

Chapter Four

THE REFLECTION MODEL

Thursday 25th February

Ford Service Centre, Mt Gravatt

The Religion report

‘Following last week’s article I did some research on the traditional attitude within the Christian Church that Christianity is the only true religion and all others are false. This view is known in academic circles as ‘Exclusivism’ and there is a rise in this kind of view in other world religions as well.

Many of you who responded to my request for feedback have the feeling that there is something wrong with this point of view. But you felt inadequate to argue the case from Scripture. Well, I have some good news.

There are many passages of Scripture that speak of the possibility of all people being saved by Jesus Christ’s death even outside the Christian Church. This approach is known as ‘Inclusivism’ and the following are some examples of Inclusive texts in the New Testament...

James finished off the first draft of his next article for the Daily Mail on his laptop PC. He was alone in the customers’ waiting room at the local Ford Service

Centre where he had come to have his car serviced. The television was turned down and he could only hope that no one else came in and turned it up. The coffee bar was available and he had taken advantage of it. The courtesy phone was also available for use for local calls.

He usually caught the courtesy bus home with Joanne, the attractive young bus driver, who let him sit in the front seat with her when he was the only passenger so they could discuss religion and life and her evening studies. However, when he had work to do, he would wait in this room with all its facilities because it provided a good opportunity for him to catch up. On this occasion he had wanted to get some thoughts on paper for his article while they were fresh in his mind before doing any reading.

Now that he was finished, he could concentrate on the article on Mark 13 given to him by Kevin's friend although he wasn't as optimistic about it as Kevin. James had been completely taken aback by Kevin's friendship with Jerry Johansson, the Seventh Day Adventist pastor. James had been taught that the SDA church was heretical. He had never had much to do with it but he couldn't imagine a Christian sect producing an article of such a high standard of scholarship that it would be of any use to him. His New Testament lecturer in the College had said that they could be called '20th Century Judaizers', because they were like the legalistic Jewish Christians in Paul's day who tried to bring new Christians back under the Jewish Law. This included observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, hence their name - *Seventh Day* Adventists.

Of course they just might have something to offer in the area of the second coming of Christ, which was the other of their two major emphases. This provided the 'Adventist' part of their name - and Mark 13 was all about the second coming of Christ. On the other hand, he himself still had a problem making logical sense of all

the Christian teachings concerning the 'last things' - the judgment day and the end of the world, as well as the 'Second Coming'.

Nevertheless, the man was Kevin's friend and Kevin had certainly thought the man had something useful to offer so James would have to stop judging other Christian denominations so harshly – even sects. If he didn't, he would never cope with non-Christian traditions. A little reluctantly he opened the issue of 'Ministry' to the article on Mark 13, 'Did Jesus intend to return in the first century?'¹

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Joanne, the girl who drove the courtesy bus, leant around the doorpost and excused herself. James gave an almost imperceptible start as so often happens when one is interrupted while deep in thought. 'Sorry to startle you Mr McGregor but your Falcon is ready any time you are. Just pick up your keys and invoice from the counter and settle up on your way out.'

James raised his hand. 'Thank you Joanne. I'll be there shortly.' The truth was he wished he could stay longer while he was in such a mood of elation. He didn't want it to be broken by returning to the mundane world of everyday tasks. The article had not only solved his problem of how to interpret Mark 13 but had also completely shattered his preconceived ideas about the SDA's. The article was brilliant. Using their specialised knowledge of the Old Testament the author had solved the problem cleverly with an idea called the 'prophetic-perspective' approach.

The solution was neat and simple and quite radical. To the writer of the article the prediction in Mark Chapter 13 was no different from other similar prophecies found in the Old Testament. Like Mark 13, these O.T. prophecies had also been 'double barrelled' ones, in the sense that they had predicted both the destruction of a city or a nation and also the arrival of the eternal Day of Judgment at the same time -

the 'Day of the Lord.' In each case the prediction of the expected destruction came true but the Day of the Lord obviously had not.

However, the partial lack of fulfilment of the prophecy was apparently not a problem to the prophet or to the editors of those parts of the Old Testament. It seemed that in this type of prophecy any imminent event of destruction was regarded as a *foreshadowing* of God's future final act in judgment of the world, and not necessarily as the actual date of that judgment. One event was interpreted as a 'reflection' of the other that was still to come.

He could hardly wait to discuss it with Kevin but, as he walked to the counter to settle up and pick up his keys, there was something about that reflection idea that was simmering just below the surface of his mind. He just couldn't put it into words yet.

