

Spiritual Issues Confronting the Bride of Christ in the Modern World



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Four messages are presented on key issues which directly affect the nature of preparations which the church as the bride of Christ should make to be ready for the sudden coming of Jesus Christ as the heavenly Bridegroom

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Preface

This short series of four messages are focused on the most important challenges facing the bride of Christ in the modern world with regard to spiritual dedication and readiness for the coming of the Bridegroom. Many Christians are living in highly developed societies in which several of the Bible's timeless principles are questioned as they are either regarded as old-fashioned and obsolete, or because they restrict the freedom of modern man. Biblical criticism is taking on wider proportions, giving rise in many circles to a situation where very few Biblical doctrines have remained intact. Because of this accelerating movement away from biblical truths, evangelical Christians have an urgent responsibility to be at the forefront of a movement back to the Bible and its life-giving message.

In the first message specific attention is given to diverging views on Jesus, on His divine attributes, on His works and His preaching. Prevailing ideas on the Lord Jesus show a serious deviation from biblical Christology – to such an extent that it can rightly be alleged that in many churches and Christian groups another Jesus than the Jesus of Scripture is proclaimed. Terms such as the “historical Jesus” are often applied to the unbiblical Jesus of modern times. The danger associated with this practice is, on the one hand, that a Jesus is followed who cannot save the souls of sinners, and can therefore not be the heavenly Bridegroom. On the other hand, such a Jesus is preparing the way for the world-wide acceptance of the Antichrist, who will be the “alternative bridegroom” of the non-Christian faiths.

In the second message a short survey on the grey area of spiritual deception is offered. There has been a definite intrusion in a considerable sector of Christian churches and groups by co-workers of Satan's kingdom with distorted messages that often seem to be very close to the truth. A very real danger is that people who do not have a good knowledge of the Bible may be deceived by these messages. The “other Jesuses” of 2 Corinthians 11:4 flourish in the false twilight of the grey area, and some of them enjoy a very big following. As the struggle between the kingdoms of light and darkness is increasing in intensity, the grey area of deception penetrates deeper into traditional Christian societies. A well-developed ability of spiritual discernment is needed to avoid all the deviations and to persevere on the right way.

In the third message the relevance of Old Testament studies is emphasised by demonstrating how types and prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament. In this message it is shown how the family of Abraham typologically points to the family of God in the New Testament. The five persons, or groups of persons, in this family are the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Israel, and the church. The close relationship between these groups is indicated, emphasising the fact that their actions and message offer the only hope for a perishing and lost world. Isaac's marriage with Rebekah sheds prophetic light on the marriage between the heavenly Bridegroom and His earthly bride.

In the fourth message the promise and challenge of complete sanctification is discussed and further expounded (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23-24). Human knowledge and achievements have increased so markedly during the past century that even many Christians think that they no longer need the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit to make a success of their lives. The result is that carnal Christians think that they can solve all their problems with their intellect, and handle spiritual crises only by means of psychological counselling. The inevitable consequence is that several biblical pronouncements and events that defy scientific explanation are either spiritualised or outright rejected. However, the Lord shows us that there is no human substitute for a life under the full control of His Holy Spirit. Believers who cannot testify to this blessing become spiritually impoverished and cannot claim a biblical perspective on life. Their spiritual poverty is clearly portrayed by the five foolish virgins who did not have enough of the oil of the Holy Spirit in their lamps (Matt. 25:1-13).

Johan Malan

1. Who is Jesus and how Well do we Know Him?

Spiritually speaking, humans are immortal beings who, during their earthly lives, are heading for only one of two destinations – heaven or hell. Since every person enters the world scene as a sinner there is nothing more he needs to do to be lost at the end of his life. By nature he is spiritually dead and on a course which leads away from the Lord and His righteousness. However, if he realises the complete absence of a relationship with God, and wishes to ensure that the path of his life leads to heaven, he needs to change course and enter onto the way of life through the narrow gate. The narrow gate is a Person, Jesus Christ, and He said: “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me he will be saved” (John 10:9). Through faith in Him lost sinners are saved and pass from death into life (John 5:24). It is therefore critically important that every person on earth should meet the Lord Jesus. Only He can forgive their sins and give them a pure heart in which the Spirit of God dwells.

We must face the disturbing fact that all people on earth are sinners: “There is no one righteous, no, not one; ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:10, 23). In the secular world, a person can be as successful and morally upright as can be, but he still has a wicked heart in which sin hides. The seriousness of this problem is evident from the fact that the death sentence (eternal death in hell) has been pronounced upon all sinners: “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). In the New Testament this judgement is repeated, and also the only solution to escape from it: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

Because of the serious consequences of sin, God has already in Old Testament times established the principle of the substitutionary death of an innocent one in the place of guilty persons. Innocent sacrificial animals were sacrificed to God to atone for the sins of the trespassers. However, according to Hebrews 10:4, the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins, and were only preliminary, shadowy sacrifices that had to be fulfilled and validated by the once for all sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the cross.

That is the reason why Israel were given numerous promises on the coming of the Messiah during Old Testament times, as He would fulfil and terminate all the typological sacrifices by His once for all sacrifice. The Messiah was destined to fulfil two roles – that of Saviour (Matt. 1:21), and that of King on the throne of David (Luke 1:32). In certain prophecies, His role of reigning King is emphasised and in others His role as the suffering Servant who laid down His life for the salvation of sinners. Isaiah refers to the reigning Messiah who brings peace to Israel: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom” (Isa. 9:6-7).

Other prophecies in Isaiah fix our attention on the coming of the Messiah in the form of a lowly servant who would serve the death penalty for the sins of His people: “He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. ... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:2-6).

However, this image of the Messiah was unacceptable to most of the Jews. They waited on a mighty, reigning Messiah who would restore the throne of David and liberate Israel from the yoke of Roman domination. That was the reason why so few of them recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah, while even His own disciples were ignorant about His true identity as God

and Son of God. Jesus asked them about this: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? So they said, Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:13-17).

Only Peter unequivocally declared that Jesus is the Son of God and promised Messiah of Israel, because the Father revealed it to him through the Holy Spirit. In spite of this revelation Peter was not yet filled with the Holy Spirit, and consequently did not understand the role of Jesus as suffering Messiah. However, John the Baptist had at that time already in public referred to the role of Jesus as Sacrificial Lamb: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Peter and the other disciples did not take this message to heart and resisted Jesus when He referred to this important aspect of His coming to the world. This ignorance was shown shortly after Peter boldly declared that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God:

"From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You! But He turned and said to Peter, Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:21-23).

What a shocking situation! A disciple who, shortly before, proclaimed a great truth on the Messiahship of Jesus, was still ignorant on the vital aspects of the role of Jesus who, as Lamb of God, had to lay down His life for sinners. The devil exploited this ignorance and instigated Peter to express himself in no uncertain terms against the crucifixion of Jesus. He said: "Far be it from You, Lord." The Lord Jesus immediately knew what the origin of this fallacious idea was and rebuked the devil who spoke through Peter.

Although Peter said with great conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, he directly afterwards made a pronouncement in which he denied Jesus with regard to an important aspect of His coming to the world. This lack of insight would soon give rise to even bigger problems of denying the truth and subverting his faith. After Peter was denounced by the Lord, he immediately turned around and decided to stand by Jesus, even though He would be crucified. Jesus knew that what he said still did not emerge from a deep spiritual conviction and warned Peter that, because of his deceptive self-reliance, he was heading for disaster in his spiritual life: "Jesus said to him, Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times. Peter said to Him, Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You! And so said all the disciples" (Matt. 26:34-35).

