...on a New World
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Cover picture: View of the Western Wall - Jerusalem

Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version except where another version is indicated after the text.
EVERYONE knows about Jerusalem for it is the centre of much interest and controversy in the media, but not everyone knows that Jerusalem is central to God’s plan with the earth as explained in the Bible. The name Jerusalem means ‘abode of peace’ but as the title suggests it does not at present live up to its name.

JERUSALEM IN THE PAST

The first mention of Jerusalem in the Bible is in Joshua [Joshua 10.1], but it is generally agreed that ‘Salem’ where Abraham went to meet the king-priest Melchizedek [Genesis 14.18] is the same place. The mountain in 'the land of Moriah' [Genesis 22.2] where Abraham went to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, was also part of Jerusalem which is built on the four hills – Zion, Acra, Moriah and Bezetha [Genesis 22.2; 2 Chronicles 3.1].

The significance of these two events which took place at Jerusalem immediately identifies the city as central to the Divine plan. Melchizedek, the king-priest of ‘God Most High’, shared bread and wine with Abraham prefiguring the sacrificial work of Jesus as explained in the letter to the Hebrews chapter seven. Similarly, the faith in God shown by Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, established the principle of ‘justification through faith’ and demonstrated that God would provide a lamb as a sacrifice. John the Baptist identified Jesus as ‘The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ [John 1.29].

Jerusalem is a special place chosen by God and this is explained
in more detail in the record of the life of David. David went to great lengths to capture it, fortify it and transfer his throne there. Then he was able to bring the ‘Ark of the Covenant’ into the city. Finally, he bought the site for the temple and assembled the materials for his son Solomon to build the temple there. In all of this David was guided by God and we see many parallels between the life of David and that of Christ. Both shed tears over Jerusalem and both were destined to return to Jerusalem in triumph.

When Solomon dedicated the completed temple, he explained that God, who made the universe, could not be contained even in the heavens let alone a house [1 Kings 8.27]. But the temple was the place promised by God where ‘The LORD your God chooses to make his name abide’ [Deuteronomy 12.11]. Prayers made towards this special place would be heard by God. God accepted Solomon’s prayer [1 Kings 9.3] and repeated the promises made to David to establish his throne for ever [2 Samuel 7.12-16]. This is yet to be fulfilled when Jesus returns to the earth and was confirmed when the promise was repeated to Mary prior to his birth [Luke 1.32].

This all happened at Jerusalem.

When the temple was completed and the ark was put in the Holy of Holies, the Glory of God filled the temple as a cloud [1 Kings 8.11]. These dramatic events represented God’s intention to build a temple of saints who would have His spirit and a world that would give Him glory. Jesus Christ was to be the corner stone of this temple. As Paul
explains: ‘Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?’ [1 Corinthians 3.16]

Abraham, David and Solomon all recognised that Jerusalem was a special place, as it represented the importance of the presence of God in the lives of all who worship Him acceptably. All through the Bible Jerusalem takes a central role. It was the capital of the kingdom set up by David and Solomon. It was central to the national identity of Israel when they returned from the exile in Babylon to rebuild it. At the time of Christ it was again the centre of worship for the Jews. After the Jews revolted (AD 66–70) the Romans recognised its importance to the Jewish nation so they razed it to the ground.

JERUSALEM TODAY - CONTENTION BETWEEN JEW AND ARAB

For nearly 2,000 years it was the hope of the Jews to return to worship there as they eventually did in 1948 [Jeremiah 30.18-20; 31.10-14]. Have their hopes now been realised? The answer of course is ‘only in
part’ and that has only been achieved after fighting for their survival on a number of occasions since 1948. The land they occupy is only a fraction of that promised to Abraham Isaac and Jacob [Genesis 13.14,15].

