

'Of Frogs and Fish'

Article by Revd John Parker, 3 September 2021

'Of Frogs'

One of the questions facing many people at the moment is whether or not to stay within a denomination, or even within a local church, as leaders shift away from the Bible. I have had conversations with several people – both ministers and lay people – who have left the Church of England, and conversations with others who have left the congregations they were a part of, from Methodism, from United Reformed, and other denominations. If you want to understand more of my reasons for leaving, do follow this link (<https://www.cornerstonecolchester.co.uk/our-team>). This article, however, is about the ongoing relationships between those who remain and those who have left their denomination.

An illustration used by many for the dangers of remaining within either a denomination or a local church, is that of the boiled frog (sorry for those who find this a rather disgusting metaphor – I didn't think it up!). The situation in which the teaching or official position of a denomination or local church shifts, from being Biblically faithful, to that of error, is illustrated by a frog. The frog placed in cold water that is gradually warmed up, boils to death. The frog that is placed straight into boiling water jumps out. The aim of the illustration is to warn against gradual, incremental and slow change leading to spiritual death which we would spot straight away if we were confronted with it flagrantly. Slow cultural change is subtle and dangerous. The problem, however, with this illustration is that it isn't biologically true. Neither, I believe, is it useful.

We know it is not true biologically.¹ Why is it not useful? If we are in the very situation of slow cultural change in a local church or a denomination, it does not help to know that we are at risk of death, but to never know when! It suggests only two options; slow death, or dramatic immediate exit. For both reasons the illustration lacks illuminating power. Those who remain within might say things like, *"we'll try and change things from within"*, or *"we'll leave together when clear red lines are crossed"*, or *"we'll stay, come what may, without knowing spiritual death"*, or *"officially the church remains sound in its formularies or constitution"*. And those who have left, be it from denominations or local churches, believe that the only way of staying alive is leaving. They may say, *"I have my red lines which were crossed some time ago"*, or *"I cannot in all conscience stay"*, or *"Scripture says we must distance ourselves from false teaching which means we need to leave"* and the like. Hence, leavers and remainers view each other with suspicion. Those who remain might exclaim, *"There is so much good going on here: gospel life, conversions, maturing of believers, an open door for the gospel. We are not dying"*. And those who have left might exclaim, *"We could not*

¹ Gibbons, Whit, *The Legend of the Boiling Frog is Just a Legend*, Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, University of Georgia, December 23, 2007, <https://archive-srel.uga.edu/outreach/ecoviews/ecoview071223.htm> Accessed 03.09.21

go on and be obedient to scripture! How can you be so certain you won't compromise?". Does the frog myth present us with the only options? Does something untrue and impractical help illuminate the truth?

I am happy to forget the frog myth and turn to the truth of the scriptures which suggest that our approach to covenant breaking error should be very different to worrying about ourselves and whether we live or die like frogs. I want to suggest three preliminary points on which all Bible believing Christians should agree, as they are so plain from scripture. I will root these points in the Lord Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to illustrate how these truths are central and non-negotiable to being a Christian, whatever our strategy towards error in local churches and denominational structures.

1. We are not dualists

Dualism is the idea that physical things are separate from spiritual things. It has a long and ignoble pedigree. Jesus was clear in his teaching. Physical and spiritual things are linked; "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell."² Our spiritual and eternal destiny is not separate from our physical bodies. Rather, what we do with our bodies has great bearing on our final and eternal destiny. Jesus is not advocating surgery, but a ruthless approach to sin which means we need to control our physical bodies. So also the Apostle Paul, expounding this truth to the Corinthians, is clear that our body, our physical reality, is linked to the spiritual: "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."³ Physical and spiritual are not separate. We may see this very clearly in the various challenges to the church over sexual behaviour.

