

About this book...

Today is a day of discovering man, i.e. who and what he is, what he is about, and how he can come to some kind of perfection.

Man's memory can prove either a blessing or an incessant problem. To have no memory is to become a zombie. To have bad memories can bring perpetual torment of mind.

Is it then possible to eradicate memory and so be free of it, or does the conscience insist on confronting us with a sense of shame, pollution and guilt? Many persons claim, today, that they can take away the shame the memory often brings.

The author of *The Cleansing of the Memories* believes there is a biblical way of liberating the conscience from oppressive memories. This is the way of the Spirit, of the Word of God, and the Gospel. Those who greatly desire freedom from their past—and this without excessive use of therapies—will want to read this small book.

It is certainly worth the short time it takes to read it and to apply its principles, since they are so simple.

Geoffrey Bingham is an Anglican minister. His experience as soldier, prisoner of war, farmer, writer, teacher and family man, as well as theologian, has given him grounds for writing material which is Australian in tone, and relevant to the society in which we live. Some have found his books life-changing.

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The Cleansing of the Memories

Geoffrey Bingham

The Cleansing of the Memories

Geoffrey Bingham

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Wounding and the Healing
Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss
Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind
Oh, Father! Our Father!
Discovering Your Identity
Practical Christian Counselling
Direct Biblical Counselling
Shepherds of the Flock
At the End of His Tether
I, the Man!
Man of Dust! Man of Glory!

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Foreword

Memory has always been a problem with mankind. It may seem a curious thing that man can be troubled by his past, as also delighted by it. Some memories bring a renewal of shock and trauma when they come unbidden. I am sure we need to research the future no less than the past, although our fears of future events—perhaps not justified—seem to spring from a troubled past.

This little book—which is a mere introduction to the matter of memories—seeks to show that we do not need to live with our past. A miracle has taken place in history. The man Jesus has come to be repository of our past actions, be they good or bad He invited humanity to come and bring their burdens and woes and let him deal with them. This he has done very well, in ways which this monograph spells out to us

God may well use others to help us to see the cleansing of all our memories, and—indeed—His power which has killed the past. This is good, strong and gentle news of His grace. No human being can deal with our memories for He has already done this.

Geoffrey Bingham, 1987

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THE CLEANSING OF THE MEMORIES

MEMORY IS A MASSIVE THING

Gordon, in his book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, claims that the Japanese tormentors of the prisoners-of-war sought to destroy the memories of their captives. He has a remarkable passage which virtually says that men divested of their memories turn to zombies. Having, myself, been a prisoner-of-war-though not in such dreadful conditions as at that camp near the River Kwai-I know the strange things that happen regarding memory. I would like to describe one principle I discovered, though not consciously at the time of being a prisoner. Looking back over the years I realized one day that our minds do strange-if not always wonderful things-in regard to memories.

Shortly after incarceration in Changi prisoner-of-war camp,

a rumour went around that an Allied hospital ship was to come to Singapore to take off the badly wounded. Being one of these, I was enchanted. I could not sleep on the night of the rumour. My mind was filled with a mass of memories, most of them delightful. I was fascinated by the return to mind of things virtually forgotten. I realized—with a sense of shock—that I had partially blotted out these wonderful memories because they contrasted so starkly—and painfully—with our (then) present conditions. Not only could I now bear them, but I positively delighted in them.

Days passed and it became clear this was only a rumour, or, as we called such rumours, a ‘furphy’. The disappointment of the wounded men was very deep. We became wary and cynical of all such rumours. Then, later, when we knew beyond doubt that we were going to be released and sent home, our joy knew no bounds. The rich memories came flooding back. I was amazed at the fine details I could remember from when a small child. I would spend hours basking in the past. It seemed that anyone with a past like that must have a wonderful future!

MEMORY IS INERADICABLE

Memory is a wonderful gift. Anyone who has suffered from amnesia—forgetfulness of the past, a blanking out of memory—will know the painful nature of the past being a blank. Some of us have suffered temporary amnesia, and find it uncomfortable, and inconvenient. Maybe—as I have suggested above—we unconsciously use it as a device to protect us against memories too difficult to sustain, but in the long run I believe we wish to remember the past, no matter what pain it may bring. We belong to our past, as it to us.

