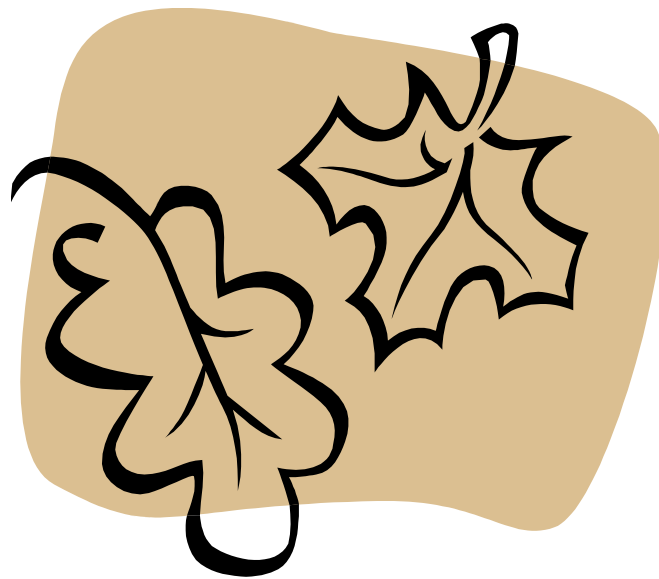


AUTUMN LEAVES

Volume 4



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Foreword

I have much pleasure in presenting the fourth volume of my *Autumn Leaves*, consisting of items that I wrote as a younger man and which I am now re-issuing in my own “autumn” years. The only exception is *Reforming of Borders* which was written in 2013.

As always, I trust friends will enjoy these contributions from my younger self and will also forgive their many shortcomings.

It is especially interesting for me to have re-read “Redeployment of Ministry” (page 37) and to see how some things in the pattern of ministry have changed and others have not.

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Naboth's Vineyard

Some expository thoughts on 1 Kings 21: 1 - 14 ¹

Our passage is a revealing one since it gives us much detail of the characters involved. A king and one of his subjects have a talk on a matter of business which leads the queen to plan the subject's death; a simple account perhaps, but full of spiritual significance.

We are told that Naboth owned a vineyard "hard by the palace of [king] Ahab". This means, in fact, that Naboth's vineyard was virtually next door to the royal palace. We need not assume that the king actually objected to having Naboth as a neighbour. It was simply that he wanted to have the vineyard for himself. He was like a spoiled child who, when he sees something that appeals to him can only say "I want it".

But let us be fair to Ahab where fairness is due; originally he only wanted to have the vineyard so that he could turn it into a vegetable garden to serve the needs of the palace. The fact that it was so near obviously made it more attractive. So, the king explained this to Naboth and promised that if he would hand over the ownership of the vineyard, then in exchange he would be given a better vineyard somewhere else or, if he preferred its cash value.

On the surface the whole offer seems so very reasonable perfectly and fair. Naboth had a piece of ground that could be very handy for the king. He is being given what seems like a fair and reasonable offer. Is Naboth's peremptory refusal not a little bit churlish?

¹ Slightly edited version of an article published in "The Gospel Magazine" June 1970 page 270.
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The clue to this really lies in the view that the Israelites took of their own private property inherited from their forefathers. To them their property was not just something to be owned for a while and then sold at will. Rather, it was part of their religious heritage, part of the land of promise that the Lord had given their forefathers and which would be passed down from father to son from generation to generation. The God-fearing Naboth would not - could not - sell his land or even exchange it for something better, no matter how attractive the offer might seem. Their inheritance was given by God and, as such, could not be alienated. As the invaluable Matthew Henry puts it: "Canaan was in a peculiar manner God's land; the Israelites were His tenants; and this was one of the conditions of their leases that they should not alienate any part of that which fell to their lot unless in case of extreme necessity and then only till the year of Jubilee, Lev 25: 28."

