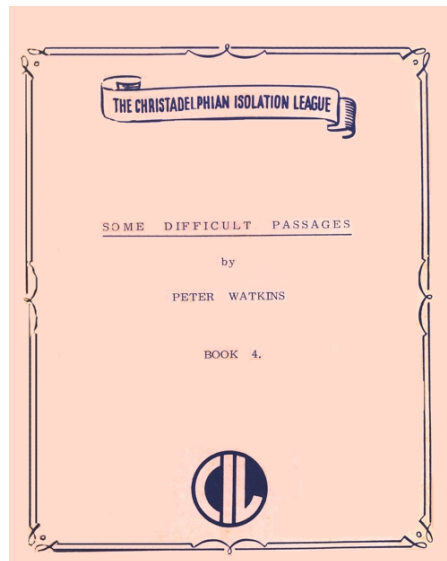


# THE CHRISTADELPHIAN ISOLATION LEAGUE



## SOME DIFFICULT PASSAGES

by

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BOOK 4.

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## SOME DIFFICULT PASSAGES.

### 1. PAUL AND INSPIRATION: DIFFICULTIES FROM 1 CORINTHIANS 7

In writing to the Corinthians concerning matters relating to marriage, the apostle Paul states at one point, “Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful” (1 Cor. 7: 2 5). How are we to regard these words? And what value are we to attach to the judgment that Paul proceeds to give? Are we to regard Paul’s judgment concerning virgins as just the sort of helpful advice that any well-intentioned, spiritually-minded brother would give, or are we to think of it as a message from God? We could be excused for regarding these words as those of Paul, the well-intentioned, spiritually-minded brother, if the context did not point so decisively in another direction. Let us acquaint ourselves then with certain features of this chapter that will help us to settle the issue.

We turn to verses 10-14: “And unto the married **I command, yet not I, but the Lord**, Let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest **speak I, not the Lord**: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband ...”

Can we see the distinction between the two sets of words underlined above? In the first instance Paul is able to make a direct reference to one of Christ’s commandments. Because Christ has already given expression to the general principle that husbands and wives are not to be separated (Matt. 5:32 & 19:6, 9), it is not necessary for Paul to pronounce on this matter as if it were a new question. He has only to refer to the Lord’s words. With regard, however, to the more complex question of the relationship between the partners of a mixed marriage — that is, a marriage in which one of the partners is a believer and the other an unbeliever - the apostle cannot refer back to any instructions which the Lord has already given. He has to pronounce without reference to any of Christ’s words, and so he says: “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord”.

There can be no question about Paul’s authority to speak. He is an apostle and he speaks by the Spirit of God. The distinction is between issues in which Paul can refer to the commandments of Christ, and issues in which he cannot do so, and is accordingly required by God, and moved by His Spirit, to give a direct ruling.

Now with this distinction in mind, let us return to v. 25. Because Christ has not spoken particularly concerning virgins, Paul has to say, “I have no commandment of the Lord.” In other words, there is no saying of the Lord’s which he can quote on this subject. He is required, therefore, to pronounce on this matter, and he is fully qualified to speak authoritatively because he has obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.

**Verse 6.** In v. 6 of the same chapter, Paul says: “I speak this by permission, and not of commandment”. These words of explanation are added by Paul after some advice

concerning marital relationships. They are sometimes taken to mean that Paul has been permitted to give expression to these thoughts, but has not been commanded to do so.

If there were no dogmatic statements concerning the absolute authority of the pronouncements of Paul, this interpretation would, perhaps, be permissible. But because there is no want of dogmatic statements concerning Paul's authority, we must look for another interpretation of the words in question.

There is an alternative explanation which has the advantage of agreeing well with the context. The issue is a delicate one, and there are a number of "variable" factors. There are two people involved - two people's needs to be met and two people's consciences to be satisfied. Each person's point of view must be taken into account. Discretion, restraint and charity are called for. One partner may be prepared to exercise these qualities, but the other may not. Accordingly the occasion is one where advice is more desirable than a command - advice from a sympathetic Father. And so the Spirit of God, speaking through Paul, permits, or allows, a certain course of action which, other things being equal, will help; but it does not issue a command concerning this course of action, because circumstances might make it difficult or impossible for a person, in conscience, to fulfil such a command. Basically then, it is God, and not Paul, who speaks by permission and not of commandment.