The purpose of this small book is not to do a psychological or anthropological study of memory, but simply to emphasize the joy of being men and women without bad memories. Millions are haunted by their past, and would give anything to be freed from such memories. If we had some psychological or magical device which could erase hurtful memories, and strengthen the good ones, then the person able to effect such a state would seem to possess a power of great enrichment to the human race. As yet no one has been able to achieve this. To this point in history we can help folk sedate themselves so that memories are not felt so sensitively, and perhaps by certain psychological techniques such as abreaction we can get the mind to reject much of the past, yet inevitably the sufferer is again—even if slowly—reclaimed by persistent remembering. Even brainwashing wears off after some time.

Forgetfulness has long been a dream of the human race. Keats talks of the drift to numbness which a drug can induce. Hamlet speaks of what might happen when we ‘shuffle off this mortal coil’, and says, ‘Perchance to dream!’ as though a dreamy state were better than this present living—but painful—one. Then he adds with dismay, ‘To dream! Ah, there’s the rub!’ He is really saying, ‘There is no escape from memory—not even in the Beyond!’ With many others he sees the time—beyond—time as a place where memories revisit us ceaselessly—even ruthlessly bearing down upon us—so that our latter state becomes worse than our former.

There are therapies today which bid us forget the past. ‘Put the past behind you’, they say, ‘Today is today. Memories are chimeras. They have no claim on you. Begin life afresh at this moment’. Such advice sounds wonderful, and many who have listened to it have been renewed by this sane approach.

Doubtless one would have to keep this attitude of mind deliberately, for memories have a way of suddenly appearing and confronting us. Some gesture, some tone of voice, some unbidden association will leap into mind without warning. Then, again, we must refuse the past. In a sense memory rejection is a matter of faith. Indeed it must almost be a religion.

Others have found a wonderful release in coming to terms with their past. In one therapy they are urged to take responsibility for every decision they have made in life, and to lay none of that accountability on to others. This, too, has provided great relief and, as the reality therapy mentioned above, it needs be stabilized into a persistent attitude, or one will again begin blaming others for the hurtful things of the past.

MEMORY AND HUMAN GUILT

Given the value of many of these treatments, we are still faced with the fact of being guilty persons. That guilt takes two forms—roughly speaking. The first is that we have a personal guilt for not being the kind of persons we ought to be. We believe that had we tried we could have done better. We have just not done better, and, for some reason or other, we feel *guilty about the failure to be truly good*. Again, we know we have done wrong deeds, or failed to do right deeds, so that we have the objective guilts of these things. Some people feel their guilts very deeply, even to coming into states of morbidity. In modern language we would say they can even be driven into neurotic and psychotic states by such guilts. The

guilt of not being wholly good, and the guilt of failures combine to produce terrible states in human beings. We all find—from time to time—that we are spending much, if not most, of our lives trying to prove, justify, and vindicate ourselves as persons. By nature of the case we cannot succeed, and so life becomes very painful. Oh! If only we could erase the past, and be free of our failures!

Some therapists seek to heal men and women of guilt. They suggest that we are our worst enemies, our most powerful and hurtful accusers. They suggest that our guilt is purely subjective, and is not objective. They explain that laws are not of permanent nature, i.e.—as we sometimes say—ontological. They are not of the essence of things—as-they—really—are. They are temporary expedients to keep some kind of order in society, and since they are man-made we should not feel guilt when we break them. Whilst some folk become excessively legalistic—and so morbidly remorseful—yet generally human beings have a healthy regard for law, even if they do not always keep it! The conscience is an existing factor too powerful to be subdued, and too dangerous to be tinkered with.

Other well-meaning therapists suggest we forgive ourselves. ‘You are your worst enemy’, they say, ‘because you will not forgive yourself’. I have always found this a strange matter—the idea of our being self-forgivers. It seems to me that we have a divided self, one part able to forgive the other. Frankly I think we take the place of God in that one part as it pronounces forgiveness to the other part of its own being! I am certain that by nature of the case self-forgiveness is an utter impossibility. We can never be greater than our consciences, and we cannot successfully subdue our guilt of being failures, or our guilts of sins committed and failures. I suggest gently that we have underrated the matter of guilt, and fail to

understand its inbuilt dynamics.

RECALLING THE PAST TO DEFEAT IT

We must admire the persistence of the human race in its endeavour to bring healing to its members. It has been said that the medical industry is the giant of all industries, far outweighing others. It has also been said that it is a self-perpetuating and self-enlarging profession. Doubtless this is true for fear of illness and death are strong contributing causes to the incessant interest people have in their illnesses. Doubtless, also, man's drive for perfection, his endeavours to keep himself tidy and trim, witnesses to what we might call his existential guilt, i.e. his dislike of being imperfect in a functional world. No matter: man is about healing himself almost all of the time.

