

There are no straight lines in nature

God's ways versus man's ideas

Understanding the difference between God's works and man's efforts is crucial in the Christian life. Everywhere the Bible not only tells us that the goal of mature faith is to discern good from evil (Heb 5:14), but declares that the work of church leaders is to teach the difference between good and evil. This was true even under the Old Covenant:

They shall teach my people *the difference* between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. Ezek 44:23

The failure to discern between what is holy and what is earthly leads men to adopt fleshly, human methods to try to achieve God's work. Warnings against this are found everywhere in scripture; for instance, Israel's political alliances against invaders, the false fire of Nadab and Abihu, the birth of Ishmael or the judgment on the Samaritan sorcerer Simon. David could not kill Goliath with a suit of armour, but by obeying God he did so with a smooth pebble from the brook. God's ways don't run in straight lines, they do not follow conventional wisdom; in fact they are frequently at odds with human common sense.

The whole point of the Christian life is to learn what pleases God and follow him every moment. The path of learning this is not straight or smooth, but follows many painful twists and turns; just as an oak tree does not grow straight and smooth like a pole but twists, bulges, has a rough bark and the lumpy evidence of dealing with gall wasps. Smooth poles need to be grown by human cultivation in coppiced tree stumps, and these stumps cannot grow into mighty trees.

The adoption of false methods leads to deadness, and eventually judgment. Everywhere the modern church is filled with all sorts of fleshly ideas and efforts to prop up dead works. Large Charismatic churches are even structured and administered as human commercial enterprises with layers of administrators, an executive management, and annual turnovers in the millions. But even at the personal level men find it so difficult to die to the world and substitute human ideas and fleshly effort, hoping that God will use it – which will never happen. Spurgeon decried this in his day,

Oh, how we long to be successful fishers for Jesus ... But we are tempted to try methods which Jesus would never have tried. Shall we yield to this suggestion of the enemy? If so, we may splash the water, but we shall never take the fish. We must follow after Jesus if we would succeed. Sensational methods, entertainment, and so forth--are these coming after Jesus? Can we imagine the Lord Jesus drawing a congregation by such means as are now commonly used? What is the result of such expedients? The result is nothing which Jesus will count up at the last great day. (*Cheque Book on the Bank of Faith*, on Mk 1:17)

Anything done by man is sinful, dead and empty (Rm 3:9ff); only what emanates from God by his will and power has life in it. Trying to do God's will in the power of the flesh is futile (Rm 8:7-8; 1 Cor 3:1-4). Churches that perform many works in the flesh are dead, even if they superficially appear to be alive (Rev 3:1-2).

This sort of mistake is due to people failing to read their Bible adequately or to understand even the basics of God's law. Not only do people fail to understand the principle, but they fail to see the historical examples illustrating the principle in scripture. On top of this they have no clue about the works of God in history that show the outworking of these principles in church history. The testimony to God's law is clear in the conscience, in

revealed truth, in commands, in exhortations, in poetry, in types, and symbols, in human characters, in history and still everywhere we see Ichabod written over churches which are spending time, effort and money on producing Ishmaels.

A natural parallel

The world of nature is full of the glory of God. It does a person good just to be able to stand alone in the countryside and quietly look at the landscape, hear the birds sing and watch the local fauna. This glory stirs the soul at all levels of observation. You don't have to travel to Norway in the winter to see the grandeur of God's creation in vast beautiful landscapes, the same glory is evidenced to the careful observer watching insects at work in a small corner of an urban garden. Just looking out of an office window at the sky fills you with awe and the fear of God.

Now in creation we see an almost haphazard sense of design and beauty. While there is often symmetry, there is little repetition (outside the basic design of creatures of a certain kind). While there is order there is also great diversity. A person standing on a hill in the Lake District will be awe-struck at the differing types of beauty in the landscape before him, but he will see no natural straight lines. For these he will have to look at the works of man.

This is a key difference between the work of men and the work of God.