Peter indeed utterly denied the Lord three times during that night. He said, "I do not know the Man!" (Matt. 26:72). When the rooster crowed he realised his enormous sin and went out and wept bitterly. Peter was forgiven, and on Pentecost 50 days later he was filled with the Holy Spirit and witnessed powerfully about Jesus as the promised Messiah, and also on His crucifixion and saving grace. Under his preaching three thousand Jews repented on that day and received Jesus as Messiah and Saviour.

The modern situation

In spite of the fact that we have the full revelation of Jesus Christ through His Word, as well as the Holy Spirit who was poured out two thousand years ago to witness of the Lord Jesus and reconcile repentant sinners to Him through rebirth, the world is still afflicted by widespread ignorance on who Jesus really is. Should He ask the same question on His true identity to people in the modern world, it would be obvious that most of them entertain distorted ideas

about Him, or have no knowledge about Him. Erroneous answers like the following would be common:

- He is Isa as described in the Koran, the son of Mary, and he will return to subject the world to the authority of Allah and the Koran.
- He is an ordinary prophet and mortal man who did not rise from the dead and ascended to heaven. He is not God or the Son of God.
- He only set a good example to us on how to be charitable and tolerant, how to assist the poor and care for the sick. He is only a role model – not necessarily a Saviour.
- His crucifixion was a political act which was aimed against criminals. His execution has no redemptive value to us.
- The generic goodness of God is enough to move Him to forgive people's sin, and therefore it was not necessary for His Son to die on a cross. A God of love will anyway not demand the death of His Son in order to forgive others.
- He may well be the Son of God, but He rejected Israel because of their apostasy, and now the church is the new Israel (replacement theology). He will not return to restore the throne of David and to establish a millennial reign of peace on earth.

This list goes on and on. Various theologians have for many years occupied themselves with the construction of the so-called "historical Jesus" in whom all the false Jesuses are personified. They describe the biblical Jesus as the "cultic Jesus" who is the product of superstition. According to them, the authors of the Bible were spurred on by the heathen nations to find their own God to worship – that being the reason why they, allegedly subjectively and contrary to biblical pronouncements, declared Jesus to be God.

However, the historical Jesus is the product of humanistic reasoning, and for that reason critical questions in terms of human logic are asked on his origin, identity, miracles, resurrection and ascension. In terms of the scientific worldview it is impossible to be born from a virgin, to control nature, raise people from the dead, to be resurrected himself, and to ascend to heaven. To so-called postmodern theologians, the historical Jesus is no more than a fallible, mortal man and within this paradigm they utterly reject his biblical revelation. From a biblical point of view they are agnostics. However, the false Jesus who is construed in this way is still going to cause big problems to the free thinkers and their followers, as Satan is going to use this deceitful view to send a false christ who will emerge from the earth. He will be multireligious and strongly deny the true God and His Son (Rev. 13:1-8).

We have however been warned by Jesus Himself that there will be impostors who will deceive humanity in His name: "And Jesus answered and said to them: Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, I am the Christ, and will deceive many" (Matt. 24:4-5). Various false christs will appear, and they will all be forerunners of the final false christ, the Antichrist. Their followers cannot be ready for the second coming of the true Christ as they expect an interfaith messiah who will appear somewhere on earth to establish a universal brotherhood of all faiths.

The correct belief

We must embrace the same conviction which Peter also entertained after the Holy Spirit opened his understanding to fully comprehend the Scriptures. He wrote two epistles to believing Jews, both of which form part of the New Testament. From these writings the redemptive power of the crucified Lamb of God is fully evident: "... knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). He emphasises that we should completely identify with the cross so that we will also mortify the sinful flesh. He says that Jesus "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we,

having died to sins, might live for righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). Only the cross of Christ can separate us from the old life and domination by the world.

Peter also admonishes believers not to shy away from the persecution of evangelical Christians: “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled” (1 Pet. 3:14). “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). In 2 Peter 2 he devotes an entire chapter to the evil influence of false teachers.

In the last two verses of his second letter Peter warns against increased deception and apostasy: “You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:17-18).

There is only one solution to deception, spiritual waywardness and moral decline, and that is to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. That should be our major goal in life. Grace and knowledge go hand in hand, and the one should not be pursued at the cost of the other. Knowledge on its own cannot make us better Christians as knowledge alone makes one puffed up. Extensive knowledge and impressive academic qualifications can become a huge stumbling block if it does not coincide with increased grace. Such people are inclined to practice theology with their mind, without their hearts being part of the exercise. Mere mental knowledge of this nature has given rise to the proverbial description of preachers as “road signs” – they point out the way but do not walk on it themselves.

Just think of the scribes during the earthly ministry of Jesus. They had no spiritual insight into the fulfilment of biblical prophecies on the first coming of Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Consequently, they also did not understand the doctrine of salvation and acted as stumbling-blocks to their own people: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13).

However, when knowledge and grace are pursued together it is a completely different matter. Such people do not only intellectually take note of biblical truths but they also embrace them by faith. In this way the knowledge of God is transformed into a spiritual asset, and people are drawn closer to the Lord to commit themselves to Him more completely. They have a holy veneration for the Lord’s Word, and refrain from questioning it and robbing it of its power by advancing all sorts of futile arguments.

It was also Paul’s life mission to gain a better knowledge of Jesus Christ and to identify with His cross in such a way that he would die to the world: “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord ... that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:8-10). We should not only have a mental knowledge of Christ but also spiritually fully identify with His death on the cross and His resurrection; then we will never be a victim of one of the many false Jesuses. Paul says he proclaims Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). There is no substitute for the gospel of the cross.

The Holy Spirit was poured out to guide us into all truth with regard to Jesus Christ, His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and second coming. Through Bible study He reminds us of everything that the Lord Jesus has said, also through His apostles, so that we can grow up to the mature man or woman in Christ. We should not spiritually be like little children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.

Strong convictions should govern our relationship with Christ, as they will also afford us with spiritual armour which will protect us against the attacks of the enemy and enable us to be more than conquerors. A victorious life is also relevant to the call towards readiness for the sudden

coming of the Lord Jesus at the end of the church dispensation. We should watch and pray to be worthy to escape the end-time judgements of God upon a wicked world (Luke 21:36). Never allow doubt and uncertainty to erode your spiritual life.

Prepared for the Bridegroom

If we believe in the true Jesus of the Bible, abide in Him and bear fruit that is worthy of repentance, He will return and take us away before the dark time of the Antichrist's reign of terror. The church of Christ is in the position of the ten virgins of Matthew 25:1-13, who trimmed their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. However, five of them were foolish as they did not make provision for the oil of the Holy Spirit. In the present time, many Christians also only have a form of godliness as there is no indication of the presence and regenerating power of the Holy Spirit in their lives (2 Tim. 3:5). Because of this, they cannot claim to be ready for the coming of the Bridegroom.

If we believe in the true Jesus of Scripture we must make very sure that we know the Lord Jesus in all His capacities, as He did not only come to save us but also to sanctify us so we can follow in His footsteps of righteousness. Paul says we are "in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). How do you know the Lord Jesus? He did not only come to save you from your sins and lost state but also to fill you with His Holy Spirit to empower you to prevail over the influence of the uncrucified flesh.

