# Expounding/Teaching the Torah

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## The Issues (1)

All scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the person who belongs to God may be equipped, thoroughly equipped for every good deed.” (2 Tim 3:16-17)

While this declaration can be extended in its application so that it covers the New Testament, in itself it is referring to the First Testament. Yet from the worship and life of churches in the West, you would never have realized that they accepted this. They may or may not read bits of the First Testament in church, but their preachers are unlikely to preach from it and their people are unlikely to read it.

From the beginning the New Testament was designed to be a supplement to the First Testament that took the First Testament for granted. It was not designed to be a balanced account of Christian faith. So the perspective of the New Testament in isolation from the First Testament is bound to be skewed. And this is reflected in the skewed nature of Christians’ usual perspective on Christian faith, based as it is merely on a reading of the New Testament, and a selective one at that, and a reading heavily influenced by post-biblical tradition at that.

Do not think that I came to put down the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to put down but to fill out. (Mt 5:17)

Conventionally, Jesus “fulfilled” the Law and the Prophets. That English verb has a fairly clear and precise meaning. We fulfill our undertakings by doing what we say; we fulfill people’s hopes or fears by doing what they long for or worry about. Jesus indeed fulfilled divine commitments and human hopes that are expressed in the Torah as well as in the Prophets. Yet this is not the point he goes on to elaborate in the context in Mt 5, nor do the Gospels anywhere else give specific examples of his fulfilling the Torah in this sense. He does also fulfill the commands in the Torah (though he sometimes gets into trouble for sitting fast and loose to these), and in Mt 5 he goes on to emphasize the importance of a detailed obedience to the Torah. Yet to understand this as constituting his “fulfilling” the Torah does involve stretching the meaning of the verb. But further, the verb translated “fulfill” (*plēroō*)does not have as precise a meaning as that English word; it is the ordinary word meaning “fill.” Thus, when Jesus “fulfills” prophecies, commonly he does not merely do what the prophet encouraged people to expect; he “fills” the prophecies, fills them up or fills them out, overfills them. With regard to the Torah, too, it makes sense to think of him “filling” it, filling it up and filling it out, as much as fulfilling it. That would be a good description if what he goes on to do in Mt 5.

He did not come to abolish, destroy, or pull down the Torah. You would never have thought so from the way Christians relate to the Torah, and to the Prophets and the Writings. As we ignore them in connection with our theology, so we ignore them in connection with our lives. There they are, full of vision about marriage and family and community, about city and nation and state, and we ignore them. There they are, full of practical policy ideas about how to put flesh on the bones of their vision for these different realms, and we ignore them. Here we are, in a terrible mess about the way we organize marriage, family, and local community, about the way we organize city life and national life, and we ignore them. It is not surprising that the secular world does so. It is grievous that the church does so.

God’s vision was for Abraham and Sarah’s family and offspring to become a blessing, an embodiment of what a nation looked like when it enjoyed God blessing and a stimulus to any nation to pray for that blessing for itself. It was designed to be a working model of what it meant to be a people. God was realistic about the fact that the people of God remained one characterized by hardness of heart, by stubborn attitudes, by closed minds, and made allowance for that, but God also held a vision before it and sought to win it to commitment, with the prospect of the blessing that would issue from following God. It was designed to be an alternative community. In practice the church is often simply an alternative version of the same old godless community, an embodiment of that community with nominal reference to God tacked on.

I sometimes get in trouble with students for underestimating the significance of the new teaching that Jesus brought, because I don’t think Jesus brought much by way of new teaching. The reason was that Israel did not need new teaching. It had perfectly good teaching already (Jeremiah had promised it a new covenant that involved the Torah being written into its attitudes; he did not promise it a new Torah). What it needed was someone who could turn it into an embodiment of this teaching. It needed someone to do something, not to teach something. That was what Jesus came to do. But if readers of this present volume should join in my students’ critique and reckon that Jesus expects higher standards of the church from the ones God expected of Israel, I do not mind that critique if the readers then set about leading the church so that it becomes an embodiment of those standards.

### Guidelines from the New Testament

1. The law (as we call it) was never designed to be a means of salvation. It was a guide to the kind of life God expected of people who belonged to him. Romans 4. Exodus 19. Deuteronomy.
2. Christians are not obliged to keep the law, whether they are Jews or not, because the relationship between God and his people is set on a new footing after Jesus – particularly as regards the element in the law that was designed to keep the Jews distinctive. Acts 10 – 11.
3. The New Testament sometimes uses the Torah as a guide to proper behavior. Classic instances: Acts 15; Romans 12:17-21
4. Jesus offers two clues to going about using it. First, ask how any part of the teaching of the Torah expresses love for God or love for one’s neighbor. To do so will involve understanding how its teaching makes allowance for features of the social context. E.g., food offered to idols.
5. Second, ask how far any part of the teaching of the Torah is declaring how things were from the beginning and how far it is making allowance for human hardness of heart or stubbornness. (The NT does the same – notably over slavery.)