Verse 40. In v. 40 Paul gives his judgment concerning another related matter, and then adds: "... and I think also that I have the Spirit of God". The whole passage reads: "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God".

It would be perverse to regard Paul's **thinking** that he has the Spirit of God as an indication that he has not. At the same time, one may be excused for asking why Paul seems to be so tentative concerning this matter. Does he not **know** that he has the Spirit of God? Indeed he asserts this fact robustly in 1 Thes. 4:8: "He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit".

In 1 Cor. 7:40, the Revised Version transposes the word "also", so that the words under consideration read thus: "... and I think that I also have the Spirit of God". This changes the whole emphasis. Having given his judgment, Paul expressed the thought that he **also - that he as well as other teachers** - has the Spirit of God.

It is interesting that these passages which are regarded by some as casting doubts on Paul's authority should all be found in the same chapter. There may be a good reason for this. Some, at least, of the matters which Paul deals with in this chapter are matters concerning which liberty of judgment is permitted. The tone is therefore gentle and non-dogmatic, and non-dogmatic utterances are often mistakenly regarded as evidence of uncertainty or weakness on the part of the one who makes them.

### **The Authority of Paul.**

It might be profitable at this point to remind ourselves of some of Paul's claims that

he is the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit, and speaks with authority.

In 1 Cor. 2:7, referring to himself and his fellow apostles, Paul says, “We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery”. Having stated that the princes of this world had not received this wisdom, he reaffirms: “But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit” (v. 10). The point that Paul has made in this verse is that the Spirit has communicated this divine wisdom to him.

This is not the end of the matter. It could now be argued that, although the original Spirit-message would necessarily have been perfect, Paul, being human, could easily have failed to grasp the message in its fulness. Thus the value or the effectiveness of the Spirit-message would be lost. This argument is answered by v. 11: “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God”. The Spirit-message is Spirit-received.

Nor is this the end of the matter. It could now be contended that a Spirit-message, Spirit-received, could be debased by imperfect human communication to other men. This is answered by v. 13: “Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Spirit teacheth comparing spiritual things with spiritual”. Every link in the chain is assured. The Spirit-message is Spirit-received and Spirit-transmitted. The end product, the words spoken by the apostle, are the words of God.

Another useful passage is 1 Cor. 14:37, 38: “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant”.

Whether Paul is commanding or advising, he affirms challengingly that the things he writes to them are the commandments of the Lord. Whether he is making a quotation from the Lord’s commandments or pronouncing on a new subject, his words are still the commandments of the Lord. A man’s critical or tentative attitude to Paul’s words does not detract one whit from Paul’s authority, but it reveals the spiritual poverty of the critic, whether he lives in the first century or the twentieth.

## **2. CONCERNING THE BAPTISM OF JOHN.**

### **The Problem.**

Two passages from two consecutive chapters of Acts will bring us straight to the problem. “And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (18:24-26).

“Paul ... came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, he saith unto them, Have ye received the Holy Spirit since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Spirit. And he said unto them, Unto what

then were ye baptised? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptised with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus" (19:1-5).

How are we to understand these references to John's baptism? Do they imply that there was some limitation or inadequacy about John's baptism? Let us put the question in another way: Does the baptism of John differ in some important respect from the baptism of the Lord Jesus?

### **Baptism of Repentance.**

It is a commonly held view that there **is** an important difference between the two baptisms. One often hears the remark that John's baptism was "a baptism of repentance", as though this expression highlights the difference between the two baptisms. A moment's reflection will convince us that this kind of half-thinking will not do. Whatever distinction there may be between the two baptisms, it is not explained by saying that John's baptism is a baptism of repentance, true though this is. Would anyone challenge the proposition that the baptism of the Lord Jesus was also a baptism of repentance? In Acts 2:38 we read of Peter urging men to "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ". The occasion was the day of Pentecost, immediately after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. Peter was baptising men into Christ. But he was also calling them to repentance. Clearly then, the Lord's baptism was a baptism of repentance too. The fact that repentance is an essential feature of both baptisms could therefore be used more effectively to show that there is no important difference between the two baptisms.