We may be less sensitive to the use of money. But, similarly, our use of money, both our reception of money, and what we give to, is not unspiritual. Whilst money is no longer as physical as it once was, it has power over physical reality as we buy and sell physical things. Money is spiritual. "No-one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."⁴ Jesus was clear, money and all it can do can be an alternative to God. Money can be an idolatry in which we trust a 'god' to provide instead of God. Again, Paul in expounding this says, regarding those who deny the power of godliness: "For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money... having the appearance of godliness but denying its power. Avoid such people."⁵

² Matthew 5:29 (Quotations from English Standard Version except where otherwise indicated)

³ 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

⁴ Matthew 6:24

⁵ 2 Timothy 3:2a, 5

It is a central truth that our obedience to God, our following of Jesus Christ does not allow us to say that ‘spirituals’ and ‘physicals’ are separate for the very reason that the Son of God became incarnate. Hence, godliness is defined by the incarnation in every area of life. This is so that the life of any church, be it local or networks of partnering churches, remains as “a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”⁶ In other words, the physical, down-to-earth godliness of hospitality, family life, managing the household, are patterned on the physical down-to-earth godliness of the Christ who was “manifested in the flesh”. Dualism denies the incarnation. Biblical Christianity accepts the Bible’s teaching on the spiritual nature of what we do with physical things (bodies, money, homes, work etc). We are not dualists.

2. We all have a responsibility to perceive the wolves, who produce no fruit

Jesus is very plain on this responsibility in the Sermon on the Mount; “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognise them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognise them by their fruits.”⁷

Jesus warns every Christian about false prophets who are in the visible church. He is clear that they are to be recognised by the fruit that they produce. He goes further in clarifying that even those who prophesy, cast out demons and do mighty works, in his name, may not even know him. He will say to them “I never knew you, depart from me you workers of lawlessness.”⁸ So, Jesus teaches that it is the responsibility of every Christian to know firstly that there are wolves in the church, secondly how to recognise them, and thirdly their end. Jesus will say ‘depart from me’, and they will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Of course, this is amplified and expounded by the apostles, be this Paul, John or Jude.

The apostle Paul commands Christians, every Christian, as we have seen in Jesus’ teaching, to avoid those who deny the power of godliness. He commands the Ephesians, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not become partners with them.”⁹ The word translated

⁶ 1 Timothy 3:15b-16

⁷ Matthew 7:15-20

⁸ Matthew 7:23b

⁹ Ephesians 5:4-7

‘partners’ is the fellowship word of Christian community – koinonia – in which love, hospitality, practical support and money are shared (see also how this word is used in the book of Philippians). Similarly John instructs that “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching (teaching on the incarnation, Jesus Christ, has come in the flesh v7), do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”¹⁰ And finally, Jude writes to all Christians “to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.”¹¹ In this context he writes, “I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”¹² Why? “For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”¹³ Jude is clear, as was Jesus, on their fate. It is clear that every Christian has the responsibility of watching out for wolves, of knowing who they are and so avoiding them, not welcoming them. Having a merciful approach, yes, on those who doubt, but also with fear understanding their end and the effect they can have on Christians. What is that effect? “In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions. It is those who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.”¹⁴ Division is created by false teachers.

So, every Christian is to be aware of wolves, able to spot those who twist the grace of God and deny Jesus, who do not have the Holy Spirit and also be aware of the division amongst Christians that these false teachers bring. My point here is more that this is the responsibility of every Christian, and so the responsibility of every pastor of the sheep to enable all Christians to fulfil this responsibility. It is not something that the minister is to keep from them or do for them, for that is to be complicit in encouraging disobedience. To do this would be to go against the clear commands of Jesus Christ and his apostles to each and every Christian.

3. We do not know the future but are to trust God

It is one of the dangers of the western church, with our predictable food supply and wealth, that we can be lured into trusting in our own power of provision rather than the provision of God. Jesus teaches trust in God’s provision: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”¹⁵ Jesus is clear that we are to trust God for our lives so that we can prioritise the kingdom of God. The apostles also expound this, whether it is not planning for the future in pride

¹⁰ 2 John 10-11

¹¹ Jude 1b

¹² Jude 3b

¹³ Jude 4

¹⁴ Jude 18b-19

¹⁵ Matthew 6:25, 33-34

or not trusting in our own strength; “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes... So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”¹⁶ Our responsibility is to do the right thing. Yes, this may damage our plan. But to prioritise our plan, instead of doing the right thing, is to trust in our power and the strength of our lives. Such ‘plans’ and ‘strength’ are implicitly based on a supposed knowledge of the future and trust in human power. Only God has a knowledge of the future and only his power can achieve his plans. We are to trust God and do the right thing, even when this appears to undo our plans and power.

