

Old chestnuts

Having dealt with the hindering attitudes in our own mind, we then have to face the comments and accusations of others. These invariably confront us whenever we make a determined stand for God.

Assuming we have now realised that we need to leave the past behind and live for the future, let's consider three arguments often used against us, and how we should respond to them.

'Better the devil you know . . .'

If we decide to leave one local church in favour of another, some will try to trouble us with doubts about where we are going. At their fingertips they have a whole repertoire of hair-raising stories. After giving us the full gory details, they conclude: 'So don't you think you'd be safer staying where you are? After all, let's face it, better the devil you know than the devil you don't!'

'Better the devil you know'? That must be one of the most ridiculous sayings in the English language. There may be some

kind of security in familiarity – even when the familiarity is an unpleasant one – but who wants to be acquainted with *any* kind of devil? Not us, I hope!

The fear of stepping out into the unfamiliar has never been, and never should be, an issue with any child of God determined to pursue his destiny.

Look at Abraham, that great forerunner of faith, who ‘obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going’ (Hebrews 11:8). Looking for the city of God, he had his heart set on God’s best, wherever it might lead him, and we are called to walk in the footsteps of his faith (Romans 4:12).

Or imagine Peter desperately clinging to a storm-tossed boat. The wind is blasting and howling, the sea is pounding and he is frightened and confused. The sea has become one big, powerful enemy. But the boat, though unstable and vulnerable, is at least familiar. And he seeks a crumb of comfort in the well-known smells and feel of a vessel which is rapidly becoming more a threat of doom than a promise of deliverance.

Imagine, too, how his mounting fear in the face of the impending ‘natural’ disaster must have grown into full-blown terror at the sight of a supernatural manifestation. Seeing a figure walking on the water, he is convinced he has seen a ghost!

With his thinking distorted by blind panic, Peter fails to recognise Jesus, mistaking the King of kings and Lord of lords for an object of terror to be avoided at all costs. Such a mistake could have had dire consequences. But, happily, the reassuring voice of Jesus breaks through the fear. At his command, Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk towards him across the water.

Safe in the hands of God

Have similar things happened in your own life? Have you, too, failed to recognise God, cringing away from him in fear, simply because you have never seen him move in that way before? Clinging desperately to the known and afraid to step out into

the unknown, have you let God pass you by?

'But I was afraid to move,' you cry, 'in case I made a mistake.'

It's true that what often holds us back is fear of making a mistake and of looking a fool in front of others. And it's possible for all of us to make mistakes. But if we never step out, how will we know whether we were right or not? Success is founded on experience, and if we just sit tight and never make a move we won't have any experience on which to found it.

Even if we do make a mistake we have the ultimate safety net. God just loves it when we step out for him and is always there to catch us if we stumble. He is far bigger than any mistake we can make and more than able to hold our heads above water. Isn't that just what he did for Peter when, after his first triumphant steps upon the water, he took his eyes off Jesus and, allowing the natural appearance of the situation to instil fear into him again, began to sink?

Peter may have felt a bit of a fool when he got back to the boat, but really he had no reason to. Of all the disciples he was the only one prepared to reach out in faith towards Jesus, stepping out of the familiar into the unknown, his one desire being to reach the Lord's side.

Scott and Rosemary stepped out in a similar way.

'We had been members of the church for about three years,' Rosemary recalled. 'We were very active as youth leaders, and in charge of the evangelism. That sounds good, but it obscured the fact that we were stagnating in our faith. After a while, though, I became aware of our lack of spiritual growth. The deacons, who were responsible for all decision-making, were very able businessmen but not spiritually motivated, and the pastor was continually frustrated at being outvoted by them at meetings.'

'So, after much prayer, we decided to leave and find a church where we could grow and where the Holy Spirit was the decider in the direction of the church. At the time of leaving we had absolutely no idea where we would go, but there was no point in staying just for the sake of it.'

'Our number one responsibility is for our own spiritual growth. If we aren't making progress then we must move on for the sake of the kingdom of God, because whatever our current responsibilities, we cannot fulfil them properly if we aren't making the personal spiritual progress we should be.'

So Scott and Rosemary moved on, stepping out into the unknown and placing themselves entirely in the hands of God. And did he let them down? Of course not! He soon provided them with what they were looking for: a deeper personal relationship with him, a warm, loving church and the challenge of biblical teaching on all areas of Christian life.