As the map on page 3 shows, they do not even have the land occupied by Solomon’s kingdom. In fact, in spite of winning several wars with the surrounding nations they do not have any land east of the River Jordan. They returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in 1982, and the Palestinians have been granted self rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip areas, which almost cuts Israel into two halves. They are still surrounded by hostile, mainly Moslem countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Only in 1967, after the ‘Six Day War’, did Israel gain control of the whole of Jerusalem. It is still a constant cause of contention with the Palestinians who object to Israel extending the city settlements to the east of the city into what they consider to be their territory. The presence of the third most holy Islamic shrine, ‘the Dome of the Rock’ on the original temple site and the Jewish reverence of ‘the western (or wailing) wall’ which is all that is left of Herod’s temple, produce two flash points in the city. Both Jews and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital city. No compromise is ever offered on that point. When one realises that Jerusalem is a centre of worship for Roman Catholic, Greek and Russian Orthodox and numerous Non-conformist Christian sects and all demand access to their shrines, we see that the result is a ghastly mix of religious fanaticism that only the return of Jesus Christ will ever solve.

Israel has been in control of Jerusalem since 1967 bringing to a close the Gentile occupation as prophesied by Christ himself:

‘...they (the Jews) will be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’ [Luke 21.24].
Jesus included this in the Olivet prophesy which spoke of the end time just prior to his return:

‘Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory’ [Luke 21.27].

He said that not only would the kingdom of God be established at that time but ‘This generation will by no means pass away, till all things are fulfilled’ [Luke 21.32]. How long is a generation? It is now more than 40 years since Jerusalem came under the control of Israel.

In the meantime the mayhem continues with terrorism a constant concern. Any activity like an archaeological dig near the temple site is an excuse for more conflict. Truly the words of the prophet Zechariah are being fulfilled:

‘...In that day...I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it’ [Zechariah 12.3].

The day that Zechariah refers to is ‘the day of the LORD’ or in other words the day of the return of Jesus Christ. The prophet repeated the phrase many times as he foretold the events that would lead up to the Jews eventually recognising Jesus as their Messiah – ‘they will look on me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as one mourns for his only son’ [Zechariah 12.10]. Then the prophet tells us that ‘in that day’ God will be in control of Jerusalem:

‘...in that day...I (God) will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem’ [Zechariah 12.9].

As the days of the last generation pass, we can see again that the city of Jerusalem will be the focal point of the interaction between God and man. The interaction will be destructive for those who know not
God but a great day of salvation for the faithful. We do not know exactly what will set off this political powder keg. At the time of writing attempts are again being made to engage in yet another round of ‘peace’ negotiations and there is talk of turning Jerusalem into an international city in an effort to meet the demands of Jews and Arabs, Christians and Muslims.

But centuries of oppression and atrocities make for implacable hatred in the area and a human resolution seems as far away as ever. It seems impossible that the ‘City of Peace’ will ever live up to its name but the Bible clearly states that God is in control and Zion (Jerusalem) is ‘the apple of His eye’ [Zechariah 2.8].

JERUSALEM – FUTURE CAPITAL CITY OF THE WORLD

So what does the future hold for Jerusalem? The Bible is full of references to its glorious place in the kingdom of God, which Jesus will establish on his return. To quote just one passage, we read:
‘…be glad and rejoice for ever in what I create; for
behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a
joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; the
voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her…’

[Isaiah 65.18,19]

But the prophets also tell us that Jerusalem will experience a time of
great trouble, until a faithful remnant of Israel return to the true worship
of their God [Zechariah 14.2,3]. Only then will God intervene in the
person of Jesus Christ, who will stand in that day on the Mount of
Olives in Jerusalem. A huge earthquake will ensue and the
Mediterranean will be joined to the Dead Sea along the major fault zone
in that area. Jerusalem will then be elevated above the surrounding hills
[Zechariah 14.8-10]. After the destruction and rebuilding of both the
geographical and national boundaries, Jerusalem will really become a
city of peace and Jesus, the Prince of Peace will reign there. It will be
‘safely inhabited’ as Zechariah puts it. [Zechariah 14.11].

The prophet Ezekiel describes in detail the building of the new
temple in the city [Ezekiel chapters 40-47]. The long closed eastern gate
will be opened when Christ returns to the city and true worship of the
Almighty God re-established. People from all over the world will travel
to Jerusalem to worship there in recognition of its unique position as
the meeting place chosen by God, and where the one mediator between
God and man – the Lord Jesus Christ dwells [Zechariah 14.16].

