



*THE MEEK*  
*and*  
*THE BOLD*

Grant Thorpe



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Published by

NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.  
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia, 5051

1986

First published by New Creation Publications Inc..  
Australia. 1986

Grant Thorpe, 1986

National Library of Australia card number and  
ISBN 0 86408 047 6

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*Cover design by Glenys Murdoch*

Wholly set and printed at

New Creation Publications Inc.  
Coromandel East, South Australia

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## ***FOREWORD***

It is not hard to think of a handful of reasons why 'meekness' and 'boldness' are difficult to talk about, probably at any time, but particularly so at the present time. Meekness has traditionally been seen as a virtue, but is now seen more in terms of weakness. 'Boldness', if it means the courage to act in the face of danger or rebuff, has a good meaning. The problem is that the bold have often been insensitive, and so their boldness has communicated, or actually been, aggression, needing to be resisted. So now we may well have false views of what it means to be meek or bold.

The church however, has had reason to know the meaning of meekness and boldness. Jesus Christ showed the meaning of meekness in his own life, and gave the world a gospel able to defuse the need for aggression. At the same time, he gave his people a truth which made them irrepressible as they moved from one nation to another, one culture to another, teaching all people to be disciples of Christ. Whenever the church loses dynamic dependence on this Christ and this gospel, both her meekness and her boldness dissipate and the message of Christ is not heard. Without a true meekness, the church knows she has no reason to be bold, and withholds her truth. Alternatively, she makes a meekness and a boldness (of a worldly sort) for herself, which the world can easily recognise and ignore.

## THE MEEK AND THE BOLD

This presentation has been prepared with the conviction that the Lord of the church constantly acts to keep his people true to him. It also assumes that the church is responsible to discern her errors and to seek renewal in the truth. But if we assess that we lack boldness, or that the boldness we have is making no impression on the world, we must not simply increase the volume of our output, or fine-tune our sociological awareness, but, first and foremost, recognise that we have strayed from the meekness of Christ which is the only true context for boldness in proclaiming the truth.

At a personal level, it may appear that meekness and boldness are basically a matter of temperament, training, and the locus of power in any given situation. This study, seeking to reflect the biblical presentation, portrays them, rather, as the actions of a godly person, to be displayed simultaneously. One could easily, and with profit, make a study of temperamental differences and inequality situations (for example, Paul Tournier's *The Strong and the Weak*), but this is not my purpose. Everyone must assess their own situation and seek to reflect the gospel of Christ with both meekness and boldness. Both the rudely arrogant and the quietly compliant person, the oppressed and the oppressor, need to learn meekness. Likewise, both the reckless extrovert and the timid introvert, the powerfully rich and the poor man at his door, will be pushed beyond the limits of their self-styled safety boundaries in order to do all that God calls them to do.

I have written this booklet with the church in mind, but it is as persons that we will read, and assess, and apply what is said. We will not change 'en masse' or by the negotiating of new balances of power. Rather, renewal will come as each of us is confronted with the truth and is

transformed by the renewal of his mind. I have written, too, out of a sense of personal need to know the strength which is not mere fleshly exuberance—a search, I suspect, which you will want to share with me.

## **MEEKNESS: TOO RISKY AN OPTION?**

What exactly is meekness? Can it be practised in a world where survival of the fittest is often the prevailing way of life?

Jesus instructed his followers to be ‘wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ because they were being sent out as ‘sheep in the midst of wolves’. He himself had come as a servant and his followers were to have the same spirit in making his truth known. This instruction, to be ‘as wise as serpents’, shows that the Lord, and now we, his servants, have other controls on our persons than the circumstances to which we are subject. We are never merely victims. Life is not taken from us—we give it. The analogy of the snake should not be taken to suggest deception. Rather, it is a simple instruction to think about all that is happening and to use godly wisdom in determining how best to act.

The early church certainly found themselves as sheep amongst wolves. New Testament instructions about daily living are full of help for such people (see, for examples, Matt. 10:16-42, Eph. 4:17-6:9, I Pet. 2:11-5:11).

Some Old and New Testament, and current English definitions of meekness are included in an appendix. However, to properly understand, and more particularly,

to experience meekness, we need to see how it was demonstrated by Jesus and experienced by the apostles when they first felt the impact of his gospel. We should avoid merely trying to behave in a meek manner (or a bold manner), because, for anxious sinners, the terror of being truly meek (or truly bold) will ensure that we evade it and produce an artificial resemblance of it, and then persuade ourselves that this is what the Bible meant.