When God orders a function it is done in a naturally aesthetic way; while it is the product of a rational mind, it is visibly manifested in a living manner, not in a digital or mathematical way. When man builds a vertical structure it follows mathematical design rules and most tall buildings look very similar. Only when an eccentric architect, like Gaudi, tries to emulate the works of nature does this differ. When God builds a vertical structure, such as a mountain, the result is always different. No two mountains look the same and all of them are rugged in their beauty.

Even when the structure follows the same basic pattern, God's work results in individuality. Everyone's face is composed of an oval, two eyes, a nose in the middle, a mouth and two ears. Despite this every person is distinct and different from everyone else. Even a person's eyes are individual and can be utilised for security recognition, just as the skin, though common to everyone, has an individual design evidenced in fingerprints.

God's way is always individual, distinctive, and analogue rather than digital, mathematical and regular. God chooses not to build with straight lines but man mostly has no choice but to build with straight lines and geometric shapes. Man is subject to physical laws but God is above them. Thus man must work according to engineering principles that work with physical laws, such as using triangular braces to strengthen structures.

A Biblical parallel

Now God does exactly the same thing in the revelation of his eternal purpose in history. The means he uses are surprising and at odds with the world. When he selects a people to be the vehicle of his word he chooses the smallest of nations (Deut 7:7). When he decides to defeat an oppressing nation he whittles away the attacking force and uses trumpets and lights as weapons (Jud 7). When God comes into the world to deliver his people from sin he comes as a weak baby of poor parents in a defeated country. When God gifts his chosen leaders to bring the Gospel to the world and manifest his power they are seen as the filth and offscouring of humanity (1 Cor 4:13).

Everywhere in scripture we see that the revelation of God's purposes is surprising and at odds with the human expectation. God kept ignoring the firstborn and choosing lower sons (Jacob, Ephraim, David). God blesses Abraham for yielding his own promised inheritance to his nephew and later commands him to kill his son. Prophets are told to do the most unusual things to fulfil their ministry (especially Ezekiel and Isaiah).

God's work is always organic, unexpected, out-of-the-ordinary, living, at odds with contemporary custom and totally opposed to the prevailing powerful and worldly manner.

The modern problem

How odd, and tragic, then that modern Christians appear to be falling over themselves trying to be like the world at every turn. With no Biblical sanctions they build their churches based upon human structures following the principles of worldly management. Not only are executive hierarchies developed, but many have even taken commercial management seminars and used them to train church leaders. In fact, the whole idea of a church building to house a large group under a dominant leader set up on a platform is utterly worldly and has no Biblical basis whatsoever. In fact it actually is opposed to clear Biblical commands about mutual ministry, corporate edification, plural eldership, personal training and teaching by discussion.

Then we see churches grasping at government money through the Gift-Aid scheme by which it not only takes money from the world (which is prohibited) but of necessity submits to worldly supervision. All this sin in order to claim a £40% tax-rebate. Christians are told to pay Caesar what is required by law, not to try to get nearly half of it back by submitting to the world.

Even Charismatic worship meetings are more like the world than anything seen in scripture. There is a docile submitted, passive audience that can be controlled and manipulated. This is more like a worldly concert than a participating church based on family principles. Then there is a platform separating all the leaders from the receivers by several feet of height. This is a worldly principle that has no place in the church.¹ Then there is a huge focus upon professionalism. The mistake is to teach that God wants the best therefore only the most professional musicians, trained and fully rehearsed, is good enough for God. This has more to do with the entertainment industry than church. There are so many mistakes here it is hard to summarise them briefly.² We could add, if there were time, the focus on the self through the types of choruses sung; the focus upon emotionalism instead of the spirit; the absence of the Lord's Supper and much more. The whole Charismatic system is utterly fleshly, human and worldly and has nothing at all to do with what God decrees for fellowship.

