

Use 1: Confrontation

Throughout its history, Israel, having been drawn out of Egypt, was always to be a separated people in the midst of idolatry. Moreover, God had always confronted that idolatry through his people:

You are my witnesses... and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no Saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses... and I am God. Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?... Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any (Isa. 43:10-13; 44:8).

Indeed, God made Israel confront idolatry, especially whenever it tried to cross Israel's borders; above all, when any in Israel itself went looking for idolatry. Prophet after prophet proclaimed against it. The Mosaic covenant demanded Israel's absolute separation from it, complete separation from paganism; fully-committed devotion to the one true God, the God of Israel, was the order of the day for Israel.¹

So much for Israel and the old covenant. The material point for the new covenant, however, is that believers have to learn from Israel's history (1 Cor. 10:1-14): 'These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11). And not only instruction: 'Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry' (1 Cor. 10:14). Flee idolatry! Just as Israel had to

¹ See, for instance, Ex. 20:1-8; 23:13; Lev. 19:4; Deut. 7:25; 12:32 – 13:18; 27:15; Judg. 10:14; 1 Sam. 15:23; Ps. 16:4; 115:1-18; 135:15-18; Isa. 2:8; 42:17; 44:9-20; 45:20; Jer. 1:16; 7:18; 10:3-16; Dan. 5:23; Hos. 11:2; Mic. 5:13; Jonah 2:8; Hab. 2:18, and so on.

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flee from idolatry, separate from it and its devotees, so for the *ekklēsia*; separation from the world and its idolatry is a hallmark of the *ekklēsia* in the new covenant.² Idolatry is always an abomination which arouses the wrath of God – both it and its perpetrators (Rom. 1:23; 1 Cor. 6:9; 10:7,14,19; Gal. 4:8; 5:19-20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 John 5:21; Rev. 19:20; 21:18).³

Pagans, even educated pagans, are idolaters:

While Paul was waiting... at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16).

The same goes for the *hoi polloi*. As the apostle reminded the Corinthians:

You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols (1 Cor. 12:2).

Ah, ancient Greece! Of course! What can you expect?

Oh no! There is more to idolatry – far more – than carving a chunk of wood, chiselling some marble, or erecting a temple. When writing to the Galatians, Paul spelled out what he meant by it:

The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

Peter did the same:

² See my *Evangelicals Warned; Relationship*.

³ It is also a nonsensical abomination; God frequently mocked it in the days of the old covenant. See, for instance, 1 Kings 18:26-27; Ps. 135:15-17; Isa. 44:9-20; Jer. 10:5. See also my ‘Do You Get The Joke’ (a discourse on Isa. 46:1-4) on my sermonaudio.com page. Idolatry – however it manifests itself – remains nonsense to this day.

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The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry (1 Pet. 4:3).

Ancient Greece, ancient Rome, heathen nations one and all, and – worst of the lot, the sophisticated West of the 21st century – idolaters, idolaters by nature and by choice, every man jack! Conversion could be described as the sinner turning from idolatry to the one true God. In the preaching of the gospel, God calls sinners to forsake idols. Take Paul and Barnabas who, when faced with idolatry-in-the-raw at Lystra, rebuked the pagans, telling them:

We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things [that is, idols]⁴ to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them (Acts 14:15).

In his sovereign grace, God, in Christ, has propitiated his wrath against his elect, and delivered them from the world and all its idolatrous corruption:

The Lord Jesus Christ... gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:3-4).⁵

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

[God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col. 1:13).

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the

⁴ See Deut. 32:21; 1 Sam. 12:21; Jer. 8:19; 14:22; 1 Cor. 8:4.

⁵ Rescued us from this world, this evil age, please note – not merely rescued us from damnation.

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dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

And believers, having been liberated from the idolatry of the world (John 8:4-36), are to keep themselves free of it:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one (1 Cor. 5:9-11).

Do not be idolaters as some of [the Jews] were... Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor. 10:7,14-22).

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

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Put to death... what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them (Col. 3:5-7).

Little children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21).

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts (Rev. 9:20-21).

The cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death (Rev. 21:8).

Concerning Babylon, the epitome of sin, the world, idolatry:

Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities (Rev. 18:4-5).

In short:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:1-2).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore

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do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says: 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:1-20).

Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured (Heb. 13:12-13).