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On his way home for lunch James was still mulling over the article and its implications when he became aware of the voice on the radio talking about reflections. The mention of that word had his full attention. 'An item of nature like a tree is a reflection of the glory of the creator.' Strange. There were no religious programmes scheduled for this time of day. It seemed to James that this coincidence was some kind of divine confirmation of the he had been pondering all the way from the garage, after reading the magazine article – a new theory of interpretation. As James arrived at their home in Carindale, he pushed the remote control to open the door of their double garage. As the door opened and he saw that Mary's old Camry was already there, he remembered that Mary was having a flexi-time half-day off, and his mood lifted somewhat.

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Carindale

While they shared a meat and salad lunch, James tried to explain to Mary the gist of Jerry's article and the reflection idea. She asked, 'Why did that article mean so much to you?'

James put down his knife and fork. 'I think it was because it made a separation between the literal prediction and its ultimate meaning. The fall of Jerusalem was not really going to be the actual Day of Judgment but only a symbol or sign of the Day of Judgment which would still be sometime in the future.'

Mary squinted as she looked at him. 'So the mental act of separation is the key?'

James loved the way she zeroed in on the essentials in an issue. He picked up on her metaphor. 'That's right. And the key 'unlocks the gate' and sets us free from the literal meaning of the text.' Phillip Gill was right. Some of his interpretations in the past had been far too literal. Maybe many passages of Scripture were not literal truth but merely reflections of truth.

Mary touched her chin with her finger. 'I remember something like that in Philosophy. Plato used the analogy of shadows cast on the wall of a subterranean cave by the flickering flames of a fire on the surface – all vague and distorted.'

'Our traditional reformed College course never included Philosophy.' James shook his head sadly. 'So, what does it mean?'

Mary waved her hand across the table. 'I think it means that things of this world are mere shadows of the eternal realities above and it is very difficult to separate the reality from the shadow.'

'Then I suppose my model *is* similar to Plato's.' James nodded in understanding. 'But it's also similar to a paradox in Physics.'

Mary pulled a face. She wasn't as interested in science as James was but she dutifully responded. 'Oh?'

James pressed on. 'Well, apparently light is a particle when it leaves an impression on a photo-electric plate in a camera but a wave when it bends around an object like the moon.'

Mary raised her eyebrows at that. 'How can it be both?'

James pointed his finger at her. 'Exactly. Logically it can't. This is the weird, illogical world of sub-atomic Physics. The two analogies are contradictory and mutually exclusive and yet, in some sense, both are true. So, each of these analogies must be only a partial image of the nature of light, neither telling the whole story but both giving an aspect of the truth.'

'I think your example is more complicated than Plato's.'

'OK.' James acknowledged. 'But God is even more complex and difficult to understand than light. We can't even represent a three dimensional solid object like the world on two-dimensional maps. So how can we possibly know God accurately?'

Mary pointed at James. 'Now that's a good illustration. At school I was always puzzled by the big difference between the shape of the world on one map compared to the other. On one it looked like it was drawn on an orange peel and on the other it looked as if the Arctic and Antarctic areas were all stretched out to breaking point, and I always wanted to know which map was the correct one, but neither was completely correct, is it?'

James shook his head. 'No! A three dimensional object can't be portrayed in two dimensions without some distortion.'

Mary continued with her meal. 'James, those are helpful illustrations but where are you going with this?'

James leant forward. 'I now realise that any belief about God is merely a partial representation of the truth it represents.' He paused for a moment and then brightened and went on. 'That means that no text or belief or doctrine has to be completely right or wrong. Or, to put it another way, it could be right in one way and wrong in another.' *Including Jesus' supposed words about no one coming to the Father except by Him, he thought to himself.*

Mary kept eating and let him work it through.

'Hey! This is great.' James exclaimed. 'This could be a way through some of those theological problems I had when I graduated. Using this reflection idea I don't have to accept or reject all those doctrines completely.'

James realised that Mary had almost finished her lunch and he had been talking instead of eating.

Mary frowned and said, 'This reflection idea of yours might appeal to philosophers but is it biblical?'

James could see her point and he did need to back it up with Scripture. Eventually he remembered, 'Somewhere Paul says, 'For now we see in a glass darkly' or as modern translations say, 'in a mirror dimly.'²

Mary finished eating and put down her cutlery. 'Why would they not see clearly in a mirror?' she asked without looking up.

James waved a hand. 'Oh! It's a reference to the poor quality metal mirrors used in biblical times. They didn't give a clear reflection – a bit like trying to see yourself in a car door.'

Mary nodded. 'I see.' She thought for a moment and then asked, 'So is everything a reflection? Is Jesus only a reflection?'

James had started eating again but stopped in mid-bite. 'That's a very good question.' He hadn't thought of that angle. 'We-ell, in Colossians Jesus is described as 'the image of the unseen God' or 'the visible likeness of the invisible God'³.

Mary sought confirmation. 'So you are saying that Jesus Himself is a kind of 'reflection'?'