Some hold the idea that if we can but face our past, recalling the memories which cause us unease, and confront them—so to speak—then we will be free of them. Some analysts insist that we bury many of our memories as deeply as possible so that they will not confront us. This could well be true. In this case—say analysts—we must dig out these memories and bring them into the light of day and sensible human scrutiny and be finished with them. There may be many cases where this has worked, and some relief has come to patients. We would have to agree that some memories are so painful that disinterring them would be a difficult task. Perhaps we need to do more research on whether this is really a good thing, and whether or not it might actually increase our sense of guilt and failure as we—so to speak—relive former

experiences. Is it possible that their interment is a functional self-protective device of some value?

The question for us is whether such a practice is essentially Christian in nature, i.e. whether this is a Biblical practice, i.e. does it accord with the Gospel? For those who are not Christians—whether therapist or patient or both—the question of a practice being Biblical or not does not arise. We only address ourselves to this question as Christians. Even then we are not in a position to reject the good fruits of so-called secular research. Christians are happy to be healed through medical practice which does not call itself 'Christian'. Like-wise they are free to use the insights of any therapy provided it does not deny the truth of God.

Even so we have to ask what guarantee we have that the past—once recalled—will necessarily be dealt with, and in particular the matter of its guilt. In order to discuss this we must refer to the matter of accountability. That is, are we accountable for all decisions which we have made, be they wise or unwise, good or evil? The answer must surely be, 'Yes!'. Whilst we admit that parental upbringing, our cultural education, elements of heredity, and the matter of circum-stances may well have conditioned us towards certain decisions, yet we are morally responsible for those decisions. If we are not, then it means that a human being is close to being 'a chip on the ocean', i.e. tossed about vagrantly by the elements we have just mentioned. Of course we seek to off-load our responsibility and accountability on others, but by nature of the case we cannot be successful. Our own consciences will not let us off *that* hook!

If then we pursue the matter of memory recall, or dig about to expose past experiences, we might in fact increase our *sense* of guilt. We cannot—of course—increase our guilt, nor for

that matter decrease it. It remains objectively real whether we sense it deeply or not. Whatever the value of depth-psychology, the recalling of the past can only confront us afresh with our guilt.

FAULTY COMPASSION FOR THE ILL-TREATED

Some therapists in their very human compassion allow their love to flow around people who have been badly shocked and wounded in the past. They look upon them as the victims of wrong parental upbringing, the faults that come with heredity, the cruel circumstances that come upon humanity, and the adverse environments in which some have had to live. When they communicate their compassion and sympathy they help the injured person to off-load his or her guilts on to these adverse elements. They take away the very heart of responsibility for choices, and accountability in regard to them. Hence they build up a wall which will hold the (so-called) victim to his (or her) hurts, wounds and freak happenings. If the person does not take some responsibility for reactions to these elements, then escape from them is impossible.

It is undoubted that some children—and for that matter adults also—have been faced from time to time with terrible experiences. Even so—no matter how shocking the event—it is the reaction to the happening which can destroy the person affected. If anger, self-pity, and hatred result, then the person is bound by these in unbreakable bonds. If the person responds with love, forgiveness, and even concern for the one who has perpetrated the evil, then liberation results. For the former the recall of hurtful events renews the anger and self-pity; for the

latter it is not a hurtful matter. That one has discovered—and used—the depths of God's great ocean of love.

ONLY DIVINE POWER DEFEATS MAN'S GUILTY MEMORIES

Man's guilt is primarily objective. If he has raped, thieved, stolen, or murdered, then he is guilty of the act he has committed. If he has done nothing wrong then he is not guilty. We have seen that some human beings have a morbid sense of guilt, and others harden themselves against any sense of guilt—that sense of guilt is no true gauge of human guilt. No one in this world can dissolve man's guilt. The Hebrew never thought of sin without thinking of 'the guilt of sin'. Nor would he separate the two. He knew that sin is a powerful displacement factor in man, and with it also is that existential guilt we mentioned earlier in our essay, i.e. the guilt of not being truly ourselves in relation to God and His true creation.