Of course there are some impressive arguments for the view that John's baptism was different from that of Christ. These could perhaps be summarised as follows:

1. A distinction is made in the gospels between John's disciples and the disciples of the Lord Jesus. John's disciples worked at the same time as, and independently of, the Lord's disciples. They are represented as being men who "fast oft". This difference of discipleship, it could be argued, implies a different baptism.
2. Certain men who had knowledge only of John's baptism needed further instruction (Acts 18 & 19 - quoted above).
3. Some men who had knowledge only of John's baptism had to be re-baptised (Acts 19 - quoted above).

Let us discuss these points. It is true that a distinction is drawn in the gospels between the disciples of John and the disciples of the Lord. Matt. 9:14 & 11:2 illustrate this: "Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?" (Matt. 9:14). "Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples..." (Matt. 11:2).

It is true, too, that the disciples of John worked at the same time as the disciples of the Lord, and that they seemed to work independently. Two other passages are relevant here: "After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and

there he tarried with them, and baptised. And John also was baptising in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptised. For John was not yet cast into prison” (Jno. 3:22-24). “When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptised more disciples than John, (though Jesus himself baptised not, but his disciples)...” (Jno. 4:1, 2).

We have already looked at the passages from Acts 18 & 19, and cannot dispute the fact that both Apollos and the disciples from Ephesus, who are described as knowing only John’s baptism, needed further instruction. It does look, too, as if John’s disciples, referred to in Acts 19, were baptised again.

It should perhaps be mentioned here that some people construe the passage in another way - a way that does **not require the** re-baptism of John’s disciples. It is argued that the “they” of v. 5 (“When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus”) is not a reference to the disciples at Ephesus whom Paul was, on this occasion, instructing, but to “the people” of v. 4 to whom, according to Paul, John preached. It is recommended that the reader reads carefully the whole passage at this point in order to see that the words can indeed be understood in two different ways. Because, then, of the ambiguity, we cannot be dogmatic about the re-baptism. At the same time it must be admitted that the more obvious reading is that these disciples at Ephesus were baptised again by Paul. The fact that most people read it like this suggests that it is the more likely reading.

### **The Other Point of View.**

The contention that John’s baptism was different from the baptism of the Lord Jesus does seem therefore to have some substance. On the other hand, there are weighty considerations which support the opposite point of view:

1. The Lord Jesus was himself baptised by John.
2. The Lord stated on the occasion of his baptism, “Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. He recommended John’s baptism - or seemed to - to others.
3. Some, at least, of the apostles were baptised by John, and there is no evidence that they were baptised again. If the apostles were re-baptised, the matter would have been so important as to merit reference to it. If the re-baptism of the disciples of Ephesus is important enough to occupy a paragraph of Scripture, surely the re-baptism of the apostles - if it had happened - would have found a place in the New Testament.
4. The words of Paul, recorded in Acts 19, concerning John’s baptism, are worth pondering: “John verily baptised with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after, that is, on Christ Jesus”. This testimony is decisive. We note that this is the source of the expression so often referred to carelessly, “baptism of repentance”. The expression is explained by the words that follow. The repentance, the re-direction of life, was to make men believers in Jesus. Paul’s explanation shows that John’s baptism does not differ from the Lord’s baptism to which Peter invited people on

the day of Pentecost. Peter's words, which have already been quoted once, are; "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ".

It is submitted here that the weight of evidence points to the conclusion that the baptism of John was the same as the baptism of Jesus. Several difficulties have yet to be answered though. For example, if the baptism of John was valid, why did the disciples of John continue to function as an independent group? Why did Apollos and the disciples at Ephesus need further instruction? Why did the disciples at Ephesus need to be re-baptised?