### **THE MEEKNESS OF CHRIST**

Jesus exercised his ministry from a position of weakness. (I use the term ‘weakness’ because meekness may both feel like, and look like, weakness, from a social or worldly point of view.) He grew up in Nazareth, a town scorned by strict Jews. He worked with his hands—i.e. as a commoner in Graeco-Roman terms. He conducted most of his ministry in Galilee, away from the main stream of Jewish life. He seemed to be quite free from the need to pursue famous connections. He never had the official backing of his nation’s leaders. He refused to create images of his own importance by making unreal claims or by resorting to force. He did not hide (for reasons of political expediency or professional detachment) his own feelings or what he had come to do. He was exposed and vulnerable, though not foolishly so. He not only forgave those who sinned against him, but announced beforehand that he would do so. He did not need to identify with the weakness of others as an outsider. He was weak—in worldly terms (see Matt. 11:29, 21:5, II Cor. 10:1, 13:4, Phil. 2:8). All of this stood in marked contrast to the

scribes and Pharisees who worked from an authority based on knowledge, status, and tradition (see Mark 1:17, 1:22).

I don't think it is helpful to say that Jesus took up the cause of the weak and despised, or the unjustly treated people of his day. That is, he did not take up their cause as defined by them (eg. Luke 12:13-15). But he did take up the concerns of all people. He related to each as having full dignity and responsibility. This often made him the friend of outcasts because he posed an alternative to Pharisaic oppression and snobbery (see Isa. 1 1: 1 -9, 61:1-4).

Jesus said he was 'gentle and lowly in heart'. Even as Israel's king, he rode humbly into Jerusalem (Zech. 9:9, Matt. 11:29 30, 21:5). This gentleness was not socially conditioned, as though Jesus was obligated to live dependently and compliantly. The apostle Paul suggests the nature of his meekness when he says that Jesus did not consider equality with God 'a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself. taking the form of a servant' (Phil. 2:5 8). In his case, meekness was simply the revelation of the Father's character and the spilling out of that into all of the tasks given to him to do amongst men.

As noted already, the fulfilling of these tasks left him socially vulnerable. It was then that he would offer up 'prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death' ( Heb. 5:7; 4:15). Being meek, for him, meant that he could not evade the tasks associated with his servanthood, or the people he had been sent to save, and that he felt in full measure the weight of it all, and that he sought the aid of God to accomplish his task.

## **THE MEEKNESS OF THE CHURCH**

Jesus taught that the meek were highly favoured because they would 'inherit the earth'. When Luke recorded the statement of Jesus about 'the poor in spirit', he wrote: 'Blessed are you poor...' and also 'Blessed are you that hunger now...' and 'you that weep now' (Luke 6:20-21). These things suggest that, in the case of sinful beings, meekness is induced by being socially disadvantaged in some way. A little thought must show that this is not so. Many socially disadvantaged people become arrogant or resentful rather than meek. They may become insipid people-pleasers, or whining pessimists. None of these people could be described as meek.

However, it must be acknowledged that the followers of Christ described in the New Testament were often other than the great and powerful. Jesus noted that it was 'babies' who understood his message, and that it was hard for the rich to enter the kingdom (Matt. 11:25, 19:23-30; also 9: ! 2). Paul observed that there were not many wise or noble amongst the converts at Corinth and recognised that it was important that it be this way 'lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power' (I Cor. 1:17-2:5).

One could say that there is no virtue in being weak or despised, except, perhaps, that it is more difficult to run from the reality of life and the awesomeness of human inadequacy. Likewise, we could say that there is no vice in being strong or well respected. The rich and the powerful are by no means excluded from the kingdom, but because they are so accustomed to having life the way they choose it to be, they may forget that their life is for the service of

God and their fellow creatures. They may not see how wretched and pitiable they really are because they cannot see their own need, and therefore cannot recognise the needs of others around them who call for their help. They may have forgotten what it is like to be needy. They would then have no fellow feeling with a Deliverer who lived his life for the meek of the earth. They would have no true understanding of their sin, or of God's anger with them, and so have no true idea of what the gospel was about (see I Tim. 6:17-19, Rev. 3:17-18).

### **THE NATURE OF MEEKNESS**

What then is the nature of a true human meekness?