### Tithing

From Genesis to Malachi and on into the New Testament tithing is a norm, but its significance is understood in a number of different ways. The practice hardly changes, but its aim and meaning are worked out anew in different contexts and connections. The implication would be that tithing remains a norm today, but that we may need to discern afresh what God wants to do through tithing.

Tithing starts in Gen 14 (translations vary over whether they use the word “tithe” or the word “tenth” for *ma‘ăśēr*). Abram has gone off on that risky expedition to fight with forces that have taken Lot as a prisoner-of-war. He has returned not only with Lot but also with much plunder. Some of Abram’s allies come to see him on his return, and one of them is the king of Salem, Melchizedek, who is also “priest of God Most High.” He blesses Abram, and Abram gives him a tenth of his plunder. Genesis has not reported any specific divine instruction about tithing; like sacrifice in Gen 4 and the leaving of the ground fallow in the sabbath year, tithing is not a special revelation from God but a human instinct or a part of general revelation. Special revelation comes in due course in the way God harnesses these natural human instincts and instructs people to express them. Abram knows that tithing is a human thing to do, as faithfulness, love, justice, worship, and prayer are human things to do. People are made that way. He can assume that this king of Salem understands this, too. When God gives you something, you recognize where it came from by giving some of it back to God.

Tithing next appears in the story of Jacob (Gen 28:10-22). Jacob is on his way out of the land of promise, on the run from the brother whom he has swindled of his rights as firstborn. Yhwh appears to him and promises to keep him safe and bring him back to the land, and in response Jacob promises to tithe whatever Yahweh gives him. Given the calculating nature of Jacob, grabber by name as well as by personality, it is tempting to read his commitment cynically: “if you are going to look after me and give me food and clothing and bring me back here in prosperity and peace, then you can be my God, and I will give you a tenth of all that you give me.” Tithing can be a means of indulging in our instinct to calculate, a means of being selfish.

Yhwh’s own first instruction about tithing (Lev 27:30-33) constitute a caveat about trying to evade the challenge of tithing. Tithing applies to produce and to animals, and the way you tithe animals is by giving up every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s staff. What happens if your best sheep happens to be the tenth? Can you substitute a less flourishing sheep for that one? No substitutions are allowed.

What happens to tithes? Numbers 18:21-32 gives one answer. Tithing is a means of seeing that the ministry is supported. Tithes go to the clan of Levi, whose task is to look after the services at the sanctuary. They have no land to work, so the tithe of the rest of the clans’ work and land goes to them. “Underlying all the ancient Near Eastern sources dealing with the tithe is the notion of a tax that is indispensable for the maintenance of the temple and its personnel.”

Deuteronomy also affirms that tithes go to the Levites (Deut 12:1-19) but adds a special provision for every third year (Deut 14:22-29; 26:12-13). The calendar is thus divided into seven-year periods in which there are two “regular” years, a “third” year, two more “regular” years, another “third” year, then the sabbath year, after which the cycle starts again. In the “third” year, the tithes are to benefit not only Levites but also immigrants, orphans, and widows, who are in the same position as Levites in having no land from which to gain their livelihood. (What are these needy groups supposed to do for the two intervening years? The way questions such as this arise with a number of the policies set forth in the Torah, not least the jubilee regulations, may show that these are once again more like God-given dreams than God-given policies. People have to work out how to realize the dream.)

The offerers themselves share in eating tithes (Deut 12:17-19; 14:22-29). In doing so they give concrete expression to their recognition that Yhwh owns the land and that it is Yhwh who has given them its produce. Eating it before Yhwh, they are enjoying the land as Yhwh intended. At the same time, they are subordinating themselves to Yhwh by going to the place Yhwh designates and by giving generously to their fellows, the Levites and the needy. They are embodying an awareness of the link between obedience and blessing. Indeed, “in bringing the tithe the offerers are actually enjoying the benefits which Yahweh had set before them.”

Joshua-Kings refers only once to tithes, with some solemnity. If you insist on having kings, Samuel warns, you will pay for it, literally (1 Sam 8:15-17). Like the word for “offering,” the word for tithe or tenth can have both a secular and a religious meaning; it can denote a tax. Kings will take a tithe of your grain and vines and sheep for their staff. Perhaps Samuel means they will appropriate the tithes that are due to the ministry and to the needy, or perhaps he means they will add a second tithe to the first, to pay for the cost of having a monarchic state. Either way it is an indication that tithing can be a means of the leadership oppressing ordinary people.