Man cannot recall his sins for he has done them. He cannot erase them for that is impossible. In spite of all his efforts he cannot have 'a good self-image' for he has fallen short of the full image of God in which he was created. He needs a miracle (i) to erase his guilt of sins, and (ii) to restore to him the sense of being fully a human being.

When we say God's power can erase guilt of sin, and restore man to confident joyous living, then we must not think of God as having great reservoirs of power, so that by merely taking thought he can banish guilt of sin and human existential guilt. Something better and other than this must happen. That something—or someone—was, and is, Jesus Christ. How then does God erase guilt and drain human memories of

their accusing and painful content? How does He halt the process of guilt triggering off sin, sin compounding guilt, and both enlarging human displacement, dislocation, and hopelessness? How is the burden of guilt, the shame of moral pollution, and the sickening reality of human failure lifted from human beings? The answer is, 'By Christ'.

**GOD CHANGES THE PAST,
AND SO TRANSFORMS THE FUTURE**

We say simply—and with reverence—there is no 'fiat forgiveness' with God. That is God cannot just *declare* man is forgiven and justified. We may think God has such power, but in one sense He does not. To declare our forgiveness and justification over the top of all human sin and law-breaking is to make His law a fool, His precepts unholy, and is to reduce all morality to nothing, and the structure of the moral universe to be of no point. God cannot do that! What then can He do?

The answer lies in Romans 8:1–3:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *for sin*, he *condemned sin* in the flesh.

What does 'for sin' mean? It means 'in regard to sin', 'concerning sin', 'relating to the matter of sin'. It cannot mean 'on behalf of sin' for it was on behalf of man. 'Condemned sin' means 'judged sin', i.e. brought it to judgement and executed the judgement. This God did 'in the flesh', i.e. in Christ's

flesh—his body as it hung on the Cross. God held court, brought sin to trial, and finished its guilt and its power. It is of this fact that the church of Christ has sung over nearly 2000 years.

Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.*

There are other New Testament statements all of which are rooted in the prophecies of the Old Testament. Paul says, 'He [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin for us'. He says further, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree"'. This is close to Isaiah's cry, 'He...was numbered with the transgressors'. Yet again Paul states that God set him forth as a propitiation by his blood. Leviticus 17:11 says, 'The life of the flesh is in the blood'. It also says, 'I [God] have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life'. Curse and guilt—especially of breaking God's law—are linked with the idea of propitiation, for that is the only acceptable offering in God's eyes for the violation done to His peerless holiness by man's sin. The conscience demands no less propitiation than does God, and will let no man off its hook until it sees pure propitiation done, i.e. a living holy offering such as is acceptable to God.

The Apostle John also speaks of propitiation, saying that God's love is shown primarily and wholly in this offering, for 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins'. Peter adds, 'You know that you were ransomed...with the precious

* Rock of Ages by Augustus M. Toplady, 1740–1778

blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot'. The writer of the book of the Revelation speaks of Christ as 'him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood'.

What then does all this add up to?

THE UTTER DEFEAT OF SIN: THE CLEANSING OF OUR PAST

That which happened on the Cross, and which was confirmed, sealed, and made dynamic by the resurrection has changed the course of history. The author of Hebrews says, 'When he had made purification for sins...'. He is saying that on the Cross Christ removed the pollution of man—that which David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah call 'the guilt of sin' (Ps. 32:5; Isa. 6:7; Jer. 33:8). Paul is told, 'Arise, be baptized, washing away your sins', and later tells the Corinthians, 'You were washed, you were sanctified...'. The writer of Hebrews states, '...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, *purify your conscience from dead works* to serve the living God'. *Dead works* are man's sins. Thus man is wholly purified. The writer of Hebrews goes on to exhort his readers, '...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water', which approximates to Peter's 'an appeal to God for a clear conscience', and 'Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth...', i.e. by believing the Gospel.

Forgiveness and cleansing of sins are both the one action of God. In Acts 15:9 Peter claims that the Gentiles who believe

on Christ are now a pure people for 'he [God]...cleansed their hearts by faith'. This whole matter of cleansing is to us, perhaps, the most important thing of all. It means that through the Cross we have had all our sins utterly purified. If this is so then *our sins no longer have any kind of hold over us. We are wholly purified from them.*

Is this, then, not too good to be true? God's promise to His people through the prophet Isaiah was:

Come now, let us reason together,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

Isaiah is saying, 'Your very sins themselves shall be utterly purified until they are in no way evil'. This being so, then the sins of our past cannot come to accuse us, for they are pure! This comports with God's promise through Ezekiel that 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you...and I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses' (Ezek. 36:25, 29).

