

# **WHOSE SIDE IS GOD ON?**

**An enquirer in Northern Ireland**

**PETER HANNON**

Foreword by Rev. Ken Clarke

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# Foreword

At school I loved participating in the annual school dramatic production. One lesson I learned was that what goes on behind the scenes directly impacts what happens on stage.

On the stage of Northern Ireland during 25 years of “the troubles” much has been going on behind the scenes to bring about peace, reconciliation and a genuine grasp of the feelings, perceptions and aspirations of “the other side”. Speaking and sharing in the atmosphere of truth and not myth - be it religious, social or cultural - is crucial if progress is to be made.

One of those behind-the-scenes people in Northern Ireland is Peter Hannon. With sincere faith, immense courage and insuppressible hope, he has given himself to listening and understanding. He has planted seeds of peace where others have been reluctant to walk. He is a member of our congregation. Like so many in Northern Ireland we know the consequences of terrorist activity. Our beautiful and ancient church building of St. Patrick’s was damaged by a bomb on Friday night, 13th November, 1992. A large section of our town centre was destroyed by the blast and subsequent fire.

In this book Peter shares with us his heart. Out of his own personal suffering and his experience in South Africa and Northern Ireland comes a document which is factual and fascinating. He deals with realities. Painful lessons have been learnt. Hopes and dreams have been challenged. Surprising friendships have been forged.

The path of peace is a dangerous one. The healing of divisions takes time. With honesty, humour and hope Peter gives us a book which is worth reading - but he gives us more than that. He

whets our appetite to *be* peacemakers wherever we are! “If you know these things, blessed are you if you *do* them”, said Jesus.

I warmly commend ‘Whose Side Is God On?’

Ken Clarke

*Rector of St. Patrick’s, Coleraine*

# Introduction

An Deus sit? Does God exist? If He does, what does He expect of me? What do I expect of Him?

Having asked three blunt questions, a friend who has carried major responsibility here in Northern Ireland and whose wisdom I respect, suggests that I attempt three blunt answers, setting out my stall from the beginning.

First: I do believe God exists. Proof, for me, cannot be a matter of intellect alone, but of experience, experience which personally becomes irrefutable.

Second: He expects of me that I take Him seriously, in His totality, not selecting what suits my comfort, my attitudes, my comprehension. He is all or nothing.

Third: I expect of Him that He has a plan and a purpose for me and for my country; that He can reveal that plan, step by step; that it is not a blueprint but a destination - "I am *the way*, the truth and the life"; that He is trustworthy in supplying every need to move towards that way.

My wife adds, "It is a way of humility, of forgiveness, of a demanding love.

"The tumult and the shouting dies;  
The captains and the kings depart:  
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,  
A humble and a contrite heart".

Most of us here in my home country of Northern Ireland count ourselves as believers. We are a believing people. Yet something has gone wrong. To the world we allow our divisions to symbolise a denial of faith.

The same was often said of South Africa when I lived and worked there for many years.

What is missing? Both countries compel questions of those of us who count ourselves Christians. How easy it is to say “I believe”, but then make decisions as though God has no say.

And, as we look at the creeping demoralisation of our Western ‘Christian’ society we must ask, what has gone wrong? Others rather than believers seem to be setting the agenda. Is this a measure of their strength or of our weakness?

I am no philosopher nor theologian. All I can record is a personal journey trying to explore something of the greatness and unexpectedness of God’s ways in face of these questions.

It is a journey, not of theory, but of simple practicality where building blocks of faith have been set in place, one by one. And, as I continue to learn, so new insights into what goes on in my country begin to emerge.

Of course there are no easy answers, no simplistic solutions. Many others have wider and deeper experience than I, working with care and dedication for cure here in Northern Ireland.

I believe that God *does* work, though I can only catch a glimpse of how and through whom. And if, in these pages, more questions are provoked than answered, perhaps the purpose will be served, for we are in an eternal search where both saints and strugglers have been needed throughout the ages.

## **RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS**

Northern Ireland and South Africa point us inevitably to the issue of relationships - how you get on, or don’t, with those whom you find difficult and different.

When ‘the troubles’ erupted here in Northern Ireland I realised

that I had to move out of my own comfortable circle and ask why? What had gone so wrong?

I drove up to Derry/Londonderry (we cannot even agree on the name) one day with a friend whose background was totally different from mine. He was Roman Catholic, I Protestant. He had personally suffered in terms of job discrimination at the hands of my group. He was giving leadership in the Falls Road area of Belfast, the heartland of anti-government feeling; I lived, insulated, in the well-to-do suburbs.

As we travelled, I asked, "Gerry, what are the facts about discrimination?" He paused for a moment and answered, "Facts? Facts only confuse the issue. In this situation each side has its own set of facts, mostly accurate, but selected to prove its own case. Each ignores the real fact which is what the other side *feels*. Feelings are the real facts".

Learning the true facts is, of course, supremely important, but an old Scottish friend who lived with us for some time through the early years of 'the troubles' made a point similar to Gerry's. "Peter", he said one day, "If you want to do anything about the situation here you have to start from the basic fact that everything the Catholics feel about the Protestants, and everything the Protestants feel about the Catholics is absolutely true!"

Perhaps one takes that with a pinch of salt. But, at the same time, if I accept that *all* of us equally need change then at least I could get away from the eternal cycle of blame and of,

"Oh yes, but ...".

Not long ago I realised that Jesus had something to say on this which I had never taken on board. When reading Matthew, chapter 5, I always assumed that He laid down that if I come to the altar with my gift and there find that I have feelings in my heart against someone else, I have to go and put that right before returning to the altar.



Then suddenly it struck me that that was not what Jesus had said at all. In fact it is (verses 23, 24), "If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember *that your brother has aught against you*, leave there your gift before the altar and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift..."

"If your brother has aught against you". That is quite a different cup of tea. Jesus commands that it is what *the other person feels* that has prime importance and is my responsibility, not my own sense of rightness. What a challenge that is in our divided community.

In Ireland the power of our remembered grievances, often justified, is world famous. Some people say to us, "Why can't you forget? It is all over and done with". This makes me think of a doctor saying to a sick man, "Your symptoms started some time ago; why not forget them and be healthy". I need to go deeper than that if old wounds are to be healed.

Napoleon said, "History is a fable agreed upon" - and a parliamentarian added, "by the winners"! I know that I was brought up to remember the things my people and my country are proud of, the battles we won, the good things we did and the awful things perpetrated by our enemies. How does this interpretation of history stand up to Jesus' command? I need to look with fresh eyes and fresh understanding at past events, not so as to wallow in guilt but so as to learn something of the cost of bringing healing.

I was shaken to come across recently one incident in my own history that I had not heard before, just the tip of the iceberg if I am honest. It concerned a certain Governor Hunter who, in 1797, wrote from Australia to the Secretary of State for Colonies protesting that he had received five shiploads of prisoners from Ireland with no list of names and no details of crimes.

The Secretary of State wrote back that he did not know who they were or anything about them. There had been resistance to the payment of the tithe to the established Church of Ireland, my church, and His Majesty's troops had rounded up whole villages and put them on the ships. Some may indeed have paid the tithe. There were no charges or trials, nobody was convicted. A majority were Catholics, but there were also Presbyterians, including Presbyterian ministers.

I need to take on board such facts if I am to live into 'what my brother may have against me', not dismiss them because such things never affected me or happened long ago. They are still a living reality to many, whether I like it or not.

It is right to love my country and, indeed, to be proud of much in my heritage. Everyone has the right to such pride. And everyone's reasons for pride are different. With the pride I need the sensitivity as to the reality of what others remember.

Ballinamallaght, for instance. Soon after the bombings and killings on our streets began I called on a Catholic priest to whom I had an introduction in the hills outside Derry.

As we talked I asked, "Father, what does the name of your parish, 'Ballinamallaght', mean?" He looked at me sideways, considering whether to tell his guest the real story. Then he said, "When your people came to this country as settlers 350 years ago, my people were forcibly cleared off the good land down there in the valleys" - he pointed to the rich farms in the distance - "and pushed up here into the hills. When they reached this spot they turned and cursed the people who had supplanted them. The name remembers that: Ballinamallaght - the place of the curse".

As we got to know one another the priest asked me one day if I would agree to meet a friend of his. I happily said yes, only to discover a little later that this friend, P. J. McClean, had been interned for 4 years without trial, presumably for his implacable

opposition to the established set up in Northern Ireland which I, with my background, would represent.

When I found this out I said to my wife, "What on earth would I have to say to such a man?" I tried to search out what I felt God might want me to learn, and finally, rather nervously, I rang up McClean in Co. Tyrone. His wife, Annie, answered the phone and, later, she told me, "When I heard your accent I said to P.J., 'Why do you want to have anything to do with one of 'them'?"

P.J. agreed to see me, if only at that time because of my introduction from our mutual friend.

I well remember knocking on his door in the village street. He invited me in to his front room, sat me down on a hard chair and looked me in the eye. "What do you have to say?"

I took a deep breath and plunged in. "When the latest 'troubles' erupted here in Northern Ireland, my first reaction was to blame somebody else - agitators or others who were upsetting a country which I considered to be moving towards reform. But this attitude is cheap. If my country blows up under my feet, then I need to look more deeply at why.

"I realise that I have grown up taking privilege for granted - the best schools, Oxford University, a fine home in a lovely area and the certainty that every opportunity could be open to me. With that has gone an ignorance, and indeed often an indifference, as to what many of my fellow countrymen experienced in the way of discrimination. I have come to the conclusion that this ignorance and indifference makes me as responsible for the trouble in our country as anyone who pulls a trigger or plants a bomb.

"I would like now to work with you," I went on, "to build a country which would no longer just be for the benefit of my group, nor just for the benefit of yours, but where together we

could create an Ireland which could give faith back to the world rather than destroy it by the way we live”.

He was silent for a while. Then he said, “If I were to call a meeting of my friends in Omagh (the county town), would you say to them exactly what you have said to me now?”

Well, I took a deep breath. I did not know who his friends would be, though I had my own ideas at that time. Anyway I said, “Yes”.

In fact that meeting never took place for, shortly afterwards, P.J. was again swept up into internment, while I went out to South Africa, thinking I would only be away for a year, but in the end remaining for 14.

During that time we would exchange Christmas cards. P.J.'s at the beginning would be grim pictures of barbed wire and bitterness. I learned that he was one of those to undergo ‘deep interrogation’.

Twenty years later, when we spoke together at a meeting in Westminster, London, he looked on those days. “When I was arrested in 1971 I had been Chairman of the Civil Rights Association which had always stood for non-violence. But when internment came, without trial, I lost faith in the instruments of state.

“The test came”, he continued, “when my case, with others, was brought to the European Court in Strasbourg. There had been different forms of torture during an interrogation period of nine days - the hooded noise, hanging up with handcuffs on the wall, wounds inflicted, 24 different forms in all. I lost four stone in weight. I thought that the Government could never afford to release me alive.

“I then managed to get a message out as to what was happening. When the Prime Minister heard of it, it was stopped,

and when the case came to court the Government offered no evidence against me though I remained in prison”.

In the camp at Long Kesh P.J. was elected Secretary of the Internees Camp Council by the 1000 prisoners. “It wasn’t long”, he went on “before I realised that hatred in me was not going to answer the violence and injustice, but it was doing *me* a lot of harm and blocking my effective communication with the young prisoners. I went through a period of depression and then of self-examination and, in a way, of mourning. But I began to see how to turn the whole situation around and how to set about building a society that really worked.

“I hope”, P. J. concluded “that I do not give the impression that *we* are free from guilt. Even if the British Government is not free either, it is not responsible if I do not work for what is right, rid of any baggage of bitterness and grievance”.