First, meekness is the understanding that we are creatures, made by God as finite and dependent beings. Nothing could be clearer than that we are dependent, not only on God, but on one another. Our whole being cries out for the sustenance and the approval of God because without them, we are unable to live. We are also dependent, at every turn, on other people. We are made with aspirations and a calling too large to be fulfilled individually. In the church, this principle is spoken of in terms of a body where each part is dependent on the other. But all people have to acknowledge, in one way or another, the givenness of life, and their need to be subject to the wills and capabilities of others.

Secondly, meekness is the understanding that we are weak, morally weak, not just because of circumstances,

but because our failure to make the best of what was given to us. This can be felt at a personal level, but also at a cosmic level; that is, the shame of not being able to live agreeably and usefully together in the world. The apostle Paul refused to forget his early inability to discern that Jesus was the Messiah, and his (Paul's) persecution of the church. He estimated that, of himself, he could do no good thing. The parable of the generous employer, told by Jesus, raises the question as to whether any human being has ever earned his reward in God's kingdom. All should be deeply humbled if trusted with usefulness in the kingdom. As sinners, our strength will never be seen apart from our frailty, and it is important that we see our frailty, and that others see that we know our frailty. Only this can make us believable.

Thirdly, meekness takes the form of joy and gratefulness at the mercy of God, and because the matter of meekness is vital, we need to ask where we stand ourselves. True meekness is for us to receive the gospel in a childlike manner. It is to see Christ crucified in our place. It is greatly humbling for us sinners to have someone else suffer because we ignorantly yet culpably erred, and to see our shame and folly exposed in that way. It is more humbling again to know that kindness is reaching out to us through the suffering of Christ, and to know that that kindness is God's. Worldly strength recoils from such a prospect, but the meek are made glad (Mark 10:13-16, James 1:21 ). Meekness is found, not by defining it, but by experiencing it.

Fourthly, meekness is expressed as servanthood and obedience. Believers are wholly changed by the grace of Christ. If their greatest point of vulnerability (their guilt) can be dealt with so finally and graciously, they can trust God with everything else. The true source of their aggres-

sion or remoteness has been exposed and expunged. They are strongly quiet and confident and deeply involved in the welfare of the world (see Prov. 3:25-26, 14:26, Isa. 30:15, 57:15, Matt. 5:5).

Pagan writers before Christ had lifted up the virtues of the self-confident man, but Jesus congratulated those who were 'poor in spirit', mourning, and meek, not because they were that way, but because they would receive the blessings of the kingdom (Matt. 5:3-5).

So the meek are not those who are cowered before their fellow men, but those who have been humbled before God. They know the true meekness of living, as a creature in the Creator's world, as a saved person in the company of their Saviour, as a subject in the King's kingdom, and as a servant in a world of brothers. They have become sharers of God's nature as revealed by Christ.

Whole new dimensions of life are opened up. Things that registered before as 'put-downs'—grievances, humiliations, reversals—need no longer be felt as such (eg. II Sam. 16:11). Neither do they need to be tolerated as if it is the Christian's duty to do something about them. But their actions can arise from the call of God rather than as a reaction to evil. [Life can be viewed from the perspective of a servant—not as a lesser being than those served, but as one of God's people fulfilling the purpose for which he or she was made and called (see Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12, Titus 3:1-2, I Pet. 3:4). The opposite of selfishness is not, firstly, to live for others, but to live 'for him who for their sakes died and was raised' (II Cor. 5:15). Such meekness, arising as it does from the gospel, is also listed as part of the fruit of the Spirit. This means that it is only by living in those things which the Spirit shows us to be true that meekness is maintained (Gal. 5:22-23).

These descriptions of meekness make it clear that

meekness is first of all a humble relationship with God, but a relationship that has an 'overspill' into human relationships. Probably the major motivation of human beings is the need to be justified. If a person has acknowledged his weakness and received divine approval, the need for self-aggrandisement has been removed and one can come to terms with the need to live dependently also in a human scene. Meekness is certainly not compatible with self-justification. But where a person has been justified by faith, they can take their place alongside others, not with the right to have power, or the power to gain their rights. but with the poise to cease being an aggressor.

### **BE STRONG!**

The term 'boldness' may not be common today, but there are numerous examples in our society of people seeking to recover the confidence to act, and this is what I mean by the term. Some of the current attempts to be humanly strong can be seen in those who resist what they experience as oppression. Workers, and women, and whole nations, as well as many sub-groups, have learned to recognise and to rebuff the attempts of others to minimise their importance or to curtail their freedoms. Other attempts to be strong occur when people study how to make full use of their talents and opportunities and personalities. Assertiveness training is now widely provided to enhance personal development, and, of course, to increase commercial productivity.