There is an interesting illustration of this point in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jerusalem was about to be overthrown by the Chaldeans when the prophet heard that a plot of ground in his native village of Anathoth which belonged to a kinsman named Hanameel had come up from sale. Jeremiah had the right of both inheritance and redemption and as such he was religiously obliged to buy it to prevent it going out of the family, which would have been seen as a disgrace (Jer. 32: 6 - fin). He did this at a time when Jerusalem was in great danger.

Now, it would seem very foolish to buy land just at the time when the city was about to be overrun by the enemy, but Jeremiah did buy it and publicly - almost ostentatiously - took possession of the title deed to the land and had it placed in a sealed jar for preservation. This was a sign - a sign that no matter how dark things appeared, the Lord still had a purpose for his people. The day would come when once again they would

be able to work and inherit their own land (verse 43) which was part of the promise of God.

It was for such reasons that Naboth was so emphatic when he declined to sell his vineyard even to such an important person as the king. "The Lord forbid," he said, "that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." Of course, as Ahab was himself an Israelite, he knew that Naboth was right and so he made no attempt to argue. He went back into his own house, vexed and angry. He lay down on his bed with his face to the wall and refused to eat any food. He was frustrated because his plan for the vegetable garden had been thwarted and there was nothing that he, even as the king could do about it. Naboth was quite within his rights - indeed his attitude in the circumstances was the correct one - so all that Ahab could do was sulk.

The story might well have ended there. Ahab would have got over his chagrin and no more might have been heard of the matter. However, at this point in the drama there enters the formidable figure of Ahab's wife, Jezebel. She was not an Israelite by birth. She came from the Phoenicians - a brilliant pagan race. Jezebel had inherited this brilliance and, along with it, all the ruthlessness of an oriental despot. To her, the religious tradition of Israel, with its firm belief in the one true and living God, was something to be stamped out at all costs and replaced by the Baal gods of her own country; and she certainly did not spare herself in the effort. It was so sad that her efforts were not directed towards the truth. Had Divine Providence made Jezebel an ally of Elijah instead of an adversary, they would have been a formidable force in the Lord's cause. But, as it was, Elijah and Jezebel were destined to be sworn enemies. In fact, Elijah prophesied that the dogs would eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel and in due time this

shocking and terrible event came to pass. There was no happy ending for Jezebel.

The point that Jezebel could not - or would not - see was that for Naboth this piece of ground was not just any old piece of property to be bought and sold at will, nor was it an investment; it was part and parcel of his religious faith and life. To sell or exchange this vineyard would be, in fact, a subtle way of selling out not only his personal faith but also the faith of his forefathers. Such action could not even be considered.

Sometimes we can be caught in a similar situation. We can be given what seems to be a reasonable offer to sell out for an apparently attractive price or to exchange for something that seems superficially equivalent or perhaps even better. Perhaps that is why so many people have, often unthinkingly, sold out on the spiritual values of the eternal gospel in favour of some bogus "modern" theology or in favour of a purely secular type of social concern or involvement.

It is very tempting for many who are not mature in the faith to forget that Christianity is, in the very best sense, exclusive. It is the claim of the Christian Gospel that it - and it alone - gives a unique solution not only to the problems of the individual, but to the history of the whole world.

Christians would not want to deny the value of social action and witness. Indeed, evangelicals were frequently pioneers of reform in former days. But ultimately even our finest and bravest works come under the judgment of God, before whom we are all unworthy servants. We do not and cannot justify ourselves to God but rather we come empty handed, clinging only to the Cross of Christ and pleading his eternal sacrifice. As the Apostle Peter

said "... there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

We have, as Christians, the most precious of all heritages but that does not mean that we can be content to pull up the drawbridge and sit in the ivory tower. It certainly does not mean that we can be content with a mere status quo as if that is all that matters. We must remember that being called a "Christian" is a costly thing and that if we call ourselves such, then we need to be ready for all the consequences.

