

The lamp and the light

Over the years, I have come to appreciate that the Scriptures are true, not by and large, but through and through. As David wrote, “The sum of Thy word is truth”.¹ As such, even small things in the Scriptures can be of great moment. What follow² are musings that result from mulling over two short but remarkable passages. One is in the Old Testament (Prov 6:23) and the other in the New (1 Jn 3:23).

A gem in Proverbs

Tucked away in the book of Proverbs is a passing sentence with a word picture that I’d like to explore in some depth here.

My son, keep your father’s commandment and forsake not your mother’s teaching (torah). Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When

you walk they will lead you; when you lie down they will watch over you; and when you awake they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching light, and the reproofs for discipline are the way of life, to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress. Do not desire her in your heart and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes; for the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts down a precious life. Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can he walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched? So is he who goes in to his neighbour’s wife; none who touches her will go unpunished. (Prov 6:20-9 NASV)

If this portion of Proverbs exhorting the young man to beware of fornication and adultery is indeed

from Solomon to his children, is there not an extra edge to it when it dawns on you, that it comes from his own direct experience when he was a child? Was not his mother Bathsheba, and father King David?

Parents work together in bringing up children. But does it not strike you in this portion of Proverbs that the teaching and the instruction – *torah* in Hebrew – is assigned to the mother? In terms of a child’s earliest care this makes sense, since even today the mother is usually the primary care giver in the family. The father is assigned the commandment, as is proper for the one who is head of the

live and move and conduct our lives always sharing and explaining what God expects of us, often in the passing incidents that occur through each day.³

As a child grows, it is the privilege of parents to direct the child beyond the parents themselves to our heavenly Father. There are many ways they do this. Perhaps the first experienced consciously by the child is when parents give thanks for the food at each meal. Later they show that in “emergencies” the first thing we do is pause and ask for help through prayer – when the child has a nightmare, or has mislaid a

precious toy. How these things exercise our faith as parents, and how faithful the Lord is to uphold his reputation.

In fact, in the way God has ordered things,

“In fact, in the way God has ordered things, human parents initially stand in a place that is very like that of God to the infant.”

household. Together, both parents – male and female – reveal what God is like to the child.

Parents give us everything other than life itself – the sperm and egg are already living – but of course a brand new human being begins when the woman’s egg is fertilized. Parents give us our very first experiences of nurture and protection (mother’s milk, toileting, bathing) love, language, the concepts we have about the universe, instruction and skills, and correction and discipline. The limits parents set are meant to be protective so the child will survive and mature in a world where actions may have irreversible and ongoing consequences. Day by day, for better or worse, they demonstrate and model what it means to be human and, hopefully, godly. And the Lord expects us, as he did for the people of Israel, to

human parents initially stand in a place that is very like that of God to the infant. I’ve always wondered how many commandments were on each of the tablets given to Moses, – perhaps four on one tablet and six on the other, or five on each? This is because the commandment to honour parents comes as a bridge between the four commands about loving God and the five about loving our neighbour. The specialness of their place is indicated by what the Apostle Paul⁴ understood as the promise of a long life attached to the commandment, and parallels the everlasting life offered by God the Father.

What is needed for a lamp to make light?

In the time of Solomon, the Greeks, or the Romans, for a lamp to produce light there were various things needed: oil, a wick, flame to

light the lamp, and regular trimming of the wick to keep the lamp burning brightly. These were so familiar to people back then as to be regarded as common sense. Of course to us, in our electric world, it is no longer so. In fact, to our modern eyes, this strange terracotta vessel might not even be recognized as being an oil lamp. It might be mistaken as a vase for dried flowers or something else.

However, the relationship between the lamp and the light was dramatically illustrated one evening in the Bible study group I attend. When we passed around a replica of a terracotta oil lamp from the British Museum and turned off the electric light there was only darkness. The clay vessel called a “lamp” by itself gave no light. If the wick was lit without oil, it burned up and just smouldered. When oil was added and the trimmed wick relit, the tiny flame lit the whole room. The metaphor became very powerful, and those in the room got the point at once.