In many modern churches it is hard to notice any significant difference in character between the supposed Christian individuals and people in the world. They do the same things, watch the same TV programmes, follow the same fashions, go on the same vacations, listen to the same music, adopt the same forms of speech, buy the same gadgets, play the same games, and scream for the same football teams. Some churches have even

¹ Any separation of 'clergy' from 'laity' is anathema to the principles of NT church life. Establishing the subjective dominance of leaders by a platform is more akin to a political rally than Biblical church.

² For instance: God often chooses those who are not the best for his purposes; just look at Jacob for a start. Professionalism has no place in the church, which is just a sharpened form of the flesh. God is not after a smart performance at all. The church is a family, the house of God, and the whole Charismatic idea is alien to God's church. Finally, there is no music in the NT and no apostolic command to use it. It was seen as a fleshly stimulation by the early church and did not appear for hundreds of years when the church became corrupted. Almost every principle of Charismatic worship is the opposite of what God wants.

deliberately modelled their meetings on the world in order to attract newcomers. Sadly there are also many cases, in certain types of church, where the members fiddle the same expenses claims, use the same foul language, feel free to cheat their employers, indulge in the same lewd jokes and behaviour, and even worse.

The reason for this

The modern church has become like the world in many respects, even in committing the same sins. How did this tragedy come about?

The basic fault in the church is the refusal to submit itself to the word of God. Instead of following God's clear commands it thought it knew better and could choose its own way forward. Thus it became ruled by pragmatism. Instead of doing what God said, it believed it could do it better and more logically if it followed the world. The church drew straight lines instead of submitting to God's organic methods.

God said that the local church is based upon mutual edification, is like a family and is led by a team of elders meeting in a house; organic principles at work. Instead the church said, 'We will gather many people who never contribute, put them in a large building which we will buy from gifts and lead them by one dominant figure teaching from a platform'.

God said that the least would be the greatest in the church (i.e. had the most priority) and the weaker members were to have greater honour. Yet in most modern churches the leaders are treated like celebrities and the poor and weak are ignored. I have seen famous Charismatic leaders live in a large house, have a new car almost every year, have luxurious vacations and much more, while the poor in the church who paid for this could not afford to buy soap or sufficient food. God is very angry with this.

God said that the giving of Christians was pre-eminently to help the poor and needy, first in the church and then in the neighbourhood and also for the work of itinerant ministries (not usually local elders). Instead the church established a tithe (not a New Covenant form) and wasted it on large buildings and maintenance, plus funding many levels of a leadership hierarchy. Often the local poor, even in the church, were completely ignored.

Man does not like the uncertainty of God's methods; he likes straight lines. Thus when God declares that the prime reason for gathering is to celebrate the Lord's Supper, being focused upon Christ, men found that unattractive or impractical for their large numbers and centred their church on a man preaching to a silent congregation; some even breaking bread very rarely, if at all.

God shows us that evangelism is mainly centred upon the individuals in the church witnessing to their neighbours (friends, relatives, work colleagues, local neighbours). Men, wanting a more controllable practical straight line, developed Gospel meetings whereby strangers are brought to a fleshly service whereby the Gospel is preached by a man to a large captive audience in accessible, non-threatening ways.

The problem of thinking in straight lines

Man naturally follows his own train of fleshly thought and for this reason we are told to deny ourselves, to put off the old nature, to be renewed in the spirit of our minds. The beginning of the Christian walk is submission, self-denial and utter dependence upon the word of God. How clear does it have to be? God tells us three times that man doesn't live by human resources (bread) but by God's word (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4). We cannot live a successful Christian life if we fail to seriously study the Bible. Scripture must become like a vital meal to us; Bible study must be as serious and as important to us as breathing or

eating. We cannot feed our spirit if we fail to study (not just read but also assimilate and apply) God's word. Such study will lead us to continually centre our lives upon the Lord Jesus Christ, not our best ideas.