When released - perhaps this could only happen in Ireland - with his £14,000 compensation won at Strasbourg, P.J. returned to his village and bought the former police station which had come onto the market. This is now his delightful home, the cell roof still in evidence in the bathroom! His friends tease him that he has become too institutionalised to feel at home elsewhere.

P.J.’s sense of outreach and initiative is remarkable. He sits down readily with those from all sides of the community, Unionists and Sinn Fein, the Orange Order and the police - to work to build bridges across the barriers of different political conviction. He has his own firm convictions - and we by no means always agree - but his readiness to listen and to learn is a constant challenge to me.

He emphasises that, while restitution for the past may be necessary, wrongs committed by others must never be used as an excuse to remain sunk in a spirit of blame. And Gerry, whom I quoted earlier, says, “No one can take from me the right to be responsible”.

## THE REASONABLE ONE

For a long time, in my approach to Northern Ireland, or indeed South Africa, I regarded myself as being in the select company of the 'reasonable' people. I could stand rather above the quarrelling, difficult ones who caused all the trouble.

This myth was painfully exploded for me by an experience in South Africa which remains engraved in my memory.

My family and I were sharing a house with a senior Afrikaner. We were engaged in the same work, trying to bring about change and healing in the situation. I thought we were getting on quite reasonably when, one day, the lid blew off.

"You are totally impossible to work with. You are only interested in yourself and what *you* are doing ... " and a long list of instances were produced for me to ponder.

I was shattered and felt quite misunderstood. Next day I went back to my friend and said, "I am really sorry if I hurt you. I did not mean it at all..." and I tried to explain the circumstances which had been raised.

The result was nil. The iron curtain between us remained and I did not know what to do.

A few days later, as I tried to reflect with God about the impasse, the thought suddenly hit me, "You need your friend's help to understand what you do to people simply by being you. Saying 'I didn't mean it' is no excuse. Some of the worst hurts can be inflicted even when you are unaware of it. You need your friend's help to understand what it is in your character that others react against."

So I went to my friend and said this, asking for help. Then the door opened and we began to talk.

But God had not finished with me. A week or so later I awoke

in the middle of the night and - an experience that I rarely have - it was as though a voice was saying to me, "The real truth about you, Peter, is that you enjoy treating people around you as second-class". I reacted, thinking that this was just what I was against in Northern Ireland and South Africa. But the voice persisted, "No, it is true. As long as you have felt fulfilled in what *you* are doing, you are only too happy for those around you to take second place". And I saw with startling clarity that the problem of South Africa or of Northern Ireland was not just those unreasonable extremists on either side, but the inbred arrogance and self satisfaction of people like me who sincerely believed that "Oh, if only *they* could be reasonable like us" we could make progress.

This insight profoundly altered my approach to people when I returned to Northern Ireland. I knew that I had to learn to listen in an entirely new way, not just waiting for that golden opportunity to express *my* point of view.

This was brought home to me by an incident not far from where we live. A fight broke out one evening between some teenage friends of ours from a Protestant 'big house' background and some of their Catholic counterparts. Bones were broken and feelings were raw. My instinctive reaction was to say, "Isn't it awful" and tut-tut over it.

As the days passed I found myself wondering if this was good enough. I made enquiries as to who the most extreme man in the area was and was told of a public representative, a farmer, who was regarded as being very hardline.

But still I hesitated, rather nervous as to what to do. Finally my wife, Fiona, said, "Well, if you are going to do anything, you had better do it!" So one Sunday afternoon we got into the car and found where this man lived. We drove into the farmyard. Fiona said, "You go in first!" I knocked on the back door and was

welcomed into the kitchen.

Immediately some of my preconceptions began to shift. All the family were still gathered round the big table - granny, mother and father and the children. One sensed an instinctive warmth, even if they were somewhat puzzled. We made some small talk for a few minutes and then the farmer said, "Well, you had better come into the front room". I thanked him but said that my wife was still in the car. The farmer's wife immediately went out, opened the car door and said, "What are you doing out here?" Fiona laughed a bit shamefacedly, "I was scared!" The wife thought this the funniest thing she had heard, and the ice was broken.

So we were sat down on the sofa, a cup of tea was brought, and the farmer turned to me, "Why have you come?" I began rather similarly to what I had said to P.J. when we first met, and then told him the story of my experience in South Africa of being "impossible to work with" and some of the lessons I was learning from that. I said that I had really come because I wanted to learn what a man like him thought and felt; that I had come to listen.

So listen we did, while he told us in no uncertain terms of what he felt about the situation and the evils of 800 years of British colonialism. Sometimes I was tempted to dispute his interpretation of things. He was totally convinced of the complete justification of the Republican struggle. But then I thought, "No! Listen and learn".

And learn I did. He himself suffered many personal slights and indignities. I began to get new insights into why he thought as he did. It was not that I agreed with all he said. Not at all. But I felt that God wanted me to be ready to lay aside my own viewpoints and to mean it when I said that I was there to learn.

To my surprise he accepted to come with his wife for tea a couple of weeks later. Bridges of friendship - and real liking -



quite apart from agreement on political viewpoint began to be built which have strengthened ever since. I am grateful that we can learn to value each other for our own sake, without any other end in mind. And now we can speak bluntly about what we each feel to be true, without offence being taken.

Not long ago I was driving in his vicinity when I had the unexpected thought to drop in on him. I found him ready to climb the walls with bitterness. The night before a good friend of his had been shot by loyalist paramilitaries and he was convinced that there was security force collusion. He poured out all he felt. There was nothing I could say or do. After an hour I had to leave. As I got into the car he suddenly said, "Thank you for coming and listening. If you hadn't I don't know what I might have done". Actually I had done nothing. It taught me again that God's ways are not my ways.

On the other side of the fence Dr. Ian Paisley focusses strong reactions in many. I have had much to learn about the divisions within our own Protestant community and why he and others feel as they do. The challenge of "if your brother has aught against you..." has demanded a new honesty and willingness to learn on my part.

Over an initial lunch with Dr. Paisley in our home, when I spoke of being told that I "was impossible to work with..." this seemed to strike a chord of recognition from him. His assessment of my 'big house', Church of Ireland, 'establishment' background was illuminating. And I have been grateful for the chance of further honest, open-hearted talk.

## **WHOSE SIDE IS GOD ON?**

So, with all our different viewpoints, whose side is God on? Mine of course because, after all, I am in the right. But is He?

An incident in South Africa opened a new line of thought on this for me.

At a dinner in Cape Town a Rhodesian banker told a story. I say 'Rhodesian' deliberately as he was one of the architects of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence back in 1965 which was to lead on to war and the eventual creation of Zimbabwe.

He vividly described the tensions of those early months when, under pressure of economic sanctions, he and his colleagues wondered morning by morning whether the economy could survive. A man of real personal faith he told how, time after time, he would go back to his office, get on his knees and pray. Time after time - and he told us graphic details - he felt God answer his prayers.

At the time of the dinner party Rhodesia was, in fact, just about to become independent Zimbabwe. That same week I received a letter from Salisbury / Harare. It told of a conversation with one of the guerrilla commanders leading the fight in the bush against the banker and all that he stood for.

A friend of ours had found himself discussing with the guerrilla fighter whether the guidance of God could be a reality. "I believe in the inner voice", the guerrilla said. He described how, not long before, he had been woken up in the middle of the night by an insistent thought, "Move!" It was so urgent that he roused his men and, there and then, in the darkness, they shifted camp to a new site.

Next morning the guerrilla leader discovered that, in the early dawn, just after they had left, the original site had been

surrounded by the security forces. If he had not obeyed the promptings of the inner voice he and his men would have been killed or taken prisoner.

So, whose side is God on? At one moment He seems to favour the 'white imperialist', the next the 'black terrorist'. Did He support U.D.I.? Does He support those who engage in violence?

As my wife and I discussed the puzzle different thoughts and further questions began to emerge. Perhaps God was more interested in encouraging the growth of a living faith in each of the two, starting from where each was, rather than in the rights or wrongs of their particular causes. Perhaps He just approaches things from a totally different standpoint from us.

If God loves the other person to whom I am totally opposed as much as He loves me, then how should that affect my attitude? I cannot write the other person off without writing off part of God's purpose. Perhaps He is asking of me something of the love which He shows?

## **IS TRUST POSSIBLE?**

When inherent divisions run so deep, on what basis can trust be built?

Gerry, whose insight into the relationship between facts and feelings I found so valuable, focussed this question for me.

We had been working together with others to see what contribution we could make to the situation around us in Northern Ireland. We seemed to get on well. But then a shadow developed between us. Something was obviously worrying him. One evening Fiona and I went to his home. We chatted a little uneasily. Then he turned to me. "Peter, there is one question still unanswered in my mind: when it comes to the crunch of

choosing God's will before the pressure of your own people, what will you decide?"

That was a tough one, and vital not just for a personal relationship but for the relationship between our differing sides.

I thought about it and said, "I *have* decided that it is to be God's will all the way, but I will need help to hold to that". We talked of the possibility of an interesting job which I had just been offered in 'the establishment'. I had decided not to accept, though such jobs have to be done. It meant asking, "Is this God's will, as far as I can see, for me at this time? Am I available for Him as my priority, whether I accept or not? What about the tugs of success or security?"

In Cape Town, some time later, I happened to quote the question which Gerry put to me, first to a senior Government official, and then, by chance, two days later over breakfast to a well known black radical from Soweto. The reaction of each man was identical; he stopped the conversation and said "That is *the* question!"

The government official, one of those working for profound change in the country, went on rather despairingly, "I ask myself, can there really be any political solution which will work? Can you see it happening in any other part of the world where two strong nationalisms meet head on? I see little ahead but clash and a struggle for power...."

He had a point. He could not then have foreseen the extraordinary rapidity and comparative peacefulness of change in South Africa. And often indeed the option is narrowed down to what are seen as "the realities of power". But if this is the end of the story for us in Northern Ireland the future is indeed bleak. Is this the only choice?

South Africa points to a different alternative, one which springs

from the courageous initiative of men and women who put their faith to the test.

I think of two men with whom I worked closely. By background Sam is a black nationalist, and Pieter, a white, Afrikaner nationalist.

I joined them for lunch one day in Soweto with a black radical leader who, at that time, was in constant confrontation with the white government. I listened as they talked of the kind of South Africa they all wanted to see, and what it would cost.

Then Sam said, "When it was put to me that, if we have to live together in South Africa, it might begin for me by working with Pieter, I was shocked. I said, "No way! He tries to organise me all the time. He is so arrogant that, even if he does not realise it, he always thinks he knows best. Never!"

Pieter broke in, "And when the same challenge was put to me about working with Sam, I said, "No way! I cannot trust him. He is lazy and irresponsible and cannot be relied on. Never!"

The Sowetan sat up as though a pin had been stuck in him. "You mean you *say* these things to each other and still can work together?"

Sam and Pieter nodded. "Of course we are not content that we each remain as we are. We have to care enough to help each other to change where we need it. We learn from each other and can see ourselves more clearly as a result. But, if we don't express these things that go on deep down, what basis is there for trust?"

The Sowetan shook his head in surprise. It was for him a new dimension of an honesty which unites rather than divides.

A few days later, Pieter invited a brilliantly able Afrikaner couple to his home to have dinner with Sam and an Englishman named John. Talk turned to a new constitution which the

Afrikaner was helping to draft. Idealistic and dedicated to change, he felt that the plans had far-reaching possibilities.

Sam, Pieter and John listened. Then Sam broke in, "These plans may sound fine to you, but they have to be carried out by people. Let me, as a black man, tell you something of what I feel. I have hated the whites because we have been used and exploited and treated as less than equal human beings. But I have had to face that I myself also was an exploiter - of women and of my parents - for my own selfish benefit, just as the whites exploited me. If I really mean business about building a new South Africa, that has to start with my own way of living as well as with the whites. And we have got to work out any new constitution together. You cannot do it alone. It will demand much of all of us."