Unsurprisingly, there are indications in the First Testament that people often failed to tithe (e.g., Neh 13:10-12), but there is also a reminder that the practice of tithing can be a substitute for real commitment. Amos 4:4 implies that people were faithful in tithing as they were faithful in worship, but their giving was not matched by a commitment to faithfulness within the community. Some believers lived in fine homes, had good incomes, and enjoyed a cultured life, but they thus benefited from the fact that the way society worked made other believers much more poorly off (e.g. Amos 5:11-13; 6:4-6). The well-off could afford to tithe and still be well-off, and thus their tithing had become one of the ways they avoided God’s lordship of their lives.

Like Amos, Malachi also faults the people’s tithing practice. Heavy with irony, Mal 3:6-12 refers first to the consistency of Yhwh’s relationship with Israel over the centuries. Perhaps Yhwh implies that people have been accusing Yhwh of failing to keep consistent faithfulness; they are not convinced that Yhwh has been relating to them in love, and they cannot see Yhwh acting with the decisive authority that is supposed to be a divine characteristic (Mal 1:2; 2:17). I have not changed in the way I relate to you, Yhwh declares. The very fact that you continue in existence is an indication of that. Israel has not come to an end, despite a consistency in its character that both compares and contrasts with Yhwh’s. For generations (since the exile? since before the exile? since the beginnings of the people’s history?) they have been consistent in ignoring Yhwh’s expectations of them. Specifically, they have failed to bring their tithes and contributions (the second word may refer to the “tithe of the tithe” that the tithe-recipients themselves offered). Their practice fits with what we know or infer about other areas of Yhwh’s expectations. Sabbath years were not observed (cf. 2 Chr 36:21), debtors were not released after their six years of service (see Jer 34), and we have no record of the jubilee year ever being observed. No doubt people often experienced hardship as crops failed and/or the kings raised punitive taxes (and had more efficient means of collecting them than Yhwh employed), and it was hard to surrender so much to the temple.

Like Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi assumes that the worship of the sanctuary matters. None of these prophets were priests, but all assume that expressing a relationship with Yhwh through the priestly system is an important aspect of the community’s relationship with God. Failures in relationships with other members of the community earn Yhwh’s disfavor, and failures in attitudes to Yhwh do the same.

Like Haggai in his talk about hardship and the building of the temple, Malachi reverses the cause-effect link between hardship and failure to tithe. The latter causes the former, not vice versa. In failing to tithe, people have been “cheating” Yhwh (*qāba*‘). The rare verb uses the same root letters as the name Jacob (‘*āqab*), the ancestor whom Yhwh mentions here, and thus generates a paronomasia with the root behind the name. Even the swindler Jacob was honorable in paying tithes and offerings; at least, he promises to offer them (Gen 28:22), though we hear nothing of his doing so. But this people’s cheating means there is no food in Yhwh’s house, which is not a direct deprivation for Yhwh but is a failure that makes the whole life, ministry, and worship of the temple unviable. Even Jacob knew that paying tithes made sense; if God promises to give him so much, it is wise to pay a tithe back to hold God to that commitment.

Like Haggai, Malachi promises that keeping a commitment to the temple will make other things work out; withholding this commitment is actually short-sighted. Yhwh’s making things work out is not merely an other-worldly, eschatological, or spiritual matter. It relates to ordinary life. When Yhwh is involved, this becomes extraordinary life. The challenge to “test” (*bāḥan*)Yhwh is another irony. Testing God is usually an offence, it is the kind of thing that the “arrogant” do (Mal 3:15), or of course the doubting (Ps 95:9; also using *nāsâ*, Ps 106:14; Deut 6:16). “Go on, then, test me, if that is the kind of people you are” says Yhwh.

The process whereby the First Testament always assumes that people will tithe but keeps changing the way it sees the purpose of tithes invites the church to continue to tithe but to ask again what to do with tithes. There is no basis for saying that tithes must be paid to the church. Indeed, instead of using tithes to pay pastors and keep church buildings ambient, we might use them to offer nourishment, education, basic health care, and health education, for people in the Two-thirds World.

## Groupwork: Sabbath (20m)

Genesis 2:1-3

(Exodus 16:27-29)

Exodus 20:8-11; 23:12; 34:21

(Exodus 31:12-17; 35:1-3)

(Numbers 15:32-36)

(Numbers 28:9-10)

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Nehemiah 13:15-22

Isaiah 56:2-8; 58:13-14

Jeremiah 17:19-27

Amos 8:4-5

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Colossians 2:16

1. What would be the elements in a biblical theology and spirituality and ethic of the Sabbath?
2. Can you see or guess at the reasons why the significance of the Sabbath is spelled out in these different ways in the different passages?
3. Among the specific concerns of these biblical passages, are any especially significant in your context?
4. Does the Sabbath have another potential significance in your context, other than the ones that appear in the scriptural material?