All of this must mean that on the Cross when Christ was made 'to be sin for us' that he took all our impurity, the guilt of evil, the moral pollution of our beings and our actions, and utterly purified us, as by some holy detergent. No sin from the past can ever come against us for we are pure by the death of the Cross and the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 4:25; I Pet. 3:21). The blood of Christ has purified our consciences from dead works. No one ever need visit our memories to disinter them, and no one should ever seek to recycle them through some technique they have for purifying the past, for it has

been purified and we have been eased from frightening memory.

GOD'S HOLY AMNESIA

The writer of Hebrews often refers to the passage of Jeremiah 31:31–34, the passage to which Jesus referred at the Last Supper on the night of his betrayal when he said, 'This is my blood of the new covenant [*or*, the new covenant in my blood] which is poured out for many for the remission [forgiveness] of sins'. The passage is as follows:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for *I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*

God says, 'I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more'. We can call this 'the Divine forgetfulness', i.e. 'holy amnesia', but more correctly we should call it 'the Divine non-remembering'. *God refuses to remember our sins!* If then God refuses to remember our sins, why should we choose remember them? We would have to choose to do so,

since He has told us He does not remember them. What, then, may we make of all this?

NO SINS TO REMEMBER

Of course we have sinned. Also we sin, and will yet sin. Are we simply doing some 'positive thinking' about the matter? Are we saying, 'If I choose to say my sins are banished forever—along with their guilt—then they will respond to my mental banishment of them and be gone'? Not a bit of it! Our consciences would soon bring us back to our senses, and our sins. Conscience never lets anyone off the hook. What then are we saying? We are saying that God—through Christ—has so purged our sins, that they have been worked out to exhaustion and extinction, and all their power of guilt, penalty and pollution has been erased. In other words there are—effectively—no sins to remember! God has not simply ignored our sins. He has destroyed them, forever! They are as if they never were, which is really the technical meaning of justification.

Of course—from time to time—we will remember the sins we once did, but we must not make them back into substantial things. God has denuded them of substance, of guilt, power and pollution. If they come to us in memory, then in faith in the Cross we should say, 'Whilst you represent the sins I committed, you have no substance. God has emptied you, purified you, and taken away the guilt which accompanied you. You are wraiths, ghosts of the past come back to haunt me via the accusations of Satan and his hosts, but you have no substance. I refuse to let you have substance. Begone!'

This means, then, that God has gone through our data bank

of memory and has set it right, taking away sin's accusation, thus settling the memory in the tranquillity of purity.

THE APPLICATORY POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paul told the Corinthians that many of them had been idolators, adulterers, homosexuals, alcoholics, greedy, thieves and robbers and adds, 'But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified', adding, 'in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and *in the Spirit of our God*' (I Cor. 6:9–11). By this he means that Christ has effected purification, sanctification, and justification in his death and resurrection, but it is the Holy Spirit who has applied the work of the Cross to the mind, heart, soul, and spirit of believing man. In another place Paul said, 'For *the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus* has set me free from the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2). It has been said by some—in pictorial language—'Christ shed his blood, and the Spirit applies it', which is a way of saying that apart from the Holy Spirit the great work of the Atonement lies unapplied in man's life.

In other words man cannot know effectively the cleansing from his sins apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. This is confirmed in many passages of the New Testament (such as Acts 10:36–44 with 11:18; II Cor. 3:6, 17; Gal. 4:4–6).

KNOWING CONTINUOUSLY THE CLEANSING OF MEMORIES BY FAITH AND THE SPIRIT

We should again emphasize that God has once for all cleansed

our sins, and not just our memories. We have a cleansed memory because our sins have been cleansed. This will continue to be so whether we *feel* it or not. Every day we have to live by faith in the grace of God. That grace of God is always prior to our faith in Him and His work. We certainly have to walk by faith, for sight is not yet present. When we walk in the Spirit and are led by him, then we live in operative faith (Rom. 8:14, Gal. 5:16–26). We go on being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and so go on by faith believing in the effective work of the Cross. We do not submit ourselves to anyone to be dealt with in regard to our memories.

What we must see is that faith does not keep our memories cleansed, but keep appropriating the fact that they have been—once for all—cleansed. The Spirit keeps this reality alive and fresh to us. This then is the daily practical way of being free from the domination of past memories.

