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In this book I have tried to set out what we, as believers, can learn about our present condition from God's word through Isaiah to Judah over 2500 years ago; even more importantly, what we should do about it.

I have contended that many evangelicals are, in essence, repeating Judah's mistakes. And if I am right, then we, as Judah of old, must repent of our error and return to the Lord our God and his way as set out in his word. We must give up the remodelling of the *ekklēsia*, turn our back on the professional schemes devised by the re-engineers based on worldly principles, and return to Scripture, reforming the church to be what it should be and making sure that our preaching is nothing less than the apostolic preaching of the apostolic gospel, and all in utter reliance upon the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit.

In Isaiah's day, the Lord longed to be gracious:

The LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you (Isa. 30:18).

Joel's burden was in the same vein. Though the Lord was punishing his people (Joel 2:11), even so:

'Yet even now', declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments'. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?... I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you (Joel 2:12-14,25; see the entire book).

We are surely warranted to believe – to hope – that that is as true for us as it was for Judah. After all, the New Testament

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speaks in the same vein. See Christ's words to the seven churches (Rev. 2:5,16,21-22; 3:3,19; see also Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). In light of such assurances, let us return to him:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

Whatever else our day is, it is a day of need!

As for the issue which is at the top of the agenda in all this – evangelism – it is only the sovereign Spirit who, in his power, can regenerate dead sinners, convict them of their sin, bring them to repentance and trust in Christ, bring them to obedience to him in a transformed life of increasing conformity to Christ. Our task is not to try to bring this about by inventing schemes and systems, but, in complete reliance upon the Spirit, be obedient to Scripture. And this means that we must return to confronting the ungodly with probing, challenging, persuasive, pleading preaching, and a church life which is biblical; namely, truly the *ekklēsia*. In short, we must abandon the modern system, and get back to Scripture.

Alas, Judah, having lost faith in God's promise and power, closed their minds to the appeals and warnings of the true prophets and preferred, instead, to listen to the teachers who encouraged them to look to Egypt for help. Have we lost confidence in the biblical way of taking the gospel to the world, and, as a result, go on listening to the remodellers, looking to the world to learn 'how to do it'? Have we lost confidence in the scriptural way? Is unbelief at the root of our problem? We are certainly warned against it:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion'. For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by

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Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest... Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience (Heb. 3:12 – 4:11).

The question is, will we trust God, trust his word, trust his promise, rely upon his power? We are rapidly reaching the place where we have so organised things – church and evangelism – we really don't need the Spirit! Yet we know the scriptural principle:

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts (Zech. 4:6).¹

It takes God's sovereign intervention in power to revive his cause.

No wonder in times of need the psalmist never ceased thinking in terms such as these:

You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob! Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down those who rise up against us. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever (Ps. 44:4-8).

¹ See God's reassurance and instruction to Israel – specially to Joshua – when Moses was about to die, leaving the Hebrews to cross the Jordan, face overwhelming odds against their foes, and conquer the land (Deut. 31:1-8,14,23; Josh. 1:1-9). God uses men, but it is only his own presence and power that brings success. The same goes for the new covenant. See Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 2:3-5; 4:20.

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Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go forth, O God, with our armies. Oh, grant us help against the foe, or vain is the salvation of man! With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes (Ps. 60:10-12).

Oh, grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! (Ps. 108:12).

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes (Ps. 118:8-9).

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God (Ps. 146:3-5).

Will we go on, depending on God alone, preaching the gospel to the ungodly – that is, biblically preaching the biblical gospel, the only true gospel – despite its inbuilt seeming foolishness? Foolishness? Yes, indeed! To confront sinners, to probe sinners, to insist on the necessity of their regeneration, to warn them of impending judgment, to seek to convict them and persuade them to repent and trust Christ alone, seems utterly counter-intuitive in today's climate of doing all we can to attract pagans to church.

The modern system makes worldly sense, of course. And it is precisely because it does make worldly sense that the new system must lead to the position where, from first to last, nothing must ever be said or done to put off potential customers.² Mixing my metaphors, only when a fish has taken the bait and is firmly on the hook can the 'difficult' bits of the gospel be introduced to that particular 'fish'. Before that, whisper sweet-nothings in the clients' ears! Win

² See my *Dilemma*.

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their confidence! Assure them that they have nothing to fear, that all will be well. Lull them!³

Paul would have none of this approach:

You yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others (1 Thess. 2:1-6).

Christ told us the world would hate us and our message (John 15:18-25; 16:1-4; 17:14-18). But why would the world hate us when we provide so much free entertainment, food, coffee on tap, fun, titillation, pleasure, diversion from a humdrum life, give so much meaning to life, offer so much added value, be so adept at boosting self-esteem?⁴

As for the ‘foolishness’ involved in the gospel way, as Paul reminded the Corinthians:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...

³ I have been told that my approach will only frighten the fish, and drive them away; hence, my approach is not conducive to what is wanted in today’s evangelism. But this is to misunderstand the biblical illustration. When Christ speaks of being ‘fishers of men’ (Matt. 4:19), the parallel is with the dragnet, not fly fishing – where the angler, working with stealth, lures and deceives the fish into taking the bait. Christ never pulled his punches to avoid offending his hearers. See John 6:25-71, for instance. By the way, it isn’t ‘my approach’. As we have seen in Acts 10:42-43 (and abundantly elsewhere in Scripture), it is the biblical way.

⁴ See my *Relationship; Attracting; New-Covenant Articles Volume 12; Dilemma; Mistaken*.

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Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men... And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 1:15 – 2:5).

The apostle knew there could be no choice in this matter:

Am I now seeking the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

Paul did not mince his words when he warned Timothy (and us):

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

I may well be told that I am wide of the mark, and that things are not as bad as I have made out, that they are not at all like my caricature. Indeed, that things are going well. Maybe! But, to my mind, the dreadful scenario I have tried to spell out does address our present church life, and really does tell us which way the wind blows. To change the figure, we are on a slippery slope. Others have been there before, and

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slidden badly. Sir Richard Gregory (1864-1952) composed his own epitaph:

*My grandfather preached the gospel of Christ;
My father preached the gospel of socialism;
I preach[ed] the gospel of science.⁵*

I can almost hear the coming generation having to sing something like this:

*My grandfather preached the gospel of Christ;
My father preached the gospel of 're-engineering' and 'self-
esteem';
I preach[ed] the gospel of 'nothingness'.*

Unbelievers always prefer carnality to true spirituality; illusion, living in a dream world, to facing reality (Ps. 4:2b, NIV). Believers, churches, preachers must not pander to it. Alas, I fear that we are seeing the fulfilment of warnings and prophecies in both Testaments:

If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying: 'I will preach to you of wine and strong drink', he would be the preacher for this people! (Mic. 2:11).

The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

We know the scriptural principle:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15-17).

They [the servants of Christ] have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles (3 John 7).

⁵ McGrath pp77-78.

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The church and the world are oil and water – or should be: unmixable. Any effort to reverse this should be abhorrent to believers. If the present trend continues, however, this separation of the church from the world will no longer be true among evangelicals; in parallel with the closing pages of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the church and the world will increasingly morph to become virtually indistinguishable.