Pieter added, "The reality is that the thing I instinctively most want for the future - security for us whites - is what Sam fears will hold back the process of change. And what Sam wants - equal rights for the blacks, leading to majority rule - is what I fear".

John, the Englishman, chipped in, "Unless we are honest about our real fears, and allow God to deal with them, we are building on sand". He and his wife spoke of their three small children and how big a step it is for them to believe that the God they say they trust actually can guide as to the nation's future.

The unity of commitment of these men is constantly tested. They react to newspapers or the news on TV differently. The striking thing, however, is that their struggle to find what is right, beyond their instinctive attachment to their own points of view, deepens rather than weakens their unity of spirit. Because they are bedrock honest about their day to day reactions and the fears and hurts which inevitably come up in a divided society, their

trust in each other's willingness to obey a final authority bigger than their self-interest, remains unshaken.

They say that none of them now claims the right to know what the future structures should be. None demands that his blueprint be imposed on the others. The trust of each man is in their obedience to God who, they believe, can make all things plain, even though the path ahead may, at times, be very dark.

## WHAT KIND OF UNITY?

What kind of unity do we want? There are four kinds that I see as possible.

There is *the unity of conformity*, where I gather around me a like-minded group who think and feel as I do. Birds of a feather flocking together.

This, of course, has one major drawback. It inevitably breeds division because my group is bound to come up against that other group who think quite differently. An exclusive unity is inevitably divisive.

There is *the unity of dialogue*, where we want to talk to the other person or group so that we can learn each other's point of view. This can be helpful where there has been restricted contact, but it is limited. Once we know the other person's opinions, where do we go from there?

Underlying the wish for dialogue is often the hope or belief that if only the other side can hear what I have to say they will see how reasonable I am. The trouble, however, seems to be that they say, "We know only too well what you think, and we are not interested, thank you!"

Then there is *the unity of consensus*. Soon after I arrived in South Africa I found myself working with black and 'coloured',

Afrikaner and English. Points of view, of course, abounded. Full of natural arrogance, it seemed to me a good idea to try and reconcile these viewpoints. If people were reasonable, surely they would see sense and reach agreement. Could I not be the helpful catalyst? Well, it did not work out that way. Endless discussion usually seemed to end with people more entrenched than ever.

A 'liberal' friend's honesty brought an unexpected shaft of light. He remarked one day, "I have been quite clear in my own mind that the main change needed is for black nationalists and white nationalists to lay aside their attachment to their own extremes". Then he added, "Naturally I assumed that they should become more reasonable, like me!"

This struck home personally. A friend once said to me, "Whenever you raise a point, it is not the point I see, but you".

Consensus is valuable. Think what it would mean in Northern Ireland. But, to work, does it not need to be undergirded by a deeper concept; what one might call *a creative unity*?

In this country we are not going to reach agreement just by reasonableness or conformity. Our interests are too disparate and our instinctive reactions to each other too deep. So we have to explore a *unity in diversity*, where our differences become an enrichment rather than a handicap

Frank Buchman, to whom I owe much in spiritual training, often used a simple phrase, "Live to make the other person great".

Or, as we have been commanded, "Do unto others...".

This demands a change in my whole approach to that difficult person, that difficult community. An old American Indian saying goes, "Learn to walk a mile in the other man's moccasins".



## Family testing ground

There is no better proving ground for developing the art of building sound relationships than in the family. Lessons learnt there have been invaluable elsewhere.

At one point a confrontation arose with Catherine (I have asked her permission to record this). She was about fourteen or so, and table manners was the issue. The more I insisted on certain points, the more she dug her heels in. Each mealtime became a battleground, to the discomfort of all. This went on for several months. I, of course, was right - but that did not seem to make any difference!

Finally Fiona said to me, "Look, this is no good. Perhaps you should ask God about it. And, you need a sense of humour!"

Well, that was not easy to swallow. I was rather proud of my sense of humour! However I tried to do as she suggested.

A few days later, driving Catherine home from school, I asked if she was in a particular hurry. No, she wasn't. So, as we were going through our little town, we turned off the main road, down towards the beach, and pulled up outside a favourite restaurant where we would sometimes go on special occasions.

Catherine looked puzzled, but nothing was said. I got out, went round to her door and held it open for her. Then I opened the restaurant door for her and ushered her in. "Which table would you choose?" I asked. We sat down. "Now, what would you like for tea?" I said.

We had a delightful tea, with lots of chat. Not a word was said about manners. We went home and Fiona says that I came into the kitchen, surprised, "You know, she is really very good company!"

From that moment on there was never again any issue about

manners. It taught me such a lesson: that my 'rightness' on any issue can be the greatest block to progress. And that God has totally unexpected ways of dealing with issues if I take my hands off.

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Another time Veronica was going through some early teenage trauma (again I have asked her if I may tell this). Boys were involved and Fiona became desperate. During one sleepless night of worry she decided to get up and go along to the sitting room where she sat down and asked God if He had any thoughts for her as to what she should do. No ideas came. All was blank.

So Fiona said to herself, "Well, at least I can pray". She got on her knees and prayed that God would give her the wisdom as to how to deal with the situation. At that point she suddenly had the clearest thought, "You are praying the wrong prayer. You are praying for the wisdom to deal with Veronica, but that means that God is going to have to come to her through you - and you will inevitably muddy the waters. You need to put Veronica in God's hands, take your own off, and trust her to him". The burden lifted.

Some time later, we were at a large gathering where a lot of young people were involved. Fiona was unhappy about how things were going, so she decided to write down all that she really longed for for Veronica and to tell her. Veronica exploded, "I hate you, and I hate your God", and she rushed off in one direction in floods of tears, leaving Fiona also in floods of tears.

A friend came across her shortly afterwards. "What have you done to Veronica!" Fiona realised that she had gone back on what God had told her earlier and, out of worry, had taken control back into her own hands.

She found Veronica and told her this and that she was sorry. Veronica flung her arms around her. "I *do* love you, Mum!"

These experiences are door openers elsewhere. After the terrible bomb incident on the Shankill road in Belfast in which nine people died in a fish shop, we went up to call on an old friend to whom we had been introduced years before as one of the most militant Protestants in those parts. We found that she had been having her hair done just a few doors up from where the bomb exploded, when it went off. She had been deeply shaken.

Over a cup of tea we talked. Her long-haired teenage son, Alan, was there, but then left. She began to tell us of her difficulties with him. Queens University in Belfast had sent a questionnaire around the area enquiring about peoples' attitudes. She had asked Alan's help in filling in the form, just the day before. One of the questions was, "Would you be willing to live next to a Catholic?" 'No, I wouldn't want that', she said. "Why wouldn't you?", said Alan, "I hate your God if that is what He thinks!."

"When he said that", our hostess said, "I told him, 'If you say that, leave my house and don't come back'. But I couldn't sleep last night, wondering what I should do. Should I call him back, or what? But here he is this afternoon, with nothing said".

Fiona recounted what God had had to teach her with Veronica, and the healing which He had brought. It struck a deep chord. Then she went on to a more recent experience.

We had found that certain derogatory stories were being spread about us behind our backs. We thought that some we counted as friends were involved. We were very sore about this, feeling it was quite unjust.

One day Fiona was sitting chewing resentfully over this when, suddenly, she felt as though Christ was there with her, but she

could not see Him, only the hem of his robe. There was this shadow in between.

Then she heard Him say, "I died for you; but I also died for them. Leave them to me".

At that, all Fiona's resentment drained away and she was free again in her spirit.

When Fiona said, "I died for them also; leave them to Me", our hostess nodded. "Yes", she said, "I believe that. He died for them (the Catholics) also. I must leave them to Him".

Fiona also found herself telling of this healing of her resentment to one of the leading political figures from Derry when he and his wife were spending a day with us. Naturally we had been talking of the situation in the country, as well as catching up on family news.

Fiona's experience was still very fresh and the tears came as she told of it. It went deep with our visitors. They began to talk of a raw bitterness in their own hearts. This turned out to be not against their political opponents but against a man on their own side who, they felt, was denigrating them. "I don't know if Christ can do that kind of healing for me", our visitor said.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is these profound personal things which may be decisive when people get around the negotiating table to work out a new future for us all.

One other family incident, of which I have written before, may be worth re-telling for it taught me a great deal.

When Fiona and I got married, I thought that one of my contributions to our home could be to introduce 'time and motion study' in the kitchen. I have always been fascinated in how a job can be done most quickly and efficiently.

So I would make my helpful suggestions: if the vegetables were cut up here by the sink instead of the other side of the room, the mess to clear up would be that much less; if this pot were rinsed immediately and used again, the pile for washing up would be greatly reduced....and so on.

At one point we had a Danish friend living with us. She and Fiona were hard at work preparing the meal, when I came in and made another of my excellent suggestions. Suddenly the lid blew off. "Would you please get out of the kitchen. We can't cope with you here. You don't really think of what goes on in anyone else....!"

I retired, hurt, thoroughly misunderstood. After all, I only wanted to help.

That evening we happened to have a date to see some friends who lived in the middle of a riot area in Belfast. As we set off in the car after supper the atmosphere was distinctly cool. Halfway there we stopped. This was no good. In that mood we would only be a blight on anyone we saw.

As we reflected for a moment, the thought struck me, "Well! You have succeeded in raising in your own kitchen many of the feelings of those who throw the bombs or pull the triggers". It began to dawn on me how much I still needed to understand the feelings of others.

That evening we told our friends of what had happened during the day. They immediately felt totally at one with us.

## **Does the personal affect the national?**

We had a visit in Northern Ireland from Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, and himself a man of far-seeing leadership in India. He listened courteously as he met exponents of every point of view, all eager to ensure that he was aware of 'the real facts'. He heard much of our complications and difficulties. Then, one day, he turned to us and asked, "Do you think that Northern Ireland is too tough for God?"

This brought me up short. I began to realise how many people, on different sides, I had written off as being beyond the possibility even of God's power. This was another barrier of my own prejudice and know-how which had to be broken down.

During the days when Gandhi was with us we called on a very senior churchman. As we talked with him, Gandhi spoke of the answer to hate which he had seen coming to a key area of Indian political life. The churchman broke in, "I do not think we have hate here in Northern Ireland. Fear, yes; prejudice, yes; but hate, no!"

For a moment there was a stunned silence. If what our visitor had been experiencing in that week in Belfast was not hate, what was it?

But this pointed a finger to our weakness. We know that, as Christians, we should not hate, therefore we persuade ourselves that we do not. We hide the reality of what goes on inside us, and so God's healing power is blocked by our unwillingness to face the truth. I need to call sin, sin, personally and nationally.

My mind often goes back to a weekend gathering of black and white in Johannesburg. While we met, a terrible bus accident happened nearby in which many children were killed. Next

morning a white engineer spoke. "I realised", he said, "that when I first heard the news, what instinctively flashed through my mind was, 'were the children black or white?' And underlying that was the thought that if they were black it would not be quite so serious".

He was deeply shaken. Did he really think like that? Afterwards some of the blacks came up to him, very appreciative of the cost of his honesty. They said that they had reacted similarly, only in reverse. It is the kind of reality we usually try to skate over.

This came home to me at an all-African conference which brought together some hundred and twenty government representatives, political exiles, educationalists and students from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zaire, Zimbabwe and South Africa. They spent ten days in a search for God's will for themselves and their continent. Very different opinions were vigorously expressed and, to begin with, little progress seemed to be made.

For several days one man, a very senior Afrikaner from the heart of the white ruling circles, a man whose mother and father had suffered much at the hands of the British in the Anglo-Boer War, sat quietly listening. Then, at a heated moment, he asked if he could speak.