ASSOCIATIVE AND CONSEQUENT ELEMENTS OF MEMORIES

We are so constituted that our memories are linked with certain elements such as sight, sound, feel, smell, and numerous similar things. A memory will flash back to us, unbidden. We may be confronted with the memory before—so to speak—we can be on guard. What was formerly associated with the event that we now remember, such as pain, hurt, anger, disappointment, and broken pride, may now appear to have an immediate impact and reaction in the recipient. Even so—after the first impact—faith must be brought to bear, and the impact neutralized. Past sins, failures and memories need not be accusing reminders of our sinfulness, but powerful reminders of His

grace and love which has covered them! In this case—and with this mind on the matter—we can profit by reminders, rather than be cast down by them.

Some people—in what appears to me to be a last-ditch stand against the grace of forgiveness and cleansing—speak of the consequences of sin. We must recognize that consequences of sin do occur, and some of them are terrible. Rape, murder, and slander—to name some of the more dramatic sins—will inevitably bring consequences. The consequences we must leave in God's hands. He works all things together for good for those who love Him, and whilst many of the things are not in themselves good, He brings good out of them. There we must leave the matter. Of course where we can make restitution and compensation we ought to do so, but to cling to our sins because they had bad consequences is only as matter of anger and of devilish pride, for it rejects the grace available to the person responsible for the consequences.

This also brings us to another matter, the pride of people in rejecting God's utter release from the past.

CALCULATED FORGETFULNESS OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS

There are two ways of saving human pride in achievement, particularly in regard to God's grace which has thoroughly cleansed sins and their memories. By 'saving human pride' we mean that grace seems to say, 'You, of yourself can do nothing about your sins, their guilt, and their harmful memories, for only grace can do that'. This, of course, is true, but grace does not demean man. It redeems him, and gives a genuine choice of will. It is not really humiliating.

What then are two ways to save human pride from the so-called 'humiliation of grace'? The first way is simply to reject God's act of the Atonement which kills the guilty dynamic of sins and memories. The second is to receive the gift of forgive-ness and cleansing by grace, and then—later—to deliberately forget God's act of grace. There is a sense in which God's love obligates us to obedience (John 14:15; II Cor. 5:14) so that when we wish to disobey and go our own way we must deliberately forget God's love, especially as it is shown in, and by, His forgiveness. In Revelation 2:1–7 Christ rebukes the church at Ephesus for deliberately forsaking its first love, i.e. love which came through forgiveness of sins.

A powerful example of deliberate forgetfulness is found in II Peter 1:3–9. At the end of this passage in which the author exhorts his readers to add one spiritual and moral virtue to another until all add up to love, he says:

*For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and *has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.**

The verb *to forget*, here, is a verb indicating intentional and deliberate forgetting. One commentary explains it as 'contracted forgetfulness', 'wilful and culpable obliviousness' (*Commentary on the Whole Bible* by Jamison, Fausset, and Brown, Oliphants, London, 1961, p. 1487). To put it quaintly, 'If we keep remembering to forget that we were purified for our old sins, then we will save our pride, but we pay the price of spiritual vitality and inner tranquillity'. We can surely go our own way, but God's forgiveness will keep confronting us.

Related to the once-for-all nature of cleansing the writer of Hebrews has an excellent illustration. Referring to the Old

Testament sacrifices he says, ‘If the worshippers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin. But in these sacrifices *there is a reminder of sin* year after year’ (10:2–3). Against this Old Testament pattern and principle he opposes the New Testament pattern and principle: ‘...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’, and, ‘For by *a single offering* he has perfected *for all time* those who are sanctified’ (10:10, 14). That is why he can say ‘with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience’, which could also be translated, ‘from a consciousness of evil’.

We see, then, the once-for-all nature of cleansing and forgiveness. Everything has been dealt with by God at the Cross and we must-by faith-leave it there! We must not seek to disinter the past or regurgitate its elements. We must not seek to recycle our worms-so to speak!

WHY PEOPLE WANT TO GO BACK TO THE PAST

The obvious primary reason is that some do not know that the evil of their past has been dealt with. To these we must speak the good tidings of liberation. The second reason we have seen above-they do not wish to be obligated to obedience by the love shown in forgiveness. A third reason is that pride cannot accept that grace has completed the work of healing our past in the one decisive act of the Atonement. We still want to have some part in it. A fourth-and quite powerful reason-is one which relates to the third, namely that we think our past too difficult a thing to have been dealt with decisively by the Atonement. In other words we think our experiences of the

past are so special and so vast as to be beyond the scope, capacity, and power of the Cross and resurrection!