When you are able to testify about the blessing of sanctification your relationship with the Lord Jesus will become stronger and spiritually more enriching. He will become to you wisdom from God, since all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him (Col. 2:3). He is the Word that became flesh because all the biblical promises on salvation and sanctification were fulfilled in Him. If you experience Him in this way you will become highly committed to conduct Bible study on a regular basis. The Holy Spirit will give you enlightened eyes of the mind to understand the Bible, He will remind you about everything that the Lord Jesus has said, and also proclaim to you the things to come as prophesied in the Bible (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14).

Can you testify about this love for the Lord and His Word, as well as the desire to see the heavenly Bridegroom face to face? If so, it will have a positive influence on your personal holiness. John says that everyone who has the hope on Christ's coming, "purifies himself just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). Exert yourself to lead a pure life which is separated from evil, and to know and do the will of the Lord under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The alternative to this is a life of failure, defeat and spiritual unfruitfulness. If you cannot witness about the Lord Jesus' various works of grace, you find yourself among the ranks of the foolish virgins who will not, during the midnight hour of the church dispensation, be counted worthy to be taken away by the heavenly Bridegroom. His coming will be very sudden, and then it will be too late to make hasty preparations to accompany Him to the marriage of the Lamb. Rather take the necessary steps to be spiritually worthy *now*, and be sure to share in all the benefits of a life of victory and fruitfulness. That will ensure that you do not appear before the judgement seat of Christ empty-handed.

The only solution to the problem of fleshliness and spiritual backsliding is to abide in Christ and know Him in all His fullness. John says: "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (1 John 2:28).

2. The Grey Area of Deception between Two Kingdoms

In the spiritual sphere, people everywhere are exposed to influences emerging from two different kingdoms, i.e. the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. All people begin their lives at the wrong end of this spectrum between light and darkness because they are born with a depraved and sinful nature. When they are saved they are translated from the darkness of their lost state into the marvellous light of Christ's kingdom (1 Pet. 2:9). Paul says that God the Father "has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14).

After salvation our problems and spiritual battle do not come to an end as the devil targets all believers and uses deception and temptation in an effort to revive our old, carnal nature, thereby aiming to once again render us slaves of sin. However, we have the grace of the Lord, the promises and guidelines in His Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit to prevail over these temptations, to keep the flesh in a crucified state and to be more than conquerors in Christ. But it is nonetheless a fierce battle in which we are engaged, and no Christian can afford to underestimate its seriousness. We should identify the problem for what it is, and then put on the full armour of God to remain standing against the wiles of the devil.

To be able to be victors in this spiritual battle we must have a good knowledge of the enemy and always be able to draw a clear line between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. We should unerringly know what is permissible and what not, so as to be able to prevent situations of inadvertently furthering the cause of the enemy. We are commanded to always walk in the light and to continue resisting the works of darkness. If we testify to the fact that the old things have passed away and that all things have become new, we should fully realise that all sins of the past, together with all the other works of the depraved flesh, are out of bounds to us. Paul says, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Eph. 5:11). The Holy Spirit convicts us of all sin so we can confess and forsake it and be completely delivered from it.

In the light of God's Word it is easy to discern the two kingdoms, since the sinful works of the flesh have been fully revealed, thus enabling us to draw a clear moral line between right and wrong. It is an indisputable biblical fact that the evangelical Christian faith is the only true faith, and that all forms of idolatry and occult practices are forbidden to children of the Lord. No one comes to the Father but by the Son (John 14:6), which means that all other mediators are false mediators.

In spite of the sharp distinction between the kingdoms of light and darkness, the devil and his co-workers have succeeded in establishing a grey area of deception in which it is no easy task to distinguish between these two kingdoms. Through the ages, false prophets and false teachers have penetrated the kingdom of God under the provocation of the father of lies, with the aim of deceiving believers. Through disguise, false claims and simulated godliness many of them succeeded in presenting themselves as apostles of God who achieved considerable esteem and even leadership positions, which are then used to deceive gullible believers in distorting God's Word.

The deceivers do not walk in the light of God's Word, they do not proclaim the triune God and are not guided by the Holy Spirit. They disseminate false light, proclaim a false peace, a false way of salvation, a false doctrine of sanctification, a false teaching on the second coming, and also distort and falsify various other biblical promises and doctrines. These false teachers wreak havoc in Christians' lives because they gain entrance into Christian churches, and achieve credibility among ignorant people by offering them easy but false solutions to their problems. To be able to expose and resist them, we need intensive training in the truths of God's Word and exercise our senses to discern both good and evil (Heb. 5:14). The following characteristics of the very dangerous grey area of spiritual deception are mentioned in the Bible:

Disguising

False teachers do not reveal their true spiritual allegiance, but pretend to talk on behalf of the Father and the Lord Jesus and claim to be zealous adherents of the Christian faith. What does the Bible say about them? “For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Such people show themselves as great believers and protagonists for the righteousness of God’s kingdom, but in truth they are agents of the devil. It is a general characteristic of them to resist the doctrine of the deity of Christ and also to denounce the redemptive value of the gospel of the cross. During the time of the earthly ministry of Jesus, most of the religious leaders were of this type, and that is the reason why they resisted Jesus and His gospel. However, He exposed them for who they really were: “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do ... for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44). The deceived priests and scribes furiously denied these allegations as they regarded themselves to be covenant children of the God of Abraham. However, they were spiritually far removed from this position.

Jesus often warned His disciples against the false prophets: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:15-16). Their guise is obvious: they pretend to be innocent members of the flock of Christ who talk on His behalf, but they are really accomplices of the enemy who have only one purpose and that is to proclaim false teachings.

Fallen angels of light

Some of the false prophets exalt themselves to the position of angels of God, and some of them even allege that they were in heaven during visions or dreams, where they received messages from Christ for His church on earth. However, these “prophets” can be identified in the light of their preaching, as their message is always at variance with the gospel of the cross and should therefore be summarily rejected (cf. 1 John 4:1). During the early Christian church there were deceivers of this nature in Galatia. They reasoned that the grace of Christ was not sufficient for salvation and sanctification, and had to be supplemented by observing the Old Testament laws of Moses.

Paul sternly rejected these deceivers who masqueraded as angels or apostles of God: “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you other than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:6-8). People subject themselves to a spiritual curse if they thoughtlessly believe the deception of false prophets and act accordingly.

Paul expressed his shock and dismay towards the Galatians for acting so naively as to actually deny the message of the cross: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? – Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ... Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. ... You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Gal. 3:1-3; 5:2, 4).

That is the grand purpose of false prophets and false teachers – to act against the gospel and alienate believers from the Lord Jesus. However, they do it in such a subtle and convincing way that their victims strongly believe that their actions and preaching are in accordance with the Bible and the will of God.

Proclaimers of fables

The grey area of false preaching is characterised by the proclaiming of religious fables. These are theological fabrications which are offered instead of the truth, and in such a way that they are acceptable to opportunistic churchgoers. The new ideas are highly seductive as the standard for becoming Christians is lowered to a level where rebirth and sanctification are no longer needed. Examples of such teachings are the Catholic's view of baptismal regeneration and the Calvinistic doctrine of election. In both instances an inalienable form of salvation (eternal security) is imputed to a person without the necessity of complying with the command of rebirth or conformity to biblical standards of holiness. Any preaching which insists upon observing high standards of dedication and holiness is not tolerated and actively resisted. Paul informed Timothy about this false doctrine and said:

"... the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). These popular preachers who are followed by permissive, worldly-minded and ease-loving believers often have large numbers of people who associate with them, follow them and read their books. Sometimes these preachers come from outside but they are followed by various churches that agree with their ideas. The very popular ones are often on the forefront of an ecumenical movement to unite churches.