"I am a Christian", he said. "All my life I have wanted to do God's will. But, some time ago, as I was driving home one evening, God tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'I have something to say to you'.

'What is it?' I asked. "He said, 'Are you prepared to give Me your nationalism?' 'What! And become British?' 'That is not what I asked', God answered. 'Are you prepared to give it to *Me*'?

"I knew that I could not turn my back on what He wanted", the Afrikaner went on, "so I said 'Yes'. But He was not finished with me. He then asked, 'Are you prepared to give Me your flag'?"

'And accept the Union Jack!' 'That is not what I asked. Give it to *Me*. And once more, 'Are you prepared to give Me your anthem?' 'And sing 'God Save The Queen' or 'Nkosi Sikilele!' 'No! Give it to *Me!*'

The Afrikaner found it hard to speak. One sensed the struggle still in his spirit. He said, "I did decide because I know that only if we give to God the most precious things in our lives and in our nations will He show us the way ahead for our continent".

Those men and women of Africa were deeply stirred. "With a man like that we can work", they said. "He challenges all of us". He certainly challenged me. The atmosphere of the conference changed and a unity of purpose began to emerge.

## **INTEGRITY**

Those who say that a person's private life has nothing to do with public life are living in an unreal world.

How, for instance, can I trust a man to be true with me if I know that he is cheating his wife? Or be true to the country if he is cheating on his tax returns? Personal integrity *is* key to building trust.

A man who gave great leadership in the struggle for justice and equality in South Africa often comes to mind. He is an outstanding man in the so-called 'coloured' community and now holds a senior post under President Mandela's government.

A longtime friend, he came to our home one evening to meet an Afrikaans professor. Inevitably they talked of the political situation. The professor began giving forth in a rather patronising way about what he considered the high potential of some of the younger 'coloured' leadership.

Our friend finally broke in; "Look, do you really know these



men? What drives them?" Then he went on to spell out in some detail how he himself 'read' them. With this man there was the temptation of money; with another, the readiness to climb over others to get to the top; and with another it was his relationships with women. "Unless we help them on these points they will betray the hopes of our people".

Then he said to the professor, "When I was in my final year at school, I was letting fly one day about the sins of the government and the dishonesty of the white man. The man I was talking to looked me in the eye and said, 'What about yourself? No one is as reactionary as the man who wants to change things, but is unwilling to start with himself first'.

"I was shaken", our friend said. "I could not get this out of my head. I knew that I had cheated in a recent exam, so who was I to accuse others? But honesty could mean being thrown out of the school and jeopardising everything for the future".

Finally, after a long inner struggle, he did go to his headmaster and tell him the truth. He was not thrown out. In fact he went on to hold one of the top educational posts in the land. But his final comment to the professor has stayed with me: "Anything I have of integrity in my life I owe to that decision".

## **FAITH AND POLITICS**

This is all very well, you may say, but can personal decisions really affect national events? Has faith anything to do with politics? Indeed, should it?

A wise man once remarked that faith has nothing to do with politics - but everything to do with politicians!

We, all, in Northern Ireland are politicians. Can you meet anyone without a strong opinion on how the country should be

run? We cannot just push responsibility off onto those whom we see in public leadership. Our politics are an amalgam of the hopes, fears and prejudices of all of us.

Henry Drummond once wrote, "Next to losing a sense of a personal Christ, the worst evil that can befall a Christian is to have no sense of anything else".

Professor Jannie Malan, a theologian from the University of the Western Cape who became a very good friend, has strong things to say on this. He wrote in the daily newspaper 'Die Burger', which supported the ruling white National Party at that time,

'There are many people in our country who believe totally in the Gospel and whose faith, on a personal level, means everything to them. They are convinced that their sins are forgiven by God, for Christ's sake. They strive to live in obedience to God's will, zealously proclaiming the Gospel, praying for it and contributing sacrificially towards it.

'Yet sometimes their faith seems to affect only limited parts of their lives, while they remain blind to injustices which go beyond the personal to society as a whole. Such Christians can pray fervently for more personal holiness, sincerely struggling to deal with issues such as immorality, drunkenness and dishonesty, but it can take a shattering spiritual experience to open their eyes to the injustices built into our pattern of society.

'It is astounding how many good Christians in our land are ready to acknowledge before God that they are sinners, but who become angry if anyone suggests that their confession of guilt should include those parts of our political structure which, by promoting our privilege at the expense of others, undercut the moral integrity of our people.

"Or will we", he concludes 'still try to assert that such things do not exist?'

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As a North of Ireland Protestant I find that I feel a particular affinity with the Afrikaner. Perhaps it is our shared background as settler communities whose history goes back to the 17th century. We both have been moulded by the Reformation and by being a minority. And, of course, 'King Billy', King William of Orange, who is our folk hero in Northern Ireland, also stems from Holland.

Another Afrikaner who makes the link between the personal and the national very clear is Professor Willie Jonker, Professor of Dogmatics and Ethics in the Theological Faculty at the University of Stellenbosch, the cultural home of Afrikanerdom near Cape Town.

Each year a highlight of the University's life is Mission Week when, for six successive nights, some three thousand students and staff pack the historic Sentraalkerk and neighbouring halls to hear from one of their spiritual leaders. For someone accustomed to the secular atmosphere of European university life, the event is an eye opener.

Twenty years ago, when apartheid was still firmly entrenched, Professor Jonker chose this opportunity to deliver a powerful challenge to his people under the title of 'Die Liefde van Christus Dring Ons' - 'The Love of Christ Compels Us'. The Professor granted me permission to translate what he said into English for wider publication.

Just a few points which he made: he spoke of the need for his people to look at themselves through the eyes of the black man. "According to an opinion poll", he said, "only one percent of the black people think of the Afrikaners as peaceloving people, while the overwhelming majority consider us impolite, cruel and heartless. We are often quick to say, 'What you think is not true. It is incitement that has made you think like that'.

"Certainly we may never have intended many of the things

which are ascribed to us. At the same time *we must enquire into our way of doing things*".

He discussed the need to respect another man's values and identity without demanding that "You must first become white; you must first become as I am; you must first accept my identity".

He went on, "Can the black man always see in my life that I am set free by the message that I preach? Can he see that we are free from fear?"

"It is impossible", he concluded, "that a man be gripped by the love of Christ and yet stay the same in his own life and society".

When one meets the Professor, one realises that such words are not spoken easily. One senses the struggle it is for this quiet, scholarly man to be true to what he feels God is telling him to say.

On a recent visit back to South Africa, over a cup of tea in his home, he brought us up to date on some of the remarkable events in which he happened to play a key part.

In November, 1990, at Rustenberg in the Northern Transvaal, 250 delegates gathered, representing some 80 South African churches. Professor Jonker was asked to give an opening address.

He told us that he had long felt that his Church, the Dutch Reformed Church - often referred to as the ruling white National Party at prayer - needed publicly and unconditionally to take responsibility for the wrongs of apartheid. Going to the conference, he said, he hoped that someone would do this. Then, the night before he spoke, he felt God telling him, "You are the one". He said, "I did not consider myself qualified or adequate, but I felt God impel me".

The day after he spoke, 'The Guardian' newspaper of London headlined, 'Churchmen Atone For Apartheid Sins', reporting, "The conference heard and accepted a 'confession of sin' from the Dutch Reformed Church for its role in the apartheid system ...

Professor Willie Jonker said that the apology for ‘responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs’ done to South Africa was made on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Afrikaner people as a whole. He was entitled to do so, he said, ‘because the Church at its latest Synod has declared apartheid a sin and confessed to its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it long ago.’”

It was an emotional moment. Archbishop Tutu spontaneously went up and publicly embraced the Professor.

Malan and Jonker are only two of a much larger number of courageous Afrikaners of whom one could write; people who, often at the cost of being attacked by their own people, laid the foundations on which President De Klerk could build in his negotiations with President Mandela, negotiations which no one could have foreseen, even five years ago, as being successful in bringing about what many have called the ‘South African miracle’.

And, if ‘miracles’ can happen in South Africa, why not in Northern Ireland? Circumstances may be very different, but the feelings involved, the fears and insecurities, the hurts and harboured memories have much in common.

## **GOD’S UNEXPECTEDNESS**

These men do not arrive at such decisions ready-made. They are often the outcome of a lifetime’s journey. And the starting point is sometimes totally unexpected.

I have been privileged to know firsthand some of the key experiences of one such man. It taught me much about the extraordinary outreach of God’s ways when one person has the courage to step out, unconditionally, in faith.

Chris Greyling grew up on a farm in the Transvaal with a great

love for his own Afrikaner people, but great prejudice against the English, the Indians and the urbanised blacks. The rural blacks he felt he could understand. They were his friends. "Basically that meant that I only trusted black people who remained in an inferior position", he says. "The white man had to remain in his place and the black man in his. Once the black man started wearing a dark suit, carrying a briefcase and speaking English instead of his own language, then he became a danger, an enemy".

While studying theology in his first year at university, Chris faced a deep change in his life. And God, as if with his own sense of humour, used English, an Indian and urbanised blacks to answer his needs.

One evening Chris was invited to the home of a dentist friend in Pretoria. Four young people told stories of God at work in their lives. Their open honesty struck Chris. And they clearly had something to live for. He wanted that reality. But each time that evening, when he tried to speak to them in English - something he had always resisted doing - his tongue seemed to tie itself in knots. But still it proved a decisive moment for him. No one told him what to do, but he began to look at himself afresh, beginning with things which he felt needed to put right in his family relationships.

At that point I was one of those taking part in presenting a stage play 'The Forgotten Factor' which dramatised with humour and power God at work in answering division. Chris and some of his fellow theological students began to work with us.

We were invited to take the play to Kenya, so we asked Chris and his colleagues to come with us for their two month Christmas holidays.

Chris was soon requested to go on ahead of the main party to the town of Eldoret to prepare for the play coming - and he was

to work with an Indian businessman, Jethabhai Patel. In the area where Chris had grown up Afrikaners were encouraged to boycott the Indians and their shops. "But in Jethabhai", he said, "I met a man whose sole aim was to live in obedience to God. He suffered many insults from whites, but remained free from bitterness. He invited us for supper. It was my first meal in an Indian home, and I was deeply impressed.

"That evening," Chris continues, "in quiet before God I had to confess my racial pride and prejudice. If God could change a man to the stature of Jethabhai, who was I to think myself superior just because I had a white skin. It was a landmark in my life."

Later, in Nairobi, Chris stayed with a medical doctor and his wife. She was seriously crippled and often in pain. Despite this she constantly cared for others.

At one point Chris found himself separated from his fellow Afrikaners and having to work with a hot-tempered, very English character. This got too much for him. He walked out, disgusted, very lonely and very sorry for himself.

When he got back to where he was staying, tea was served in his hostess's room. She was sitting in considerable pain. Chris says, "I came into the room terribly conscious about myself and the way I was wronged. I asked my hostess how she was. She said, simply, "Chris, I was naughty this morning. I felt sorry for myself. Then the Lord said to me that if I am sorry for myself, I cannot be sorry for anyone else".

There stood Chris, a strong, healthy man with his whole future before him. And there was this lady, barely able to move, and in pain. "I went out for a long walk in the forest nearby", Chris continues, "and there I knelt and was honest to God not only about the self-pity of that day, but for a whole life of self-pity because of growing up in a poor home with a drinking father.

Since then those words have lived with me, ‘if you are sorry for yourself, you cannot be sorry for anyone else’.

It was as if God was preparing him. In Kenya at that time everyone was talking of a man called Jomo Kenyatta. He was very much *persona non grata* with the British authorities. Perhaps this gave the Afrikaners a fellow feeling.