So don't be afraid to step out. God will look after you!

You, too, can walk on water!

Leaving behind a dying church to start a new fellowship with five other people, Glenn wasn't afraid to step out into the unknown. On the contrary, he was excited by the challenge of moving out in faith. And that new church is now a loving family of some forty Christians – working, praying, sharing, caring and building together, with genuine commitment and love for each other.

His testimony is one of success. But he was only successful because his attitude was right. When most were afraid to lose the comforting familiarity of a sinking boat, when the majority were held back by a false sense of security, Glenn was willing to step out for God in any way he asked. His eyes were not on what he was going into, or what he was leaving behind—they were firmly fixed on Jesus. And this is his advice for us:

'Your loyalty is towards God, who is seeking to bring you up in the rich environment of his family on earth. It's not towards any other collection of people or traditions where the life, joy and vigour of Christ isn't expressed. It always seems safer to stay with the familiar, but don't be pressured by the prejudices of those who are clearly missing the blessing of God.

'Get out of the boat, start walking, keep your eyes on Jesus

and you won't regret it.'

It's sound advice. Throughout life we all fall victim to material and spiritual pressures and uncertainties. But how we respond to them is up to us. We can cringe back into what is familiar – storm-tossed as it is – or we can respond in obedience and faith, stepping boldly out into the unknown.

Is Jesus calling you to come? Then step out, and you'll discover that you, too, can walk on water.

'Rats desert a sinking ship'

Staying with the nautical theme for a while, this is a very destructive accusation. Though completely irrational, it is persuasive because it touches us at our point of vulnerability, questioning our faithfulness and integrity.

'Ah,' comes the response at our decision to move on, 'rats leaving the sinking ship, eh?'

The idea, of course, is to provoke in us an image of heroic selflessness on the part of those remaining. In our mind's eye we see the stoic captain keeping his post on the bridge, the band playing patriotic tunes of self-sacrifice and the great liner slipping peacefully below the waves with solemn dignity.

And where am I? There I am – a rat racing for safety as far from the sinking vessel as I can get!

But why should such a scene make me feel guilty? Surely, all it proves is that the rats are smarter than the people! If the ship is sinking, take to the boats – when we get to heaven no martyr's crowns will be handed out for suicide.

One of the greatest tragedies of the Bible is that Jonathan died with Saul when he could have lived with David. Yes, King Saul was Jonathan's father, but he had been rejected from the purposes of God. David was to reign in his place. And David and Jonathan both knew God had joined them together for a particular purpose (1 Samuel 23:16-18).

Yet Jonathan stayed with his father and, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, died with him on the battlefield.

We could argue that Jonathan was only being faithful to his father, and what else could we expect? But *loyalty is only to be commended when it springs from the genuinely spiritual – not from the merely sentimental*. As we have already observed, faithfulness to God should bring us to a place of success, not a place of despair. It isn't our responsibility to 'carry the can' for the rest of the congregation, as Fran discovered.

Unable to stand the dryness any longer, she and her husband left their church after several unsuccessful attempts to bring the life of God into it.

Their efforts had brought only heartbreak as they witnessed the persistent refusal to respond to God. Eventually they came to see that it wasn't up to them to carry the responsibility for other people's attitudes; each needed to respond to God for himself. And leaving was the only option if they were to develop their own walk with God.

'Follow God's prompting,' Fran advised, 'and he will never leave you at a dry church. And what he can do for you, he is perfectly capable of doing for the others. It's not your job to look after them. You tend to think that you can't leave a sinking ship, but in the end you'll just sink with it.'

Jonathan owed loyalty first and foremost to the Lord, not to his father, Saul. But, unwilling to let go of the past, he was unable to move into the future. And when the ship finally sank he was still on board and sank with it, robbed of the abundant life God had wanted to give him.

It's a tragic story of a man with great potential. And it is also a grave warning for those of us with conflicting loyalties which have effectively barricaded our way ahead with God.

'You'll never find what you're looking for!'

Finally, we have the full-frontal, double-barrelled shotgun approach. The first blast is intended to shatter my illusions: 'You'll never find the perfect church.' And the next assassinates my character: 'And even if you did it would cease to be perfect

the moment you joined.'

This attitude is based on two false suppositions. First, it assumes the church is doomed to imperfection. And second, it infers that God has given up on me. Both concepts I strongly reject. God hasn't given up on me – or you – and has no intention of doing so. Individually, and as a church, 'we shall be like him', the Bible tells us (1 John 3:2).