However, in many cases the false teachers do not come from outside but are the products of apostatising within their own churches and theological seminaries. They therefore emerge from within their own inner circles. Paul warned against such a case when he addressed the church in Ephesus: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:29-30).

A few decades later the Lord Jesus Himself, in the book of Revelation, told this congregation that they had apostatised into a lifeless, manmade form of godliness in which they maintained no relationship with Him as Saviour: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent" (Rev. 2:4-5). They did not heed this admonition against deception and later indeed lost their lampstand (the light of the true gospel) and in due course lapsed into complete spiritual darkness. They still loved their church and also played an active part in its activities, but the love for Christ was absent in their hearts. That situation was the consequence of extensive exposure to the preaching of false teachers.

Intensified campaign against Christ and His gospel

The devil and his team of false teachers are waging a fierce campaign against the Lord Jesus with a view to denying His deity, changing His saving grace into licentiousness, and falsifying His Spirit of grace. Paul also warned another church against involvement with Satan's grey area of spiritual deception: "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted – you may well put up with it!" (2 Cor. 11:3-4).

When Jesus is denied by refuting His divine attributes and rendering Him "another Jesus", e.g. the fable of the "historical Jesus" which was construed by apostate theologians, then the biblical Jesus as well as His heavenly Father are denied. John says: "Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? ... Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either" (1 John 2:22-23).

Peter also ties in with this warning and describes all distortion of biblical Christology as heresies which are secretly introduced to falsify the light of the gospel. He says: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed" (2 Pet. 2:1-2). The distorted, low standards which are promoted by these teachers will be very popular and, among others, cause evangelical Christians who honour biblical standards of salvation and sanctification to be portrayed as ludicrous, old-fashioned, and obsolete. Their spiritual convictions and moral norms will be rejected as an irrelevant lifestyle because it restricts human liberties.

Attack against the Bible

The Lord makes very clear statements on the authenticity of His words that have been recorded in the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Nothing should be added or taken away from it (Deut. 12:32). If we honour the Bible and observe its injunctions it will go well with us and the Lord will use us in His service: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

However, in the grey area of spiritual deception strong doubt is expressed on the Bible as the inspired, inerrant and all-sufficient Word of God. On the one hand there is a group of self-appointed prophets who add to the Bible by means of extra-Biblical revelations of God's will through dreams, visions, and audible voices speaking to them, while some of them even allege that they visited heaven during ecstatic experiences. They then proclaim their false, unverifiable messages. On the other hand, there is a growing number of apostate theologians and preachers who take away certain portions of Scripture by way of spiritualising, allegorising, or simply by denying the relevance of certain statements. The Lord sternly warns both these groups:

"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Rev. 22:18-19).

The denial of biblical pronouncements is usually done by virtue of the fact that certain descriptions are regarded to be scientifically impossible (e.g. a virgin birth), or because it is seen to be emerging from primitive mythology, or due to the fact that certain views and practises are regarded to be outdated and obsolete. The consequence of this situation is that virtually all the basic truths in the Bible are denied, giving rise to a so-called theology of denial. Examples of doctrines that are denied are the creation account, the Fall, the Flood, the virgin birth, deity, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the end-time restoration of Israel, the rise of a personal Antichrist who will act as world leader, universal messiah and self-declared God during the coming tribulation period, the rapture of believers, the second coming of Christ, and the restoration of the throne of David in Jerusalem, from where Christ will rule during His millennial reign.

We are on the threshold of the fulfilment of important end-time prophecies, and it is conspicuous how the denial theologians enthusiastically proceed to try and counter any belief in the literal fulfilment of biblical prophecies. They do not only spiritually impoverish church members who are influenced by them by robbing them from certainty of salvation, but they also alienate them from the blessed hope of the rapture (Titus 2:13), and promote a false sense of security by completely denying the outpouring of divine judgements during the great tribulation. This is a very old approach among false prophets. Jeremiah says: "They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). They follow the easy and socially acceptable way by denying prophetic warnings in the Bible.

Signs and wonders

A common practice among false prophets is to make dramatic appearances when they offer a spectacle of signs and strange experiences in an effort to give credibility to their deceptive teachings. Among these are phenomena such as falling in the spirit as well as extreme claims on healing and even the resurrection of the dead. Everything is done in the Name of Jesus, often accompanied by strong exclamations such as, "In the mighty Name of Jesus!" However, it is evident that a foreign spirit is at work in their meetings. Such prophets act in the deceptive twilight of "another Jesus" and do not guide their audiences towards a life-changing encounter with the true Jesus. They cannot do so as they do not know Him personally and only use His Name to gain access to the hearts and minds of the deceived. Many of the false prophets and their victims staunchly cling to their erroneous ideas and will continue with their self-deception until they will finally be rejected before the great white throne where they will appear before the Judge, Jesus Christ, who will reject and condemn them: "Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matt. 7:22-23).

End-time campaign by false prophets

There is a very important question which should be asked about false prophets and their deception, i.e.: What is the devil's final purpose by empowering and using false prophets, and how far has he already progressed in realising his objective? The Lord Jesus Himself exposes the devil's plans when He answers the questions of His disciples on the end-time: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, I am the Christ, and will deceive many. ...Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (Matt. 24:4-5, 11). This deception is often so subtle and convincing that even serious Christians may be confused and induced to open themselves up to it: "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24). Guard against it: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

There will indeed be large groups of people who will accept a false Jesus, the Antichrist, instead of the true Jesus. This even includes the chosen people of Israel, and that is why Jesus said to them: "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive" (John 5:43). However, this serious error of judgement by the majority in Israel to embrace the false messiah will not be confined to them alone as the adherents of all other faiths on earth will follow suit. They will all accept and worship a common false messiah: "And all the world marvelled and followed the beast ... and they worshiped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast?" (Rev. 13:3-4).

The highly sinister and final objective with spiritual deception is that a false christ will gain control over the whole world during the tribulation period. All the deceived ones will be the spiritually unclean bride of the Antichrist (Rev. 17:3-5). However, this marriage will be short-lived. When the Antichrist declares himself to be God in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (2 Thess. 2:4), all people who refuse to worship him in this capacity will be executed (Rev. 13:15; 17:16).

What unspeakable privilege does the bride of Christ have to prepare for His coming and to be ready to be caught away to her mansion in heaven (John 14:2-3; 1 Thess. 4:16-17)! To be able to appear before Him in a spotless robe she has to consistently resist the defilement of spiritual deception, and "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

3. Typology of Abraham and His Family

It is remarkable that such a major part of Genesis is devoted to a narrative of Abraham and his family. Why are they so important to us? This is a very special family which typologically alludes to the family of God, and for this reason believers from Israel and the Gentiles can identify with this family and learn much from their experiences. The five key persons in this extended family all represent a person, or groups of persons, who are part of God's family: Abraham is a type of the Father, his wife Sarah typifies the people of Israel, his son Isaac is a type of Jesus as the Son of God, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, represents the bride (or church) of Christ, while Abraham's servant, Eliezer, refers to the Person and role of the Holy Spirit. God's family, therefore, is composed of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Israel and the church. Let us consider this typology in more detail:

Abraham is a type of the Father. He is not only the founding father of Israel but is also in a New Testament context described as the father of all believers. Paul says that "Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And 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" (Gal. 3:6-8). Jesus was a descendant of Abraham, and through Him the blessing of salvation by faith has come to all nations.