Chris and a fellow Pretoria student decided to call on an African whose name they had been given. They mentioned to him that they would be most interested to meet Mr. Kenyatta. “That’s lucky”, their host exclaimed, “I am expecting him any minute”, and a few minutes later in he walked.

Kenyatta was startled and suspicious to meet white South Africans. Chris and his colleague told him what they had been learning for themselves and for their country. What they said caught his attention so that when we opened with ‘The Forgotten Factor’ in the Civic Theatre a few days later, those two opposites were present, the British Governor in the front row downstairs and Kenyatta in the front row upstairs.

Kenyatta invited the South Africans and others of us to visit one of his schools, a centre of his nationalist network, and to have lunch with him. He himself interpreted for us when he asked us to speak to a great meeting of his people. Then Chris sat down for a meal with the man who was to be one of the future leaders of Africa, though regarded at that time by all in authority as a danger. “That is one chicken I shall never forget eating”, says Chris.

From that beginning sprang remarkable events. Kenyatta caught a glimpse of a new road for Africa; but then all seemed to be lost in the bitter onset of the Mau Mau revolution, with its horrors on all sides.

Seven years later, as independence approached, several men who had been hardcore Mau Mau fighters but who, in prison



camp, had found a faith, went to see Kenyatta just before he was released from detention. They outlined to him a possible programme of reconciliation to prepare the way for the first elections. Kenyatta said, "You do not need to explain this to me. I know what it means". And he pointed to his bookshelf and books given him by Chris and his friends.

On taking office as his country's first black leader, President Kenyatta called a meeting with the white farming community, his bitter enemies. Some of their leaders told me later, "We did not want to see him, but then we said, 'Well, he is President, so what else can we do?'"

The President began, "If I have done things which have hurt and harmed you, I ask your forgiveness. And for the things done to me, I forgive. We have got to build a new Kenya together". The whites were stunned. It was totally unexpected, and it set a pattern of reconciliation on which, for all its later problems, the country's progress was to be built.

When the students returned to Pretoria not everyone understood what they were up to. Some said they had become 'political'. But Chris's concern had become that men hand over total control to God in their personal lives and in their wider responsibilities. It was up to Him what happened from there.

Chris kept looking for God's fresh initiatives. One morning he had the thought, "Go and meet Dr. William Nkomo". Now it was one thing to see black nationalists in Kenya, but quite another to do so in conservative, Afrikaner Pretoria. Nkomo was known to be one of the most militant men in South Africa. With others he had founded the African National Congress Youth League because he felt the parent body too moderate.

Commenting on this visit, Nkomo said, "The students came to my house. It was unusual, to say the least. It was not the 'done' thing. They said that they had been wrong to adopt an attitude of

racial superiority on the basis of colour, and they now wanted a basis of unity founded on listening to the voice of conscience and the idea, not of who is right, but what is right. There seemed to me to be no point in preparing myself to shed the blood of such people. They seemed genuine. It would be reactionary for me to retain the old stance.”

Over a period of time Nkomo began to work together with the students and others on this new basis. In a way he was ahead of his time. The depth of his challenge reflected then many of the things which President Mandela is saying today. Some of his own people opposed him, though he continued to speak out fearlessly against injustice. And his impact on white thinking was another factor in laying the foundations for the present change in South Africa.

When Dr. Nkomo and a party of black and white South Africans were visiting Europe in 1971 we invited them to come and share their convictions with us in Northern Ireland. They met leaders of church and state.

Cardinal Conway asked Dr. Nkomo, “People say to me that I must speak out about the wrongs in South Africa. But what would help most?”

Nkomo replied, “Gather as many people as you can, Catholic and Protestant, here in Northern Ireland, who have the answer to prejudice, bitterness and fear, and send them to us in South Africa to pass on their experience.”

So the ripple effect of Chris’s original decision spreads. He himself is now a Professor of Biblical Studies. Like Professor Jonker, he was invited to give a series of Mission Week talks at Stellenbosch University. He told the thousands there, “I have been gripped by the way the prophets, when they were alone with God, would cry out about the sins of their nations with a deep compassion, confessing not only personal but national sin.

“They spoke boldly, without fear of man. The way of the Cross for me is not in self-righteousness to blame others, but in humility to accept both our sin and the change which God can give, with prophetic boldness”.

When we spent a day with Chris on our recent visit to South Africa, he told us of the amazement with which he was watching people in church bodies and elsewhere accept change which would have been unthinkable only a couple of years earlier.

The factor of God realistically at work in national situations is spelt out in a new book ‘Religion, The Missing Dimension Of Statecraft’. Douglas Johnson, Executive Vice-President of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, introduced the book which instances examples of remarkable changes, inspired by people of faith, in many countries. One describes the part played by Professor Jonker and others in recent South African developments. In his foreword, former President Jimmy Carter writes, “The book poses a challenge to diplomats and politicians, religious figures and lay persons, analysts and academics alike”.

# The sin of limited expectations

A wise man was once asked, “What is the most costly sin?” He might have been expected to say “Pride” or “Dishonesty” or “Lust” or “Anger”. But the answer was, “The sin of limited expectations”.

Nothing is as costly as cutting God down to my own size, imprisoning Him within my own limitations. Writing this, I happen to read in St. Paul’s second Letter to Timothy (chapter 1, v. 12) “I am persuaded *that He is able.*”

He emphasises this in his Letter to the Ephesians (ch.2,v.20): “He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think”. That used to be spelt out for me:

Able for all we ask or think.

above all we ask or think

abundantly above all we ask or think

exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think.

The scale and complexity of the issues around can make one depressed with one’s own inadequacy, feeling, like Winnie the Pooh, that “I am a bear of very little brain”.

But this is the heart of faith: Not that *I* am able, but that *He* is - if I let Him. For He has given me the dignity of putting the key into my own hand.

My father taught me much about this from his experience. When I was growing up, he was a very successful Archdeacon in the Church of Ireland. The youngest man to hold his position, he had the biggest parish in the country, four assistant clergy, thirteen Sunday schools and everyone organised down to the last baby.

He was clearly a man marked for future promotion. But two things concerned him: the first was the depth of division between

Catholic and Protestant. Was this the fulfilment of Christ's wishes? And second was - my mother. As a wild young tomboy, she surprised everyone by marrying a clergyman at the age of eighteen. She became a loyal parson's wife, but without any real faith of her own.

One day, at a conference, my father was expressing his worries about Ireland to a young man who heard him out, and then was brash enough to say, "Archdeacon, if you want your country to be different, are you prepared to be different yourself?"

No one had spoken to the Archdeacon like that before! He might well have walked out in high dudgeon. Fortunately he was honest and humble enough to go off by himself and ask God, "What is the truth? Have you anything fresh to teach me?"

He had two thoughts which were so unexpected that he felt only God could have inspired them. The first was, "How can you make God real to anyone else when *you* are the centre of all you do?" My father realised that much of the parish was built around his own success.

The second thought was uncomfortable: to go home and be open with my mother about one thing from the past, quite small, but which he had kept hidden from her.

He obeyed. He spoke to his congregation of what God had revealed to him about his success drive. He began to start each day, as well as with prayer and reading his Bible, by taking time in quiet reflection to search God's mind for what *He* might want in his personal touch with people, for the parish and for the country. When parishioners came to talk over their problems, rather than just giving them his advice, he would make a practice of suggesting that they try to seek God's will together in quiet so that his visitors began to find in a new way an independent touch with a living, leading God.

At the end of the year, when asked to take a mission to a

neighbouring diocese, he agreed, suggesting that he bring with him a large group of people who had found a new experience that year of God's power in their lives. This was happening with a completely fresh reality.

The second step was more painful. My mother did not like his honesty one little bit. Deep down certain things in herself were challenged. Finally, after giving him some rough weeks, she accepted that a quite new effectiveness had come into my father's life which she, too, wanted. She became honest, decided to experiment with listening to God, and discovered a faith which she also began to pass on to others.

My father found himself then being led into wider, unexpected areas. His care began to range beyond the parish. Certain Protestant political, industrial and press leaders took God into their lives in a new, decision-making way. I remember a Government and an Opposition Member of Parliament meeting regularly together in our home to search for *what*, not *who* was right in contentious legislation.

My father's contacts went wider. He had a growing sense that God was meant to impact the way the nation went. In the post war years Ireland was asked to send a delegation to the founding of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. This was to be the forerunner of the European Community. De Valera, then Leader of the Opposition, wanted Ireland to make a constructive contribution to the healing of the wounds of war. He suggested that my father from the North might travel to Strasbourg with the Southern delegation. My father brought with him Fred Thompson, a Unionist Member of Parliament who was one of those exploring a new dimension to his faith. This happened for two successive years, building important bridges of trust for the new Europe.

Looking back to this kind of national initiative, it strikes me that it could never have happened without the new sense of

expectancy that had grown in my father, arising out of his very personal decisions.

The importance of the link between the personal and the public has become increasingly real to me over the years. Personal 'life-changing' and national policy-changing must go hand in hand. In a situation like ours there is only one true choice: either renewed bloody confrontation or a rugged spiritual struggle to cure individual and national self-will. Any more comfortable or less demanding alternative is built on sand.

As I understand it, Jesus and St. Paul did not preach political solutions, even in the unjust society in which they lived. But neither did they accept the status quo. They were relentless in their challenge to the fundamental motives of everyone, politicians included. The result has been immeasurable for us all in the standards on which our social and political institutions have come to be built.

If we fail in this primary task of 'life-changing' we are left with a false alternative: to launch into a 'social gospel' programme of protest, where we are *for* some people and *against* others; or to shut our eyes to reality in our nations and content ourselves with personal evangelisation alone. Both of these ignore the promise - and the challenge - of 'exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think'.

## **MAJOR - AND MINOR - DECISIONS**

If I am truly to believe that God can work effectively in national affairs, this has to be grounded on the certainty that He works at every level of my personal life. What, for instance, of issues such as career? Security? Money? Marriage? Only if I can trust Him with these, will I trust Him to show the way ahead

politically.

Or am I like the couple who, in the old story, were asked, "What is the secret of your getting on so happily?" "Well", the husband replied, "When we got married we agreed that I would make all the major decisions and my wife all the minor ones".

And how has it worked out?" "Fine", the husband said. "Of course, so far there have been no major decisions".

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When I went up to university I had a general belief in God, but no real experience of His power at work. A friend said to me, "You can become an effective part of a cure for nations if you want; but you will never be free to do this as long as you have anything to hide".

This challenged me. I used to enjoy sitting around in deep armchairs discussing with others the state of the world. But, of course, nothing changed. One day I went alone to my room and, like my father, asked God to show me the truth about myself. It had been suggested that I look at what Christ might demand of me in terms of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love - with no 'ifs' or 'buts'; and to write it down in black and white so that there should be no dodging.

Immediately some small but uncomfortable thoughts struck home: to pay back money I had taken from my mother's handbag years before; to write to the school I had just left and admit to cheating in one exam; to be open with my father about what I was really like - thoughts, habits, temptations.

These may seem little, personal points. And they were. But extremely relevant, for all that. Honesty removed the mask. And it helped me end pretence. Then I got down on my knees and



gave my life to a God of whom I really knew very little, asking him to meet my needs.

It was the key to a new freedom of heart - and to other unexpected things.

I had always been a rather fearful young fellow, very anxious about the opinions of others. A few weeks after acting on these decisions, I was walking across the college quadrangle and bumped into a man I knew slightly. He was older than many, an ex-army captain who played rugby for the university. He represented the kind of person whose approval I rather wanted to have.

To my surprise he said, "Come up and have a cup of tea". As we chatted, he suddenly asked, "What has happened to you? You seemed to have found something in your life". I was astonished that he had noticed me at all!