Now these three truths above are, I would suggest, universally accepted, or should be, by those who hold to scripture being the Word of God. This is the water in which we swim. Yet, given that these truths are so central, they can be easily assumed rather than expressed and applied to the situations we face. This is especially so regarding the question of leaving or remaining in congregations or denominations affected by false teachers.

Yet, I believe, we seem slow to answer serious questions like these:

What aspects of our current situation would encourage us to be dualists? What aspects of our finances, or our buildings, or the way we use our bodies encourage us to put them in the ‘not spiritual and irrelevant to eternity’ box?

What aspects of our current situation as pastors, ministers, vicars or incumbents would encourage us to keep the sheep in the dark, either by not teaching them or not warning them of wolves? Of course, we may want to be slow and merciful in arriving at conclusions. Our approach does not necessarily need to name specific false teachers. This surely has wisdom. But if the apostles did name people, should we never do this?¹⁷ What if we know individuals in Christian leadership who are clear false teachers, through personal conversation and examination of public teaching, should we encourage the sheep to welcome them and meet with them for political ends? Should we? If we are church members or on PCC, an eldership, deaconate or group of trustees, how are we obeying the command of Jesus to be on our guard for the wolves? How are the wolves being clearly recognised by us as they produce the fruit of division, doubt and denial of Christ as sovereign saviour and Lord?

If we are content for most to be unaware of who is causing division amongst us, we may end up thinking that such division is coming from God’s people, will we not? If only a few are aware of the impact of false teaching amongst the sheep, those who obey Jesus and his apostles will be considered to be the scaremongering “troublers of Israel”¹⁸, rather than prophetic, won’t they?

¹⁶ James 4:13b-14, 17

¹⁷ 1 Timothy 1:20

¹⁸ 1 Kings 18:17b

What aspects of our current situation and political response carry with them an implicit belief about the future which only God knows? What plans are in danger of using financial and political power rather than trusting in the provision and power of God? Are we failing to do the right thing, because we prefer our plans?

When it comes to the question of Biblical faithfulness, often, we ignore the water in which we swim and instead focus on particular proof texts that justify our strategic position of staying or leaving, be this inside or outside a particular political structure like a denomination. Yet, these strategic concerns are not in the Bible and so cannot carry the same weight as the texts we have considered. Were we to overwhelm the above truths, by our chosen strategy, will we not end up 'straining out gnats and swallowing camels'? If we are overwhelming the clear and weighty teaching of scripture by lighter matters of its truth, are we any different to the Pharisees?

What unites the above central and weighty truths? I would suggest the issue of idolatry, and with it some very dark spiritual powers.¹⁹ It is idolatry to separate spiritual matters from the physical; false prophets have always led people into idolatry rather than away from it; trust in human power is itself idolatrous. This is why it is so important for every Christian.

Of course, remaining within a denomination does not rescue us from idolatry. It is only Jesus Christ who does this as we seek to obey his word in that situation. And it may well be that the pressures on those of us in a denomination are those of idolising the security of money and buildings that such a denomination brings, rather than obedience to God. Yet, equally, leaving a denomination does not rescue us from idolatry because only Jesus Christ does that as we seek to obey him in every area of life. Yes, there is greater financial insecurity, but idolatry can still be a temptation. To get a job rather than trusting God to provide for ministry (though he may do so through getting a job!). Or defining ourselves by our courage in leaving, rather than by faithfulness to Jesus Christ and love for all who are his. Being within or without does not rescue us from idolatry, only Jesus does. He is able to keep his servants from falling and only him. We are more like fish than frogs.