The Scriptures use metaphor as a way of relating what is visible to what is not. Oil is often used as a metaphor of being anointed by or filled with God the Holy Spirit. Flame is a metaphor for the life of faith in God – in the New Testament it refers to being “begotten of God”.⁵ The wick that draws upon the oil is our obedience drawing on the riches of God.⁶ Its regular trimming is the discipline that a loving parent and our heavenly Father give to each child to help them continue in the way of life.⁷

How does this metaphor relate to the *torah* and commandment?

How is the relationship between the lamp and its light similar to the relationship between the commandment and the teaching (*torah*)? The commandment is rigid and inflexible like a terracotta lamp. However, rigid as it is, the lamp can be carried into various contexts, and

illuminate them. The commandment remains the same, but the situation in which it is enacted varies. As people do what God commands, their actions make visible the teaching of God and reveal God’s character in different situations. God’s teaching (*torah*/gospel) only shines forth when people actually do what is commanded in word and action. So, it is only when the commandment is embodied and enacted that light is shed abroad. Then we become like lamps revealing the light of godliness and, as Jesus says in another place, when we do this consistently it is as though there is a greater light lighting us up.⁸

That is why in Psalm 19:8b, a brilliant meditation on the creation, the *torah*, and individual conscience, David writes, “the commandment enlightens the eyes...”. It is not just the eyes of the heart or mind or soul that are enlightened, but our

“It is God the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, who lights our lamps with the life of God.”

physical eyes he is speaking about. It’s not so much that the commandment is like a traffic sign or road marker indicating the way of life. It’s more like the demonstration by a good driver of what the road code states. That’s why it was not enough to have the text of Scripture written on wrists, foreheads, doorposts, and gates (like the road code), but as the prophets and Jesus reminded the Jews, the text had to be made incarnate in people’s lives (as is shown by the competent driver).

The implications of this for children and our culture are enormous. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory⁹ states that children learn mostly by imitation. Where do children get their role models? Is it mostly from the family and the community of faith, or elsewhere? On national TV there was a program called “Frontier

House”, which showed some modern-day families living as people did in 1883 in Montana. No electricity, running water, piped sewerage, shopping malls, cars, telephones, computers, internet, radio or television. Back then, what children would have seen then was family, the neighbours, the creation around them, and the occasional store-keeper, doctor, or drover. Any entertainment, whether play or music, had to be made. But today, how much of our children’s modelling of living is from various media bursting with advertisements (the art-work of Mammon)¹⁰ where everything is sexualised or panders to pride and self-indulgence, and where violence and gratuitous genital sex abound?

What did Jesus say about the lamp and light?

Of course, only Jesus Christ faithfully lived out the

commandments to truly reveal the *torah* – he was the *torah* embodied – and showed that God is light.¹¹ He called the disciples and we who follow him to do likewise.

Jesus proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount:

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven.*¹²

It is God the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, who lights our lamps with the life of God. But it is only as we do what the Lord wants that the *torah* (revelation, teaching, instruction) of Jesus is revealed to the hurting and desperate world around us.¹³ The world gives the Father credit for the good things we do not because of our pious behaviour but because of our grace-filled behaviour. They recognise that only God could provide the wherewithal to do these things.

My children's generation are wary of words. They are bombarded with them. Words are cheap: "The old words of grace are worn as smooth as poker chips and a certain devaluation has occurred, like a poker chip after it has been cashed in". Far from being lost outright the old, old story ... is now too familiar to be heard, "the weariest canned spot announcement on radio/TV, more common place than the Exxon commercial." The gospel has become like a word repeated in rapid mindless succession; it no longer means anything, having fallen victim to its own inflation or become unrecognisably blurred through inferior reproduction."¹⁴ Bruce Cockburn sums up the attitude in one of his songs, "Everything is bullshit but the open hand."¹⁵ But if the people of God really forgave, were able to give thanks in the face of adversity, and really counted all things as trash compared with the surpassing wonder of knowing Christ Jesus, the world would be hungry to hear the message of the Gospel and would give thanks to our heavenly Father. This is because, though they hold the truth in unrighteousness,¹⁶ they recognise that we can only do these things when we draw upon the enabling provision of God.

