



FAITH

Praying and believing

ON THE EARTH

O LORD SEND US PROSPERITY - *a gospel awry.*

To be doing alright is no bad thing for a Christian as long as we're sure what we mean by it. Mind you, it's more a matter of being than doing we are told these days. What we *are* comes first. Anyway, as we know full well, we have to *be* saved and set free, *be* justified by faith, before and *doing* of good works can have much real significance. 'Do gooders' are often enough a hindrance not a help if there's too much self-love and self-will around.

Jesus is our great example - "Learn of me", he says, and we need only turn the pages of the gospels to see over and over again the sort of person Jesus was when he 'went about among us doing good'. He teaches us by word and imagery as well as by his deeds - in stories, and by precepts and injunctions - so there is much to live up to.

To be 'doing alright' might well suggest, then, that we are having a good try, being decent folk as far as we can and at least aren't any worse than the people next door. We have our principles, and more or less Christian ones at that.

There's another way of looking at 'doing alright' all the same. It's the sort of thing we say about social-climbers and get-rich-quick people, with a wink on the side that suggests that means and methods are not always above board or of the best. Not far below the surface, in our tone of voice perhaps, there's maybe just a little hint of envy. 'Doing alright' here means getting all the best for yourself out of life and never

But we must look again at Jesus, and learn of him, as he said. Yes we *are* to ask in faith and can believe that we shall receive - but all asking is to be done in the *name* of Jesus - in the same Spirit in which he lived and died. He came to give his life as a ransom for many and died in utter penury, in agony on the Cross. Was this a success-story by our twentieth century standards? How many would say of him as he hung there, "O he's doing alright"?

But that in the last analysis is exactly what he *was* doing. He was fulfilling all righteousness, as he had said earlier at the time of his baptism - yielding up his life to the Father in atonement for our sins. It was more than alright, it was the most successful life ever to be believed. But the success and prosperity came through total self-loss, through the blessedness of giving. The 'prosperity gospel' means no less than this for the Christian too, so let us take care how we walk, in our comfy first world setting, and make sure that the gospel we witness to is not ours but Christ's.

mind your neighbour. Is *this* Christian? Hardly.

Sadly, nowadays, we are living in what some people call a post-Christian era. Christianity is felt by them to have had its day, with any life left in it ebbing rather meaninglessly away. Humanity is come of age and God is dead, they try to tell us. Great things have been promised us to take God's place, like peace and prosperity, with man (and of course woman too) in control, and nature kept firmly in place by technology. But the goods haven't been delivered. We are left after all with a void - no God, no Christ to redeem and save us, and all the nasty mess we find ourselves and the world to be in.

We Christians haven't helped all that much either. We're always a little behind the times anyway, and so for the most part are only just noticing what has been happening. Suddenly we discover that a whole host of 'isms' have been creeping into the Church unawares: materialism, consumerism, individualism, to name but a few. We've been tainted ourselves most probably but it's only when these things start getting out of hand that we begin to take fright and react.

How many blessings we must thank God for in the healing movement and in charismatic renewal. What a wonder that the gospel can reach millions through satellite television! But if it should be that the wrong gospel is sometimes being preached through means like these, then we must sit up and take note.

Now God certainly wants us to be 'doing alright', morally speaking, trying as best we can under the circumstances to lead a good life. But he certainly isn't likely to be well pleased if our one aim is to feather our own nest, look after number one, get all we can out of life merely for ourself. If this were to become a priority for the majority of so-called Christians, then we'd have much to fear.

There are some, all the same, who preach a gospel perilously near to this. It's no gospel at all of course but a perversion. Yes, God *is* concerned for our well-being. He made us in the first place, then came

down to redeem and save us by dying on the Cross, so there's no doubt about it at all. This being so, and if we believe in him and trust him, are there any limits to what he will do for us? Can the omnipotent God say no?

Ah yes, but God resists the proud, and reserves his grace for the humble, and that's where the crunch comes. One of the subtlest temptations for the born-again Christian, for believers who know themselves to be justified by faith and saved by grace, healed and restored, filled with the Spirit . . . is plainly and simply *PRIDE*, as it is for every professed follower of Christ, let alone every human being. It is an easy step from: "God can do everything and *wants* to do everything for me", to saying that God will and must. Then we take the place of God in the running of our lives, and in our arrogance persuade others that we can do the same for them, never mind who gets hurt on the way.

It's all very subtle, but it's an inverse of the gospel. Mind you, we can become quite adept at substantiating these ideas by scripture. Look at the splendid quote in Psalm 118, verse 25:

O Lord save us we pray:
O LORD SEND US PROSPERITY!

and the versions, note, are all translated in basically the same way. Thus we can freely, and with a good conscience, ask God to make us prosperous and successful - and we *know* he will. He does what we ask since we have *FAITH*, so it's alright.

There's no need to spell out the full consequences of this attitude when it's carried to extremes. Many of us have seen some of them already in divided churches and congregations, and in the hurt of those who wonder where their faith was lacking since they have not been visibly healed, or since life is in no sense a success, by human standards, despite the prayer.