I told him what I was trying out. He began to talk openly of his own needs. It was a surprise to find that, underneath the veneer of success and achievement, he was remarkably like me. In the next weeks he also started experimenting with God's way.

My fear of other people began to be cured as it dawned on me that a totally new effectiveness could come into my life. But this needed to be anchored. It was one thing to get cleaned up personally, and to feel free and relieved; quite another to put myself under orders, and hand over control, daily, to a new boss.

Being practical, it began by getting up earlier in the morning. This in itself showed a certain intent, for it was anything but normal student practice. As well as reading the Bible, to take time to ask God to prompt as to what He might want me to do. Not just my plan, but to look specifically for His.

Of course not every idea came from God. But if thoughts were tested by His Word, His standards and, when in doubt, the wisdom of trusted friends setting out on the same path, then

there was less likelihood of being fooled by self-will. Naturally there was, and always is, a risk; but much less of a risk than that of completely missing something of the grandeur and effectiveness of His plan by not giving Him the chance to reveal glimpses of it.

I had been afraid that, gambling on giving my life to God, He might tell me to stop doing all the most enjoyable things, golf being one of them. One morning, some time after beginning the experiment, I woke up one morning, and clear as a bell in my mind was the thought, "Good Lord! You haven't played golf for the past ten days and you have been perfectly satisfied". It just happened that I had been spending time with different people to whom God seemed to have led. And in fact a lot of golf was subsequently played and enjoyed!

In a way it was a small incident. But to me it was very significant, because somehow from that moment I never really doubted that, if God was trusted, He would satisfy me fully.

In the next months the most surprising people became friends, men I would normally not have thought of meeting. One, later, became Secretary of the largest political party in Nigeria; another a Prime Minister of Ethiopia; and others were from different parts of Africa. It was the beginning of a calling to that continent.

I well remember Manny. He was a Marxist from Ghana. His father was the most senior black civil servant under the British, but Manny had rebelled bitterly against colonial rule. He was refused a passport to come to Europe for further studies, so he managed to stow away on a ship, terrorising a member of the crew into feeding him surreptitiously for the voyage to England.

Landing at Liverpool, he got off the ship, unobserved but penniless. Walking the streets, he spotted a pound note in the gutter and with this was able to get himself to Oxford where he had an introduction to a Professor. Academically brilliant, he

persuaded this man to sponsor him, and, when I met him, he was working from 4.00am each morning in the local dairy to earn enough money to sustain himself.

I cannot remember how I first got to know him, but soon I was often joining him and some of his radical colleagues at the cheap municipal restaurant for lunch. There they would review current affairs, mocking the imperialist sentiments of some of the British press and reading the Communist newspaper 'The Daily Worker' for 'the truth'.

I listened. Occasionally I could tell Manny something of what I myself was learning. Then, by chance, I discovered that his birthday was coming up. With some other friends we bought him a present of a bright red jersey and invited him to a party. He was taken aback. No whites had ever cared for him like that.

Slowly he began to open up. One day, totally to my surprise, he mentioned that he had written home for the first time to his father from whom he had been so deeply divided.

During the next holidays I was going to do some voluntary work in London and invited Manny to come and stay with me there. At that moment trouble broke out back in Ghana. There had been strikes against the authorities. The police opened fire on the protesters, killing more than twenty. Feelings were inflamed.

Next morning Manny said he would be away for the day. Late that night he returned and began to talk. He said that the Ghanaian students had arranged a mass meeting that day to protest against the British government and that he had been asked to take the Chair. ( I had no idea that he was held in that kind of respect). As he was going into the meeting a man from King Street - the Communist Party headquarters - had approached him, handing him a piece of paper, saying, "This is the text of a motion for the meeting to pass".

Manny put the paper into his pocket and the meeting got under way. Passions ran higher and higher, and calls for retaliatory violence increased. At a crucial point Manny got to his feet. He identified himself completely with the demands for freedom and justice. "But", he said, "will we allow our struggle to be used by others for their own purposes?" And he took the paper from his pocket, told how he had been given it by a white man, and asked, "Are we going to be told what to do by such men?"

The whole tone of the meeting changed. A strong motion was drafted, but one which contributed towards an end to the immediate violence. In the next years leading to the independence of Ghana in 1957 there were no further incidents on this scale.

Listening to Manny that night, I was amazed at how God works. And it struck me that He does want to use each one of us, however unlikely that may seem, for the healing of nations.

## **CHOICES**

Friendship with many of these men at Oxford was on a basis where honesty about my own needs, my own ups and downs, was often the door-opener to helping the other person talk of his deepest problems. Then together we could look at what it might demand of each of us to tackle the corruption and division in our countries.

It meant being ready to move into areas where sometimes I felt out of my depth. It was a temptation to remain within the orbit of like-minded people with whom I could immediately feel comfortable. But actually it was the 'Mannys' of life, or the tough rugby playing crowd, who proved more stimulating.

All the time, of course, one was learning. I came to see that compromise on Christ's standards opened a fissure through which all conviction drained away. I needed to work closely with others who would provide a caring but astringent comradeship if I was to grow in faith.

Then, on leaving Oxford, fundamental choices for the future naturally came into focus. One was that of career. Each person has, of course, their own distinct, equally important, calling. For me, forty seven years ago, God pointed the way to a life based on faith and prayer, without the security of contract or salary.

This decision took shape at the Moral Re-Armament conference centre in Switzerland where I saw firsthand some of the steps of faith which lay behind such events as the post-war reconciliation between France and Germany, with French Foreign Minister Schumann and Dr. Konrad Adenauer, the German Chancellor playing vital parts; the winning to a vital Christian faith of some of the Communist leadership of the German mineworkers; and the change of direction of Dr. Azikiwe, the Nigerian nationalist leader, which had an important role in an independence struggle free from bloodshed. I had the chance to act as Dr. Azikiwe's aide for some days during a visit he made to Europe.

'Thy will be done on earth' seemed to be a practical thing to live for.

Having taken this step about career, a further issue soon arose - marriage. Attractive girls abounded. Falling in love several times I was often tempted to take developments into my own hands. But the decision had been made, however falteringly, that God's will would be final. Again and again it seemed right to wait and not to demand my own terms.

Then, one morning, while in Switzerland with a large group of people, the thought struck me in my morning time of reflection,

“Fiona is the girl you will marry”. She was there with us, though we did not know each other well. I did not feel it right to say anything to her at that point, returning to West Africa for two more years. During that time my love for her deepened, though anxiety would occasionally arise that someone else would snap her up!

I was back home in Ireland recuperating from an illness when Fiona unexpectedly turned up to stay with a school friend nearby. She came to know my family but, rather against my will, my conviction remained, “Wait!”

Then, to my dismay, I discovered that she had left for America and no one knew how long she would be away.

Some months later, one Friday morning in London, I woke up with a sense of extraordinary clarity that the time had come to propose. But it seemed illogical. “That is silly”, I thought. “Fiona is thousands of miles away and no knows when she will be back”.

Later that morning, while driving around London doing various jobs with an old friend from Oxford days, he asked, out of the blue, whether I had any ideas about getting married. He knew Fiona well, so I told him of my conviction, but that it seemed stupid as she was on the other side of the world.

I went home for lunch. The phone rang. It was my friend. He said, “You might like to know that Fiona has just walked in through our front door, unannounced from America!”

The next day I proposed and she said yes. God had been leading her similarly.

This is not to suggest a pattern for anyone else. But it is worth recording in some detail because such experiences build a rock-like certainty that God does know His business. And that if He can work in such caring detail for me, why not for national

affairs? But He will not reveal the thread of His pattern if I try to interweave it with my own designs.

# Is our faith radical - or moderate?

Radicalism is an emotive word. To some it implies a condemnation, denoting those who promote violence and a cruel, irresponsible extremism.

Others wear the badge of radicalism proudly. For them it denotes a readiness to go all the way, at whatever cost, rejecting compromise in order to destroy injustice.

Some who condemn it live cocooned in a comfort which they do not want to have disturbed. Some who promote it give the lie to their ideals by the selfishness of the way they live. Materialism can be worshipped equally by both.

The word radical derives, of course, from the Latin, 'radix', meaning 'root'. It implies a readiness to go to the root. So anyone adopting the name is making a very great claim.

In Cape Town we had a visit from a vigorous young black man from Soweto, 1500 kilometers to the North. It was his first time in the Cape. From the slopes of Table Mountain we looked across the city, out to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and others of those whom he regarded as his true leaders were still imprisoned. It was an experience to stand beside him and realise the depth of his feeling, his sense of pilgrimage. Three of his brothers were in political exile. He had not seen them for years and was not even sure where they were.

In the following days we had long discussions about the implications of radicalism. He studied history, so naturally we looked at the first modern revolution, the French, with its great banners: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. "We will do away with the old structures; man will be free to realise himself and build anew".



Was the vision of the idealists fulfilled? Much was created. The old order was ended, new structures founded and inspiration given to many since. But the nobility of the goals did not prevent the terrors of the Committees of Public Safety nor the infighting for power among the revolutionaries themselves. One result was the imperialism of Napoleon. Was this true to the original aim?

We asked ourselves, by whom are revolutions most often betrayed or defeated? Not by the oppressor, but by the revolutionaries themselves. As was said to our earlier friend, "No one is as reactionary as the man who wants to change the system, but is unwilling to change himself first". Some call for liberty, but live licence; denounce greed, but grab for themselves when the chance comes.

Many who claim to be radical are, in fact, merely reactive. They are fuelled by bitterness against what is wrong, rather than a clear passion for what is right. They know what they are against. What are they for?

It can be easier to die for a revolution than to live to create the new and just society. In the heat of rebellion against a system which destroys dignity, some can be ready to do anything, even give their lives, to end what is wrong. That is a high price. I met men in South Africa prepared to pay it and I could only respect them.

But it can be even more costly to live the selflessness which will end the exploitation of man by man. Not just months or years of revolt, but a lifetime of dedication where true freedom and respect for each other is practised.

Does violence work? It can, of course, produce a certain level of change. It can break down wrong structures. What it does not do is build new ones or bring any final answers. It only provides a fresh context in which the same question must be asked: how do you create a truly just society? And the cruelty that goes with

violence engenders a hate which demands its own price. Those who use hate or force to gain power, inevitably have to use fear to maintain it.

We sat on the mountain top one day, the young Sowetan and I, looking to the North and discussing these questions. What would the future hold for the continent? My mind went to a Nigerian friend who, for thirty years, has given leadership in the struggle for a new Africa. He spoke in Zimbabwe to leaders of that nation, "Idealism is not enough. Our mistrust of one another, our greed, our dishonest practices blind us and divide us. Corrupt men can never build a progressive society. We need a moral and spiritual infrastructure".

A moral infrastructure. What disciplines would the young Sowetan need, as indeed any one of us needs, to fulfill the longings of his people? We talked frankly of the temptations of money, cheating, jealousy, drink and womanising, and of his own decisions on these points. No man can bring true freedom to the masses if a slave to any of these.

Then he took me by surprise, asking me, "Here am I, a young black man, staying with you and your wife and the girls. What do you expect of me?"

I said, "I expect the commitment to purity, to care for others, to the discipline that I look for in any young man, be he black or white, who sincerely wants a new future for this country. And I expect you to give me the same challenge".

Then he said, "I never thought that I could talk of these things with any older person, much less a white".

I need the risk-taking spirit of the radical, while we can explore for each of us the full dimension of true radicalism.

## MODERATION

In contrast to the radical, my human nature likes moderation; just a reasonable amount of everything - including commitment; enough goodwill and good works to ease my conscience but leaving my comfort undisturbed.

Well, fine, but one cannot pretend that moderation sums up Christ's challenge, or that it offers any adequate answer in a situation like ours in Northern Ireland where the future is going to be decided by those with the most passionate conviction.