Through studying God's word we learn to be absolutely opposed to worldly thinking. Instead of following fleshly straight lines, we become organic and living, following the Spirit's direction. Thus when assailed, we forgive and bless our enemies; we pray for our persecutors; we love those who hate us; we turn the other cheek to our attacker. These are not just words, we must actually live like this today. If you are not finding that you must actually do this in your life, then it is likely that you are not living the Christian life at all.

'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. Jn 15:20

A disciple is not above *his* teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more *will they call* those of his household! Matt 10:24-25

It is clearly exceptional for a true believer to not be persecuted, slandered and attacked in some form or another. When attacked in any way the believer does not follow the straight line of man's thinking and defend his reputation, position, honour, or person – he follows God's organic principles and counts it all joy (Jm 1:2), thanks God (1 Thess 5:18) and continues.

This is but one example of submitting to God's word calling us to do something outside the expected norm. Our nature runs in straight lines, but if we are to glorify God we deny this temptation to walk according to our desires, and submit to God's word, however uncomfortable that is.

We must abandon the straight lines of men and follow God's word

God's work in the church will not be done by man's ideas and efforts, however logical and demanded by circumstances. We must abandon the desire to build in straight lines and learn to simply obey the truth as taught by Christ and his apostles. Though uncomfortable to the flesh, this obedience brings freedom since the truth always brings liberty (Jn 8:32)

It cannot be stressed enough. We must not allow ourselves to be forced into a merely pragmatic, human way of thinking and planning, especially in church life. We are to follow God. We must learn the difference between the clean and unclean, between the holy and the profane, between good and evil. This requires a change of thinking, being renewed in our minds, and this comes by saturating ourselves in God's word. It is this word that cleanses, refreshes, invigorates, stimulates and feeds us. Knowing God's word will bring wisdom and discernment, enabling us to judge rightly. The lack of such sound judgment today has led to a thoroughly corrupt church, ready to capitulate to the darkening political powers at work in the world. Only those who submit themselves thoroughly to the word of God will get through.

People who think in straight lines are like a train on rails, it is impossible to make any sudden turn or change direction for the better. Human tradition is exactly like this. The reaction against historic church tradition, which led to the Charismatic Movement in the 1960s and 70s, very quickly established its own traditions that were much firmer and more dangerous than those it replaced. Instead of deadness it brought emotionalism; instead of formalism it brought paganism; instead of inactivity it brought fleshly over-activity; instead of no family involvement it brought family abuses by pressurising them into

overwork; instead of no place for the young it became dominated by youth-thinking. We could go on.

We must learn that as there are no straight lines in nature, so we must take care to think along the lines that God gives us to follow, and these will often take unexpected twists and turns. His thinking is not like our thinking and his thinking often upsets our great plans.

'For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, nor *are* your ways my ways,' says the LORD. 'For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

Isa 55:8-9

If we fail to observe God's thoughts, as revealed in his word, then we will become fools, however great our plans may seem to men.

The wise in heart will receive commands, but a prating fool will fall. Prov 10:8

The way of a fool *is* right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel *is* wise. Prov 12:15

Plans that are not according to God's thoughts will cause men to stumble and result in judgment.

Who *is* wise? Let him understand these things. Who *is* prudent? Let him know them. For the ways of the LORD *are* right; the righteous walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them. Hos 14:9

Friends, this is the most important thing for you to understand and get right in your heart. If you determine to follow God as revealed in his word, no matter how difficult that may be, if you truly submit yourself and your thinking to God's revealed will, then you will also learn everything else you need to know in time. But if you think in straight lines, if you prefer to listen to the words of men, if you act out the prompting of your subjective feelings, if you just do as you are told by deceived leaders – then you will stumble and fall.

God's word must be the arbiter of all our decisions. We are accountable for all that we do and will have no excuse on the Day of Judgment for our errors; just as at Nuremberg, we will be unable to claim that we were only following the orders of our superiors. We are accountable for our actions to God alone.

May God give us all the grace to learn of him and live obedient lives.

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