One answer covers all these questions. Whereas the baptism of John was designed to bring people to Christ, some people failed to understand its true significance. The fault lay in the people and not in the baptism. It is an important fact that Paul needed to expound the true meaning of John's baptism to people who claimed to have been baptised "unto John's baptism". They did not understand the significance of the symbolic act, despite their baptism.

The baptism of John was "of heaven" and not "of men". John made it very clear that he was preparing the way for the Man who was better than he. He recognised that the Lord Jesus should increase, but he should decrease (John 3:30).

### **Misguided Loyalty.**

Some people who had been baptised by John acted on John's instructions and immediately transferred their allegiance to Christ. This was as it should be, and John, the friend of the bridegroom, rejoiced because the bridegroom increased (John 3:29). Others, probably motivated by a misguided sense of loyalty, clung to John himself. Their attitude was not a wholesome one. Although they claimed to be followers of John, they did not surrender to the greater authority of the Lord Jesus, as John did. Nor did they, like John, rejoice when the bridegroom appeared. They "fasted oft". The fact that they linked themselves with the Pharisees in this matter (Matt. 9:14) was probably an unhealthy symptom.

It may be helpful to consider discipleship of John in three phases:

1. **The pre-messianic phase.** John started preaching before the Lord Jesus. Many people were baptised by him. All of these people should have transferred their allegiance to the Lord Jesus when he appeared. This would have been the logical conclusion of their baptism. Some did follow Jesus; others clung to John; others again were "poisoned" by the Pharisees and became enemies.
2. **The "overlap" phase.** It was right that there should have been a period of overlap between the work of John and the work of Jesus. This ensured a smooth take-over, and enabled John to win more disciples for Jesus. During this period John was baptising at Aenon (John 3:23). The overlap did not last long. To prevent a distraction or a competition of interest, it was required that John should be removed from the scene by imprisonment and death. Undoubtedly the circumstances of the Baptist's life had a great symbolical significance too, but space and time do not permit the development of this theme now. (See "The Law and the Prophets were until John" (P. W.), *The Christadelphian* Nov. 1951 p.



339).

3. **The “die-hard” phase.** Reference has already been made to this unhealthy phase. Some disciples were as reluctant to move on from John to Christ as the whole race was to move on from Moses to Christ. How sadly they misunderstood the mission of this great prophet, this symbol of the dying priesthood. These misguided disciples of John made their own converts and did their own baptising. Like teacher, like pupil. The understanding of those who “knew only John’s baptism” was limited. Some knew more, some less. Some, like Apollos, needed further instruction. Others, like the disciples of Ephesus, were so ignorant that, after instruction, they were baptised again - into the name of the Lord Jesus, just as John’s own original converts had been.

### 3. PEARLS AND SWINE.

What did the Lord Jesus mean when he said, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matt. 7:6)? It goes without saying that all the Lord’s words are important. But these words occupy such a prominent place in such an impressive discourse - they are in the concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount - that we really ought to know what the great lesson is, and how we can act on it.

First we must read the passage properly. We know that swine trample things underfoot, and that dogs turn and rend people. To make more apparent the link between each beast and its offensive characteristics, it has been suggested that the passage could be re-arranged to read thus: “Cast not your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot; give not that which is holy to the dogs, lest they turn again and rend you”.

Whether we accept this re-arrangement or not, we will agree that the Lord is warning against giving valuable, spiritual things to those who will not appreciate them. There are two reasons why this should not be done:

1. The spiritual things will be treated with contempt. (The pearls will be trampled underfoot).
2. The givers of spiritual things will suffer. (They will be “rended”).

#### **Selective Preaching.**

Thus far, it is clear. Now to the practical question: how do we act on this instruction? Many regard these words as advice to preach selectively. Some people, they say, are obviously unsuitable. We should not waste our time, and bring the Truth into disrepute, by preaching to them. It would be casting our pearls before swine. We may be sure that, whatever the Lord meant, he did not mean this. Who are we to decide who is worthy, and who is not worthy to receive the Word of God? Can we trust our own judgment? Can the Lord Jesus trust our judgment? Would **we** have preached to the woman at the well? Would we have deemed Matthew and Zacchaeus to be suitable candidates? The Lord chose these people, but we should probably have written them off before starting.

