

## *A Glance at History*

As already noted, dependence on image and chat began with Adam and Eve – it erupted immediately following their fall; when confronted by God, they instinctively turned to it. With the passing of the centuries, these instinctive preoccupations have never lost their power to charm fallen man, especially in his relationship to God. Although it is the way in which this plays out in contemporary evangelical Christendom that concerns me, I need to take a glance at history. We, today, are living out our particular section of history, but we are not living in isolation. We are, all of us, deeply, inevitably, affected by what has gone before. And we will be somewhat impoverished if we do not have some understanding of what that past is and how it plays into our experience today.

Consequently, I need to expose the part image and chat played in the life of Israel, both in the days before Christ and during his lifetime. Then I need to look at the influence of image and chat in the apostolic churches; then I want briefly to trace how this approach has affected church history through the centuries; and so to us today.

### *Image and chat in Israel*

Israel always had a problem with image. The old covenant was a time of religious spectacle – tabernacle, temple, sacrifices, incense, gold, trumpets, vestments, and so on, colours, sounds and smells.<sup>1</sup> In the memorable words of David, (as recorded in KJV or AV): ‘The house that is to be builded for the LORD must be exceeding magnificent, of

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<sup>1</sup> The medieval Church, which (see below) was based on the old covenant, not the new, gives us a clear sense of what it must have been like. The coronation of Charles III on 6th May 2023 displayed to millions the sort of glossy but diabolical pageant and pantomime which Christendom can produce. Even so, though it aped it, it still failed to rise in glitz to the coronation of a pope.

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fame and of glory throughout all countries' (1 Chron. 22:5; see also 2 Chron. 2:9; 6:2). 'Exceeding magnificent'! And in that 'house' (some house!), certain spectacular rituals had constantly to be gone through. So much of the old covenant was external: how tempting it was, how easy it was, therefore, for the children of Israel to concentrate on the external and forget the internal. They could simply turn up, watch (as much as they were allowed), smell and listen, open-mouthed.

Take the building, whether tabernacle or temple; if the building was right, all was right? No! God, in the days of both Moses and Solomon, gave the Israelites clear instruction about its inadequacy. The former completed the building of the tabernacle; the latter, the temple. In both cases, all was fitted out precisely as God had instructed. Very good! But the form, the shell, the outward – even in the days of the old covenant – was not enough, even though it had been constructed exactly as God had commanded (Ex. 25:9,40; Num. 8:4; Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5); the presence and power of God was essential. And that is just what God made clear to his people. After the tabernacle was complete, but was still just an empty form or shell:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-35).<sup>2</sup>

As for the temple, all was prepared, and then:

The house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God (2 Chron. 5:13-14).

It should have been impossible for Israel to miss the lesson God was so plainly teaching them: the external form may be

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<sup>2</sup> See my 'Obedience & Power' and 'Cloud, Fire, Glory!' on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) web page.

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pristine, but without the presence and power of God all was vain, worthless – and worse; it would simply encourage Israel's dependence on form and show. Just keep watching! Alas, for the overwhelming majority of Jews, ignoring the inward, the heart, the power, and the living experience and concentrating on the external, the show, the appearance, the shell, the image, was all that Judaism amounted to. As long as the veneer was intact, all was well.

It was not! Christ saw it in his day and he pulled no punches in condemning it:

Hypocrites... love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward... Scribes and... Pharisees... do all their deeds to be seen by others (Matt. 6:5; 23:2-5).

As for chat, Israel might use the right words, but here again, the presence and power of God in the heart was essential. God left his people in no doubt about it. He addressed his people through Isaiah, complaining:

This people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men (Isa. 29:13).

And God warned Ezekiel not to be fooled by fine words:

As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother: 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD'. And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes – and come it will! – then they will know that a prophet has been among them (Ezek. 33:30-33).

Christ could not have been more blunt:

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Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them... When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others... When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret... When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others... When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words... When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others... When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others... (Matt. 6:1-18).

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’ (Matt. 15:7-9).

Christ exposed the way the Jews glossed – and so circumvented – God’s commandments by the things they said: ‘You have a fine way of getting free of obedience [that is, avoiding obedience – DG]: God said... but you say’ (see Mark 7:9-7). Chat, chat, chat and image.

So much for the old covenant and Israel.

What about the new covenant? What about the time of the apostles?

### ***Image and chat in the days of the apostles***

Paul, knowing that fallen man is ever the same, was outspoken on the issue:

No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

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This powerful assertion applied to Israel in the old covenant, of course, but its real significance for Paul was in his day, the here and now of the days of the new covenant. It applied to the people he could describe as ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16).

‘The Israel of God’. As the apostle said to the Galatians:

Those of faith... are the sons of Abraham... Those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith... If [since] you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:7-9,29).

‘The Israel of God’. As the apostle said to the Philippians:

We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).