Since this is what believers are, since this is what believers are required to be, at best they are always going to be suspect in the eyes of the world: believers are inevitable separatists, bound to and determined to keep themselves separate from the world – at least, they should be – and the world will not like it; the world demands conformity to its changing norms, but believers cannot and will not comply. God's people – of both covenants – are congenital misfits (old-covenant Israel by natural birth, new covenant Israel (Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:9-10) by regeneration (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:1-2), and, as an inevitable result, are persecuted: 'Has not my inheritance become to me like a speckled bird of prey that other birds of prey surround and attack?', asks God (Jer. 12:9).

I mentioned the 'changing norms' of idolatry. Take atheism. Because the first believers would have no truck with idolatry

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and pagan temples, the pagans accused them of atheism, and made them pay for it. How the tables have been turned! Who are the atheists today?⁶

And that is far from the worst of it from the world's point of view: it is not simply that believers insist on keeping themselves separate, but they will not shut up about it! Of course not! Believers are not to be passively separate from the world, silent about their rejection of paganism, their refusal and hatred of idolatry, but, in obedience to their Lord's command and commission, they are to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16) in order that God may use them in his work of converting other sinners to Christ, delivering them from the world's evil, from Satan's grasp. This, it goes without saying, inevitably sets believers even more definitely on a collision course with the world. Satan does not calmly accept the loss of his slaves to Christ. Christ himself is unpalatable to the natural man, and his gospel meets the same hostility, as do his people when they confront pagans with Christ. The gospel is not a decent alternative in the eyes of the world; it is utterly objectionable. Saul of Tarsus, an eminent Jew, hated Christ and persecuted him in his people; as Christ told him: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9:4-5). He was set in the Caiaphas mode of wanting to annihilate Christ (John 11:47-53).⁷

It is easy to see why the world hates Christ. Christ is not just a Saviour, one Saviour among many – perhaps the best of the

⁶ In the time of the first believers, 'any person who did not believe in any deity supported by the State was fair game to accusations of atheism... Early Christians were widely reviled as atheists because they did not believe in the existence of the Roman gods. During the Roman Empire, Christians were executed for their rejection of the pagan deities in general, and the Imperial cult of ancient Rome in particular' (Wikipedia).

⁷ Remember also Matt. 25:31-46 – kindness shown or not shown to a fellow-believer is kindness shown or not shown to Christ himself. 'Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD' (Prov. 19:17); 'Whoever receives you receives me' (Matt. 10:40).

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bunch – but still just one of many. He is unique. It has to be trust in him and submission to him, and him alone; or else. He said so:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

And so the first believers preached:

Jesus Christ... there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:10-12).

There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).

It is in this spirit that believers have to confront the world and its culture with their unpalatable (as the world sees it) gospel. Christ did; the apostles did; and so must we. As Christ explained:

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Luke 12:51-53).

And this has consequences:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:34-39).

As Christ confronted sinners, so must believers:

A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him (John 13:16).

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And the world will not like it. It did not like it when Christ or the apostles challenged its culture; it will not like it when we do. Like it? The world hates it!

Let me prove it.

Christ had warned his disciples, doing so in the starkest and bluntest of terms: just as the world had hated him and his words, it would hate them and their words (John 15:18-27; 16:2-4,33; 17:14-18). Those believers knew that the world had hated the prophets for centuries past, and killed them (Matt. 23:31,34,37; Luke 11:47; 13:54; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15). They did not forget that the world (to put it mildly) had not welcomed Christ (John 1:11), but had hated him and wanted to kill him, even from birth (Matt. 2:1-20; Rev. 12:1-6), let alone when he began his ministry (Luke 4:28-29; John 5:18; 7:1,19; 8:37,40; 11:47-53,57). Eventually, they got their way. And now it would be the turn of believers; the world would hate them. They expected it. Christ could not have made the position clearer:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake (Matt. 10:16-22).

They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake (Matt. 24:9).

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (John 15:18-20).

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I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18).

As he told his half-brothers:

The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil (John 7:7).