We must be careful that we do not presume to pre-select men for God according to our own prejudices, and then invite God to make a final selection from our “short list”. We all tend to make our own decisions concerning people’s suitability. It is significant that the section of the Sermon on the Mount immediately before the passage under discussion begins with the words, “Judge not, that ye be not judged”. The Scriptures abound with instances of unlikely people being chosen to fulfil great purposes for God. By choosing unlikely people, God demonstrates that the power and the wisdom are His, and that the glory must go to Him too. By this means He also helps us to see how unreliable our judgment is. It has been remarked that we ought not to call people swine until we hear them grunt. We must preach to everybody, and God will give the increase.

Back then to the question: What did the Lord Jesus mean when he told us not to cast our pearls before swine? Some sort of judging - or, at least, some sort of judiciousness - would seem to be called for if the instruction is to mean anything at all.

**A Clue** is provided by Peter. Breaking into 2 Peter 2, we come to the words, “It is happened unto them according to the true proverb. The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (v. 22). Dogs and swine! The Lord warned us against giving valuable spiritual things to dogs and swine. Can Peter help us to identify these creatures? He is speaking about wicked backsliders. The whole of the chapter concerns these people. They are spoken of as having “forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor” (v. 15). Again he says, “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (vv. 20,21). And so the apostle says that it has happened unto them according to the true proverb ...

The pearls of Matt. 7 are therefore to be equated with “the right way”, “the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”, “the way of righteousness”, and “the holy commandment” of 2 Peter 2. And dogs and swine are the backsliders described in this chapter. It should be noted that the false brethren are not just brethren who have fallen through weakness. They are “false teachers”, men who speak “great swelling words of vanity” and “allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them that live in error.

Although they are “the servants of corruption”, they promise liberty. They turn and rend the community to which they have belonged. These are the people against whom the Lord is warning us.

But still the question remains: How are we to act on the Lord’s instruction? The answer is suggested by the words already quoted, “It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them”. Peter is saying, in effect, that it would have been better if such people had never come into the Truth.

### **Too Much Pressure.**

It is submitted therefore that casting pearls before swine is bringing unworthy people into the Truth. Do I hear someone protesting that I am being unreasonable? If we must preach to all, how can we be blamed if unworthy people come into the Truth as a result of our preaching? It is a question of pressure. Whereas it is right to preach to everyone, it is wrong to exert such pressure upon people as will cause them to make a covenant without counting the cost. By exerting too much pressure, or pressure of the wrong kind, we can induce people to be baptised who otherwise would not have done so.

The result of this is bound to be disastrous. These people do not appreciate how high the calling is. They act unworthily, and set a bad example for others. It is a well-known fact that people are more readily impressed by bad examples than by good. Some of these false brethren are natural leaders. Others will be influenced by their subversive teaching. Many will follow their pernicious ways and the way of Truth will be evil spoken of. Inevitably there will be decline and apostasy.

### **The Lord's Example.**

Christ himself shows us how to make disciples. He said, "Follow me.", and he insisted that his disciples did **follow** him. He was only willing to have men who accepted his standards. It is instructive to observe his treatment of two contrasting types (Matt. 8:19-22). The first said, "Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. " Instead of patting him on the back and saying, as we should have done, "That's the spirit we want", he cautioned the man. Did he really know what he was letting himself in for?

The second man was of the opposite type. He explained to Jesus that he would be free to follow him when his father was dead and buried. This earned a sharp rebuke, "Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead". We may wince at the severity of the Lord's words and yet miss the point. It is our bounden duty to stress the fact that the standards are very high. Christ wants dedicated people and nobody else. Is our half-hearted discipleship evidence of the fact that we have not heeded the Lord's instructions and have made the way too easy?

## **4. "WHO ONLY HATH IMMORTALITY"**

Of God it is written: "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen" (1 Tim. 6:16).