I am not seeking to evaluate all of this, but to point out that ordinary people are seeing the need for confidence to

act, not only with regard to themselves, but with regard to others with whom they have social encounter. Clearly, there are elements of good and bad in any widespread phenomenon, and each situation should be evaluated in its context.

Our society, however, is very sensitive to aggression. Various writers have catalogued in detail the harm that has been caused by its various forms. We have also become sophisticated enough to want to ferret out personal sources of aggression, particularly when it may be an attempt to cover up a deep-seated insecurity or hostility which stems from another setting earlier in life. Anyone who is seen as over-confident or unreasonably assertive may be identified as covering up a personal deficiency. In many cases, this may have helped people to recognise and to protect themselves from the aggression of others. But an over-reaction is also possible. We may become so sensitive to the strength of other people, because of unreasonable fears, that we frustrate the development and encouragement of strength within a community.

Christians believe certain things about the human race which make confident speech and action essential.

Men and women have been made in God's image, and are responsible, under Him, for the creation. Life is not simply meant to happen to them; they are intended to joyfully share with God in shaping it.

All people, and not just special people, share in this call to greatness and destiny. Therefore boldness should be characterised by mutuality, each contributing what he or she has, rather than the strong lording it over the weak. This opportunity to contribute should be given rather than grasped. It should be a response of love rather than a reaction to exclusion, and be worked out communally rather than competitively. Where a person senses that they

have more to give than is allowed for in their present situation, they will need patience and love, but be insistent, nonetheless, in seeking to make their contribution to the welfare of others. Seeing restrictions may well be the stimulus needed to be creative and to find new ways to give of themselves.

Leadership is an integral part of the creation. This means that there are general authorities, designated as such by God, so that governors are responsible for the well-being of societies, fathers of homes, pastors of churches, and so on. They are not wholly responsible, of course, but they have vital services to perform. There are also special or personal authorities where responsibility is given to a specific person to carry out a task. The idea that all persons are equal and need equal opportunity cannot be true, and, in fact, is quite ridiculous. Some have an obvious capacity to lead. So whether we talk about those with the duty to lead, or those with a clear ability to lead, the fact of leadership remains. If those leaders don't lead, confusion and a sense of lostness inevitably develops. If others resent the lead given, they only frustrate themselves and hinder progress.

In broader terms, everyone has some responsibility for others—a need, not just to vaunt themselves, but to serve God in being all that they are called to be before God, and for their fellows.

The general failure of humans to fulfil these roles and duties has not altered the fact that God calls man to them, or the fact that man feels the weight of them on his conscience (for example, a father who will not discipline his child). The failure of authorities, in particular, has not changed the way in which the creation must function, and so the problems caused by bad leaders cannot be overcome by abolishing the principle or duty of leadership.

As part of the principle that God gives special duties to some, God gave to Israel the revelation of his purposes and character, he gave to Jesus the task of saving the world, and to the church the task of making this known. If the church or the world rejects this, the creation stumbles in confusion and does itself great damage. The church, in particular, must be continually rediscovering the truth which God reveals to her so as to be the world's true light and the modelling of life and society as God intended her to be.

### **THE BOLDNESS OF CHRIST**

It would have been inappropriate for Jesus to have taken the lead in human affairs that he did if the role of Messiah had not been given to him. He knew what he had to do, and also knew what he did not have to do. He was sent only to Israel; he could not arbitrate in a family quarrel; he could not lead his disciples into certain truths before time; he could not choose or even know the time of his return to the earth. He always lived under the authority of his Father. Correspondingly, Jesus was bold in his Father's presence—that is, he did not fear to come, nor did he fear to pour out his requests to his Father.

The boldness Jesus had before man was the overflow of his relationship with his Father. When he said he was the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one came to the Father apart from him, he was not lifting himself up by saying that the Father had put all things into his hands, including the power to grant eternal life. When he drove people out of the temple courts for misappropriation of

space and thievery, it was because zeal for his Father consumed him, and the will of his Father had been contravened. It was his servanthood and his calling to take action as Messiah.