We are only children of Abraham in the sense that God made a promise to him that he would be a blessing to all nations because from among his descendants the Saviour would emerge who would, at the same time, be called the Son of Abraham *and* the Son of God. In the very first verse of the New Testament we read: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." In view of this statement Paul says: "... that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus. ... For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:14, 26).

Sarah is a type of the people of Israel. Her marriage with Abraham typifies the spiritual marriage between the heavenly Father and the people of Israel, and from this union Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, would be born. However, Sarah was barren, this reflecting Israel's extended period of spiritual barrenness during Old Testament times. This was not a permanent state of affairs and the Lord prophesied better times for this barren woman:

"Sing, O barren, you who have not borne! Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you who have not laboured with child! ... For your Maker is your husband, The LORD of hosts is His name. ... For the LORD has called you like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a youthful wife when you were refused, says your God. For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you" (Isa. 54:1, 5-7). Jeremiah further elaborates on God's future mercies upon His wife, Israel:

"At the same time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people. ... Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you. Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel! ... For thus says the LORD: Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, O LORD, save Your people, the remnant of Israel!" (Jer. 31:1-7).

In Revelation 12 we also read about this woman, Israel, during the critical time just before the birth of her child who was destined to be Saviour and King of the world. She is depicted with a crown of 12 stars on her head, referring to the 12 tribes of Israel. Satan stood before her and wanted to destroy her child. In Herod he found a useful accomplice to execute his evil plan: "And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne" (Rev. 12:4-5). The catching up of the Child refers to the

ascension of Christ. The descendants of the woman, Israel, will all be reconciled to the Messiah when He comes again (Rom. 11:26). That means that Israel's severed relationship with the Father and the Son will be completely restored. During the coming millennial reign when Israel will be spiritually restored, she will live very close to God: "And it shall be in that day, says the Lord, that you will call Me, My husband" (Hos. 2:16).

Isaac is the son of promise, who was born through divine intervention when Sarah was long past child-bearing age. He was an early type of God's only begotten Son, Jesus, who was born from a virgin through an intervention by God. The Lord tested Abraham's faith and dedication when He asked him to sacrifice his only and beloved son on Mount Moriah: "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gen. 22:2). Abraham was faithful to God and embarked on the journey to Moriah: "So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together" (Gen. 22:6).

Isaac later asked his father: "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering. So the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham! So he said, Here I am. And He said, Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me. Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided" (Gen. 22:7-14).

The Lord will provide – *Yahweh Yireh*. On the mountain of the Lord He provided a ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac. But the ram was also merely a type of His own Son who would be provided in the fullness of time as a sacrifice for the sins of the entire human race. He was also innocently sacrificed as He did nothing that deserved death. He carried His cross on His own shoulders, just as Isaac carried the wood for his sacrificial altar on his shoulders. Through God's intervention, Abraham received his son back from the altar where he was on the verge of being slain: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, In Isaac your seed shall be called, concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense" (Heb. 11:17-19).

God gave His only begotten Son, whom He loves, as a ransom for our sins. He was the final fulfilment of all the typological sacrifices that were previously brought on Mount Moriah. That includes the sacrifice of Isaac, the ram which the Lord provided in his place, as well as the thousands of animal sacrifices which were brought during Old Testament times in the temple on the Lord's Mountain in Jerusalem. However, according to Hebrews 10, the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins, and that is why the Father prepared a body for His Son to serve as a once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world. He was slain to redeem us for God by His blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev. 5:9).

Jews who do not accept the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, still keep on relying on the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah, as well as all the typological sacrifices that were subsequently brought in the temple. However, these were only shadows of God's future mercies that were bestowed through His Son, Jesus Christ. On The Mountain of the Lord He provided a Sacrificial Lamb for the sins of the whole world.

As Abraham received his son back from the sacrificial altar, so God also received His Son back after laying down His life on a cross which he bore Himself. The Father raised Him from the dead, caught Him up to heaven and gave Him a Name which is above every name.

Eliezer. The servant of Abraham was regarded to be a member of the family as he was the oldest male member after Abraham and in control of all the servants and the property. In Genesis 15:2 we read: “But Abraham said, Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” Subsequently, Isaac was born, and after Abraham received him back from the sacrificial altar he sent his servant Eliezer to go and find a wife for Isaac – not among the heathen nations of Canaan but in Abraham’s country of origin in Mesopotamia.

When Eliezer proposed to a young woman to marry Isaac she was not to be coerced in any way but had to make a free choice: “And if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be released from this oath” (Gen. 24:8). Should she agree to the marriage, Eliezer had to lead her to Isaac. It was his task to accompany and protect her, and also to care for her on the long way through the wilderness to where Isaac was waiting for them.

That is exactly what the Holy Spirit does today. After the Lord Jesus made His atoning sacrifice and returned to the house of His Father, the Holy Spirit was commissioned to go to all the world and invite people everywhere to become members of Christ’s bridal congregation. Should they agree, He stays with them and accompanies them on their earthly pilgrimage, teaching them more about the Father and His Son with whom they will conclude a spiritual marriage. He also endues them with the strength, boldness and spiritual gifts to participate in inviting other people to the marriage of the Lamb.

Rebekah. This girl received the invitation to become the wife of Isaac, and immediately accepted it. She fully introduced herself to the servant of Abraham, invited him to stay over in the house of her parents, and also accepted the betrothal gifts of a golden ring and golden bracelets. She gladly accepted Isaac as her future husband. After this important decision she immediately witnessed about this new relationship. Her testimony caused other members of her family to also open their house, hearts and lives to the welcome guest:

“So the young woman ran and told her mother’s household these things. Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban, and Laban ran out to the man by the well. So it came to pass, when he saw the nose ring, and the bracelets on his sister’s wrists, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, saying, Thus the man spoke to me, that he went to the man. And there he stood by the camels at the well. And he said, Come in, O blessed of the LORD! Why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house, and a place for the camels” (Gen. 24:28-31).

Rebekah’s family did not oppose her in any way, and fully honoured her decision to become Isaac’s wife. They said to Eliezer: “Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master’s son’s wife, as the LORD has spoken. And it came to pass, when Abraham’s servant heard their words, that he worshiped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth. Then the servant brought out jewellery of silver, jewellery of gold, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother” (Gen. 24:51-53). Abraham’s blessing rested upon all who received his servant and reacted positively to the invitation to the marriage of his son. Likewise, the blessing of the Lord rests upon all who react positively to the conviction of the Holy Spirit to enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The next morning Rebekah’s faith was tested when she had to decide whether she wanted to stay a few days longer in her parents’ house (the old life) or whether she was prepared to immediately embark with Eliezer on the long journey to Isaac. Her family members initially asked that she would be allowed to stay with them for another few days, but they were cautious not to stand in Eliezer’s way and allowed Rebekah to decide for herself: “Then they arose in the morning, and he said, Send me away to my master. But her brother and her mother said, Let the

young woman stay with us a few days, at least ten; after that she may go. And he said to them, Do not hinder me, since the LORD has prospered my way; send me away so that I may go to my master. So they said, We will call the young woman and ask her personally. Then they called Rebekah and said to her, Will you go with this man? And she said, I will go. So they sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men" (Gen. 24:54-59). She did not hesitate to fully commit herself.

Rebekah's decision at the well to become the bride of Isaac was the first and very important one. Her second decision was in connection with a complete surrender in which she had to demonstrate that she does not regard the interests of her family to be above those of Isaac, and that she was prepared to start right away with the new life to which she committed herself. Her decision was short and sound: "Yes, I will go!" Eliezer accompanied her all the way, guarded over her safety and told her everything about Abraham and his son.