The problem relates to the word "**only**". How can it be said that God **only** has immortality, when other Scriptures tell us that Jesus Christ and the angels are not subject to death? The Lord Jesus said of himself, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1:18); and, in a context concerned with the future state of the children of the resurrection, Jesus said, "Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels" (Luke 20:36). These are two amongst many passages that seem to conflict with the statement that God **only** hath immortality.

Usually we answer by saying that God only has immortality in the original sense. There was a time (we say) when, quite literally, God only had immortality. The immortality that others enjoy has been derived from God. Others have partaken of God's immortality. This is undoubtedly true. But is it the whole truth? And does this explanation really do justice to Paul's words? When Paul said that God only has immortality, would he have been willing to add "in the original sense", or was he giving expression to a fact that never ceases to be literally true? It is submitted that Paul's words were, and still are, literally true. God **only** hath immortality.

Think for a moment about the angels. Consider the proposition that the immortality that they enjoy has been derived, **and** is still being derived, from God. The angels have partaken, and are still partaking, of God's immortality. An illustration may help. Try to imagine something quite fantastic - an electric light that will never go out. Taking for granted the unique quality of the lamp itself, it would be true to say that the "immortality" of the light is dependent upon two things: 1) the unfailing supply of electricity from the power station; 2) the unbroken link between the power station and the lamp. The light will never go out because the power station will never fail, and because the contact with the power station will never be severed. In the same way the angels are immortal because God is immortal, and because their "contact" with Him will never be severed. They continuously draw their immortality from God. This will also be the nature of the immortality of the saints; and it is suggested that the immortality of the Lord Jesus is explained in the same way too.

The essential difference between this explanation of 1 Tim. 6:16 and the explanation more usually given is this. According to the more familiar explanation, those who receive immortality from God, receive it once and for all. Their nature is so changed that they do not, henceforth, depend directly upon God for their life. According to the explanation submitted here, however, those who receive immortality from God are **never** independent of Him. It is true that their natures are changed, but the effect of this change is to enable them to come into the presence of God, and to remain there, deriving their life from Him, eternally. It is the difference between independent and dependent immortality.

The reasonableness of the explanation offered here (which is not original) will be readily seen. So far from detracting from the power of the statement that God only has immortality, it receives it in its fulness. God **only** hath immortality. God is the only independent immortal being. Nor does this detract from the truth that the Lord Jesus, the angels and the glorified saints will live for ever. It is surely fitting to think of God as the only source of life. If God were to create people who were immortal in the absolute sense, as He is, they would, virtually, be gods in their own right. Remember that the end of God's great programme with humanity is "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

### **Supporting Evidence.**

We shall return to this verse from 1 Cor. 15 later. In the meantime, let us look at some supporting evidence for the main thesis.

First we look at some verses from the Psalms. "For thou wilt not leave my soul in

hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life; in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (16:10, 11). These words concern the Lord Jesus. Observe that the statement, “Thou wilt shew me the path of life”, is amplified by two other statements: “in thy presence is fulness of joy” (the path of life brings one into the presence of God); and, “at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore” (Having come into the presence of God, the Lord Jesus stays there, and receives blessing from God eternally. There is no suggestion of independence of God when immortality is attained. Indeed, the opposite is implied).

Look now at Psalm 21 and note the link between verses 4 and 6: “He asked life of thee, and thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever” (v. 4). “For thou hast made him most blessed for ever: thou hast made him exceeding glad with thy countenance” (v. 6). The eternal blessing is related to the privilege of being in the presence of God.

Now Psalm 36:8, 9 (remembering the link between light and life, expressed in John 1:4): “They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house: and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures. For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light”.

The whole of Psalm 61 is relevant, but note particularly vv. 4 & 7: “I will abide in thy tabernacle for ever” (v. 4). “He shall abide before God for ever” (v. 7). It will be seen that the eternal life of God’s servants is expressed in two ways in the Psalms, each of which implies an eternal dependence upon Him. The two expressions are: abiding in God’s presence; abiding in God’s house.