One example of this occurred in New Zealand, when the son of a Pacific Island family was knocked down and killed on a school crossing by a youth in a stolen car joy-riding down the streets of Auckland. It hit the national news when the parents wanted to meet the young man who had done this tragic thing to forgive him. The world recognised that retribution is the norm, or rather mercy for ourselves and justice for others. But genuine forgiveness is so remarkable that it makes headlines and is the hot topic of talk-back radio and the TV chat shows.

So it is as we embody the commandment in various areas of life that the world sees what the character of God is like. But what commandment?

Which is the foremost commandment?

In the last days before Jesus' kangaroo court-case and subsequent crucifixion, a lawyer and card-carrying Pharisee tries to set him up with a clever test Jesus is asked to single out which one of the commandments of the *torah* is the foremost.¹⁷ Jesus refuses. Instead, he sets together side by side the two great summaries of the ten commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind; and love your neighbour as yourself. On these two, he says, depend all the law (*torah*) and the prophets. N.T. Wright puts it like this: "The entire law consists of footnotes to these two commandments – and that goes for the prophets, too."¹⁸ Explicitly Jesus is declaring that these two summary commandments are inseparable.

But a curious thing happens later when James, the half brother of Jesus, writes to Jewish followers of Jesus Christ about the royal law (*torah*) – the law of mercy – and refers only to the second summary of the commandments. What has happened to the first summary of the commandments that Jesus quoted?¹⁹

A new commandment for a new covenant?

It is in the context of the last supper that Jesus takes the familiar symbols of the Passover meal and makes them signify his willing sacrifice of himself: "This is my body given for you for you. Do this in remembrance of me This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood".²⁰ Before this he gave the commandment of the new covenant: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this will all people know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another."²¹ He goes on to say that if we follow him we must do what he commands by the power of the Holy Spirit.²² This commandment is simply put into

the third person when Paul exhorts: "Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her".²³ As any husband knows, actually doing this is far from simple!

Later, the Apostle John expresses it this way: "Whoever loves God ... must also love his brother."²⁴ The Apostle Paul puts it similarly in his letter to the Galatian churches: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word; You shall love your neighbour as yourself."²⁵ Just before this, in the same letter, he writes that the issue is not about whether a Gentile male has his foreskin cut off or not – a badge of being a convert to Judaism – but for all who believe in Jesus Christ, male and female, it's about "faith working through love".²⁶

Where did these apostles get such an idea? Actually it was from Jesus. In his *torah* for the New Covenant, Jesus declares the same thing.²⁷ He prefaces his commandment with ways in which not to love others – setting yourself up as moral arbiter and reference on the one hand, and being indiscriminate and lacking insight on the other. Then he outlines how faith is involved in agape loving. It is by praying (asking, seeking and knocking) until God provides what we need to love in a particular situation.²⁸ Therefore, having received what we need from God, we are to do to others what we'd like them to do to us. He goes on to say that this is what the *torah* and prophets are all about! Doesn't that strike you as amazing?

For Christians there is one commandment?

The incarnation brought God among us as a conceived, birthed, dependent, maturing, and finally anointed adult human being, and this is totally new in the history of humankind. Also new, and coming out of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, is the indwelling Holy Spirit, with the temple of God becoming the body of the person who is born of God. Together these herald something new in relation to the

new commandment – as you do unto your brother in Christ so you are also doing unto God! The new commandment that Jesus gives to his disciples and to us presupposes both of these *de novo* events.²⁹ Thus, with inspired insight, the Apostle John speaks to Christians of a single commandment, and this is the second gem I want to explore, tucked away as it is in a passage about prayer:³⁰

And this is his (God's) commandment (singular) that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another as he commanded us. (1 Jn 3:23)

One compound commandment: to believe in Jesus as the Saviour and Master of this universe and, in doing what he commands, to love sacrificially as he loved.³¹ One compound commandment like a coin with two sides, or a body or a brain or with two inseparable halves, or Immanuel, God among us as human being.