Was Jesus a moderate? "Leave all! Take up your cross". His challenge to the rich young man and to his disciples was the opposite of moderation. So why do I instinctively tend to think of the moderates as the 'goodies' and the radicals as the 'baddies'? It is worth looking again at what seems to be accepted as the norm.

Anyone planning to block the effectiveness of Christians or wanting to make sure that another set of values ran the world, could say, "Keep them moderate; each busy with the second best, each doing his own thing, his own way".

The words of a very respected church minister in Pretoria remain with me. "I get up in the morning, read my Bible and say my prayers; but, if I am honest, I am often eager to get on quickly with my programme. There is so much to be done. But I know this is not good enough. I need to look afresh at whether I am effective in what *God* wants done".

This echoes a challenge for all of us, whatever job we are doing.

## THE CITADELS OF POWER

Faith for me, as I imagine for many of us, is not a static affair. My own life, even when handed over to God, has had to consist of a series of moments, of decisions, when I either accepted to take a risk in growth or else retreat in search of security and comfort.

We seem to take it for granted that our minds will have various stages in growth, as we progress intellectually. Some go to nursery school, then we all move on to primary and secondary schools, and finally, perhaps, to university or other training. At each step the exams get more demanding, stretching our capabilities.

The spiritual life should be the same, with an expectancy of growth and development. Personal faith began for me, when, needing help with my own needs, I said to God, "I cannot handle this; please take over". The old phrase is being 'born again'. And that was a reality. I was on a new path, but still an infant with everything to learn.

As God became more real to me, so I asked more of his help with what I had on *my* plate. It was, then, a step into primary school to say "What do *You* want done? What are *Your* purposes?" I began to discover that He led me to play a part in quite a fresh way in the lives of those around me. It was fascinating, and satisfying, to see that begin to work out.

Then the temptation became to retain control of how He should direct me. "I can manage this or that, but please do not ask me for more than I can handle". I wanted to cling to the security of my own conditions.

So, again I had to move forward, as though to secondary school; to give Him complete control of how and where I served Him, free of any ties of comfort or convenience. Unless this

decision was clear in my own life, what was there to offer, for instance, to those determined to cling to their own terms in running national affairs?

But there is, then, at least one more step which we Christians need to consider: to let Him take us to the citadels of power, where human control is entrenched, be it in our homes, jobs, industry or political life.

This will not be popular. People praise the Lord - and even, perhaps, praise you- if they see Him at work in individual lives, creating happy families and good citizens; but touch on the issue of control and we touch the most sensitive nerve of all. The Old Testament is full of how the Prophets did this, and counted the cost.

Jesus, too. At first glance He may not seem to have been concerned with leaders or with power. He certainly dealt with the poor and the outcast. His disciples were simple men.

Yet He was crucified. Why? Not because He was good; not because He set people free from their personal sins; but because, in the absoluteness of His demands, he was seen as a threat by those wedded to their own power and control.

Control is an emotive issue. It is *the* thing which brings into focus the reality of our natures and of what goes on in our country. Are we ready to hand over our control to God, without guarantees that the future will be built just to the pattern that *I* expect?

My whole instinct is to run from this reality. I like success and the easier road. I like the pat on the back and those sweet words, "What a wonderful work you are doing !" But that was not the way of a St. Paul. He set his sights on the toughest of targets. His usual reward was vicious opposition - and a core of people deeply committed to God alone.

A friend, who has held many big jobs in government

administration, writes in a letter, "A feature of the modern world is that so many of the 'good' men and women are ineffective because they are over-busy. Because they do not cultivate the inner strength and clarity which comes from the still, small voice enabling them to say 'No' to people and issues which make wrong demands on them, they are driven from pillar to post".

He went on, "The trouble is that there is something in me which likes being terribly busy. There is a certain security - and self-importance - in having my diary full of engagements and my desk piled high with 'urgent' papers. It can insulate me from the deeper contact with people which I know I need if I am to be effective in dealing with many of the realities around me".

It becomes for me a priority to search for a core of tranquillity, a pool of silence at the heart of one's being; the place, or rather the experience, to which one instinctively turns in moments of strain or stress. "Be still, and know that I am God".

Brother Lawrence talks of "*the practice* of the presence of God". This is where that first hour of the day is decisive. Where God has a chance of tuning the instrument before the concert begins, before the pressures and demands of the day take over.

Many of those who have led the way over the centuries in exploring spiritual development, make the point of establishing a certain discipline, a central balance, around which the gyroscope of the day's events can whirl. Then the perspective and direction of God is given a chance of penetrating to me, to those around me, and even to my country.

## **OPPOSITION**

If there is opposition, what does one do?

Some will always kick against the pricks, resisting moral and

spiritual challenge. That has always been, and will ever be. That is their choice.

Things go wrong, not necessarily if people oppose, but if I cut myself off from other people because of *my* reactions.

I constantly need clarity about my own motives so that I want nothing but the best for the other person, even if I am opposed to what they do. It is only too easy to get up a head of steam on some issue. I may well be correct, but if I go riding into action on a white charger, waving the banner of my own rightness, God help us. I have done it often and hurt people for whom I care deeply. The result has been bitterness rather than change. What matters is not my rightness, but how to turn the key in the other person's heart and will.

One test is to ask whether the other person is being helped to confront God and his own conscience, or has it become a personal clash with me? Real change will never spring just from external pressure. The core of a person's inner compulsion as to what is right and wrong must be touched.

Jesus provoked intense opposition. This was not a sign that He was wrong, but that He was right. Yet He never became 'anti' those who were against Him. His heart and His vision remained open to everyone. If that can grow in us, then we need fear nothing.

My wife has sometimes asked me, "Why do we want peace?" It is a necessary question, for there has been discrimination and injustice which has to be faced.

Yes, confrontation is necessary. But violence is not, thereby, right. We have a choice. We can, voluntarily, confront evil in our society. That is always painful and arouses opposition. It is much more comfortable to turn a blind eye to the needs and feelings of others. But if we do, it is we who open the door to violence. We cannot escape that responsibility.

If I want peace without change; if I want to live undisturbed in my own comfort, then the word reconciliation will stink in the nostrils of the militants - and they will be right.

## **DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

If God puts difficult people in my path, what is His purpose?

It is a major step to accept that He may have a purpose in it, for, like most of us, I prefer an easy life, where things go on smoothly, leaving my peace undisturbed.

Here in Northern Ireland we are surrounded by a cauldron of powerful emotions - fear, bitterness and distrust. If we lived in a more comfortable part of the world - but where! - perhaps we could afford to surround ourselves with comfortable relationships. Here we cannot, if we are to be realistic about our country and our Christian calling.

In my own character I begin to recognise more clearly some of the tendencies which are also national issues - tendencies to domination and deviousness, a wish for control and appreciation, the pull of resentment or just plain self-centredness.

For me, there are the two very distinct levels of Christian commitment. The first is the individual, aiming to live and give others a personal faith. The second is to live to foster the building of a united force of people of different backgrounds who will be available, together, for God's use.

It is easy to get discouraged when difficulties in working together arise, but it is naive to think that just because we have good intentions, or even a common dedication to God's will, everything should go smoothly. It will not be like that.

Jesus set out to train twelve men to work together. He gave this



priority. If anyone could succeed we would expect it of Him. Yet one betrayed Him, and the others kept squabbling about precedence, and, in the end, deserted. Given a further chance, they became radically different and went on to upturn history. But they provide a helpful perspective as to how tough a task it is to build a force of people ready to work together, come what may, to do God's will.

This, too, is at the heart of St. Paul's letters to the young churches. He wrestled to weld those groups of very ordinary, very human individuals into united, effective communities.

On a personal level I know only too well the pain when relationships go wrong. At times I have been upset because I have made a bad impression on others. This is very real, but very self-centred.

There is the deeper, more necessary, pain of feeling the hurt that I cause others. In this country, because of my privileged background, I know so little of real suffering, yet I need to try to live into the reality of what others experience.

My mind often goes back to Ken, a close friend who died of cancer. I learnt much from the time with him. The more ill he became, the more I wanted to care for him and his family.

There lies a key for me here in Northern Ireland. The greater the need of the other person or the other group, the greater the care required of me.

I have often rationed my care according to the appreciation which I got in return. If I felt that the other person or group did not value what I was doing, then I switched off and became critical, callous, or, at times, cruel in things I did or said about those concerned.

At my preparatory school, when I transgressed, a master set me to write out fifty times the proverb, 'Where there is no vision, the people perish'. Needless to say, this remains engraved in me ever

since. And I have come to see that it is an essential truth for any relationship which is to be creative. It is at the heart of the command that we love one another.

What spurs me when someone becomes hard to get on with? Reaction against what is wrong in them or vision of what could be right? Cutting down or building up?

My wife has often quoted a friend of ours who once said to her husband, "Darling, I love you as you are, but I am meant to help you be the man God wants you to be". My wife had added, "Don't we sometimes operate just the other way round with those we find difficult? 'I hate you like hell as you are, so I will try to make you what *I* think you should be!"

'Where there is no vision the people perish' is also a challenge to us as Protestants in Northern Ireland. What is our vision for ourselves? For others?

More precious even than the medical supplies and money which we so generously give in response to the Bosnias and the Rwandas; more precious than the devoted service there of our doctors and other volunteers could be our offer of an experience of national healing to division.

In this, *our differences become our greatest asset*. If the issues facing us were easy; if our community life was comfortable and undisturbed, who in the outside world would pay attention to what we have to say? The hunger is for the assurance that age old hurts and hatreds can be cured.

If we turn inwards, allowing ourselves to be consumed by the difficulties of 'them' and 'us', we betray those who cry for help; and we betray the generosity of spirit in our own people. Tough decisions do, of course, lie ahead. We cannot minimise them. But as every issue arises that would accentuate division, could we deliberately ask, "What do we have to offer the world on this?"

Looking inwards we have no reason to agree. Self interest says

to hold on to what we have or to demand what we do not have. There can be a vested interest in division.

But, looking outwards, perspectives change. Then our diversity becomes our advantage. We can say, "See how different we are; look at how that enriches us; how it helps us to live beyond ourselves, to appreciate 'the other', to be true to our faith."

True to our faith. We have in this country of ours a shared Christian heritage. We are brothers in our belief, not strangers to one another.

We all pray, "Thy Will be done", not "Our will be done". Suppose we took that on board, nationally. Not liberal 'dogoodery' but loyalty and obedience to what we dare to proclaim, Sunday by Sunday. Then we would give the lie to those who declare that faith is irrelevant, a sham, counting for nothing when self-interest is at stake.

Dr. Nkomo said to the Cardinal, "Send to us in South Africa Irish men and women of faith who have learnt the art of healing division". A churchman from Sarajevo made the same plea to my wife, "Please come to us from Ireland, with an answer".

When asked for bread, do we offer a stone?

These questions lead to a new glimpse of the Cross. Jesus gave His life not just for those who appreciated Him, but for those who were unfair to Him, misjudged Him and inflicted enormous pain on Him. This leaves no room for the luxury of self-centredness or self-pity. There is no longer the right to 'retire hurt' because of bruised feelings.

At times I have gone to Jesus full of self-concern, crushed by something that has happened or how I have been treated. But being crucified is quite different from feeling crushed. It is going willingly to God for His purposes, whatever the cost; an ultimate freedom from self for the sake of others.

Will I suffer, if only a little, for someone else's sake, particularly

someone not easy to like, without even the condition that they change their attitudes in return?

“This hast Thou done for me;  
What have I done for Thee,  
Thou crucified?”

Unity of heart always depends on *me*. It is the fruit of being set free of any selfish demand on others.