‘Many nations shall come and say, “Come, and let us go
up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God
of Jacob; he will teach us his ways, and we shall walk in
his paths.” For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the
word of the LORD from Jerusalem’ [Micah 4.2].

Jesus will then be King of Kings on the throne of David in
Jerusalem, as the angel Gabriel told Mary [Luke 1.32, 33]. His reign,
together with the saints will last for a thousand years.

This is the destiny of Jerusalem!
However there is a deeper spiritual aspect to the city that is described in the Revelation given to John. John saw a vision of post-millennial Jerusalem:

‘Then I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them...’ [Revelation 21.2,3]

Just as there was a real temple but also ‘a temple of saints’, so there is a real city of Jerusalem, but also a city ‘new Jerusalem’ of saints. God will be present in the temple and the city of saints in the sense that they will be immortal and reflect His character just like His son Jesus Christ does now. The City of Peace teaches us lessons about the purpose of God and the Prince of Peace its future king.

As we think about the great future that is assured for Jerusalem let us echo the words of the Psalmist:

‘Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces”’ [Psalm 122.6].

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Editors note: For more information on this subject, write to the Correspondence Secretary for your free copy of Light on Israel (see advertisement on back cover)
Important Bible Words

The Gospel

THE Apostle Paul, one of the great teachers of Christianity, was commissioned by Jesus on his conversion to ‘... bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel’ [Acts 9.15]. Later on he introduced himself in the letter to the Romans as ‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God’ [Romans 1.1]. Confiding to his readers he said:

‘...I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for every one who believes; for the Jew first, and also for the Greek’ [Romans 1.15,16].

GOOD NEWS

In our English Bible the word ‘gospel’ is peculiar to the New Testament writings, translated from the Greek ‘evaggelion’, meaning good news or tidings. From this root other related words have entered our language. As an evangelist, Paul said ‘...I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles’ [2 Timothy 1.11], evangelising the Roman world as he spread tidings of the good news of the gospel.

Paul appreciated the vital importance of this gospel teaching as the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. To be unenlightened by it is to remain in the dark as he wrote to the believers at Corinth: ‘But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not
believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them’ [2 Corinthians 4.3, 4].

The gospel’s unique life giving property is linked with the great work of Jesus at the heart of Christianity. When Paul urged the young man Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel, he reminded him how God ‘...has saved us and called us with a holy calling...according to his own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus...who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ [2 Timothy 1.9, 10].

THE GOOD NEWS DEFINED

But to restrict the scope of the gospel to the work of our Saviour when he died on the cross is a mistake, ignoring the much wider plan God had in mind from earliest times. In fact we are not left to speculate, because the gospel preached by Jesus and the apostles is defined in very specific terms. It was after his cousin John the Baptist had been put in prison by Herod that ‘Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel”’ [Mark 1.14, 15]. For the next three years before his crucifixion, we learn that Jesus ‘...went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him’ [Luke 8.1].

Similarly Jesus sent out his twelve disciples to preach the kingdom of God to the people and it is recorded that ‘they departed and went through the towns, preaching the gospel...’ [Luke 9.6]. We note here how the terms ‘gospel’ and ‘kingdom of God’ are interchangeable, with no mention of the crucifixion. The disciples were unlikely to preach about a development that they did not understand beforehand. For example, Jesus taught his disciples: ‘“...The Son of Man is being delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and after he is killed, he will rise the third day.” But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask him’ [Mark 9.31, 32].
The substance of the good news did not change afterwards. In the forty day interval between his resurrection and ascension into heaven, Jesus was still ‘...speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God’ [Acts 1.3]. His final instructions were:

‘...Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.’

[Mark 16.15, 16]

Here are two examples of the content of the preaching of the evangelists after Jesus had been received up into heaven. When the people of the city of Samaria ‘...believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized’ [Acts 8.12]. The book of Acts concludes with an account of how, for two years at Rome Paul was ‘...preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him’ [Acts 28.31].