Oh yes, the early believers knew that what they were as believers, what they did as believers, what they stood for as believers, what they wanted by their preaching, and what and how they preached was going to be anathema to the world, the culture in which they were to live and evangelise. Naturally, at first, they thought only in terms of the Jews, but they soon learned what Christ had meant when he said they had to take the gospel into all the world. All the world! It meant, of course, that they would be confronted by, and have to confront, not only Jews, but pagans, principally (for a start) Greeks and Romans. If they were going to obey Christ, they knew that such confrontation was inevitable. They had no illusions about it. They knew that the world's hatred was an integral part of their stance for Christ; it 'went with the territory'. This hatred was not 'a difficulty' which took them by surprise; they had been forewarned about it, and, as expected, they experienced it. They did not go out of their way needlessly or gratuitously to court or provoke it,⁸ but they knew it was the way God was going to advance the cause of Christ as they took the gospel to sinners. 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim. 3:12). Paul and Barnabas understood that 'strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22) was a vital part

⁸ Compare Jehovah's Witnesses. Knowing that martyrdom attracts, they have been more than willing to provoke opposition; take their stance on blood transfusions, for instance.

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of their ministry. Believers knew that if they stayed faithful to Christ they would meet trouble. Had Christ not told them: ‘Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets’ (Luke 6:26)?

Nevertheless, it wasn’t long after Pentecost that believers were being tempted to compromise with the cultures around them.⁹ But the apostles stepped in, disabused them, instructing them as to what was required of them in their approach to hostile cultures. Take Paul. As he made clear when writing to 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. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart’. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For 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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, 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 decided [or determined] to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and 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. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are

⁹ Rome has been doing it ‘successfully’ for 1500 years; evangelicals, I fear, are rapidly becoming expert in using pagan culture, as they imagine, to advance the gospel. See my *Relationship*. Evangelicals might think they can control pagans; paganism, I am convinced, will prove them mistaken.

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doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory...

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again: 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'. So let no one boast in men (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:1-8; 3:18-21).

I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete (2 Cor. 10:2-6).

Yes, confrontation with the surrounding cultures was bound to be the experience of the early *ekklēsia*. There was no way of avoiding it and staying loyal to the gospel.

This confrontation, of course, did not come from a spirit of bravado. Paul certainly felt his weakness in preaching the gospel, his flesh tightened at the thought of pain, and he was not ashamed to confess it. As we have just seen, as he told the Corinthians:

I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling (1 Cor. 2:2).

No *braggadocio* here!¹⁰ As he pleaded with the believers at Ephesus:

[Pray] for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I

¹⁰ For more on Paul's sense of weakness, see 1 Cor. 4:10; 2 Cor. 11:30; 12:5,9ff.; 13:9.

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am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:19-20).

Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak (Col. 4:3-4).

Despite his fear, he did not run away from confronting the world and its cultures. While this following extract comes from his letter to the believers at Rome, it surely gives a strong indication of how Paul preached to pagans – I am referring to his classic statement about the cause and inevitable effect of idolatry:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things... They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen... They did not see fit to acknowledge God (Rom. 1:18-23,25,28).

In taking such a stance, Paul was not courting popularity was he? Was he not walking in the steps of his Master? Remember how he had confronted his hearers (Matt. 11:21-24; John 8:31-47, for instance).¹¹ As for Paul, when writing to the Galatians, he was explicit about it:

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

¹¹ See my *In Church or In Christ*.

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As he was when addressing the Thessalonians:

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 man, 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, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ (1 Thess. 2:2-6).

Again:

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

And the apostle, being deeply anxious about their resolve, sent Timothy to find out how they were standing up to it:

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour would be in vain (1 Thess. 3:1-5).

Idolatry – whatever form it takes – is always the ethos of the culture which surrounds believers, and tries to engulf them; indeed, they themselves were once caught up in that evil world, but by God's sovereign grace they have been regenerated, converted and delivered from it:

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The Lord Jesus Christ... gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:3-4).

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world [or age], following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith... (Eph. 2:1-8).

And believers have constantly to resist the temptation to return to that old culture, not least in their thinking and in their heart. As for Jewish converts, the old covenant could beckon – hence the letter to the Hebrews. As for Gentile converts, the old pagan way could still seem attractive. The apostles knew it and measured up to it, not with sugar and soft soap, but hard-nosed reality and blunt command:

Do not be conformed to this world [or age or culture], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind (Rom. 12:2).

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh [that is, died], arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh [that is, died] has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Pet. 4:1-5).¹²

¹² As Paul told the Roman believers: ‘Each of us will give an account of himself to God’ (Rom. 14:12; see also Matt. 12:36; 16:27).

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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 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).

Such was the life of the early believers.

* * *

What has all this to do with the resurrection and the kingdom? If I may accommodate the apostle's words: 'Much in every way' (Rom. 3:2).