## Plenary (20m)

## Break (20m)

## The Issues (2)

### The Sacrifices in Leviticus (Lev 1 – 7)

Why are there all these rules about sacrifices? Because worship easily goes wrong and assimilates to the culture? (e.g., rules about reading scripture in church?)

#### 1. The whole offering

Leviticus 1; 6:1-6 (‘*olah*, *kalil*)

All the animal goes up in smoke; God has all of it.

You are giving something wholly up to God

#### 2. The grain offering

Leviticus 2; 6:7‑16 (*minhah*)

Not an offering on its own but accompanying other offerings (bread to go with the meat!)

Shared by the offerer and God

#### 3. The sacrifice of well‑being (NRSV, CEB)/fellowship offering (TNIV)

Leviticus 3; 7:11‑34 (*zebah* *shelamim*)

Three different reasons for this offering:

a) Thanksgiving (i.e., to express gratitude to God for something)

b) Votive offering (i.e., to fulfill a vow which you made in praying for something that God has now granted)

c) Freewill offering (i.e., you just want to express your love for God)

Shared by the offerer and God

#### 4. The purification offering (CEB; traditionally “sin offering”)

Leviticus 4:1‑5:13; 6:17‑23 (*hatta’t*)

To gain purification with regard to some stain. This might come from a moral stain (e.g., through failing to testify in a legal case) or a ceremonial stain (e.g., through being in contact with a corpse).

#### 5. The compensation offering (CEB)/trespass offering (KJV; guilt offering in other translations)

Leviticus 5:14‑26; 7:1‑10; also Numbers 5:5‑8 (’*asham*)

To offer compensation for a wrongful act.

### The Decalogue (1)

In the twenty-first century, what might be characteristics of a life shaped by the First Testament? Here is a possible new Decalogue.

1. Praise God at dusk and at dawn
2. Relax and sleep for the time in between
3. Grow things to eat
4. Tithe what you grow
5. Keep out of department stores and shopping malls (beware the internet, too)
6. On Thursdays, pray laments for people who are suffering
7. On Fridays, think about the fact that you are going to die
8. On Saturdays, have a day’s rest (you can tend your garden if it’s not your regular work)
9. On Sundays, talk with your friends or family about Scripture
10. Three times a year, hold a week-long holiday with your friends or family and celebrate what God has done for us in nature and in delivering us

## Groups

1. How could our worship be more outward and more costly?
2. The Decalogue: how could we adapt it in light of the NT?

## Plenary

The Decalogue

1. To acknowledge as God only the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
2. To worship, serve, understand, and speak of God in accordance with Scripture
3. To attach God’s name only to that to which God’s name belongs
4. To balance work and rest in our lives
5. To seek peace with our neighbors even when they are our enemies
6. To honor our parents and our children
7. To give ourselves sexually only to our wives or husbands
8. To be generous with our possessions
9. To tell the truth
10. To be content with what we have

### Remembering: A Sermon on Deuteronomy 7:6-11

When Moses is about to give up the leadership of Israel, as the Old Testament tells the story, he preaches one last sermon. He has led them for a generation and they are now to pass on to a new stage of their life, and God has made it clear that this new stage and this seeing the fulfilment of God’s vision is to happen under a different leader. He can look on into the land where God’s vision is taking them, he knows what it looks like, but he will not walk in it with them. He is about to undertake a new journey of his own, the first time for the best part of his grown-up life that he will be journeying with God apart from them, and the mountain he is about to climb has some surprises in store for him.

So on the eve of his climbing his mountain, he preaches a sermon. It is a long one, this book Deuteronomy. I calculate that the actual sermon is about 25,000 words, which would take four hours to preach non-stop. When you preach your last sermon in circumstances like Moses’s, what do you say? What did the Deuteronomists (the anonymous religious visionaries who ghosted this sermon some centuries later, on the usual critical view) think Moses would have wanted people to remember? From all those words I take four motifs from 7:6-11.

First, remember that you are a holy people. In the Old Testament the word “holy” does not mean righteous and moral. It means special to God, different, awe-inspiring. You are a special, different, awe-inspiring people, says Moses. It is a position which belongs to Israel, and then which the church comes to share in, without replacing Israel. “You are a people holy to Yahweh your God”.