Peter, writing to believers, spelled out their standing before God:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

Clearly, then, Paul’s words about ‘a true Jew’ apply to every professing believer:

No one is a [real believer] who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a [real believer] is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

James too, spoke of the ever-present danger – the sin – of judging by appearance:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay

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attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say: ‘You sit here in a good place’, while you say to the poor man: ‘You stand over there’, or: ‘Sit down at my feet’, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (Jas. 2:1-4).

And so to the two key verses:

The kingdom of God does not consist in talk [or chat] but in power (1 Cor. 4:20).

And, one of the marks of apostasy through this age, is that there will those:

...having the appearance [or form] of godliness, but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

As for that last, since Paul told Timothy to ‘avoid such people’ (2 Tim. 3:5), we know the younger man had to face such at Ephesus. Peter and Jude used graphic illustrations, describing such professors as ‘waterless springs’ (2 Pet. 2:17) and ‘waterless clouds’ (Jude 12). What use are waterless springs and waterless clouds in drought – all appearance and no substance!

So much for apostolic times. What happened after the apostles?

### ***Image and chat in the time of the Fathers***

Following the death of the apostles, the Fathers went back to the old covenant (and paganism), and introduced priests, clergy/laity, titles, hierarchy, sacerdotalism, sacramentalism, sacred buildings, robes, and the like, into the life of the *ekklēsia*.<sup>3</sup> It was inevitable, therefore, that under such corrupt pressure, fallen man’s obsession with image and chat should, as it had in Israel in the days of the old covenant, become

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<sup>3</sup> See my *The Pastor*. See also ‘Excursus on the Vestments of the Early Church’, which may be found on the internet at [biblestudytools.com/history/early-church-fathers/post-nicene/vol-14](http://biblestudytools.com/history/early-church-fathers/post-nicene/vol-14).

embedded in the new covenant. The combining of State and Church, politics united to religion – the invention of Christendom,<sup>4</sup> no less – enforced the innate love of image and chat among professed believers. The Dark Ages had begun!

How clearly image and chat were played out in the medieval papacy, which reduced spirituality to the performance of, and observation of, a gorgeous, priestly spectacle, enacted in a language that the overwhelming majority – including many of the actors themselves (that is, the priests) – did not understand.<sup>5</sup> This only added to the sense of mystery. But from start to finish it was a tragic farce.

As I have already noted, the coronation of Charles III on 6th May 2023 was a glaring example of this Christendom-theatre performance. And, of course, while it stemmed from the Fathers, it had been tinkered with by the Reformers.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Image and chat in the time of the Reformers***

The Reformers certainly tried to row back from the gaudy pantomime they inherited, and were largely successful in the area of soteriology. But, alas, as far as the *ekklēsia* was concerned, they simply replaced the activity of priests with the activity of preachers; image and chat still held sway. Instead of watching the priest in his ‘holy vestments’ parading (according to a set choreography) about ‘the house of God’, offering mass, the faithful now sat before a

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<sup>4</sup> See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 ‘Christendom’ in my *Relationship*.

<sup>5</sup> Hence the origin of the phrase *hocus pocus*, which almost certainly came from *hoc est corpus meum* (this is my body). In medieval times, this phrase largely became an incantation gabbled in dog-Latin by a priest who often did not understand it, half-heard by congregations who definitely did not understand it. As for the theology behind it...! Hence *hocus-pocus*.

<sup>6</sup> See my ‘A Tale of Two Coronations: Farcical and True’ on my sermonaudio.com web page. See also my *Royal*.

suitably-attired presbyter, in order, through eye and ear to absorb his preaching; in both cases, there was the ever-present risk that the many-headed might simply be watching and listening to a mere professional performance.<sup>7</sup> John Milton's 'large-writ priest'!

### ***Image and chat in our time***

Coming to our day – in the digital era, with countless 'church services' and sermons (video and audio) on tap, image, spectacle and chat have reached even dizzy heights. See my comments above, on the events of 6th May 2023.

Martin Luther, though he hated the Anabaptists, envied their *ekklēsia* life, and struggled to get something like it among his followers, but in vain; the only way to get it was to jettison Christendom! In their turn, the puritans tried desperately to turn image into reality among their followers. It proved an uphill struggle. Heavy doses of the old-covenant law was their prescription. But trying to legalise people into a conforming-obedience to the gospel is a far cry from regeneration, true conversion to Christ.<sup>8</sup> The only cure was precisely that which Paul spoke of; namely, the Spirit's power from start to finish. Nothing else will do.

Fundamentally, of course, it is the old story – the fall, sin. The devil has been playing the same game and pulling the strings since Eden. He pulled those strings in the first *ekklēsias*. And that is why Paul, moved by the Spirit, wrote against it.

Hence, let it never be forgotten:

The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power  
(1 Cor. 4:20).

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<sup>7</sup> On occasion, they could watch while he actually transferred a baby out of Adam into Christ by means of few drops of water and the repetition of the right mumbo jumbo! Or so the gullible believed – or, crossing fingers, hoped.

<sup>8</sup> See my *Christ*.



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And we are to beware of:

...having the appearance [or form] of godliness, but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5).