Another helpful passage is Isa. 40:31 (but first, take note of the statement of v. 28 that “the everlasting God ... fainteth not, neither is weary”): “They that wait upon the Lord **shall renew their strength.**”

Using the figure of the tree of life, the same thought is expressed in Rev. 22:2. The tree yields its fruit every month. This surely implies that the tree is designed for continuous eating -an effective figure for the continuous drawing of life from the One who only has immortality.

Now let us return to 1 Tim. 6 and look at the passage in its context. There are several pointers to the uniqueness of God’s immortality: “Fight the good fight of faith, **lay hold on eternal life** ... I give thee charge in the sight of God, **who quickeneth** (or giveth life to) all things ... that thou keep this commandment ... until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: which in his times he shall shew, who is the ... **only Potentate** (or powerful one) ... **who only hath immortality**, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and **power everlasting**. Amen. Charge them that are rich (to trust in) the **living God**” (vv. 12-17).

### **God All in All.**

Finally let us look at the pregnant words of 1 Cor. 15:28: “that God may be all in all”. These words alone are sufficient to shew that man will never possess **independent**

immortality. The context is exceedingly significant. Immediately before speaking of this ultimate intention, “that God may be all in all”, Paul speaks (1) of the subjection of all to Christ, and (2) of Christ’s subjection to God. The logical conclusion is inevitable: “that God may be all in all.”

**“All in all”**: one can conceive of God being all in one person: and of God being to some extent in all people. The ultimate purpose is that God may be altogether in everybody. Nobody will be independent of God in any sense. Their complete existence will be encompassed by Him.

## 5. “THEM THAT DWELL SAFELY”

The problem is not a new one. In Ezekiel 38 there is a prophecy about a group of nations under the leadership of a power named Gog, invading Israel from the north. This is obviously a latter-day prophecy, and many are convinced that the time for its fulfilment has come. Indeed, several things seem to point to this conclusion. After hundreds of years of exile, the nation of Israel is established in the land again. To the north, poised for action, is a great power. This great power is known to have designs on Israel, and it commands a number of satellite nations, just like Gog of Ezekiel 38.

There are just two difficulties:

1. If Gog of Ezekiel 38 represents Russia now, how are we to understand the statement that Gog invades for the purpose of taking a spoil of silver, gold, cattle and goods. Even if these desirable things are regarded as a figure of the wealth of Israel, the problem is still there. Strategically, Palestine is important, but in its present condition the wealth of Israel would not be a great target.
2. Although, with God’s help, Israel has kept her Arab foes at bay, and even increased her territory, she cannot be described as dwelling safely. Yet this is Ezekiel’s description of Israel immediately before the Gogian invasion.

The first difficulty has escaped almost unnoticed, but strenuous attempts have been made to resolve the second. Some have been careful to point out that the word “safely” means “confidently”. This does not help. The general picture is one of Israel, prosperous, relaxed and unafraid. She is not concerned about strengthening her defences, for she fears no invader. Thus Gog is represented as saying: “I will go up to the land of unwallled villages; I will go to them that are at rest, that dwell safely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having neither bars nor gates, to take a spoil, and to take a prey; to turn thine hand upon the desolate places that are now inhabited, and upon the people that are gathered out of the nations, which have gotten cattle and goods, that dwell in the midst of the land” (vv. 11 and 12).

Some have said that “dwelling without walls, and having neither bars nor gates” refers to Israel’s freedom from the ghettos of Europe. Obviously those who have returned to Palestine do enjoy a freedom that was denied their fathers, but surely this is not the real burden of these words. If we link the words with the reference to unwallled villages, and the description of a people dwelling confidently, we see that they describe a nation that sees no need to fortify itself.

Some have argued that there was a period of confidence and prosperity in the years immediately following the Balfour Declaration, and before the Arabs started applying the pressure. Even if this were granted, it would not fit the terms of the prophecy. According to Ezekiel 38, Israel dwells safely, or confidently, **immediately before** the invasion. In fact, the relaxed mood of Israel emboldens the aggressor: an easy victory seems assured.