The church naturally wants to bring people in. When we look at the life of Jesus, we see that he mixed with ordinary people in all the circumstances of life, from weddings to funerals, from work to picnics. Jesus was inclusive and certainly not exclusive. Yet, there are lines that need to be drawn and this is not always easy.

There is an important dividing line between accommodating and compromising. Given the forces of secularism and the marginalising of Christian values, there is always a real temptation to compromise. But if we are to speak of "moving with the times", we have to be careful not to dilute the Christian message so much that people cannot tell the difference between the church and the world. It is one thing to move with the times; it is quite another to be moved uncritically *by* the times. Put it another way - if you or I were in a country where Christianity is suppressed and we are on trial for being Christians, would there be enough evidence to convict us? (I say that to myself more than to anyone else.)

Like Naboth, we have received a great heritage and we have received it only through the grace of God. Through that grace, we have been chosen to be heirs of what we do believe to be the

one true faith. Of course, the church has not always got it right and there are things that have happened in the past that we could wish had never taken place or had been handled differently. Yet through that Christian faith, we have received some of the greatest traditions and noblest aspirations made known, by the grace of God, to man.

We did not create our heritage; it is something that has been passed down to us and which we aspire to pass on to the next generation, hopefully strengthened and renewed. Like Naboth, we are expected to look after, protect and defend this precious heritage and not to trade it in for anything else, no matter how pleasing and attractive it might seem at a superficial level.

Again, like Naboth, although we want to keep and guard our heritage we do not do this out of greed or selfishness. It is our hope that the great message of the Gospel can be passed on to others in the best possible state. The Christian Gospel is not something to be passed on and presented as something that is worn out, shabby, second rate - something that we only half believe in. The Good News of the Gospel is something that is living and true, grounded in Jesus Christ as the incarnate crucified and risen Lord. Indeed, throughout the history of the Christian church, it has always been most effective when it presents Jesus Christ to the world.

The great covenanting leader, Samuel Rutherford, often felt that he had to preach quite politically about the situation in Scotland as he saw it. But one morning he was preaching on Jesus Christ and one man in the congregation shouted out in encouragement - "Ye speak o' Jesus Christ. Haud ye to it!"

It is in this sense that we can talk about the Gospel being exclusive - not as something that we want to keep to ourselves in

some holy huddle but as treasure of which we are called to be
stewards and evangelists.

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust my sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name
On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand.

Reforming of Borders ²

I have been reading, with a mixture of interest and anguish, some of the recent and well-written articles referring, directly or indirectly, to two Church of Scotland congregations - Saint George's Tron (Glasgow) and Gilcomston South (Aberdeen) who have decided to leave the Kirk over matters of Biblical interpretation and authority.

Like Ian Petrie (7 March 2013) and others, I do not doubt their sincerity. It strikes me, however, that the issues raised will affect more than just the dwindling and ageing membership of the Kirk. Scottish Presbyterianism, with all its many faults and failings, has played a major and mainly positive role in the history of our land. The break-up of the Kirk into many separate factions, draws new boundaries between people but does not extend existing boundaries any wider.

It seems that some of the younger generation of Scottish ministers do not recognise that, for generations the Kirk has been a coalition. In the 18th and 19th centuries the "moderates" and the "evangelicals" jostled for dominance. Yet, they managed to cohabit and, until the Disruption of 1843, could do so reasonably amicably. The 20th century saw the various stands once again coming together.

I was a minister in Aberdeen for more than ten years, including three of these as Presbytery Clerk. I was a "known" evangelical (but not a fundamentalist), operating within the mainstream. I did not feel threatened by colleagues of a different theological persuasion, nor were they threatened by me. We were professional colleagues and offered each other the normal

² Brief comment to the "Scottish Review" in 2013
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courtesies. Even if we approached some issues differently, we were still on the same side.

Based on the New Testament emphasis on oneness and reconciliation, the outsider might reasonably believe that the Christian church would lead the way on matters of conflict resolution. Alas, no! We seem to be experts at quarrelling among ourselves and this may be part of the "dark side" that Walter Humes referred to (14 February 2013).