## **THE BOLDNESS OF THE CHURCH**

It is always more difficult to relate to authority when it is mediated to those who have responsibility for oneself to people, moreover, who have many faults. However, authority has been delegated to the church, to go into the whole world, teaching peoples to do all that Jesus commanded.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus called certain men to him and said he would make them to be 'fishers of men'. Predictably, they took this to themselves as an honour and were presumptuous with regard to their personal status, their attitude to the public, and even their relationship with Christ (see Matt. 20:20-24, 19:13-15, Luke 9:51-55, Matt. 16:22-23). They needed to see that their boldness must relate only to the presence of the kingdom, announcing it, and conveying its blessings, and that it did not relate to their personal superiority. It was God's authority that should have made them bold, not their own; and God's authority was a gracious authority rather than a demanding one (see Mark 1:14-15). Not surprisingly, this boldness with meekness evaded them until after the death of Christ and until the coming of the Spirit. We must return to look at this problem later

because the church frequently forgets her true greatness and strives to make a greatness of her own.

On the day of Pentecost, however, this position was fundamentally changed. The apostles were confident of the truth, for themselves and for others. They did not see themselves as promoters of their own ideas. They had encountered the God of grace, and knew that they had a debt to all men to make it known (see Acts 4:13, 29, 31, 9:27. 29, 13:46. 14:3, 18:26, 19:8. 28:31. Rom. 15:15, 1 Thess. 2:2). This fact is confirmed when we see that they did not presume that they would always be bold enough, but prayed that they would be so, and that they would not allow the intimidations of powerful people to silence their testimony (see Acts 4:29-31. Eph. 6:19 20, Phil. 1:20).

The Spirit of God was given to them so that the truth of God was known to them by inward revelation, so that they would move in response to the will of God rather than in reaction to the problems around them, and so that the revelation would be revealed with all the certainty of grace. The courage they had was the courage of love. It is love which casts out fear. Their courage was not that of a competitor but of an ambassador. It was certainly not the easy superiority of those who know they have the means to effect their own ends. In the case of the apostles, their lives were at risk and God had not guaranteed that they would not suffer. They were not taking advantage of their own strong position.

On a number of occasions. biblical leaders are recorded as passing on instructions to their successors or assistants, and the theme of boldness emerges. Their experience had shown them that they must have considerable courage and directness or the forces of evil would rise up from within and without to pollute or overwhelm the people of God.

Moses told Joshua: 'Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land... Be not frightened, neither be dismayed...' (see Josh. 1:5 9; note also Num. 12:3).

David told Solomon: 'Be strong, and show yourself a man...' (I Kings 2:1-4).

Paul told Timothy: 'God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control' (II Tim. 1:6

Jesus encouraged his disciples in a similar manner. He said they were not to let their hearts be troubled, or cowardly, or timid (John 14:27). These quotes are limited so as to illustrate one point, but should be read in context to show in what matters boldness was urged.

Many things must be said to show in what manner the church is to be bold, but it must be clear at the outset that there is no excuse for failure of nerve when a task as large as the church's is at stake, nor, for that matter, when any task is given to a human being. Jeremiah was given words by God and told not to fear to utter them (Jer. 1:4 -10). Ezekiel was given a 'hard' face and forehead because the people to whom his message would be addressed were rebellious (Ezek. 3:7- 11).

Not least among the important tasks given to us is the raising of families. It is here in particular that many of our other battles are either lost or won. If a man and a woman will not act confidently with regard to their children—and particularly others -there is little chance that they will be capable of larger responsibilities. And the children will be deprived of sure foundations and enter into life with a limp. Current confusion over the roles of men and women may further emasculate our husbands and fathers. unless they can find their identity clearly.

One writer has suggested that struggle is part of the

creation as we know it, and that we can never do without a ‘disposition towards aggressiveness’, a ‘stimulus for the development of life’. He says: ‘Man is a being who does not acquiesce in existence as it is’ (Hendrikus Berkhof. *Christian Faith*. pp. 169f.). One needs to ask what object this aggression may be focused on. but. as already noted. the tasks before us in life will not always yield to reasoned argument and the exchanging of pleasantries. Certainly not in a world opposed to its Maker. We are all, irrevocably, involved in a struggle to make unity amidst diversity, order amidst chaos, peace amidst conflict, equality amidst indiscriminately spread resources. Most importantly. we have responsibility to demonstrate and proclaim truth amidst falsehood.

All of this will require boldness. We cannot live as though safety were our chief objective. nor its long-term counterpart, security. These are the occasional fruit of our struggles, but not our right. The tumults of a Davidic reign may yield the quietness of a Solomonic reign and the opportunity to develop wealth and culture. But if we fail to discern, and expose, and master the new ‘enemies’, any advantages gained are jeopardised. Risk is an integral pan of boldness. We can’t be sure what will happen. And it is meekness, of course, which allows us to see ourselves as servants of God and the truth and to say with Luther: ‘Here I stand. I can do no other.’