THE GOSPEL PREACHED BEFORE CHRIST’S FIRST ADVENT

Many Christians assume that the teaching of the gospel commenced with and is confined to the New Testament. They miss the important connection with previous developments in God’s plan, which come to a sharp focus in the work of Jesus Christ. Paul recognised that this gospel to which he had been called, God ‘...had promised before through his prophets in the holy Scriptures’ [Romans 1.2]. Paul commends the readers of this letter to the Romans:

‘Now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began but now has been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures has been made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith’ [Romans 16.25,26].
The Scriptures in question were the books of the Old Testament. Jesus challenged his critics to ‘search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me’ [John 5.39]. In his letter to the Galatians Paul explains that:

‘...the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed”. So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham...And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.’

[Galatians 3.8, 9, 29]

If we search the Old Testament Scriptures we find that Abraham’s seed or descendants were established as a nation in the land of promise, and were constituted the kingdom of God in the past. King David was promised by God that sometime after his death:

‘...I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever’ [2 Samuel 7.12, 13].

Who was this descendant who features so much in this promise? The words of the angel Gabriel to Mary about the greatness of her unborn son answer the question:

‘...you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end’ [Luke 1.31-33].

JESUS BORN TO BE KING

If the good news of the gospel concerns the kingdom of God, then
the central figure of God’s plan must be Jesus Christ. At his trial the
Roman governor, Pilate asked him:

“Are you a king then?” Jesus answered, “You say rightly
that I am a king. For this cause was I born, and for this
cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness
to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.”

[John 18.37]

At Pilate’s insistence, a sign written in three languages was
displayed over the cross bearing the body of the man who testified
before the Roman governor of his kingship. The sign read: ‘JESUS
OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS’ [John 19.19]. We are
still challenged to take seriously the claim of ‘Jesus Christ our Lord,
who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared
to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by
the resurrection from the dead’ [Romans 1,3,4]. Nothing will be able to
prevent the resurrected and now immortal Jesus from returning to the
earth to rule on the throne of David, which surely explains why the
evangelists were and still are today, committed to carry on preaching
the good news about the kingdom of God.

Before Jesus can establish the kingdom of God, the present system
of man’s rule will have to be destroyed. Paul told the Athenians how
‘he (God) has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in
righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given
assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead’ [Acts 17.31]. The
upshot of this dramatic intervention at his second coming will be that
‘the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and
of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever!’ [Revelation 11.15]

OUR SHARE IN THE KINGDOM

The hope offered to all who believe the good news about the
Kingdom is a personal share in the future world order. We think of the
sad company of disciples in the upper room a few hours before the
crucifixion. Jesus assured them:
‘...you are those who have continued with me in my trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as my Father bestowed one upon me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel’ [Luke 22.28-30].

What should be our first priority in this life? Jesus says we should not worry about material things: ‘But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ [Luke 12.31, 32].

Those who receive this great reward will gratefully acknowledge how much they owe to Jesus for the victory over sin and death he achieved at the crucifixion. Their personal saviour is ‘Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, and first-born from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and has made us kings and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever’ [Revelation 1.5,6].

JESUS THE ONLY SAVIOUR

The teaching of the gospel is not open to religious interpretation. The Scriptures are unambiguous when compared together and mean what they say. There is only one faith and Jesus is the only saviour. Peter declares of Jesus Christ of Nazareth: ‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ [Acts 4.12]. As Jesus claimed of himself: ‘... I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ [John 14.6].

Christ’s example is unique in providing assurance of a future hope. All other human teachers, however well-intentioned, are only able to offer hope now in this life, because their powers are necessarily limited and end in death. Matthew concludes his gospel record with an account of how Jesus after his resurrection, assured the disciples of the
promise of a future life to be enjoyed in the kingdom as a certainty (see Matthew 28 verses 18-20).