Before coming to the resurrection, let me make a general point. The gospel, if it is preached as it ought to be preached – including, of course, the proclamation of its proper, personal consequences – will always offend the natural man. Take creation. The very mention of creation is a red rag to the world; it is not merely a question of 'science'; at bottom, it is a question of authority, Godship. The children of the world cannot let God be God; they will not let him be God; they will not acknowledge their obligation to him, and – above all – their accountability to him. And that is why the professors of atheism are so militant in their attacks upon biblical creationism and its proponents. Something similar can be said about God's predestinating power, the fall of man, God's sovereignty in regeneration, the necessity of redemption, and so on. Above all, it is the preaching of Christ – Christ, his person and work – which the world cannot abide; it 'hate[s] him', and naturally 'We do not want this man to reign over us' is its chorus (Luke 19:14).

Natural men are idolaters – any god will do as long as he is not the God revealed in the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the crux of the battle in which believers are always engaged, always – in every generation. And it comes to a head whenever the resurrection and the kingdom, and the consequences of both, are raised and pressed home. The first

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believers certainly found it so when they proclaimed Christ's resurrection.

When writing to the Romans, having set out the appalling condition of the natural man as a wilful and stubborn idolater, in order to highlight the contrast between the unbeliever – one who refuses to allow (or, at the very least, will not acknowledge) that God has the power to create, to give life – and the believer – one who is convinced that God can do the seeming impossible, can work miracles – Paul turned to Abraham. And what a contrast! Abraham certainly trusted God to perform what he had promised and accomplish for him the ostensibly unattainable:

The promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring – not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us [that is, believers] all, as it is written: 'I have made you the father of many nations' – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told: 'So shall your offspring be'. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised (Rom. 4:13-21).

Moreover, did Abraham not show his confidence in God's power to raise the dead when he was prepared to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22:1-18)? The writer to the Hebrews spelled it out:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said: 'Through Isaac shall your

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offspring be named'. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb. 11:17-19).

As N.T. Wright observed, the point is:

Faith in the resurrection power of God, according to Paul, is the alternative to idolatry; it assigns to the creator God the power and the glory which are properly his, the very things that idolatry characteristically denies, and by denying courts death. [This is too weak; the natural man, from birth, is under the wrath of God, and is dead in sin, and is on the road to eternal death (John 3:18,36; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 2:1-3) – DG].¹³

My concern here – as was for the first believers – is with the resurrection of Christ: not merely the fact of the resurrection – a miracle which the world will not allow, cannot allow, a miracle which the world scoffs at and ridicules – but the weight, the consequences, the connotations which Christ's resurrection inevitably carries; namely, that Christ is the true and only King, that he has a kingdom, and that kingdom is everlasting, and that death could not hold him back from coming into that kingdom. Men might hate him and do all they can to thwart him and his rule, but they are doomed to fail; they crucified him and he was buried, but he rose from the dead. To preach, to proclaim, the risen Christ, therefore, means that believers inevitably find themselves in confrontation – indeed, colliding – with the world on these issues. Moreover, the first believers knew they had to confront the world on these matters. It is the same for us, today. The world insists on having its own king, its own kingdom. So when Christ – raised and King – is preached, the world will fight back with every weapon at its disposal.

¹³ Wright p735. While Wright was right to point out that 'we must not reduce the resurrection by simply 'saying that Jesus' crucifixion had been a victory rather than a defeat', and thinking of it only as 'my sins have been forgiven' (Wright p728; see also Wright pp730,735), it does include both. I have tackled Wright on personal conversion before – see my *Hinge; Conversion*. We do not preach Christianity; we preach Christ.

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This is what the first believers found, but they did not shirk it. C.S.Lewis:

To preach the gospel¹⁴ meant (to the apostles) primarily to preach the resurrection... The resurrection is the central theme in every Christian sermon reported in the Acts. The resurrection, and its consequences, were the ‘gospel’ or good news which the Christians brought.¹⁵

Yet this would have been regarded as anything but ‘good news’ by most listeners. Take the Jews. As Wright explained:

The resurrection... set the early Christians on a course of confrontation, not to say collision, with other Jewish groups of their day, particularly the authorities. Any claim that Israel’s God¹⁶ had acted *here* rather than somewhere else in Judaism (the temple, for example! [see Acts 7 – DG]) and in *this* way vindicating a man whose work and teaching had been highly controversial [too weak: Christ’s work, teaching and person had been overwhelmingly loathed by the Jewish authorities; so much so, they realised that to preserve their status, not to say save their skin, he had to be got rid of (see John 11:45-53) – DG], was bound to create a storm, and soon it did. Hard-line Pharisees like Saul of Tarsus, bent on a very different eschatological [prophetical] and political agenda, were horrified at the talk that *this* man being raised from the dead, with all that it implied. The official hierarchy, mostly Sadducees, were doubly horrified. Resurrection always had been a novel, revolutionary doctrine, and this new movement proved their worst fears about it to be true.¹⁷

Just so! Luke has carefully recorded the history of this early confrontation.

But before I look at that record, a glance back to the way in which talk of the resurrection brought conflict for Christ himself:

¹⁴ Lewis had ‘Christianity’.

¹⁵ C.S.Lewis: *Miracles*.

¹⁶ Wright used lower-case ‘g’.

¹⁷ Wright p727, emphasis original.

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The Jews said to [Christ]: ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them: ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’. The Jews then said: ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken (John 2:18-22).

‘For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father’. There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said: ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?’ Others said: ‘These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’ (John 10:17-21).

Yes, Christ certainly collided with the Jews over the question of his resurrection. Now for the post-Pentecost experience of the first believers.

Let me start my look at Acts by picking up the narrative just a little way into the account:

The captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon [Peter and John], greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in [‘in the case of’ – NASB margin] Jesus the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:1-2).

‘Greatly annoyed’? What a weak translation of the Greek! They were grieved, exasperated, sore troubled, offended, pained, greatly disturbed; not to put too fine a point in it, the temple officials and the Sadducees were livid, up in arms, worked up about it. About what? About the believers preaching Christ and his resurrection, with all its consequences (see also Acts 2:24,32; 3:15,26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30-37; 17:18,31-32).

The Jews hated the thought that God, by raising Jesus from the dead, had exposed them as fools by utterly ruining their scheme to use the Romans to destroy, once and forever, this (as they

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saw him) upstart-Messiah (Matt. 26:3-5; John 11:47-53), the rabble-rouser, and that the believers were now actually preaching this resurrected Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah! Things could not have turned out worse! The Sadducees – the top dogs in Judaism at this time – were even more incensed than the rest of the Jews because they refused to believe in any resurrection whatsoever! Clearly, if the believers persisted in preaching Christ risen from the dead, the early *ekklēsia* was certain to clash with the Jews, and clash violently. The first believers, however, did not hesitate, they did not flinch, they did not shy away from this conflict. Quite the opposite! They did not mute the resurrection. Oh no! They deliberately preached – proclaimed – the risen Christ, deliberately confronted the Jews over the issue, and at every turn,¹⁸ and did so right from the word ‘Go’ – the day of Pentecost – laying the blame for Christ’s death fairly and squarely on those responsible for it. Even in his opening remarks in that first public proclamation of the age of the new covenant, Peter went for the jugular:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men [that is, Gentiles]. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it (Acts 2:22-24).

Not only that! He confronted the Jews with the fact that the Old Testament – their very own Scriptures – in particular, David in Psalm 16:8-11 – had foretold them of it. Moreover, he – Peter (whom they dismissed as utterly ignorant – see Acts 4:13) – was now having the audacity to confront them even further by (as they would see it) teaching his Jewish grandfathers to suck eggs:

Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God

¹⁸ Very much as Jesus himself had confronted the Jews over the sabbath (to take just one Gospel, see John chapters 5, 7 and 9).

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had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says: ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool”’. Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:29-36).

Phew!

The dust had hardly settled on this confrontation when Peter (accompanied by John) added insult to injury (in the eyes of the Jewish leaders) by what he said in his discourse to the gathered crowd following the cure of lame man at the Beautiful Gate:

Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name – by faith in his name – has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. Moses said: ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul

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who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people'. And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham: 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed'. God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness' (Acts 3:12-26).

This was the last straw! The authorities had had more than enough. They pounced:

As [Peter and John] were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening (Acts 4:1-3).

Even so, when the apostles were hauled before the court, Peter pulled no punches:

Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone [quoting Ps. 118:22 to the religious leaders!]. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:8-12).