Being holy meant having nothing to do with the way the Canaanites were. After all, “Yahweh your God chose you out of all nations on earth to be his special possession”. They resembled the rooms in Buckingham Palace which you do not see when you go on the tour, the rooms which belong especially to the Queen. The Israelites had that specialness to Yahweh. They were to be different.

Israel never took any notice of this expectation, and we do not want to be different either. Forty years ago Christians were different: we did not go to the pub or the cinema or go dancing, for instance, or if we did, we knew we were breaking taboos. Now we are all indistinguishable from the world, and it is not obviously a step forward. Yet I do not really want Christians to start looking different in that kind of way.

So how should we be different? What is holiness? When you think about it, to call human beings holy is a kind of contradiction in terms. “Holy” is by definition what makes God and what distinguishes God from us. So what sense does it make to call us holy?

I wonder whether for us being holy means being supernaturally human. It means being human, but in a special way that is redolent of God, that is special, that is supernatural. The way Ann and I have to be holy is by coping with Ann’s illness. The way anyone else has to be holy will be different. But as I think of the Christians whom I know best, I think of them being human, but of there being something special, something supernatural about them in their humanness.

There is a British television programme called “How do they do that”? That is what I think of many of my Christian friends. How does he do that? How does she manage to be that kind of person? It is probably something they are unconscious of, or take for granted, but for other people it is what makes them special, what makes them holy.

I do not think much about the heroics of coping with a wife who is disabled, and I am always a bit astonished when someone else comments on the patience it needs or on some other aspects of how Ann and I handle Ann’s illness. I know that people find it is something through which God gets access to them, in some mysterious way. And that is true of aspects of who other people are, too. It is as we let the people we are be the people we are with God, that the supernatural appears through the human and the world has the opportunity to see that there is something different about us. That is something I would want to leave with people if I were going, like Moses.

But Moses is talking corporately. It is as the people of God that he reminds them they are holy. I want to encourage belief in the church as God’s holy people.

Each summer our seminary in England has a day to which we invite the vicars who are receiving curates from us, so that they can see something of the training from which their curates are coming. One year I was appalled at the paternalism that emerged in the way some of the vicars spoke of their congregations. It was important that the vicar and the curate decided on their line about policy issues before the church council discussed them, otherwise it would be confusing for the people, would it not?

Who do they think are the holy people of God? The clergy are simply some paid functionaries whose position puts them in greater spiritual danger than anyone else in the church. It is the church that is in holy orders, by virtue of our baptism. To put it in Deuteronomy’s terms, the declaration that God chose Israel comes before any talk of God’s choosing the king. The people were familiar with the idea that God chose David. The Deuteronomists dared to preface it with the declaration that the choice of David, like the choice of the priesthood, was subordinate to the choosing of the whole people.

And Moses is inviting his hearers to believe in the holiness of the actual Israel, the visible church if you like, the actual church which exists, the Church of England and the Methodist Connexion and the Baptist Union and the Korean Presbyterian Church and the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and the Coptic Orthodox Church. It is always tempting to re-define the church to mean the group we belong to, the bit of the church that we think is really alive. It is tempting to be cynical about the church which actually exists, as comes out in our jokes. When Moses says “you are a holy people”, he is talking about the Israel which actually exists. It is the visible church that is holy, and therefore is not to be dismissed or despaired of. Remember that you are a holy people.

Second, remember that you are loved. I reckon it is better, if you have the choice, to fall in love with one of your friends than to try to make a friend of your lover. Moses here implies that this was what God did. He uses two words for love. “It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that Yahweh cared for you and chose you”. “Cared for you”. “Set his affection on you”, the NIV has. “How did Yahweh come to have those feelings for you, come to be attached to you?”, asks Moses: it is a word that can describe people’s sexual feelings for each other. “Well it was not because there were so many of you”, he answers. This is just as well. When the Deuteronomists were writing this sermon, Israel’s heyday lay in the past, and it would be as well if the reason Yahweh was attached to them was not that there were so many of them, and this is as well for us, too.

Perhaps it is the ecclesiological equivalent of “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64?”. “When my hair is gone and I can’t stay up as late as I once did, when I’ve gone pear-shaped and cellulite, will you still love me?” “It was not things about how you looked that made me love you in the first place, fathead.” “So why did you love me?”

At this point if you’ve got Nora Ephron as your scriptwriter you say as Harry did to Sally, “I love that you get cold when it is 71 degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you’re looking at me as though I’m nuts. I love that when I’ve been with you all day I can still smell your perfume on my clothes. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night”. If you have Hosea as your scriptwriter, it is the same. You say things like “When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert”.