THE SCOPE OF THE GOSPEL

The work of Jesus is inclusive of all mankind. The Scripture tells us that he was ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ [John 1.29] and ‘that the world through him might be saved’ [John 3.17]. One day God will establish His Son as king on His holy hill of Zion in Jerusalem: ‘Yet I have set my King on my holy hill of Zion…Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession’ [Psalm 2.6,8]. Then all nations will be blessed through Abraham’s special descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This good news transcends all national, cultural, language and ideological barriers, as the following Scriptures show:

‘…according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ…made known to all nations…for obedience to the faith’ [Romans 16.25, 26].

‘…this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations’ [Matthew 24.14].

‘...In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears him and works righteousness is accepted by him’ [Acts 10.34, 35].

Over the last two thousand years the world has undergone radical social and political change. However Bible teaching concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ is fixed, needing neither revision nor addition. Paul’s strong warning to those of his time who were perverting and corrupting the gospel of Christ is equally applicable in our day: ‘... if anyone preaches any gospel to you other than what you have received, let him be accursed’ [Galatians 1.9].
FINDING MESSIAH

Jesus was not the product of his age, a man just thrown into prominence by events. He transcended his times because his role had been defined long before, in many detailed and varied prophecies and promises. This is why the early disciples recognised the arrival of the person anticipated in the Old Testament writings. (see for example John chapter 1 verses 41,45 and 49).

By your studies of these same Scriptures may you also come to find Jesus, recognising him as the long promised Messiah. The difference for ourselves, who live at the end of the long interval between his two advents, is that we will have to wait for his return to the earth before we can see Jesus in person.

‘And it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for him he will appear a second time apart from sin, for salvation’ [Hebrews 9.27,28].

Meanwhile the request contained in his model prayer takes on real meaning for believers:

‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ [Matthew 6.10].

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What is True Baptism?

THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM

Among Christians today the importance of baptism seems be either entirely missing or much neglected. In many high profile modern preaching campaigns the call to ‘take Jesus into your life’ has apparently superseded the Scriptural requirement to ‘repent and...be baptized’ [Acts 2.38]. A simple prayer for God’s guidance in the way of life is portrayed as all that is necessary to become a true disciple of Jesus, with the hope of immortality that he has made possible. Yet the question must be asked – is this approach the same as that used by Jesus and his disciples in the first century and if not, is it really sufficient for salvation? In this article we will investigate the role of baptism, what true baptism actually is and just why it is so important for each of us.

So let us begin by looking at the part that baptism played in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. We are introduced to the act of baptism almost as soon as we begin reading the New Testament. Part of the preparation that took place for Jesus’ ministry was the work of his cousin John. The most striking feature of this work was the fact that he baptised men and women who came to him, recognising that they were sinners and needed salvation [Matthew 3.4-6; Mark 1.4, 5; Luke 3.2-4]. This is why he is often called ‘John the Baptist’. The importance of this preparation for Jesus’ ministry is pointed out by the gospel writer Luke:

‘All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptised by John. But the Pharisees
and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves because they had not been baptised by John.’
[Luke 7.29.30 NIV]

Baptism has always been a part of being a disciple of Jesus. Right at the beginning of his ministry Jesus and his disciples baptised those who wanted to follow him [John 3.22-26; John 4.1, 2]. Jesus himself began his public work after first being baptised by John [Matthew 3.13-16; Mark 1.9; Luke 3.21]. This emphasis on baptism continued after Jesus’ resurrection. The closing words of Matthew’s gospel record tell us about Jesus’ last instructions to his disciples:

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ [Matthew 28.19].

The Book of Acts is full of references to the call to baptism that accompanied the ministry of the apostles in the first century. In his address to the crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, right at the beginning of the preaching of the gospel by the apostles, Peter stressed the vital importance of baptism. When asked what should be done to achieve forgiveness of sins, he pointed out the two vital first steps, repentance and baptism:

‘Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins’” [Acts 2.38].