The leaders were appalled; they could not believe their ears:

When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished (Acts 4:13).¹⁹

¹⁹ Jamieson-Fausset-Brown commented: "We thought we had got rid of him [that is, Jesus]; but lo! he reappears in these men, and all that troubled us in the Nazarene himself has yet to be put down in these his

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Not only were the leaders appalled; they tried to put a stop to the apostles' preaching by the use of threats. Peter and John would have none of it:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).

Following which, they went back to their friends and, in light of Exodus 20; Nehemiah 9:6; Ps. 2:1; 146:6, prayed for courage to go on boldly proclaiming the risen Christ (Acts 4:23-31). God immediately answered, bestowing the Spirit upon them in an effusion of power: 'They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness' (Acts 4:31).

The Jews did not take this lying down. In response to the apostles' refusal to be cowed, the Jewish authorities struck again:

They [the bigwigs] set them [the apostles] before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying: 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us'. But Peter and the apostles answered: 'We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5:27-32).

After some debate, the authorities:

...called in the apostles... beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go (Acts 5:40).

So:

Then [the apostles] left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house,

disciples". What a testimony to these primitive [early] witnesses! Would that the same could be said of [us] their successors!'

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they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus (Acts 5:41-42).

Indeed, the message of the resurrection – and the conflict it caused – spread to Jews far beyond Jerusalem and wider Judea.

Paul and Barnabas, for instance, took up the spiritual cudgels when addressing the Jews in Pisidian Antioch:

Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God [that is, proselytes], to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognise him [that is, Jesus] nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’. And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way: ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David’. Therefore he says also in another psalm: ‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption’. For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed [that is justified] from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the prophets should come about: ‘Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you’ (Acts 13:26-41).

Then Paul and Silas:

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...came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying: 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ' (Acts 17:1-3).

The Jews, infuriated by such preaching, gathered and stirred up a rabble who hauled Paul and Silas before the authorities, laying this charge against them:

These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things (Acts 17:6-8).

At Ephesus, Paul:

...entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8).

As he later told the Ephesian elders, when meeting them at Miletus, although he knew that imprisonment and worse awaited him at Jerusalem, he was determined to go there:

...if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:24-27).

And when he was under house arrest in Rome, he called the Jewish leaders to meet him:

When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets (Acts 28:23).

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Although some of the leaders were convinced, others would have none of it. As they left, Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9-10 to them. He did not change his tune, or tone down the strain:

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).

So much for the Jews. Now for the pagans.

Take Samaria, the people who were a hybrid semi-pagan, semi-Jew:

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ... When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women (Acts 8:5,12).

Then we have the epoch-making move of the gospel being taken to the Gentiles with Peter addressing Cornelius and those gathered in the centurion's house:

Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:34-43).

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And when Paul was at Athens, facing the superstitious, religiously-besotted academics in the Areopagus, he dismissed their idolatry, declaring:

We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:29-31).²⁰

His hearers responded:

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others... (Acts 17:32).

Paul before Felix:

This I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust... Some Jews from Asia – they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day’ (Acts 24:14-21).

Felix listened to Paul again, and ‘as [Paul] reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment [following the return of Christ in power, of course], Felix was alarmed’ (Acts 24:25).

Festus, seeking the help of Agrippa in the legal aspects of Paul’s case, had explained by telling him that the Jews, in accusing Paul, had complained ‘about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive’ (Acts 25:19). When he stood before the king, the apostle went into detail:

²⁰ See my *To Confront*.

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I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?... To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:6-8,22-23).

And in Paul's closing retort, he returned to the prophets, making a pointed, rhetorical demand of Agrippa, and, without waiting for his reply, replied for him:

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe [them] (Acts 26:27).

The case is surely made: the kernel of the clash between the early believers and the cultures which surrounded them was Christ – the Messiah – the Son of God, Christ raised from the dead, Christ as King of his own kingdom, and as judge, and all as prophesied in the Old Testament. This is what the believers preached; and this is what so greatly aroused the wrath of the cultures – Christ raised, Christ the King.

Let me probe it further.

As for the Jews, as Wright put it:

The Sadducees were right to regard the doctrine of resurrection, and especially its announcement in relation to Jesus, as political dynamite.²¹

For Rome, Caesar was king, the only king; indeed, in the Roman world – that military and political power which dominated virtually all the known world at the time, including Jewry – the Emperor had to be worshipped – or, at the very least, publicly acknowledged – as divine: he had become a god. As we have seen, the Jews knew this was the most sensitive

²¹ Wright p730.