'Of Fish'

A biologically truthful analogy for this situation would be that different species of fish are suited to different oxygen levels. All fish need oxygenated water (yes, even lungfish that can survive for periods of time out of water). A trout will die in water which the carp thrives in, yet all fish need oxygenated water. We cannot be both Christian and idolaters. We need the oxygenated water of worship of God through Jesus Christ rather than the deoxygenated putrid water of idolatry. However, just as different fish will have different capacities, different abilities to cope with low oxygen levels, so Christians in different situations will cope with different effects of false

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 10

teaching. So, maybe some have left denominational structures, as they recognise the idolatry that rejection of the word of God has brought. This might be by their immediate leadership within the denomination, their minister or pastor, or lay leaders. Or maybe it is the practical rejection of the word of God within their congregation, a refusal to trust in God. Some may be more sensitive to idolatries, which we all battle with, than others. But if we are 'carp', and we observe 'trout' gasping for oxygen, oxygen levels are falling. We may have different tolerances or different temptations to idolatry, just as in the early church Christians had different tolerances of eating meat sacrificed to idols and the idolatry that surrounded it, but idolatry itself is not neutral. What none of us can survive, just as no fish can survive deoxygenated water, is idolatry. So, if some of us observe others writhing in the agonies of conscience, we should take note. Maybe it is a greater sensitivity, but it is a sensitivity to something real, as Paul warns those whose consciences are not troubled by idolatry at all. He has to tell them, "I do not want you to be participants with demons."²⁰ Idolatry is not neutral, even if idol meat was. Idolatry is not neutral, even if some of us can resist the temptations false teachers are presenting in our current situation. Maybe we need to hear the warning to "take heed lest he fall" and "Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?"²¹ And whilst for others of us, we need to flee idolatry, that may not be weakness or oversensitive consciences, but obedience to that command of Paul's, "Therefore my beloved, flee idolatry."²² This can be expressed in many different ways.

We face different temptations to idolatry and will have different thresholds dependent on a wide variety of factors – our marriages, families, financial situations, freedoms on the ground, and sensitivities of conscience often due to our pre-Christian lives (which are to be respected in love according to Paul).²³ Surely this is the key question in the face of false teachers who peddle idolatry in the guise of Christianity. Surely this is the main concern in the face of heterodox teaching. Yes, the scriptures teach separation, as well as mercy, as we have seen. Maybe we adhere more to one set of scriptures than the other. But what is non-negotiable for us all? What should we be talking about? Keeping ourselves from idols and so continuing to love one another in obedience to Christ so showing that we are his disciples. Idolatry sucks the oxygen out of the water we swim in, it incurs the jealous judgment of God. What would be the early warning that idolatry is on the rise, the early warning that oxygen is being sucked out of the water we swim in? A lack of love.

We are commanded to love one another as He has loved us. The mark of Christian maturity is love. The activity that assures us most that we are his children is not only the doctrine we believe – and certainly not our political strategy, however Biblical we believe it to be – but that we love with actions and in truth.²⁴ This is how people are to see that we are his disciples, that we love one another. If there is or has been a lack

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:20.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 10:12b, 22a

²² 1 Corinthians 10:14

²³ Romans 14-15, 1 Corinthians 8

²⁴ 1 John 3:16-18

of love amongst us, is this not evidence of idolatries that are simmering below the surface and erupting? As James says, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?... You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?’ But he gives more grace.”²⁵ How we need more grace in our current situation to rise above the idolatries of heart that are quenching our love for one another. How we need more grace.

Here is the main concern of this article. Are we observing warm and loving relationships across the remain or leave divide? Are we in partnership with faithful Christians primarily, or our denomination or political group primarily? Are we preserving Christian fellowship, or has our strategy become so high in our own hearts and minds, that we excuse ungodly behaviour and ungodly words as if the central matters considered in this article are secondary? Has our strategy, be this to remain or leave, stopped us showing the fellowship and love of Christians? What might we need to consider most? Surely we need to consider the encouragement of the apostle John at the end of his first letter about the love that those who remain in the truth show for one another. What is his exhortation to those who enjoy fellowship with Father, Son, Holy Spirit and the apostles? If we are those, what must we all do?

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”²⁶

²⁵ James 4:1, 4-6a

²⁶ 1 John 5:21 (New International Version)