So central to the theme of salvation is this act of baptism that the Apostle Paul refers to it as part of the foundation or first principles of the doctrine of Christ:

‘...the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment’ [Hebrews 6.1,2].
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

The reason for the importance placed on the act of baptism becomes clear when we realise what it actually signifies. At its most simple level, baptism is described as a washing away of past sins, so that a person can become clean in the sight of God. In this respect it is the New Testament equivalent of the ceremonial washings instituted under the Law of Moses. This link with the Jewish ritual of the Law explains why the act of baptism seems to have been fairly familiar to the Jews who were contemporary with both Jesus and John the Baptist.

For example the word used to describe the ceremonial washing of people and utensils under the Law of Moses [Hebrews 9.10; Luke 11.38; Mark 7.4,8] is the same word translated elsewhere in the New Testament which refers to baptism. So this link is picked up by the gospel writers, particularly in the records we have of their public preaching in which they describe baptism in this way [Acts 22.16]. In addition, the act of baptism does three things:

- It relates us to Abraham and the promises made to his descendants.
- It relates us to the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- It creates a new person ‘in Jesus’.

The first of these points is explained by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians in which he wrote:

‘For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ...And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise’ [Galatians 3.26-29].

It is through baptism that we become spiritual Israelites and so can hope for the blessings that were promised to Abraham. In this same chapter in Galatians, Paul calls these blessings ‘the gospel’. In contrast, before being related to these promises we are:
without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.’

[Ephesians 2.12].

So the true Christian hope is in the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs to which we become related only through baptism; otherwise we are without hope.

The relationship to the death of Jesus is important because it is baptism which unites us with his death and resurrection. The whole of Romans chapter six is well worth reading in this respect, but the following verses emphasise this relationship between baptism and the literal death and resurrection of Jesus:

‘Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ...if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection.’

[Romans 6.3,5]

Paul uses this fact to point out the dramatic change that takes place when a person is baptised. So fundamental is this change, that it is referred to as a transformation from death to life – a spiritual resurrection that looks forward to the literal resurrection in the future. When writing to the Ephesians, Paul emphasised that they were ‘dead in ... transgressions and sins’ before they accepted Jesus’ leadership and yet had been ‘made ... alive with Christ’ [Ephesians 2.1-4 NIV]. In Colossians the same words are used to describe the act of baptism as a ‘quickening’ or ‘making alive’ in Christ [Colossians 2.12, 13]. Thus it indicates that a spiritual change takes place at baptism.

This is reinforced by passages which tell us that the person dies in a spiritual sense on entering the waters of baptism and the individual who emerges is a new man or woman. Baptism is far more than simply a ‘washing away of sins’ [Acts 22.16]. It is the beginning of a whole new life as the words in Romans chapter six make clear:
WHAT IS TRUE BAPTISM?

‘knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin’ [Romans 6.6].

Since the old person no longer exists, the newly baptised disciple has become a new being in Jesus: ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation’ [2 Corinthians 5.17].

Although baptism is such a dramatic new start, it must be stressed that it does not convey automatic salvation on the person being baptised. The new life begun at baptism must be dedicated to the service of God in the recognition that ‘we should no longer be slaves of sin’ having changed our allegiance from serving ourselves and our natural sinful nature, to serving God [Romans 6.6]. Although baptism is an important step in following the instructions of Jesus, it is not sufficient by itself to obtain salvation, since this is ultimately only achieved through the grace of God [Ephesians 2.8].

THE ACT OF BAPTISM

Having established the importance and significance of baptism, we need now to consider exactly what a true baptism is and what the New Testament writers were referring to when discussing the act of baptism. In this discussion we need to bear in mind the following points:

❖ Baptism follows belief in God [Mark 16.16].
❖ Baptism is part of repentance [Acts 2.38].
❖ Baptism relates us to the gospel message [Galatians 3.26-29].
❖ Baptism symbolises death and resurrection [Romans 6.4].

The first point is a pre-requisite for anyone who is attempting to find out whether human beings have any hope of another existence outside the immediate present. Coupled with this acknowledgement that there is a power greater than humanity, is a realisation that our existence is not without purpose, but that God is interested in His creation and has planned a reward for those who seek and find out
what He requires and who try to follow those requirements [Hebrews 11.6].