Isaac awaited her outside in the field before she reached her final destination: "Now Isaac came from the way of Beer Lahai Roi, for he dwelt in the South. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted his eyes and looked, and there, the camels were coming. Then Rebekah lifted her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel. ... Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her" (Gen. 24:62-67).

In view of the fact that Isaac is such a clear type of the Lord Jesus, his bride Rebekah obviously typifies the bride of the Lamb. In the same way in which the servant of Abraham went out to look for her and invited her to become Isaac's bride, the Lord also seeks us through His Word and His Holy Spirit to enter into a much more exalted betrothal and marriage with the Son of our heavenly Father. As preparation for this union we should, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, put on Jesus Christ's robe of righteousness. Paul said to the church in Corinth: "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). We should fully cooperate in the process by dedicating ourselves to work on this garment: "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev. 19:7-8).

Isaac went out in the evening to meet his bride in the field. As the heavenly Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus will meet His bride in the air (1 Thess. 4:16-17). That will be at the end of the church dispensation when the evening shadows are stretching out long. He will continue to love her, as always since their first meeting through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, and will then be united with her forever at the marriage of the Lamb.

Bound together by love

From the study of this typology it is evident that love was the most significant characteristic of relationships in Abraham's family – love for God and also love for one another. The love for God was preeminent, and that explains why Abraham did not withhold his son whom he dearly loved, when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's faith in God was firm and irrevocable, and he believed that the Lord was able to raise him from the dead. Isaac had the same faith and love in his heart, which explains why he did not complain or shy away when he was to be sacrificed but willingly submitted himself. When Isaac afterwards got a wife he loved her with this same love which the Lord had poured out in his heart. That is the secret why the blessing of the Lord so clearly rested upon their lives.

The question which we now have to answer is: How does divine love function as a basic principle of life in the New Testament family of God? As far as the Triune God is concerned, this principle has clearly not changed since God is love and will always remain unchanged. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the same, yesterday, today and forever. God loves lost humanity so much that He gave His only begotten Son as a sacrifice so that the penalty for our sins could

be paid and our souls be saved. His saving grace still operates unchanged where His Word is proclaimed. As far as Israel is concerned, we have read in Jeremiah 31 that God loves them with an everlasting love, and still desires that they will return to Him as a people. He remains the same, and keeps on calling them back to Him (Jer. 3:12).

But how is the situation with the two other members of this family, i.e. Israel and the church? As a people, Israel are still alienated from God and are therefore not examples of His love, except for a small group of Messianic Jews who follow Jesus as Messiah. However, this situation is going to change as the Lord expects it of His church to reach out to Israel in love and win them back for God by virtue of the atonement in the new covenant. Do they do that? A Messianic Jew once said that there is such a poor relationship between Israel and the church that he fears the modern Isaac (Jesus Christ) will one day have to introduce his wife and mother to one another.

The Lord Jesus wants His disciples (the church) to reach out spiritually to His mother (Israel), and even commanded that when He hung on the cross: "When Jesus therefore saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, Woman, behold your son! Then He said to the disciple, Behold your mother! And from that hour the disciple took her to his own *home*" (John 19:26-27). With this arrangement Jesus had far more in mind than caring for His mother Mary. He also committed His mother, Israel, to the care of His disciples in the church, who are His bride.

The church certainly has an obligation to comfort and encourage Israel, and also to care for them. We are called upon to provoke them to jealousy by the way in which we serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through His Son, Jesus Christ (Rom. 11:11-12). The gospel was to be proclaimed first to Israel and then to the entire world (Rom. 1:16). We must comfort Israel by telling her that her iniquity is pardoned (Isa. 40:2). Although they have temporarily lapsed into unbelief as a nation they were nevertheless instrumental in bringing the Word of God to us (Rom. 3:1-3). We received a spiritual heritage which was initially offered to them, and for that reason we owe them much.

Paul confirms the fact that Israel's spiritual hardening is not permanent but only partial and temporary: "And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: The Deliverer will come out of Zion and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom. 11:25-26). Here on the Mountain of the Lord, where Abraham was called to sacrifice his son four thousand years ago, and where Jesus was sacrificed two thousand years ago, the Lord Jesus will appear at His second coming to save the entire remnant of Israel. On that day, Israel will look on Him whom they have pierced, and grieve for Him bitterly (Zech. 12:10).

However, the bride of Christ was not always faithful to her calling to support and care for Israel and to lead them to the Messiah. We have no excuse for this neglect as Paul says in Romans 5:5 that the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. If we can testify that we are reconciled to the Father by virtue of His Son's sacrifice, and that the Holy Spirit has poured out His *agape* love into our hearts, then it should be evident to all that love is the basic characteristic of our lives. Jesus said to His disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

If we can testify about sanctification, divine love should be the basic feature of our lives since love is the first fruit of the Spirit. Paul says to the church in Corinth that he could not speak to them as to spiritual people who are filled with the Spirit of God, but as to carnal people who are still characterised by envy, strife and divisions (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Israel paid a high price for backsliding from the God of love. Unfortunately, many New Testament Christians also lapsed into lovelessness and fleshliness, thereby failing to comply with their calling to demonstrate love towards God, towards one another, towards Israel, and also towards a perishing world in which millions of people have not yet been invited to become members of the bride of Christ.

4. The Necessity of Complete Sanctification

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it” (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

This is one of various commands in the Bible towards sanctification. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul already made it very clear when he said: “For this the will of God, your sanctification. ... For God did not call us to uncleanness, but to holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 4:3, 7-8).

In a certain sense, rebirth can also be described as sanctification. In Acts 15:9 Paul says that God has purified the hearts of the Gentiles by faith. However, that refers to initial sanctification when the convert receives a new heart with a new nature. But that is only the beginning of his spiritual life. Like a small child after birth he still has to grow up to become a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Further steps of dedication are needed to achieve this level of spiritual growth as the old, fleshly nature should be crucified while the inner sanctification which we received in our hearts must also become manifest in all our conduct. To this end we need the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible uses different terms to denote several aspects of sanctification as a deeper work of grace. Among these are:

- *The filling of the Holy Spirit.* That happens when a person who has already received the Holy Spirit at rebirth is further filled with the Spirit to enable him to prevail over the flesh and sin (cf. Eph. 5:18).
- *Obtaining a pure heart.* When the Holy Spirit is given full control over a person's heart and life he is cleansed from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1).
- *Endued with power from on high.* This is to enable a believer with divine power to be able to work for the Lord (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).
- *The victorious life.* Christians are encouraged as follows: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:10-11). We must be able to prevail against sin, temptations and fleshly lusts.
- *Complete sanctification.* This description applies to a person who is not only saved and born again but also experiences holiness in all his conduct (1 Thess. 5:23).

The Lord states in His Word that sanctification applies to all aspects of our earthly walk: “But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, Be holy for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:15-16). That includes our spirit, soul *and* body. Paul communicated the same message to the church in Rome:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:1-2). This message is addressed to Christians who already had a testimony of salvation. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit their mind (spirit and soul) should be renewed to such an extent that they will also sanctify their bodies and put them to the service of the Lord.

To the Thessalonians, this message is conveyed in even more detail: they should not only be sanctified during rebirth, but also pursue complete sanctification. That calls for blameless conduct in all the areas of your spirit, soul and body. It is imperative that we know exactly what the full implications of this command are.