So why is it that the expectations of so many of God's people never break through the barrier of the disappointments and failures of the past?

Look back at the testimonies in this book. Clearly people's lives have changed dramatically as they have cast off the dead and dying for the vital life of Christ. But their testimonies aren't perfect. To question them all in detail would be to uncover some doubts and fears about the steps they were taking. Would they adapt to the new environment? Was it really the place God wanted them to be? How would they cope with the hostility and criticism from those left behind?

For Colin and Hazel, their welcome at first was not as friendly as they could have wished. They would have loved another couple to come alongside them as they battled to cope with the leaving behind of old friends and familiar surroundings, but at first it just didn't happen. Now, close relationships are developing but, as they discovered, getting to know people takes time.

For others, like Kenneth back in chapter five, there is the awful feeling of redundancy as, leaving behind positions of leadership and other responsibility, they find themselves with nothing to do. In some cases, as with Chris and Tanya, the new church is itself going through a difficult time, making the first few months especially rocky.

In other cases the problem is 'culture shock' after what has been left behind. Unused to the lively worship and the zeal for God, many feel at first like a fish out of water.

It's not surprising. There is bound to be a certain amount of insecurity and confusion during a time of such spiritual and

emotional upheaval. There are new patterns to adapt to, old ideas to shed – and though things can sometimes be great from the word ‘go’, often it takes some working at.

So don’t despair if you’ve made a change but so far things aren’t working out quite as you had hoped. Persevere!

Andrew and Elspeth found the early days in their new church a strange mixture of excitement and panic. People were warm and friendly, but both felt very much on the outside. Eventually, Andrew began to break through his emotional barrier, though it took much longer for Elspeth to overcome her fear of the new surroundings. But gradually, as she put her trust in God, he brought her through, and this is now their triumphant testimony:

‘We have “grown up” spiritually. We have become part of a family and we now know where we are going. What a change! Once we were losers but now we are winners.’

For all these people it was worth the initial difficulties. God is seeing them through – and he will see us through, too. But we must be prepared for some heartaches as well as great joy. And we must resist the temptation to give up every time something goes wrong.

Pressing on

The history of failure is not doomed to repeat itself for ever. If the Word of God urges us to ‘press on to maturity’ (Hebrews 6:1 NASB), then God himself is convinced we can make it!

If we don’t go for perfection, what is the alternative? Blessed imperfection? Shall we proclaim a substandard, shop-soiled, slightly stained kind of Christianity? One that motivates into a zeal that is one notch above ‘apathy’ and raises our expectations to somewhere near the level of confusion?

Someone once said: ‘If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time!’ So don’t lower your sights to conform to the prevailing acceptance of mediocrity. Look up. Aim high. Press on to the upward and high call of God in Christ Jesus.

Just in case any of us should be tempted into smugness by comparing ourselves with others, let's remember that our 'perfection' isn't measured by the other man's 'imperfection'. We cannot judge our success by the other's failure. God's infallible standard is Jesus Christ himself, and he alone is the pattern to which we are called to conform, the example we are expected to follow.

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he appeared to his disciples one day on the shore of Lake Galilee. He asked Peter, 'Do you love me? . . . Tend my lambs.' And again, 'Do you love me? . . . Shepherd my sheep.' And a third time, 'Do you love me? . . . Tend my sheep.' He then emphasised his commission to Peter by restating his claim on Peter's life: *'Follow me!'*

Peter's responsibility of ministry was thus shown to be directly related to his relationship with the Lord. But at that moment Peter turned and saw his friend, John.

'Lord, and what about this man?' Peter questioned. But Jesus replied, *'What is that to you? You follow me!'* (John 21:15-23 NASB). You see, our response to the call of the Lord doesn't depend on what the other man does, but on what the Lord commands *us* to do.

Some will say, 'You can't go that way. Why, brother So-and-so doesn't agree with that at all.' Then we will be presented with an impressive list of notable Christians who are vocal in their opposition to the 'new thing' that is drawing us. Some of them are influential and respected leaders. They have blessed many, maybe even had an input into our own lives. What are we to do?

What about this man? What about that man? The polite rebuke of Jesus is still the same: 'What is that to you?' Or to put it into the vernacular: 'Mind your own business - you follow me.'