The second point follows from the first and occurs when a person realises that naturally, we are without any real hope and that a fundamental change has to occur in our way of life if we are to please God [Psalm 49.20]. The third point underlines the fact that there is only one true gospel. Salvation is only achieved through the work of Jesus and through faith in him [John 14.6] and the exclusivity of this way is expressed very forcibly by the Apostle Peter:

‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved’ [Acts 4.12].

Implied in all these preliminary steps before baptism is a knowledge of the true gospel, an acknowledgement of the need to follow God’s ways and an appreciation of our natural sinful state. None of these steps can be taken by a person who is too young or who has insufficient knowledge to appreciate what the gospel is and what they are doing in being baptised. So it is not surprising that we find no mention of infant baptism in the Bible. The christening of babies is not a Biblical concept and is certainly not true baptism.

COMPLETE IMMERSION NECESSARY

The importance of having sufficient knowledge before baptism is indicated by an incident that occurred during Paul’s preaching at Ephesus, when he discovered a small group of disciples who had only received the teaching and baptism of John. After telling them about Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection, Paul re-baptised these men into the name of Jesus, implying that their previous baptism was insufficient [Acts 19.1-5]; yet when these men were baptised by John they certainly had a greater knowledge of God’s ways than a child of a few weeks old!
The actual form of baptism is indicated by the original word used and also by the descriptions in the New Testament of baptisms that took place during the work of the apostles. The Greek word ‘baptizo’ usually translated into English as ‘baptise’ means complete immersion. It is used in classical Greek to describe the sinking of ships, the dipping of cloth during the dyeing process and also the immersion of vegetables in vinegar when pickling. It is interesting that all these processes cause a complete change in the thing being ‘baptised’. It would be impossible to pickle a vegetable, sink a ship, or successfully dye cloth, changing it from one colour to another, by sprinkling them with liquid.

Similarly it is impossible to baptise a person, leading to the tremendous change that we have thought about, simply by sprinkling them with water. No-one would conceive of burying a body by sprinkling soil onto it but would cover it completely with earth. In the same way a person being baptised, being symbolically buried with Jesus and changed into a new creature, must be completely covered by water.

That first century baptism was complete immersion, is implied in several places in the New Testament. For example we read that John baptised in a certain place in the river Jordan because ‘there was much water there’ [John 3.23] and that Jesus ‘came up ... from the water’ after his baptism [Matthew 3.16].

A particularly interesting occasion concerns the Ethiopian official who was baptised by Philip. In the book of Acts it is recorded that Philip was told to go and meet this man who was in his chariot travelling back along a desert road to his home country. Having explained the gospel message to him and received the Ethiopian’s confession of faith, both Philip and the Ethiopian went down into a nearby pool in order to baptise him. If sprinkling had been sufficient, a few drops of water from a water bottle would have been all that was necessary. Instead, as in the case of Jesus, the Ethiopian had to go down into the water in order to be immersed [Acts 8.26-39].
BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In many places in the New Testament, baptism by water is coupled with another baptism described as being ‘in’ or ‘of’ the Holy Spirit. This has led to confusion among many people and a feeling that baptism in water is unnecessary when compared to this ‘spirit baptism’. However, it must be emphasised that ‘spirit baptism’ does not replace baptism in water and it did not and does not automatically follow immediately from it, as, for example, it did with Jesus [Matthew 3.16].

This again is made clear through the ministry of Philip in the region of Samaria. Although he baptised many people, none of them received the special gifts of the Holy Spirit until the apostles Peter and John went to them and they received the Spirit through the laying on of their hands [Acts 8.14-17]. Yet we have no record that the Ethiopian official, for example, also received this ‘baptism of the Spirit’. When Cornelius a Roman Centurion, heard the gospel message from Peter, he and his household received the gifts of the Holy Spirit but still needed to be baptised in water. The Spirit gifts were given simply to demonstrate that God’s purpose had been extended to the Gentiles as well as the Jews [Acts 10.44-48].