There can be no separation here between following Jesus and doing what he commanded. The two great summaries of the commandments are inseparably united:

- loving the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind is trusting in this faithful representative of Israel and human-kind, Jesus, the Christ; and
- loving our neighbour as ourselves is loving as Jesus has commanded and showed.

These have always gone together. Now they are unified in Christ's own self. What about in his body, the church? Paul writes:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you (all as Christians) to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one-another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.³²

Sounds to me like the new commandment Jesus gave his disciples to me. Paul goes on to proclaim that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope and one calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

one God and Father of all. I would assert that there is also now this one compound commandment.

Why is *agape* love a must for those who trust in Jesus?

God the Father has given everything into the hands of Jesus the Christ, God as a human being, resurrected a glorified human being.³³ We are to be revealers of the true nature of God – that God is *agape* love – through our obedience and our drawing upon the enabling provision and power of the Holy Spirit.

Francis Schaeffer says something worth pondering about this compound commandment:

Several years ago I wrestled with the question of what was wrong with much of the church that stood for purity. I came to the conclusion that in the flesh we can stress purity without love or we can stress the love of God without purity, but that in the flesh we cannot stress both simultaneously. In order to exhibit both simultaneously, we must look moment by moment to the work of Christ, to the work of the Holy Spirit. Spirituality begins to have real meaning in our moment-by-moment lives as we begin to exhibit simultaneously the holiness of God and the love of God.³⁴

Why the surprise?

When the Son of Man comes in glory with all his angels, at the final judgment of all in the gathered nations, he will separate humankind into two groups, and both will exclaim, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."³⁵

Does this not strike you as remarkable? I can understand why those who have rejected Jesus as the Christ might say this. In a world of self-improvement and just desserts for those who don't "make it" there

is no room for God's economy of grace and mercy. It is inevitable that such a mind-set will result in surprise at what Jesus says. But why the surprise for Christians? It can only be that being a Christian is not obvious as we go about our lives in the neighbourhood, bus, plane, shop, market, work, school, various corporations and agencies. Or perhaps it is not just this. Perhaps it has something to do with our being within time in a way that God is not. Perhaps it means that we need to treat all humankind, even those who are obviously enemies at a particular moment in time, as if they might at some time in the future become our brothers or sisters in Christ.³⁶ Whatever the reason, there is genuine surprise on both sides.

It is this parable of Jesus that has entered deeply into my being and motivates me in all my dealings with others. On a number of occasions, patients have plucked up the courage to ask me if I am a Christian, asking this because of how they have observed me treating them. I often imagine how it would be to meet my patients in the new heavens and earth, and have them exclaim, "So you are a Christian – I never would have guessed from the way you treated me back then!"

The implications ripple through the fabric of life

All men are religious, so there is nothing that does not involve a commitment to something ultimate. Is there any part of being human that is not to be offered in the worship and service of Christ Jesus? We have to remember that the world is also a worshipping and serving world.³⁷ This is why sharing the message of the Gospel is not something imposed "*de novo*" on people who are not already religious – it is merely inviting people to refocus their misplaced faith (in the creation rather than the creator) on the only legitimate one to whom worship and service is due – Jesus "the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen!"³⁸

The incarnation is not so much a

collapsing of the God/creature categories as a uniting of them. Thus, in Christ, there can be no false divisions (dualisms) between heaven and earth, (upper story/lower story), nature and grace, faith and knowledge, belief and behaviour, head and heart, mind and spirit, truth and love, worship and service, theory and praxis. The implications of this for the new humanity (the church), for our own lives, for our marriages and families, for work, for every human cultural endeavour by Christians, are truly radical.

To conclude, it is only by embodying what God commands – by believing in his Son, Jesus Christ, and by loving one another as he loved us – that we enable the love of God to become visible to the watching world. Only then can it be seen that the truth is, “God is love”.³⁹ Only then can we become radiant with the love of God to a world lost in deep darkness.⁴⁰

It is appropriate that I end with a quote from George MacDonald.