The church throughout the world seems to be currently obsessed with the "gay issue" as though this is all that matters. Already the two prominent congregations referred to above have decided to leave the Church of Scotland at immense financial cost to themselves. In taking such a step, they are actually giving those with whom they disagree, enormous power over them.

But the cost goes wider than either of these congregations. It is a further weakening of the established church in our land. To some, this will be a matter of indifference. To others, it will be source of great loss.

The Old Testament as Interpreted by the New ³

No one requires to be told that this subject opens up some great difficulties for us. The science of hermeneutics is perhaps one of the thorniest, yet one of the most basic, areas of "practical" Christian Theology and will, no doubt, grow more important in our present theological climate.⁴

One of the most basic of interpretations which would be accepted by most people is that the Old Testament *must* (at least to some degree) be interpreted by the New. This is perhaps only too obvious, but still important to state. Indeed, it is following the legitimate and necessary principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture. It is also in harmony with the general (and frequently misunderstood) principle that God's revelation, whilst not in any way contradictory, is nevertheless progressive. Saint Augustine's often quoted dictum that "*The New Testament is latent in the Old; the Old is patent in the New*" is both valid and theologically sound. The outcome is that since now, by the grace of God, we live under the New Covenant, we cannot occupy the standpoint of the Old. To put this in another way, I suggest that every sermon based on an Old Testament text or passage must always be, in fact, a New Testament sermon.

We are all well aware of the general perception of many people that the Old Testament is full of law and wrath and the New Testament full of grace, love and good example. Of course, such a superficial view discloses a woeful ignorance of the Bible. However, let us not be too quick to congratulate ourselves as we are liable to fall into one of two traps in our interpretation.

³ A paper delivered at a meeting of the *Scottish Church Theology Society* (Aberdeen Branch), October, 1969. It was not very well received at the time, which was good for my humility!

⁴ See J A Balchin's articles on hermeneutics in the *TSF Bulletins* of Autumn 1961, Summer 1962 and Autumn 1962. See also the masterly article *The Interpretation of the Old Testament by the Old Testament* by Klaas Runia in the *TSF Bulletin* of Autumn 1967.

- We may indulge in a kind of Old versus New Testament “one-upmanship” and plump for the Old Testament as against the New as if we were entitled to choose between the two. Of course, the Old Testament is full of wonderful accounts of God's grace and is a real quarry for exegetical preachers.
- We may get so tied up with the fact that the New Testament has given us the light that we may form the idea that the Old Testament can be discarded as so much “Jewish old clothes”. If we go for this option, we actually discard a considerable part of the Scriptures.

I suggest that the key to this difficulty lies (as it should in the science of biblical hermeneutics) within the pages of Scripture itself. We must look at how the New Testament actually deals with the Old Testament before jumping to too many conclusions. Probably the first thing we should notice is that much use is made of the Old Testament both in direct quotation and in direct or indirect reference. For example, there are over six hundred direct Old Testament quotations alone.

Next, I suggest that that we should remind ourselves that although the Old Testament is the Jewish Scripture, under the New Covenant we read it as a post-messianic book. It is not intended to be disrespectful to Jewish people to say that we Christians regard the Old Testament as a book that does unequivocally point to Jesus Christ.⁵

So far, this all seems very simple but, of course, there are many potential problems. There are some quotations which seem almost too good to be true and some might even suggest that they are somewhat strained. For example, Matthew 1: 23 quotes

⁵ See, for example, the genealogies of Christ in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.
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Isaiah 7: 14 – *Behold a virgin*⁶ *shall conceive and shall bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel* which is applied directly to Jesus. Or take Matthew 2: 6 quoting the prophet Micah 5: 2 where the town of Bethlehem is quoted as destined to be the birthplace of the messiah – and Matthew seems to quote the Old Testament passage somewhat differently from its original. Again, Matthew 2: 15 quotes Hosea 11: 1 *Out of Egypt have I called my son* applying this to the return of Joseph, Mary and Jesus from Egypt after the death of Herod whereas, in the Old Testament context itself, originally it referred to the Exodus experience.