WHAT BAPTISM LEADS TO

Ultimately baptism can lead to the eternal life promised by God to his servants throughout the pages of the Bible. We have already referred to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, how that through baptism we ‘put on Christ.’[Galatians 3.27] The Apostle Paul also reminds us that ‘in Christ all shall be made alive.’[1 Corinthians 15.22] This is the hope of all true Christians - those who have acknowledged the existence of God, have accepted the one true gospel message, have repented of their previous way of life, have been baptised and who now serve God to the best of their ability as they wait for Jesus’ return to establish his Kingdom.

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A question has been asked about the role of women in the church based on Bible teaching.

This question has come to the fore in the last few years because of the ever increasing focus on the perceived need for ‘political correctness’ and equality to eradicate gender, racial, religious or social discrimination particularly in the business employment forum and in the home. Inevitably it has exercised the minds of many religious leaders.

As dedicated students of the Bible we can and must address issues like this in the light of Scriptural injunction, teaching and example, in order to understand the position which should be taken by followers of Jesus in their personal and communal life.

The way God views this is very clear and was endorsed 2,000 years ago by the Apostle Paul when writing to the believers in Galatia:

‘For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ [Galatians 3 v 26-28].
These comments by Paul remind us that there is no place in God’s family for discrimination on the basis of gender, race or social standing and the Divine standard does not change with the passing of time. Why then does there appear to be some suggestion of ‘inequality’ in the role of women in the Scriptures?

The first important point to consider is the different yet equally important roles that men and women have in their relationships, both in marriage, the family and in their worship of God.

There are some notable women mentioned in the Bible who had special roles in the Divine purpose. Rahab and Ruth are both singled out for mention in the genealogy of Jesus [Matthew 1.5]. Others included Anna the prophetess [Luke 2.36]. Timothy’s mother Eunice and Grandmother Lois [2 Timothy 1.5] not to mention the women who often were present with Jesus during his ministry and after his resurrection. We also have the example in the Old Testament of Queen Esther who was instrumental in saving the Jews from terrible persecution.

Solomon asked a question about the value of a good wife:

‘Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain’ [Proverbs 31.10,11].

In contrast we are reminded of the first woman, Eve who tempted Adam to disregard God’s instruction concerning the fruit of a particular tree in the Garden of Eden. This point is picked up by Paul when writing to Timothy:

‘Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression’ [1 Timothy 2. 11-14].
This statement primarily relates to communal worship and teaching in the church. The following chapter in Paul’s letter to Timothy reminds us about the qualifications needed by men to be appointed bishops and deacons or overseers and elders of the church, which includes being the husband of one wife and ruling their children and houses well (See 1 Timothy chapter 3).

This distinction concerning communal worship is also addressed in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 where the heading over verses 2 to 16 is ‘Men and Women at Worship’. If you read these verses you will see that Paul’s teaching is about the requirement to show the distinction between men and women in this very important aspect of their lives:

‘But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God’ [1 Corinthians 11.3].

The Apostle Paul then continues to endorse this hierarchy by showing that women need to demonstrate their understanding of the principles involved by covering their heads in the presence of men in worship:

‘For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man…For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.’

[1 Corinthians 11.7, 10]

In the Christian home we have the ideal situation suggested to the Colossian believers, in order to provide a harmonious family environment in which love and respect is the key:

‘Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and do not be bitter towards them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is
well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they should become discouraged.’

[Colossians 3.18-21]

The chapter in Colossians goes on to show that the same mutual respect follows through into the relationship between servants and masters and so we see that the whole basis of any relationship between two people is non discriminatory.

So coming back to our original question, the roles of men and women are different in their approach to God when they are together as a community of believers. This is not discrimination between individuals as we might view it at a human level, but recognition of the relationship that exists between God, Jesus, men and women.

These different roles are to stimulate harmony and progressive encouragement, not barriers or restrictions to be upheld in order to satisfy egos for male dominance or feminism.

As individuals there are many very intelligent women just as there are intelligent men and the Scriptural injunction does not prohibit women in their contact with the family and others from teaching them about God and giving religious instruction. We conclude with the words of the wise man Solomon who described a woman’s role in this way:

‘She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness’ [Proverbs 31.26].

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