Nor is this all. The greatest difficulty lies in the self-pity and anger element, where the subject believes that he (or she) has been badly done by, i.e. that he is the victim of such things as heredity, environment, parental upbringing and circumstances-to say nothing of the cruelty and selfishness of *other* people. Some who seek to help such people are often persons of great sympathy and compassion, but beneath it all the sympathy and compassion may be, in fact, for themselves! They are saying-in effect-‘I feel this situation deeply, because were I in it, then I would view it in such-and-such a light’, i.e. would have anger and self-pity.

Some people genuinely believe that God has not dealt with the past-forever. They can believe that Christ has borne their sins in his body on the tree, but not that he has ‘borne their griefs and carried their sorrows’. Nor do they believe, ‘...with his stripes we are [already] healed’. If they did, they would allow no one to draw them out regarding the past, nor let their sins and sorrows be recycled.

PRIESTS OR PROCLAIMERS?

Without doubt the Christian church is a priesthood, but then it is a corporate priesthood. It shares in Christ’s priesthood, and indeed expresses it to the world, but does not comprise of an aggregate of priests. As a corporate priesthood it also proclaims. It tells ‘the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (I Pet. 2:9). The church is-as the Reformers taught us-‘the priesthood of *all*

believers', which, however does not equal 'the priesthood of every believer'. As Christ's Body—the church—we are the expression of Christ's priesthood. It is his sacrifice we proclaim, but we do not mediate it.

In John 20:19–23 and Luke 24:36–49 we have two descriptions of the one event. In the first account Jesus appears to say that whoever's sins the apostles remit (forgive), they will be remitted, and whoever's sins they retain they will be retained. In the second account this is explained by the fact that repentance and remission (forgiveness) of sins are to be pro-claimed to every nation. The proclamation of forgiveness is not magisterial but ministerial. Men hearing the Gospel will believe and receive remission of sins, and others will refuse to believe and—so—have their sins retained.

The drive in us to be mediators and priests (or priestesses) is a very strong one. However we need to be most careful. Our task is to proclaim God's Word, and thereby His nature, His Creatorhood, and His Redeemerhood. His Word is inseparable from Him. To detach His Word from Him, or to seek to mediate grace from Him, is not our task. His Word and Spirit will do the work directly. Because of our innate bias to self-proving and self-justification we cannot deal objectively and wisely with the problems of the human heart. The Puritans used to say, 'Never meddle with the human heart!'. God's Word can deal with these problems, for God is never apart from His Word so we are really saying, 'God will deal with these problems', or, 'God's Word will speak to the needy heart'. Whilst in one sense we are agents of the Word, we are not the Speaker, nor are we direct agents of its action. Paul was very careful how he spoke that Word saying that he did not wish to rob it of its power by human eloquence and wisdom, for he wanted men's faith not to stand in the wisdom

of men but in the power of God (I Cor. 1:17, 2:1–5).

It is probably because—in many cases—we do not believe in the power of God's Word that we want to go beyond the Word, or dress it up, and argue for the truth of it. We even want to mediate the Word by our own principles and rituals, in which we are taking people one remove from the Word and so from God. This is why we often think we have a right—and indeed a duty—to bring people to a recall of their sins, and seek to alleviate the pain of them, or ameliorate the guilt. This is not man's province, but that of God—and of Him only. There is only one Mediator between man and God—the man Christ Jesus. We must not think of God as the 'far-off-God' as though without us He would not 'minister to a mind diseased'. That was Macbeth's question of the court doctor:

*Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart? (Macbeth V iii 40–45)*

Sometimes we have to fight even ourselves so that our human compassion and sympathy may not come between another person and God's work with him or her.

WHAT, THEN, OF THE PAST: DO WE HAVE NO PAST?

We surely do have a past. Without it we would be lifeless. We would have no continuity from that past—in this present—to the future. We would thus have no hope, and in this sense we would be dehumanized. Are we then seeking to evade the sins, faults, and failures of the past and concentrate only on the

‘good things’? It would be difficult for us to classify the ‘good things’, especially if we understood their value, and the Christian doctrine of growth and maturity through suffering. No, all things both–good and bad–constitute our past, and are substantial in our present, and are linked with our future.