James realised he was on dangerous ground and said, almost to himself. 'It would seem so.' *If the divine Jesus himself could be understood as a 'reflection', then the Biblical descriptions of Him had to be even more of a reflection.*

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Mary contemplated the dirty dishes and said with a sigh. 'That was pretty heavy stuff. I feel as if something nice and comfortable has slipped through my fingers.'

'It was the same for me too.' James nodded sadly. 'In one fell swoop I feel I've lost my biblical innocence.' His shoulders slumped as he pushed his plate away.

Mary looked at him and said, 'Do you think a person can still be a Christian without taking the teachings of the Church literally?'

James straightened up. 'I certainly hope so.' James remembered a saying, '*Hold to Christ and as for all the rest be totally uncommitted*'. He continued, 'Maybe Christian teachings point us to the risen Christ like signposts that point you to a town. They can still do their job even if they're a bit dilapidated or need a bit of paint.'

Mary raised a finger. 'As long as they're not *so* dilapidated they can't do the job.'

'Right!' James conceded.

Mary gave a mischievous grin. 'If human and very fallible preachers like you can lead people to Christ when they preach, why do the Scriptures need to be infallible and without errors?'

‘Thanks a lot dear.’ James said sarcastically. ‘But you’re right. As one of my old lecturers used to say, ‘Infallible just means that the Scriptures unfailingly lead us to Christ.’

‘That’s a clever way around it.’ Mary smiled. ‘So, you think you can now resolve all those conflicts that worried you during your theological training?’

‘Some, possibly.’ James’ eyes glinted as he nodded slowly. ‘I’ll just have to look over the list of things sitting in my ‘too hard’ basket.’ It would be a bit of a wrench but he would just have to abandon the literal meaning of some of his favourite texts and doctrines. At least the problem of Mark 13 had been resolved, thanks to Kevin’s SDA friend, ironically without doing too much harm to the integrity of either Jesus or the Scriptures.

Mary paused on the way out to the kitchen and asked a little too eagerly. ‘Does that mean you can now offer yourself for a full-time appointment?’

James held up his hand and called out. ‘Hey! Hold your horses. I’m not ready for that yet.’

Mary came back to the table with another jug of cold water. ‘OK. One step at a time. But with your problem areas, do you really feel that getting behind the surface meaning of the doctrine might help?’

‘Indeed.’ James took a sip of his newly filled glass. ‘And I like your phrase ‘getting behind’ the surface meaning. I can think of one of my problem areas where just such a separation would be helpful.’

Mary raised her eyebrows. ‘Oh? Which one?’

‘Life after death.’ He answered. ‘There are at least two conflicting Christian views. One says that when we die, our soul or spirit goes straight to heaven to be with God. The other says that our physical bodies will rise again from the dead at the end of time, in the last days, and both views are supported by the bible.’

They cleared the table and moved the conversation to the kitchen. 'And how do you apply 'separation' to those ideas?' Mary threw him a tea towel as she washed up the few dishes. 'They can't both be right, can they?'

James replied, 'No! Not if you take them both literally.'

Mary dried her hands and then put one hand on her hip. 'So, what's the solution?'

He realised that she was pushing him to make sure that his theory didn't just stay theory as so often happened with him. *The ideas came to him: Disregard the physical aspect. Think in terms of a spiritual body and ignore the time element.* 'By 'getting behind' the surface meaning, as you said. Then we can find the truth represented.'

James looked smug as he hung up the wet tea towel, until Mary asked, 'And that is?'

James' smile disappeared. He put one hand on the doorpost and looked down. 'Whew! You're not going to let me off lightly are you? OK Let me think. Death is not the end. There is a life beyond – our personality has a life with God, somewhere, sometime.'

Mary smiled. 'That sounds a bit vague but at least, it's nice and positive.'

James straightened up. 'Please teacher, can I go now?'

Mary laughed. 'OK.' James started to walk away but stopped when Mary said, 'Wait. One more question. This assignment you've been given - it's to look at the truth behind other religions, isn't it?'

James nodded. 'Something like that.'

'Well, what *about* other religions?' Mary pointed at James. 'Doesn't your new 'reflection' theory apply to them too?'

James narrowed his eyes. 'What do you mean?'

Mary picked up the paper and sat in her favourite chair. 'Well, aren't the teachings of other religions reflections too?' She decided she had helped him enough for the time being and started reading.

'Of course.' James said almost to himself. 'Same rule for all.' Then he took the hint, bent over and kissed Mary warmly and appreciatively on the cheek. 'Thanks.' He said as he went off to his study to put some of these new thoughts on paper.

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1. 'Ministry' A Magazine for S.D.A. Clergy/May 1983. Ed. J. Robert Spangler
p. 10.
2. 1 Corinthians 13: 12.
3. Colossians 1:15