But if you are just an ordinary prosaic British person, when you get asked “So why do you love me?” you get lost for words and perhaps you simply say “I just did, and I still do”. So it is when the Deuteronomists are writing Yahweh’s script. Moses moves to the other word for love, the all-purpose Hebrew word which can still mean affection and passion but can also suggest friendship and commitment. “I did not get attached to you because there were so many of you. It was just because I loved you. I had found myself committed to you and I could not get out of it. It had become part of me. I had to do what I’d told Abraham and Sarah I would do.”

Remember you are loved: that God is attached to you and committed to you, for reason to do with you maybe, but certainly for reasons to do with God. No matter what seems to happen to the church, God loves it and will continue to be committed to it. It means God has not finished with it. God will fulfil the promises made to it.

Third, remember that you are called to knowledge. As I come to the end of ten years as principal of an Anglican theological college, I have from time to time wondered what it has been about. When I had just been appointed principal, there was an informal chapel occasion which ended up with the faculty who were present coming to the front and someone praying for us and giving each of us a word from God, and mine was that I had had a vision for college and I had not thought it would be fulfilled, but that it would be fulfilled.

At the time I thought it referred to college being more relaxed about charismatic gifts, and more open, and that has happened, but I have come to realize something else. Sometimes you only know what a prophecy meant when it has been fulfilled, and over the past two or three years I think we have seen a quantum leap in our integration of theology and prayer and life, and that was always my subconscious vision, but I did not have much hope that these could ever come together and I did not even articulate that vision, but God had it and shared it and it has come about. I believed that people were called to knowledge.

“Know then that Yahweh your God is God”, says Moses, and adds some further theological facts about Yahweh that the people are to know. It sounds like the essence of doing theology, and it is. But the NRSV rightly translates it as “acknowledging” these facts about Yahweh, not just knowing them. It assumes that theology and commitment are one thing, not two things. That is something Moses wants to leave with people when he goes. When theological students are in the classroom they are not playing academic games. They are worshipping. And when they are in chapel, they are not playing religious games. They are knowing.

What are those facts about God? For Moses the key one is that God is faithful, someone who keeps covenant and commitment. “Know then that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God”. I am glad about that because I feel in special need of it. I am leaving because God made it clear that the moment had come. We are going where we are going not so much because God guided as because God pushed and manipulated. People ask me from time to time if I am excited about it, and the answer is “Not especially”. It is just the direction God has pushed us. People say it is courageous; it would have required more courage to stay here. But all sorts of things could go wrong. There was a time when we had sent our belongings off but had not actually completed purchase on the apartment we had sent them to, nor had we got a mortgage, and a mail package about this had gone astray in the post, nor had we got a visa, and the embassy phone lines were permanently busy. Just before we left we heard that our belongings were not going to be there before us, as we had planned, and I am not sure how we will work around that. I expect it will be OK; but there are other more personal things that could go wrong, and I have to trust that it is true that God is faithful.

Moses offers us various encouragements. He reminds us that Yahweh has been faithful in the past, keeping that promise to Abraham and Sarah. He reminds us that Yahweh bothered to exercise such power and bothered to deliver us into the freedom which we do enjoy even when we are not actually in a promised land, so surely the wilderness will not be the end. He reminds us that there is a vast disparity between God’s responsiveness to lovers and to haters. Punishment for the haters, yes; but faithfulness to 1000 generations for the lovers. One generation will do, thank you. For us I am at least as encouraged by the signs that it is indeed God who is doing the pushing and manipulating, so that if we end up in a mess and I feel as I sometimes do that God could have made my life a bit easier than other people’s life looks, well at least I will know that I am in this hole with God. We have to remember that we are called to knowledge, and knowledge of the God who is faithful.

Fourth, remember that you are called to follow God’s word. What Moses says more specifically is, “You are to observe these commandments, statutes, and laws which I give you this day, and keep them.” I do not actually like that. I do not see why God is so keen on giving commandments. I am not very keen on giving commands - why is God? I do not want people to obey me - why does God? I cannot believe that if I were God I would be so keen on issuing orders. It seems such an odd thing to enjoy, even if you do know best.

So at the moment this is an angle on scripture that I am trying to wrestle with. Other people will have other questions about scripture. If there are no aspects of scripture that they do not like and do not have to wrestle with, then they are kidding themselves. It means that they have bracketed them out or reinterpreted them. That is what as evangelicals we have to do. We know we have to accept all of scripture, so we make it mean something else so we can accept it. As a Bible teacher one of my basic concerns has become simply to get people to read the Bible with open eyes. Some people learn to, others do not. I want people to read the Bible, to be open to finding there things that they had not realized were there, to be enthralled and dazzled and appalled and infuriated and puzzled and worried and stimulated and kept awake at night by these extraordinary words from God, to let their mind and heart and imagination and will be provoked and astonished by them. I want them to “observe them ... and keep them”.