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point for Pilate – and, when they were blackmailing him to give into their demands and crucify Christ, they had no qualms about pressing it home:

Pilate sought to release [Jesus], but the Jews cried out: ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar’. So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews: ‘Behold your King!’ They cried out: ‘Away with him, away with him, crucify him!’ Pilate said to them: ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered: ‘We have no king but Caesar’. So he delivered him over to them to be crucified (John 19:12-16).

Even so, Pilate made sure that he had the last word and got his own back on the Jews:

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’. Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate: ‘Do not write: “The King of the Jews”, but rather: “This man said, I am King of the Jews”’. Pilate answered: ‘What I have written I have written’ (John 19:19-22).

Nigel Pollard explained the background Roman-thinking:

[An] element in the Roman state-religion was what is generally referred to as the imperial cult. This cult regarded emperors and members of their families as gods.

On his death, Julius Caesar was officially recognised as a god, the Divine (‘Divus’) Julius, by the Roman state. And in 29 BC Caesar’s adopted son, the first Roman emperor Augustus, allowed the culturally Greek cities of Asia Minor to set up temples to him. This was really the first manifestation of Roman emperor-worship.

While worship of a living emperor was culturally acceptable in some parts of the empire, in Rome itself and in Italy it was not. There an emperor was usually declared a ‘divus’ only on his death, and was subsequently worshipped (especially on

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anniversaries, like that of his accession) with sacrifice like any other gods.²²

Warren Carter:

The worship of emperors practiced in the towns and cities of the Roman Empire resembled ruler-worship elsewhere in the ancient world. The repertoire of activities was typical of religious practices in the classical world and included variously temples, shrines, altars, images, sacrifices, priests, processions, feasts, oaths of loyalty and obedience, hymns, poems, prayers, incense, and contests in athletics, music, and imperial encomiums. Expressions of worship could take place in households, trade associations, and in municipal, provincial, and state festivals.²³

Wright:

There can be no question that the title [‘son of god’ – let alone ‘Son of God’ – DG] would have been heard by many in the Graeco-Roman world... as a challenge to Caesar.²⁴

As we have seen, the first believers did not shirk this confrontation; there would be no compromise, even though it put them on the high road to possible execution.

Wright again:

Calling Jesus ‘son of god’ [let alone ‘Son of God’ – DG]... constituted a refusal to retreat, a determination to stop Christian discipleship turning into a private cult, a sect, a mystery religion. It launched a claim on the world: a claim at once absolute (a tiny group of nobodies cocking a snook at the might of Rome) and very serious, so serious that within a couple of generations the might of Rome was trying, and failing, to stamp it out... [The believers] refused to relinquish the world to the principalities and powers, but claimed even them for

²² Nigel Pollard: ‘The Imperial Cult’, BBC website.

²³ Warren Carter: ‘Imperial Cult and Early Christianity’, *Oxford Bibliographies*, OUP website.

²⁴ Wright p729. Hence the centurion’s remarkable statement at the cross following the death of Christ – with or without definite article and the upper case: ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’ (Mark 15:39).

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allegiance to the Messiah who was now the Lord, the *kurios*... The resurrection of Jesus... supplies the groundwork for this... [Believers] calling Jesus 'son of God' [let alone 'Son of God' – DG]... constituted themselves by implication as a collection of rebel cells within Caesar's empire, loyal to a different monarch, a different *kurios* [Lord]... The Sadducees were right to regard the doctrine of resurrection, and especially its announcement in relation to Jesus, as political dynamite.²⁵

The resurrection showed that Christ was and is the Son of God.
Wright:

[Believers] meant by this not simply that [Christ] was Israel's Messiah, though that remained foundational; or simply that he was the reality of which Caesar and all other tyrants were the parodies, though that remained a vital implication. They meant it in the sense that he was the personal embodiment and revelation of the one true God [Wright had lower case].²⁶

Thus, for their disparate reasons, both Jews and Romans hated idea of the risen Jesus, he who, by his resurrection, was declared to be the Son of God. Consequently, none of this can be dismissed as a question of merely academic interest. The penalties for not offering a pinch of incense at the Emperor's shrine were severe.