Sanctification of the spirit

A born again person has been quickened by the Lord, and his spiritual life is characterised by faith, hope and love. He believes in God through the Saviour, Jesus Christ, his hope is completely fixed on the Lord for this life *and* eternal life, and the *agape* love of God has been poured out in his heart by the Holy Spirit. However, during complete sanctification and the filling of the Holy Spirit a qualitative change occurs in his spiritual life. His faith and hope are strengthened and his heart is filled with the love of God. Let us consider the nature of these changes.

Like other gifts of the Holy Spirit, faith, hope and love are dynamic. You can have more or less of any of them, which explains the fact why these gifts can function in a stronger or weaker way. This situation poses the challenge of complete sanctification, which is vital to every Christian to become spiritually strong in the Lord.

Faith. If we experience that our faith is faltering, then our witness, our trust and our prayers will suffer – for he who doubts cannot truly pray and give witness in faith. During the time before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the Lord Jesus often called His disciples people of little faith. The night on the stormy sea He said to them: “Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?” (Mark. 4:40). They acknowledged this deficiency in their spiritual lives and asked the Lord Jesus: “Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5).

The devil’s attacks are aimed at undermining and reversing your spiritual growth. He wants your faith to dwindle and become weakened, and achieves that purpose by sowing seeds of doubt in your heart. Things happen to you which cause you to doubt if the Lord is still with you, and whether He truly loves you and cares for you. It is a serious sin to question the Lord’s presence and love, as the enemy then makes progress to subvert your faith and to eventually render you a victim of despair.

The weakening of people’s faith, as well as more extreme forms of backsliding, are big problems which occur widely in the end-time. “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). The Lord Jesus Himself asks the very pertinent question: “... when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). He will find much religion but will He find true faith in Him among people?

We should be involved in a consistent process of sanctification and the strengthening of our faith. Jude says: “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God” (Jude 1:20-21). He then commits his readers to the protection and care of God: “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy ...” (Jude 1:24). To be able to share in this blessing the Holy Spirit must have full control of our lives and not be countered by an uncrucified flesh (cf. Gal. 5:16-17).

Hope. Paul encourages us “to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the inner part behind the veil” (Heb. 6:18-19). Is the flame of hope still burning in your heart? Do you look forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ, and to eternal life which awaits us in heaven? Is this hope an anchor to your soul in the rough and troubled waters through which the boat of your life sails? Hope is a vital spiritual disposition.

When the hope on the second coming of Christ is fading away, the devil is quick to replace it by secular objectives such as the gathering of earthly riches and the building of a worldly kingdom. Many people only wish to become wealthy and prosperous. Some of them also try to establish a Christian kingdom in the transient world (kingdom-now), and no longer actively expect the coming of the heavenly Prince of Peace and His eternal kingdom.

Hope is a very relevant and functional aspect of a Christian's spiritual life. It is not only focussed on eternal life but also on the Lord's care and protection during every day of your earthly life. Particularly during crises, we should not become despondent and fall into depression but fix our hope and faith firmly in the Lord who will deliver us from every evil: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. ... May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5; 15:13).

Love. The self-sacrificing love of God must be foundational to your entire life and you should be rooted and grounded in it. You must love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. Likewise, this *agape* love of God which reaches out to others, should be the essence of your relationship with other people. It is only after complete sanctification that we comply with this standard.

What happens if we are not filled with the love of God? Then our relationship with the God of love weakens, our faith, hope and prayer life suffers, and our human relations also deteriorate markedly. Human love can easily lapse into lovelessness, disinterest, intolerance, and even contempt and hatred. However, God's love is completely different. It remains unchanged and is able to carry us through every crisis. If you are not filled with this love you should trust the Lord for the blessing of complete sanctification. The first and foremost fruit of the Spirit is divine love.

Sanctification of the soul

The three aspects of a person's soul are his intellect, will and emotions. God's holiness should also become manifest in all these areas.

The intellect. Through the mind and the senses of sight and hearing we become aware of good as well as evil things. Apart from the truth, there is also a large number of evil thoughts and teachings which gain access to the human mind from outside. Are your mind and thoughts under the control of Jesus Christ and do you honour biblical principles in your thinking, or has your mind become a storage place for lies, vile thoughts, materialistic desires, deception and half-truths? You should resist evil in your mind by bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

The will. Human beings can apply their will to make good or bad decisions. Christians should intentionally decide to serve the Lord with all their heart and to remain faithful to Him in every area of their lives. The New Testament teaches us to only seek and do the will of God (Rom. 12:2). Ask the Father to reveal the mystery of His will to you (Eph. 1:9), and to "work in you both to will and to work on behalf of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). You should apply your mind while probing His will in the Bible, and trying to understand its inherent logic: "Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). Also pray "that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Col. 1:9), "that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12).

Do you make progress in this area, or does the devil still succeed in influencing you to fulfil "the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (Eph. 2:3)? Do not acknowledge defeat and give up in the struggle, but ask the Lord to help you to "escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:26).

Emotions. In the spiritual war in which we are involved, many people are emotionally paralysed and discouraged by the enemy. Under the influence of tension and disappointment they allow emotional depression to take hold of them, which gives rise to negative thoughts such as passivity, despondency, bitterness and even utter lack of interest in life. Such people do not care about their own lives, neither are they concerned about other people's lives.

There are also active negative feelings by which the devil attacks people, such as revenge, hatred, aggression, envy, jealousy, and unforgiveness. In all these cases evil must be

overcome by good (Rom. 12:21) as the love of Christ and the joy and forgivingness of the Lord enable us to do so. Even when negative emotions strongly present themselves, we should refrain from giving expression to them but rather practice self-restraint through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian's temperament and emotional life should be completely controlled and determined by the Holy Spirit, otherwise the impetuous, fleshly temperament will be dominant. In a fully surrendered life you will discover that the joy of the Lord can supersede and replace all negative experiences, impressions and feelings. Under the most perilous conditions in prison Paul could still say with conviction: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:4-5).

Peter also confirms this command, and says that we should "rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). Does the joy and kindness of the Holy Spirit fill your life? Or do you still have an unbridled temperament which can easily be stirred up and provoked to uncontrolled outbursts by the enemy of your soul?

Sanctification of the body

Our bodies should also be sanctified and put to the service of the Lord. For this reason the devil also attacks our bodies, so we should always take care to protect our bodies against evil attacks. The following three aspects of our body are directly concerned with the process of sanctification: our members, senses and physiology.

The members represent the ability of the body to do things – good or bad. You can work, write, talk, think and do various other things with your body. Before your repentance you committed sin with your body, but now you are obliged to serve the Lord: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (Rom. 6:12-13). The devil will actively tempt you to sin with your body but you should resist him and remain true to the fact that your body now belongs to God: "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1).

The Lord Jesus also needed a human body to fulfil His role as the sacrificial Lamb of God. He said to His Father: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me" (Heb. 10:5). We also received bodies to work for the Lord – in whatever way. Through His Holy Spirit the Lord dwells in our bodies, which commits us to live holy lives both spiritually and morally, because we are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

Senses. The five senses of the body are gateways through which a great variety of influences can affect you for good or evil. The eyes are important for the receiving of information in visual form, e.g. all the things which you can see or read. Hearing is the gate which admits both truth and lies to the mind. When the eyes and ears are used simultaneously, information is received audio-visually. Just think about all the immoral and provocative videos which people view on the internet, as well as the soundtracks to which they listen. There is no limit to the large quantity of evil images and thoughts which a person thus accumulates in his mind. These things penetrate very deep into his memory and subconscious mind, thereby severely defiling his thoughts.