*If I mistake, He will forgive me. I do not fear Him; I fear only lest, able to see and write these things, I should fail of witnessing and myself be, after all, a castaway – no king but a talker; no disciple of Jesus, ready to go with him to the death, but an arguer about the truth.*⁴¹

Endnotes

1. Ps 119:160.
2. The following thoughts are developed from two devotions given at the biennial Conference for Christians in Higher Education in Sydney during 11 and 12 April 2003 organised by the National Institute for Christian Education. The theme of the conference was “Critiquing Contemporary Christian Culture”.
3. “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the door-posts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut 6:4-9)
4. Eph 6:2.
5. See 1 Jn 5:1.
6. See the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins in Mt 25:1ff.
7. See also the pruning metaphor Jesus uses in Jn 15 about the true vine, and what the writer of Hebrews says this about the Father’s discipline of Jesus: “For it is fitting for Him ... to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.” (Heb 2:10).
8. See Lk 11:36.
9. Albert Bandura, b. 1925. He believes that people acquire behaviours through the observation of others. The people then imitate what they have observed. He has done several studies involving television commercials and videos containing violent scenes that support this theory of modelling. “Of the many cues that influence behavior, at any point in time, none is more common than the actions of others.” (1986)
<http://www.psy.pdx.edu/PsiCafe/KeyTheorists/Bandura.htm> [Accessed 22 September 2003]
10. Guy Debord quotes in his preface to his work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, (New York: Zone Books, 1994) the nineteenth Century philosopher, Feuerbach, who wrote in the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*: “But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence.... Illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.” Debord, a Marxist philosopher nevertheless writes with prophetic insight in point 15 of his treatise: “As the indispensable packaging for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system.... The spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.” He could well have said “image”, “logo” or “brand”.
11. 1 Jn 1:5.
12. Mt 5:14-16.
13. Dallas Willard notes regretfully: “A fundamental mistake of the conservative side of the church today is that it takes as its basic goal to get as many people as possible ready to die and go to heaven. It aims to get people into heaven rather than get heaven into people ... it creates groups of people who may be ready to die, but clearly are not ready to live.” *Renovation of the Heart – Putting on the Character of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 2002), 24.
14. Peter S. Hawkins, *The Language of Grace* (Cowley Publications, 1983), 55.
15. Bruce Cockburn from the song “Strange Waters” on the CD *The Charity of Night*, Ryko D 31713, 1997.
16. Rom 1:18.
17. Mt 22:34-40.
18. Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2 Chapters 16-28* (London: SPCK, 2002), 92.
19. Jas 2:8-13.
20. Lk 22:19-20.
21. Jn 13:34-35.
22. Jn 14:15.
23. Eph 5:25.
24. 1 Jn 4:7, 20.
25. Gal 5:14.
26. Gal 5:6.
27. Mt 7:1-12.
28. Luke’s Gospel has the following: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” (Lk 11:13)
29. See Jn 13:34-5.
30. Jesus taught the “golden rule” in the context of prayer although we usually don’t appreciate this – see Mt 7:1-12. In fact it is not possible to *agape* love one’s neighbour as oneself without prayer. Paul succinctly refers to this drawing on the power and provision of God the Holy Spirit when he writes to the Colossians about their “love in the Spirit”. (Col 1:8).
31. 1 Jn 3:23.
32. Eph 4:1-4.
33. Jn 13:3.
34. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church before the Watching World – A Practical Ecclesiology* (London: IVP, 1972), 54.
35. Mt 25:31-46.
36. This puts a different angle on Rom 12:14, 17-21.
37. See Rom 1:25.
38. Rom 9:5.
39. 1 Jn 4:8.
40. Phil 2:15.
41. George MacDonald, *An Anthology*, ed. C.S. Lewis (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983), 123.

Peter Dennison is a husband, father, and former teaching elder at a Brethren Assembly in Porirua, New Zealand. He currently lectures in Public Health Dentistry at the University of Sydney, attends a neighbourhood Anglican congregation and enjoys a “blokes” group which meets weekly. He loves reading the Scriptures, fiction and poetry.