Wright:

The whole point of passages like Romans 5:5-11; 8:3-4 and Galatians 2:19-20; 4:4-7 is that what Jesus did in his public career and supremely in his death was to be understood as the work of 'God's Son'... *and that the resurrection declared that this had been the case*... It declared that Jesus always was 'God's Son'... Paul is our earliest witness to the theology of the first Christians, and already in his letters, within two or three decades of Jesus' public [ministry],²⁷ we find it stated firmly and clearly that the resurrection was the act of Israel's God, the world's Creator, demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth always was his 'Son'... [Take] John's prologue (John 1:18)... Thomas:

²⁵ Wright pp729-730.

²⁶ Wright p731.

²⁷ Wright had 'career'.

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the resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is ‘my Lord and my God’ [John 20:28].²⁸

Wright summed it up:

For a fuller picture, we would need to factor in the New Testament’s talk of the Divine Spirit, the one who, the Christians believed, had been instrumental in God’s raising of Jesus from the dead.²⁹

The early Christians... did not abandon their Jewish roots and adopt the language and thought-forms of paganism. They developed their theology by embracing one of the central Jewish beliefs of their day, the resurrection of the dead... This was what made them a messianic group within Judaism. This was what made them take on Caesar’s world with the news that there was ‘another king’. This was what made them not only speak of the one true God, but invoke him, pray to him, love him and serve him in terms of the Father and the [Lord],³⁰ of the God who sent the Son and now sends the Spirit of the Son, in terms of the only-begotten God who makes visible the otherwise invisible Creator of the world. This is why, when they spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, they spoke of the resurrection of the Son of God.³¹

No wonder the Herods, the Caesars and the Sadducees of this world, ancient and modern, were and are eager to rule out all possibility of actual resurrection. They are, after all, staking a counter-claim on the real world. It is the real world that the tyrants and bullies (including intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies) try to rule by force, only to discover that in order to do so they have to quash all rumours of resurrection, rumours that would imply that their greatest weapons – death and deconstruction – are not after all omnipotent.³²

Many commentators interpret passages in Revelation as references to the battle between believers and the Romans over the State’s demand for Emperor-worship. No wonder! Christ’s

²⁸ Wright pp733-734, emphasis original.

²⁹ Wright p735.

³⁰ Wright had lower case.

³¹ Wright p736.

³² Wright p737.

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resonant answer to the trick question – posed to try to make him blunder and so fall foul of the authorities – had set the agenda for believers:

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's (Mark 12:13-17).

The early believers were taught to submit to the earthly powers where they could (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17), but when it came to worship, when it came to preaching the gospel – especially with its emphasis upon Christ as King (or Prince – Acts 3:15; 5:31) – as we have seen, no compromise was allowed:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard... We must obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

Revelation 5 is a key passage. John 'saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals' (Rev. 5:1). Only one person could break those seals and open that book: 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals' (Rev. 5:5). John continued:

I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth' (Rev. 5:6-10).

The vision had not come to an end:

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering

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myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!'

And the four living creatures said: 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshipped (Rev. 5:11-14).

As for the seven seals, do not miss the repeated, triumphant chorus:

The Lamb opened one of the seven seals. [that is, the first]... he opened the second seal... he opened the third seal... the Lamb opened the seventh seal (Rev. 6:1,3,5,7,9,12; 8:1).

Jude, quoting Enoch, declared:

Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him (Jude 14-15).

He urged his fellow-believers:

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (Jude 20-21).

Returning to Revelation, do not fail to catch the tenor of John's opening of Christ's addresses to the seven churches in Asia, and how, right from the start, it set the tone for this triumphant book. John:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he

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is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’.

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 1:4-9).

As Christ was soon declaring:

Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:17-18).

What a claim!

As Christ said, introducing his letter to the *ekklēsia* at Smyrna:

The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life (Rev. 2:8).

And what a promise he gave to the *ekklēsia* at Thyatira:

Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star (Rev. 2:25-28).

And to the lukewarm Laodiceans:

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne (Rev. 3:21).

And do not forget the repeated chorus: ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’ (Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

While much of this was written to and for believers, it incidentally – but clearly – shows us the prominence of the resurrection in the way believers thought and what they

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preached when addressing unbelievers. There can be no doubt that such doctrine inevitably aroused the ire of the unconverted.

In short, confrontation was the hallmark of the way the early *ekklēsia* faced the surrounding cultures. And preaching Christ as King, shown by his resurrection, and all the implications of this doctrine, was at the very centre of this confrontation.