Furthermore, humans have a sense of taste which relates to what they eat and drink. An undisciplined sense of taste can lead to over-indulgence in food and drink, which can harm the body and impair our usefulness in God's service. The sense of smell also operates together with the sense of taste in many ways. The sense of feeling can be perverted by indulgence in nicotine, alcohol, drugs and sexual immorality. Those who are unable to control their craving for sensual pleasure can become addicted to and enslaved by it. There are also different kinds of medicines which are used to produce ecstatic feelings which help people to escape reality.

However, when the effect of these remedies decreases, they are taken again and again because their victims have no control over their own lives.

Drug addiction and a contaminated mind and spirit can in no way be reconciled with a holy life. Paul says to such people: “Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits. Awake to righteousness and do not sin. ... Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (1 Cor. 15:33-34; 2 Cor. 7:1).

Physiology. The proper functioning of a person’s body is an important asset and a gracious blessing from the Lord. To be in a good state of health and able to use the full potential of your body is indeed a privilege. Christians who work for the Lord should meticulously guard over their health. Follow a balanced diet, do not consume harmful substances, get enough exercise, do not venture into places where you may be contaminated by contagious diseases, and refrain from highly strenuous demands to your frail body. Regularly go for medical check-ups. Many missionaries failed to observe these rules and have paid a high price for doing so. Furthermore, your body needs rest in order to function properly. However, too much rest and idleness is also detrimental and should be avoided.

Temporary and eternal considerations

Complete sanctification is much needed in a Christian’s life for two reasons. Firstly, it is to equip us and make us fit to function to our maximum potential in the service of the Lord during our temporary earthly existence. The objective with this blessing is “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). Without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit we will never reach this level of complete sanctification and fitness for service.

Secondly, we must be prepared to appear before the heavenly Bridegroom in a worthy manner when He comes. He makes it possible to us, but we should actively pursue holiness by our faithfulness and dedication: “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

Do you look forward to the second coming of Christ and do you prepare yourself for this meeting? Everyone who has the hope on Christ’s coming “purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:3). The Lord Jesus does the work of purifying but we must be prepared to confess and forsake everything that stands between us and Him. All negative feelings that emanate from passivity and love of ease should also be actively resisted: “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). Lazy people are not used by the Lord but replaced by others. Serve the Lord with all your heart and all your strength – then your life will not be spent fruitless and in vain, and you will have a divine peace in your heart which surpasses all understanding.

Soon, the trumpet will blow and we will see the heavenly Bridegroom face to face. We can look forward to this day with boldness because Christ has provided everything that we need for our spiritual life and our service for the Lord. Through His atoning death He opened a way of salvation – that is a narrow way which leads from Golgotha to the gates of heaven. Furthermore, He has given us His inerrant and infallible Word in which we can learn everything about salvation, sanctification, and various other commands and promises. He went still further and gave the Holy Spirit to every Christian to guide us into all truth so we can correctly understand the Word and order our lives accordingly. That is not all: He also endued us with power from on high to be able to proclaim the Word to all people under all circumstances – even to hostile peoples. At the same time, He gives us the assurance of His constant presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). We do not only have all the spiritual aides to do our work, but we are also sanctified in our spirit, soul and body to be able to live victorious and make our lights shine in a dark world.

Epilogue

The preceding four messages are all focussed on aspects of the end-time revelation of Jesus Christ to His church. The very first of these revelations will occur when He appears in the midst of His bridal church to be united with her. That will happen at the end of the dispensation of world evangelisation, during which they were commissioned to be His witnesses among all nations. It stands to reason that, under difficult circumstances and in the midst of widespread ignorance as well as hostile refutation of the truth, a believer can only be a witness of Christ if he knows Him very well. Christians must therefore ensure that through Bible study under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they gain a good knowledge of our wonderful Saviour who will also reveal Himself as Bridegroom, Judge and King. There are also several other capacities in which we should know Him. When this knowledge and spiritual dedication become rusty there is a real possibility that many Christians may end up among the foolish virgins.

To take a stand for Jesus Christ inevitably implies that you dissociate from all other faiths and their gods. The Lord Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Paul also confirms this statement: "And what accord has Christ with Belial [a worthless idol]? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? ... Therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:15-17). There is no justification of an ecumenical union or cooperation between Christianity and the non-Christian faiths.

Furthermore, for many years a dominion of spiritual deception has been established within Christian churches. This is a grey area in which false teachers pretend to be servants of Christ, but actually they teach people to abandon various tenets of the Christian faith. Through their influence the process of apostatising has reached such an advanced stage that the alternative kingdom of the Antichrist is now deceiving millions of so-called "Christians" to depart from the true Jesus. The result is a growing number of nominal Christians who only have a form of godliness. They claim to be Christians but they follow "another Jesus" who is foreign to Scripture and busy leading them away from the true Shepherd towards the kingdom of the Antichrist.

Evangelical Christians should have a strong sense of identity with regard to their position as members of the body of Christ or the "family" of God. We are all brothers and sisters of one another because we are children of our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. We are also indwelt by the same Spirit, and therefore associate closely and share a common love for one another. We do recognise other structures and realities in human societies, such as different family and kinship groups, tribes, cultural groups and nations – also God-given gender groups. We therefore practise "unity in diversity" while we are all underway to our eternal home where there will be no sin, fears, tension, distrust, and disharmony.

Our calling is that we should, right now in this broken world, receive the blessing of complete sanctification. We should not abide by our first cleansing from sin, but also trust the Lord for the filling of the Holy Spirit. That will not only render us effective disciples during the church dispensation but also ensure that our spirit, soul and body will be blamelessly preserved until the coming of our Lord Jesus. That will exempt us from the charge against the foolish virgins that their Christian faith was practised by own initiative without the power of the Holy Spirit. They have possibly lost much of their zeal for the Lord when the Bridegroom tarried until midnight, and the night became very cold and dark. In His prophetic discourse the Lord warned against negative human reactions when conditions become unfavourable and societies very decadent: "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12). However, backsliding should not occur even though the majority of people become more immoral and filthy. In times like these we are called upon to persevere in holiness (Rev. 22:11). We should not hesitate to take a stand for Christ in a polarised situation, since unity with an apostatising world is unwanted and impossible.

The wise virgins were not absolutely blameless as they fell asleep together with the foolish virgins during a time when they should have been watching and praying. They were indeed spiritually worthy when they were alerted, but it is obvious that their expectation on the coming of the Bridegroom, as well as their knowledge of the signs of the times, were not up to standard. It is so important that during the present period of the great falling away we will heed the prophetic warnings that time is running out and that we should do everything possible to remain vigilant and faithful to the Lord Jesus. In this way we can make sure that we are occupied with the things of His kingdom and will be found busy with these when He comes. The evening shadows are stretching longer and there is little time left to work for the Lord (cf. John 9:4).

If we entertain the correct biblical future expectation, we will also determine the correct priorities in our spiritual life. We will dedicate ourselves to doing whatever work the Lord has entrusted to us, and always take care to be spiritually pure and ready to appear before the Bridegroom. We do not entertain an Antichrist expectation but a Christ expectation. We therefore do not occupy ourselves with survival strategies to try and make ends meet during the dark days under the rule of the Antichrist, but we prepare to appear before the King of kings in the ivory palace in heaven (Ps. 45:6-15).