Believers who go as workers should be less dependent on regular meetings of a larger group, able to survive with some close fellowship with a small group and to feed themselves with personal study. Their level of maturity should be much higher than that which is now usual. Duties should be lighter than they have been for people overseas. A greater sense of security and fulfillment by having a valid job in target countries should be possible. Children of workers should feel integrated as part of the community they are in. With a more secure support it should be possible for workers to remain longer as more educational options open up for their children.

Local communities will be enhanced by development within them through business involvement. New Christians will not be being taken out of the structure of their cultures and communities to be trained for full time work. There should be less fracturing of bonds and social structures this way. Growth of the new church is simplified and readily reproducible. There is not the demand for extensive training. Costs involved with training both monetarily and in time are reduced to a manageable level. The time to maturity in new believers should be significantly reduced. Problems associated with crackdowns on new believers should be lessened. With a less society disrupting approach, changes will not stand out as much, lessening initial negative responses. If some believers were relocated, incarcerated, or otherwise should be to induce more community participation and influence by the new believers instead of resulting in marginalisation and isolation. There will be long term benefits for the community and country themselves.

Having this looser structure about the world should allow a great cross fertilisation of ideas and understandings. The church should be more truly a single body nourishing the various parts. Understanding and growth of insight should occur at a greatly accelerated rate.

There may well need to be some sort of oversight of this system. Whatever it becomes it should be light and representative across a wide area. There may need to be some sort of “magisterium” which decides contentious and problematic issues. With all believers being established to a far greater degree of independent understanding, the teaching of church history which will cover so many of the problem divergences that occurred in the past (at least we have the benefit of history to use), and the provision of close personal fellowship as an initial base, the risks of heretical and dangerous detours should be lessened. With a fellowships based on a more horizontal relationship, there is more likelihood of early variances being discussed and worked through before they become a deeper problem. The desire here is for a more brotherly association than for one based on imposition of leadership ideas.

Teaching and practice that is based on a healthier and less costly use of material resources should establish a people who can sustain continued growth and be a blessing to communities they live in. There is not the need to plan, finance and found costly buildings and administration that is duplicated time and again across local areas. With reduced dependence on buildings the church elements should be more freely mobile. It is more likely to seek that which is above rather than merely temporal concerns. It is an understanding that we are seeking a home that is in the heaven. Our true structure is there. There is not the need to establish a less-than-perfect concrete picture of that which is above.

In contrast to this though, for individuals and their families, there is the ability to establish their own homes. Financially they should be more able to achieve this. There is less demand from a central church structure for money to achieve its ends. And people should be able to learn more effective methods of using the money they have. In the same way that Martin Luther said that even if he knew Jesus was to return tomorrow, he would still plant an apple tree, there is wisdom in establishing secure homes.

Jesus said that we would do greater works than he did. And yet when he rose from the dead he could appear seemingly at will at various locations manifesting himself to his disciples. He had his apparently limitless divine power to perform signs of wonder as he did in his life before his death. And yet he left this earth,

leaving us here with his Holy Spirit power to endue us with the power to undertake this mission. What did he mean for us to achieve? Where is our deep understanding of what he meant?

This book has been aimed at suggesting a possible way forward that should bring about results to redress current problems and bring forth a new vibrant church to bring joy to the heart of the Lord and to the people that live within this system. Let there be joy instead of sorrow, excitement instead of boredom, growth in the place of stagnation, depth in the place of shallowness. With much of what is proposed being done in limited or alternative ways already, it would not take much to achieve. It will simply take some boldness in experimentation to see if this can be made to work in a bigger framework. Most will see the advantages of it. They will come along and try. For those who cannot do so or do not wish to try there is the established system which will no doubt gladly continue to service their needs as long as they wish it. With the rapid changes in our society now, unless we try something bold like this, we will not see people going on very far nor the world as effectively touched as it should be. Our voice will become an even more strident unconnected call that will seem increasingly unrelated to those around us.