These few examples may help to highlight the difficulties. What, for example, do we make of the *Out of Egypt have I called my son* quotation? How does it stand up to the so-called scientific exegesis of the form-critics? Do we even think of taking the view of Rudolph Bultmann⁷ that this is no more than reading New Testament doctrine into the Old? Bultmann's view is that the New Testament writers were, no doubt, well intentioned in what they did, but were quite mistaken, being motivated by apologetic or even polemic interests. It is, of course, well known that Bultmann sees little or no value in Old Testament interpretation because, for him, the Old Testament is merely a pre-Christian book. Also, Bultmann does not believe in the pre-existence of Christ or in the cosmic effects of his death and resurrection.

There is no doubt that we are dealing with a difficult area and so we must be careful at which end of the argument we begin. We will not get very far if we think that by some process of deductive logic we can either prove or disprove the authenticity or value of the Old Testament. Rather, we must begin with the

⁶ Or *young woman*.

⁷ See Bultmann's contribution to *Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, Ed, C Westerman (1963) *ad loc*

question of authority and work our way back from there, apologetically.

*The authority of scripture for which it ought to be believed and obeyed dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof and therefore is to be received, because it is the word of God.*⁸

In other words, the *starting* point is with a principle of authority and not with some kind of radical distinction between Old and New Testaments. But the problems still remain; we may agree that we must preach from the Old Testament and that without it the New Testament is incomplete (and *vice versa*). The crucial question that we still come back to is whether or not we follow the interpretive tradition of the Old Testament that we find in the New?

Now let us be clear: if we do *not* follow in that tradition, by implication we seem to be suggesting that the New Testament writers were mistaken or that somehow they twisted the evidence (possibly out of the best possible motives) to suit their own presuppositions.

Whilst this kind of approach may sometimes be heralded as *brave, radical or far sighted*, it is actually an easy way out which, at the same time, creates more difficulties than it solves.

Most of the scholars agree that the main Old Testament quotations in the New fall into three main categories

1. Messianic prophecies

⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I: 4
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2. General non-messianic statements made in the Old Testament and are applied to Jesus Christ in the New

3. Typological passages

In the case of category number 1, there are relatively few difficulties. Some passages are messianic and obviously so. Others are also messianic but perhaps less clearly so. It would seem (to me) to be pointless to go behind the New Testament and try to delve into what might have been the pre-Christian Old Testament interpretation of the messianic hope on the assumption that this interpretation must be preferred. We live under the New Covenant, so why go back to the Old?

The New Testament writers believed - as do we - that Jesus of Nazareth was the Lord's Christ and Messiah. The New Testament passages concerning the Lord's Servant are many and clear.⁹ Other Old Testament themes taken up in the New include the important New Covenant (Hebrews 8: 8-12, Jeremiah 31) and Bethlehem as the place of the messiah's birth (Matthew 2: 6, Micah 5: 2). Matthew 11: 10 applies the passage in Malachi 3: 1 that speaks of the messenger who comes before the Messiah as being fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist. Yet again, Matthew 21: 5 speaks of the humble king of Zechariah 9: 9. In these passages, there are few real difficulties, if one accepts that, indeed, Jesus was the Messiah. God had not fully revealed himself in the Old Testament but with the coming of Christ, all things were transformed.

Category 2 is much less straightforward and some scholars would suggest that the New Testament interpretation is arbitrary. Let us look at an example that we have already mentioned - Matthew 2: 15, speaking of the holy family's safe return after the death

⁹ See R T France *The Servant of the Lord in the Teachings of Jesus* in Volume 19 of the Tyndale Bulletin.

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