If Moses and Israel will commit themselves to that, together and apart, they can cross their river, and he can climb his mountain.

### Five Amazing Things You Can Tell God Not To Do (A Sermon on Exodus 32)

Some while ago I remember being puzzled when I read one or two books about preaching, because they had chapters in them on titles for sermons. A title for a sermon was something I had never felt the need of. Then on a visit to the USA I think I discovered the answer, that you advertise in the local newspaper not only the times of next Sunday’s services but the subjects of the sermons. It seemed to me a wondrous expectation, that not only should you have a striking title for the sermon, but that you should have it by the Wednesday before you were due to preach it. Both of these I would normally find difficult.

On this occasion, at last, I would be able to fulfill the requirement, because this sermon is about “five amazing things that you can tell God not to do”. A colleague of mine once preached a sermon about the ten bad habits of God, and these are partly related (God is always late, is unpredictable, does not care what people think, has a love which is blind, prefers the broken to the strong, is self-contradictory, does not remember evil and personally repents of evil, is faithful but has changes of mind, is paradoxical, and behaves like a child).

The five amazing things you can tell God not to do come in a prayer of Moses in Exodus 32. There is Moses on the top of the mountain with God, receiving instructions about the way the relationship between God and Israel is to work out, and what is to be the pattern of worship, and how God and Israel are to relate to each other. There at the same time at the bottom of the mountain is Israel itself, rather impatient about how long Moses is going to be delaying at the top of this mountain and deciding that it will exercise some creative initiative, indulge in some innovative liturgical development, in connection with the question of how God and Israel will relate and how Israel will worship. Ironically, there at the bottom of the mountain is Israel doing exactly the opposite to what God is telling Moses at the top of the mountain. It leads Moses into having to pray for the people.

First, he says, “Don’t lose your temper”. “Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?’

It seems strange to think of God getting angry. There are at least two important and precious implications in the fact that God does. One is that it means that God is a real person. God is someone with feelings and passions such as compassion and mercy. God is someone who loves and cares, who joys and delights, who gets jealous and gets angry. God is not a kind of abstract entity up there on the top of the mountain or an impassive monarch sitting on a throne in heaven, untouched by anything. God is not an idea, nor merely the ground of my being. God is a person with passions, and therefore among the passions anger, wrath, a temper to lose. And that is part of God’s being the one in whose image we are made.

I suspect that the Israelites talked about God being angry because that was often how it seemed to be, to judge from what happened to them. You know when someone is angry with you: you have got cuffed about the ear, and you know there is probably something behind that. Things go wrong in your life, or in the world, or in the church, and you infer that God must be angry. Then you either try to infer the rational explanation for that, and repent, or you conclude that there is no rational explanation, and you say “Come on, stop it”, as Job did.

If we look at the world and the church as we know it, it would be a reasonable inference that God is angry. Perhaps that is why world and church (in Europe and America, at least) are in such a mess. We easily accept the fact that the church is so decimated and insignificant and we shrug our shoulders, instead of asking whether God is angry. What we should be doing is challenging God about letting the church be the laughing stock of the nation, as it often seems to be. Instead, we simply accept it or shuffle about it, or try to do our best, our really pathetic best, to do something about it. Perhaps what we should be doing is what Moses does, saying to God “Why are you losing your temper?” We might even get a response.

Moses’ second challenge to God is, “Don’t give up on us”. Don’t give up on the project that you have begun. “Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?” You have only started the job. You said you were going to take us into the land you promised us. You said that you were going to enter into a relationship with us. You said that you were going to provide the world with a model of what it was like to be the people of Yahweh. You are not going to give up on the job, are you? You are not going to give up on us, are you? You can’t do that.

Again I suggest that if we look at a world and a church where it can seem as if God has given up on us, then Moses’ kind of prayer may be one we should be praying. Why give up on the church? One can think of umpteen reasons for doing so. “But don’t give up on the church. The job is only half done, Lord.” And“Don’t give up on me.’ I would give up on me. Moses invites us to challenge God about giving up when the task is only half-completed, with regard to the world, the church, or individuals such as ourselves.

Moses’ third challenge is, “Don’t give the wrong impression”. It continues from the second. “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that Yahweh brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth.’” Think of the kind of impression you would be conveying to the world, to the whole of creation. Think of your own reputation. It is one of the standard bases upon which prayers in the Bible appeal to God. We ask God to do things “for God’s glory”; that might seem a somewhat selfish basis of appeal. It is “for your name’s sake”, lest people think badly of you. The people in the Bible are totally unscrupulous in prayer. They will do anything to get God to do the things that are near God’s own heart and God’s own agenda, to get God motivated to act. “You cannot cast us off at this moment and give the impression that you could not do the job after all, that you were not capable of bringing a people into a relationship with yourself and into their promised land, even if you were capable of bringing them out of Egypt.