These and other attempts to explain Ezekiel's description of Israel at the time of the Gogian invasion have one thing in common. They are all attempts to **explain away** a passage that presents an obstacle to an interpretation that is taken for granted.

The passage is not a difficult one really. It appears difficult when one is committed to an interpretation of Ezekiel 38 that contradicts it. Let us, instead, look for an interpretation that takes the words concerning Israel's confidence fully into account. Let us regard Israel's mood and condition as an essential feature of the prophecy, instead of as an embarrassing detail that has to be disposed of.

If this description of Israel is difficult to fit into the contemporary scene, then we must stop trying to force it into a place where it does not properly belong. We must open our minds to the possibility that the time is not ripe for the Gogian invasion.

### **A Kingdom Scene.**

It is suggested here that the conditions described in Ezekiel 38 are "kingdom" conditions. The Lord Jesus has returned to Israel. The people are enjoying the blessings of his beneficent reign. They have good reason to feel supremely confident. It will be seen at once that this interpretation satisfies the terms of the prophecy concerning Israel's peace and prosperity. But it has other things to commend it too. See how it accords with the prophetic context. Ezekiel 38 and 39 are a continuation of the prophecy commenced in Ezekiel 37. The three chapters together describe a dramatic reversal of fortune. In Ezekiel 37, the bones of Israel are scattered in heathen territory; in Ezekiel 39, the bones of the heathen are scattered on the mountains of Israel. The prophetic programme is therefore a consecutive one. Now observe that, in the concluding section of Ezekiel 37, God's servant, David (a prophetic name for the Lord Jesus), is king over the people of Israel. Then Israel becomes confident; and then she becomes prosperous. The stage is set. Gog thinks an evil thought, attempts an invasion, and is destroyed upon the mountains of Israel.

### **The Stone that Becomes a Mountain.**

It may be objected that Israel would hardly be enjoying the blessings of the kingdom when the rest of the world is full of wickedness and rebellion against God. This is no problem. It is wrong to imagine (as many do) that the kingdom of God fills the whole world at once. It is a process. In Daniel 2, the kingdom is first represented as a stone - a stone that smites the image upon the feet. Then the stone becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. The suggestion is that the kingdom in its stone phase, is located in the land of Israel. So, to change the metaphor, Israel becomes an oasis of blessing in a wilderness of wickedness.

## **Consequences.**

If this interpretation is correct, its consequences are important. It has been suggested that Christ returns before the Gogian invasion. This means that the Gogian invasion can no longer be regarded as the decisive sign of the advent. What it amounts to is that if we are waiting for Gog before really making ourselves ready for the second coming, we may wait too long.

## **A Separate Prophecy.**

More often than not, Zechariah 14 and Ezekiel 38 are treated like two prophecies of the same event. Although they are both latter-day prophecies concerned with an invasion of Israel, and Israel's vindication, there are important differences. Zechariah 14 describes a siege of Jerusalem, with all the attendant suffering. There is not a single word concerning Israel suffering in Ezekiel 38. Zechariah speaks of the Lord's personal return and intervention. Ezekiel does not mention the return: the Lord has already come.

If the two prophecies are kept separate, there is no problem. Israel, now proud after her spectacular victories, has to be humbled. Zechariah 14:1, 2 describes this process. Jerusalem is besieged, and there is great suffering. In their extremity, the Jews are compelled to cry to God for deliverance. God responds by sending the long-promised Messiah, whom the Jews recognise as Jesus of Nazareth, whom, their fathers crucified. "His feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives" (v. 4). Jesus saves Israel and becomes king. Thus the kingdom is established in Israel, but not in the world. Israel enjoys great prosperity; the people are secure and confident.

To the nations outside, Israel has "done it again". They do not suspect that the Son of God has delivered them. They see Israel abounding in wealth, and seemingly careless about her defences. Gog thinks an evil thought. ... The rest of the story we know.

So Zechariah 14 must come first, and it could come very soon; then Ezekiel 38. Finally, let me repeat one important point: Israel does not suffer under the Gogian invasion.