It is axiomatic that a man can learn from his past. He needs experiences—including failures—to learn how to live this life. James and Paul both say that tribulation produces character, steadfastness and maturity, especially when trials and tests are received positively. We need the past—whatever it may have been—for without it nothing makes sense. At the same time we need that past purged from all its harmful elements. Only then will we not be victims of our own pasts.

One of the great themes of the New Testament is the matter of repentance. Meaning literally ‘a change of mind, or heart, or understanding’—for all three things are really the one—we need repentance before forgiveness. Although very little is said about confession in the New Testament we need to confess our sins. This does not mean we know what they are—all of them—but it is our (changed) attitudes to these sins that matters. If we acknowledge our sins in general, and what sins we remember in particular, then forgiveness can apply. As many sins as we refuse to acknowledge are sins, for this many we will not know forgiveness. Some have sought to receive forgiveness without repentance, hence they blame those sins on others, and thus deny themselves the wholesome forgiveness of them. Recently I heard of a man who left his wife for an adulterous relationship. He then blamed her for driving him away, and so for his becoming an adulterer! Only a desperate person would stoop to such casuistry. What is more he said she would suffer for the things he had done, and not he, seeing she forced his departure.

Anyone trying to help another caught in his (or her) past should avoid leading that one into self–pity or the placing of blame on others, however much the person may have suffered at the hands of those others. He can only help a person out of the tragedy of his past by pointing to the Atonement and the healing work of the Cross, and the presence and power of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The purging that then takes place is realistic and lasts forever. Of course Christians need to be encouraged by the reading and proclamation of the Word—time and again—to have fresh understandings of grace, forgiveness, and justification. This is—as we have said—the art of living in Christian freedom.

We conclude then that we—each of us—have a past. The Christian’s past has been purified. His memory data bank—so to speak—has been righted from its old sinful bias and deceit, so that it is as a new mind. The good things of the past are retained, so that in the present the believer may live unimpeded by the wrong things of the past.

THE JOY OF A PURE MIND AND HEART

Paul said, ‘To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted’ (Titus 1:15). Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’. If then we do not have pure hearts and minds, we are open to the accusations and powers of evil. The new birth—or as it is also known regeneration—changes a person from a fallen human being to being a new creation (II Cor. 5:17 cf. John 3:3–6; Gal. 6:15; James 1:18; I Pet. 1:23). This is the state of having been given a new heart (Ezek. 36:24–28), i.e. the pure heart.

If the past has not been purified, then nothing is presently pure. Christians often test out whether they have the new heart or otherwise—quite an unwise action. They say, ‘Impure thoughts come into my mind. I have a mind like a sewer’, and such statements. No one is proof against the entrance of certain thoughts, but every believer can refuse those thoughts as being inconsistent with his new heart, and by not giving them a place to stay, banish them. As Luther is reported to have said, ‘You cannot stop birds flying over your head but you can refuse to let them nest in your hair!’. We are constantly urged to live in a continuing process of the renewing of the very spirits of our minds, by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10).

Whilst it is true that we will never be free of temptation whilst we are in this body with its five senses, and a world in which the powers of darkness work as much harm as they can by deceit, threat, and seduction, yet it is a matter of great power that our consciences have been purified from dead works to serve the living God. We can have great joy and peace, and love and live continually in them. The pure—i.e. the purified—in heart are blessed. It can be a wonderful life, whatever suffering may come our way. We can know the freshness of purity and the tranquillity of God’s *shalom*, i.e. His peace.

CONCLUSION:

OUR MEMORIES ARE PURIFIED AND HEALED

The sum of the matter is as follows:

(i) Christ has borne all our sins to extinction.

- (ii) His death and resurrection have effected purification of our sins from their pollution, power, and guilt.
- (iii) We need never look back to our sins and failures, but if ever we have occasion to, then we know they have no power to affect us in this present.
- (iv) We need no one to try to recycle our sins, nor to draw us back into the pain, anger, and self-pity that once our griefs, angers, and sorrows contained.
- (v) God does not remember our sins, so that we, too, must not do so. We must remember not to remember.
- (vi) Being given a new heart, we can now live a new life, which, although it will never be perfect in this world, does not have to be dogged by failures of the past, present, or the future.
- (vii) We must insist in living in the great grace of God by faith, in dependence upon the Father, upon Christ as Lord, and upon the Spirit who indwells us and enables us to live the new life.