And fourth, “Don’t be inflexible.” Turn from your fierce anger. Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. The Old Testament is not at all afraid of the notion of God having a change of mind. Readers of the Bible again shuffle about this, as if God should not have to do a thing like that. Perhaps part of what lies behind it is this. Anyone who is involved in leadership knows that most of the time the kind of decisions that you are taking are not made clearly on the basis of this being one-hundred-per-cent-obviously the right action, or even ninety-per-cent-obviously the right action. They are often made on a basis of sixty-forty, if you are lucky, or 51-49. And God is in the same position as anyone else with regard to this. God is always having to choose between the least calamitous courses of action.

So it does not take much to push God from 51 to 49. God had decided to do this, but was only a percentage point away from doing the other. “Could you not reconsider the basis on which you have made that decision? Could you not just change those figures around? Don’t be the kind of person who, once they have made a decision, won’t reconsider. Politicians let themselves be caught in a bind in this way, as if changing one’s mind is a weakness. Being prepared to change your mind is a strength (well, admittedly, not if you do it all the time). To be flexible is a strength.

So one of the things that is going on in prayer is that we are indeed asking God to do something different from what God was going to do. Indeed, if that is not part of what is going on in prayer, then there is no point in prayer. The point of this kind of prayer is to get God to do something that otherwise God would not do, or not to do something that otherwise God would do. When we are asking God to do things, it is an activity which is designed to make a difference. We are saying to God “Don’t be inflexible. Change your mind. Do something different from what you intended”.

Ann and I once invited a friend of ours to come on holiday with us, and she declined because she could not really afford it and she did not want to come without paying every penny of her way. The next year she could afford it and came, and we also invited another friend. This second friend seemed likely to decline for the same reason, but our first friend urged us to try to persuade her, not to take “No” for an answer. I expostulated “But you wouldn’t come last year!” “You didn’t try to persuade me”, she said. I had given in, taken “No” for an answer. I would not do it again with her, or with God.

Fifthly, “Don’t forget your word”. “Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever”.

God has made some promises and what Moses is doing in prayer is reminding God of these promises. Talk of “claiming” things from God can sound questionable, but there is something to it.

You are battering on God’s door or upon God’s chest and saying “We will not allow you to forget the words that you have uttered to us about your intentions. We will not allow you to forget your promises”. What we are doing in prayer is reminding God of commitments that God has undertaken, that God cannot get off the hook of.

And Yahweh had a change of mind about the disaster that was planned for the people. If we want to be philosophical (in a certain sort of way), of course, we can say that God knew ahead of time that the moment would come for a change of mind and that it was all part of a plan. We may prefer to safeguard God’s sovereignty in this way. But the Bible does not do so. More often what the Bible does is lay the story out as a story, lay it out in narrative order, lay it out as history. It then portrays God’s response to Moses as a real response. We are not told in brackets “Now of course God knew ahead of time that Moses would pray that way, and God had made allowance for that”. If this had been so, would God’s response really have been a response? In the story the Bible tells, it was a real response.

What is going on in prayer is that God is involving us in the process of decision-making whereby things happen in the world. It is not the case that God decided by fiat ahead of time, before Day Six of creation as it were, what was to happen in each of the umpteen trillion years that was now to unfold. It is the case that God decided to create some people who would indeed be made in God’s image, with the characteristics of God, and would then be drawn into the project that God was initiating at the moment of creation. And prayer is one of the ways in which they would be drawn into the fulfillment of that project in the world.

That is why, if we do not say things in prayer, things do not happen. Perhaps that is why history has gone on for such a long time. That is why church history has gone on for such a long time. That is why Israel’s history went on for such a long time. God never found that anyone suggested the right action at the right moment. God invites us into the fulfillment of that divine purpose in the world. Thus, when people pray, things happen (or get prevented).

Normally the way prayer goes on in the church bears no relation to what the Bible has to say about the subject, like most other things that go on in the church.

Five amazing things you can tell God not to do:

\* Don’t lose your temper

\* Don’t give up with the job half-done

\* Don’t give people the excuse to misjudge you

\* Don’t be inflexible

\* Don’t forget your promises.

Or to express these five daring exhortations as positives:

\* Be patient with us

\* Be persistent with us

\* Be aware of what people think

\* Be prepared to change your mind

\* Be mindful of your promises.