And it is God’s business to choose with whom I must work.  
*The choosing is His business, the cherishing mine.*

## **LEARNING FROM OTHERS**

In Northern Ireland if we want answers, we are increasingly going to have to learn from each other.

If someone were to ask me, “Are you teachable?” the answer would be “Yes”. But when my mother-in-law said to me, “Peter, you talk a lot about control in others, but in the family you try to run everyone else”, it took a hard swallow to accept that she had a point.

In fact I do not find it easy to learn from others, even - or, perhaps, particularly - those close to me. From those with greater experience, or whose wisdom it is easy to respect, that is not so hard. But from those, for instance, younger than I, who, I feel, should respect me ... !

Willingness to accept correction is, of course, a contentious issue. The idea runs head on into today’s trends, where ‘self-realisation’ and ‘doing your own thing’ are deemed all important. It is a paradox that many who most fiercely demand that their own self-expression be recognised are often exactly those who

shout most loudly against those in government who adopt the same philosophy.

The saints who, through the ages, opened new doors for peoples' development, established Orders where men and women voluntarily put themselves under authority. It was felt that human nature is so stubborn and devious that a certain readiness to accept human corrective could be helpful in accepting divine corrective.

Anyone who exercises authority cannot, of course, always be right. But the principle is valid. I have learnt most from those who have taken the risk of giving me sharp corrective, even when sometimes I did not like it at all, and sometimes, indeed, felt it unfair. I know that the more new truth about myself is indicated, the more chance God has to move me towards His wisdom.

## Fear or freedom?

The other side of a readiness to learn from others is an equal need for a fear-free independence of others, where I speak up for what I believe to be true.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian whose Christian thinking inspired resistance to Hitler and who was killed by the Nazis, said, "If you do not let God rule over you, very soon another will rule you".

An expert in one of the world's great financial institutions, who is responsible for evaluating massive aid projects to the Third World, was telling me of the problems of corruption and dictatorship which she faces. "But", she said, "what worries me perhaps more is my own colleagues. They are like cookies. They look lovely and crisp on the outside, but when it comes to standing up for their convictions in the face of their boss, they crumble at the first bite".

Peace at any price. Appeasement in the face of wrong, the 'spirit of Munich', can be attractive. Solzhenitsyn, in his Nobel Prize Speech, talks of it being the dominating spirit of our age. It is only too easy to avoid the responsibility of hard choices.

Democracy and freedom presuppose at least a minority who have the courage of their convictions. If I allow anyone else to control my beliefs; if my peace of mind is dependent on what someone else thinks of me or does to me, then I am laying the groundwork for dictatorship.

A thought from an early morning time of reflection, "Your maturity is tested by how you react to group pressure or to strong personalities. Your temptation is to try to please or appease, while simmering underneath. You need to stand on your own two feet. No one can take from you the right to be responsible.

You can never get away with blaming someone else for what you are, or are not, doing.”

In ‘Gulag Archipelego’, Solzhenitsyn asks, “How can we free him who is unfree in his soul?” And Schifrin, another who suffered the horror and degradation of the slave camps, answers, “He alone is free who frees himself from the wretchedness of inner slavery”.

President Nelson Mandela finishes his autobiography, ‘Long Walk To Freedom’ with the words, “We are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free”.

These men are passionately concerned about political freedom for their people, but they say that freedom must be sought on two levels if it is to be meaningful. They themselves could be manacled and seemingly powerless, yet generate an inner freedom and independence of spirit which proved to have indomitable power.

I, on the other hand, can enjoy all the liberties of a free society, yet walk around bound by fear, resentment and self-centredness. The challenge of these men is that my freedom of spirit can be independent of how I am treated by anyone else. It lies between me and God alone.

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To be realistic about Northern Ireland, or indeed many other situations, the reality of fear has to be faced. My fear of ‘them’ can distort judgement, destroy care, and impel a clinging to what I have.

One of my black friends in South Africa taught me much on this. He was passionately committed to his peoples’ struggle, and I sometimes felt threatened by the strength of his commitment. I was not going to be pushed around by him.

But equally, if I tried to retain the right to have the final say, he wanted nothing to do with me.

We each counted ourselves committed Christians. Could we find together the trust that answered fear on one side and hurt on the other? It was not easy. It depended on each of us accepting that the other would, when it came to the crunch, look for God's will and His authority, rather than our own certainties.

Even so sometimes, quite unwittingly, I could do things which provoked a sudden, volcanic reaction. "Oh, you whites....you will never understand...!"

It was a temptation, when this happened, to tread carefully around the sensitive areas, fearful of cracking the thin ice and plunging once more into the murky waters below. But in this way we could never find solid ground together.

We came to be able to look each other in the eye and talk straight, even about the uncomfortable things. It took time, pain and laughter, but with my friend I can now say that we do trust each other. We gave equal rights to each other to decide, and to carry out those decisions. We learnt the discipline of listening together, with an open mind and will, for God's leading.

We have to work out what kind of relationships we want: cosy, comfortable and compromising, where, if you scratch my back, I will scratch yours? Or Cross-centred and challenging, where we are not afraid to have truth spoken?

It has been helpful to recognise that while 'perfect love casts out fear', the corollary is equally true, 'fear casts out love'. I cannot really care for an individual, a people or a nation if I am afraid of them.

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St. John in his Letter (1 John 4, v.18, Philips trans) makes the



interesting comment that fear “always contains some of the torture of feeling guilty”. This has certainly been valid for me. The grip of fear only began to be broken for me when I brought into the light of day those things I had not wanted myself, or anyone else, to look at.

In West Africa a Nigerian friend, Matthew, illuminated this for me in a very real way. He was a Labour Officer in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, responsible for settling labour disputes. His work often took him out of his office.

One day, talking of the problem of corruption, he said, out of the blue, that, in defiance of all the regulations, he used part of his time outside his office to establish and run a private timber business, registered in the name of his six month old son.

Matthew went on, “If I am to be serious about putting right what is wrong in the country, I need to go to my boss and tell him what I have been doing”. But he was scared stiff. He would be sacked, and his family and others depended on him.

Every morning for a week he went to his boss’s door and, every morning, gripped by fear, he turned away. Finally he knocked and went in.

His boss listened and said nothing except, “Come back tomorrow”. Matthew was dismayed. He was convinced that his dismissal papers would be waiting for him. Next morning he returned and his boss said, “Tell me again”. Matthew did. His boss said, “I would not have had the courage to be honest”.

Matthew was not dismissed. On the contrary he became known as a man who could be trusted. Within three years he was promoted to be responsible, nationally, for the conditions of service of thirty thousand employees. When people tried to bribe him or push him around, he stood straight, strengthened by his own answer to fear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Such experience builds a faith strong enough to trust God with what is most precious. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who led Ghana to independence, used as his slogan, “Seek ye first the political kingdom ...”. We may condemn this, yet, when it comes to the nub of our political rights, adopt the same philosophy for ourselves. We make sure first to secure what we think we need, and only then look to where God might fit in.

No one pretends that it is easy for anyone, specially if we feel we have things to lose, to let go of control and privilege. Jesus himself said that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God”. Rich in possessions, rich in power. And then He says, uncompromisingly, “He who will save his life shall lose it ...”.

St Paul wrote to the Romans about “cutting the nerve of your instinctive reactions”. Only if we face that *fear is sin*, and then yield to God our ultimate control, can we be given the chance to break deadlock. Only then can the door be opened to the politics of repentance, the politics of trust, the politics of forgiveness.

## **THE CEMENT OF PEACE**

The central theme of the New Testament hinges on the concept of a dynamic love as the supreme force for change. It is the highest expression that we know of the nature of the God we serve. So many of the issues we have been discussing fall into place immediately this kind of love becomes our active attitude towards other people, towards ‘them’. You do not do harm to people you love, however firmly they may need dealing with.

At His last meal with His disciples, Jesus laid it on the line for them in a rivetting act of service, washing their feet. “If I then,

your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also must wash one another's feet".

As we pray every Sunday in our Service of Holy Communion, "In honour preferring one another".

In Luke 7, v.47, Jesus issues another provocative challenge, "He to whom little is forgiven has little love".

Borodin, the Russian who planned the Communist takeover of China, points this up from an unexpected angle. He commented that "the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, so often preached, so little practised, and seemingly so innocuous, is the greatest single stumbling block in the path of Communism".

Jesus is saying that unless I accept the need for forgiveness for myself and for my people, I cannot fully experience the love of God. Borodin implies that, if I do accept this, I am letting loose a force which is *the* answer to a divided society.

As a friend writes, "Repentance leads to a change of heart; a change of heart leads to revolutionising relationships; revolutionising relationships leads to trust, and the possibility of a totally new day for our country."

Thomas Merton, in his book, 'Seeds of Contemplation', asks, "How am I to know the will of God? Whatever is demanded by truth, by justice, by mercy or by love must surely be taken to be willed by God. In demanding that I respect the right of another, God is not merely asking me to conform to some abstract, arbitrary law; He is enabling me to share, as His son, in His own care for my brother. No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light, because his way has turned aside from truth, from compassion and therefore from God".

"Thy will be done on earth" has to begin afresh for me each day in a time alone with God. He has, every day, to break through the barriers of my human nature. He asks that I live so effectively that miracles in men and women of the most difficult

kind become possible; that care replaces fear; that control is something I readily share, not cling to at all costs; that He can speak to me at any time about my attitudes and my actions.

The crux of this commitment is not emotion; it is my will. The decision to keep obeying and to keep caring, regardless of what I feel, regardless of how difficult the other person makes it.

It is the one quality which will bind a nation - or a marriage - in moments of crisis. It is the essence of our calling.

It is the cement which will build a peace to satisfy the needs of all.

Whose side is God on? He is on mine - and on theirs.

More important - am I fully on His?

# 'Afterword'

by Jaspre Bark

Hold the back page! When I suggested writing an 'afterword' for Peter's book, he politely informed me that it was already on the way to the printers. He generously offered, however, to hold up the proceedings.

I must state from the outset that I am not, nor have I ever been a resident of Northern Ireland. Nor am I a member of any church or Christian community. I have a different and equally personal reason for wishing to add a footnote to the work you have just read.

When I first met Peter I was a fulltime political activist/agitator. I tended to view the problems of Northern Ireland, and more or less all of life, in terms of the class struggle. I was quite surprised therefore when Peter, completely unbidden, sent me an early manuscript of this book. Upon first reading it, what had the greatest effect on me was the magnanimity with which he assessed the Irish situation. It was the first time I had encountered a member of the privileged Protestant classes admit to a responsibility for the troubles. The great amount of courage and self knowledge this took proved both a revelation and an inspiration for me.

This show of good faith on his part prompted one of my own, and I began a personal reassessment. I realised that while I railed against bigotries like racism and sexism, I myself was a class bigot and had many prejudices of my own to deal with. It was Peter's approach that allowed me the opportunity truly to face the hypocrisy in my own character and to change it.

I was present at a dinner held by Peter and Fiona for two

senior couples from a strong Catholic/nationalist background. The question was raised about how reparation might be made between the Catholic and Protestant communities, in the wake of recent peace talks. I offered a tentative suggestion based on what I was learning myself about good faith. It is the same show of good faith, and the challenge inherent within it, which I believe this whole book represents.

Over here in England we have seldom afforded the troubles in Northern Ireland the attention or understanding they deserve. This complacency and insularity is often due in no small part to the media's description of the troubles and the people caught up in them. It is for this reason that works such as this are so important. Because not only do they indicate that the problem represented by Northern Ireland is not simply regional, but one of national and global importance; they also allow us a perspective of the process of reconciliation and of the Irish people that we are seldom given the opportunity to see.

This is partly why I wished to write this 'afterword'. The other reason (aside from wanting to express my gratitude to Peter in print) is to attest personally to the efficacy of the ethos that his work embodies.