### **BUT—BEWARE!**

Those who presume to be bold with regard to anything but science and technology today, grasp a prickly nettle!

Some of the problems have to do with the directions society has taken, and others are the result of the church's own stance. We will not solve problems by analysis, but it is sensible to avoid confusion by knowing some of the influences at work in society, and to avoid arrogance by being aware of some of our own follies.

## Pluralism

A person who claims to have the truth in our present complaisant climate may be seen as an oddity. Many diverse viewpoints are now not only tolerated but seen as good and right for those who hold them. Os Guinness (*The Gravedigger File*, p. 106) describes the results of pluralism:

Slowly a whole generation grows shy of commitment, embarrassed by conviction. For the counter-cultural type, the order or the day was 'hang loose'; today's version is 'laid back'. For the religious liberal, the passwords are 'ambiguity' (never certainty) and 'reflections' (never revelation). The general result is the same. The search itself is the only truth. To be on the pilgrimage is the only progress. All else is yesterday's arrogance. passing out of the reach or the desire of today's thoughtful person.

## Secularisation

Secularisation has been described as 'vast assembly of plans and procedures, all carefully calculated and minutely controlled in which nothing is left to chance,—nothing is left to human spontaneity or divine intervention', a world in which people are, in spite of obvious gains, 'shut up to triviality' (Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File*, pp. 57.61). Reliance on the processes of science and technology

with their mind-staggering accomplishments, has left many doubtful if the truth about anything can be found except through scientific study and experiment. We call on 'experts', who differ among themselves, to advise us on the right way to go about everything. No one should object to the obvious benefits we have all received through science, but in being overawed by it, we surrender ourselves to a false deity. If we confine ourselves to the projections made from observations of our environment, we must then abdicate as its confident masters. If someone wants to say clearly why we are here, and what our duty is, he or she must not be dependent on science or technology.

### **Sectarianism**

We turn now to problems which the church has brought upon herself. Some Christian leaders have seen the faith in narrowly creedal or behavioural terms, and so defined the faith in a way which excluded other genuine believers. This has unnecessarily divided the church and presented a confusing face to the world. In some cases, it has also trivialised the gospel. The extent of this problem in Australia may be gauged by the common man's surprise, or even approval, when churches are seen doing anything together. Two of Australia's well-known novelists still record their disenchantment with the church because of its triviality. Maurice West was once a member of a monastic group where 'everything came pre-digested, pre-packed, stamped with the seal of authority which raised the most trivial or most tendentious opinions to the status of articles of faith' (the *Advertiser*, 6 August 1983, p. 27). Patrick White says that he and his friend stopped attending church 'after the rector of the day declared it

sinful to guess the number of beans in ajar at the annual church fete' (*Flaws in the Glass*, pp. 144-145).

No simple solutions to sectarianism are likely to be found, of course, but the church can minimise the problem by determining not to major on minor matters, either of biblical interpretation or of Christian practice. Issues will always arise, as they did in the early church, which must be decided according to each person's conscience. As Christians, we need, urgently, to be open to the Holy Spirit, who shows us the things of Christ, who is also the Spirit of unity, so that, together, we can refuse to argue over issues which are not central to our testimony, and to show our neighbours the truth without which we cannot live.

A false boldness may readily arise out of the need to defend our own position or party. This should rather be called a bluff cover for fear. It tends to build ghettos of self-protection rather than outgoing communities.

### **Authoritarianism**

A second area of criticism against the church is its authoritarian manner, still upheld in some quarters, but particularly evident in her treatment of the weak during the times of her strong influence over Western society. There is strength of a worldly sort, in status, or knowledge, or ability, or personality, or resources, or tradition, which can lead to boldness, of a worldly sort. Given the opportunity, the thirst for power appears in all of us. It can as easily take the form of religious fervour, or pseudo spirituality, as overt aggression. Such a boldness should be discerned as false and firmly discounted. God has revealed enough to the church to allow her to walk

confidently, but not enough to make her arrogant.

Related to the problems of authoritarianism is the church's association, at times, with civil authority, or her dependence on approval by external authorities. Christianity which has opted for an 'approved faith' (by civil authorities, academics, the religious establishment, or the latest poll) will not have any good news for the poor. They will be too busy courting their patrons. Or where the church comes, for any reason, to have power over people, or is identified with those who do, it is in grave danger of losing the context for a true boldness, the meekness of knowing one is subject to the needs and requirements of others. Early Australian history has left us with an unhealthy legacy of this sort, as has much of Western civilisation. The Australian historian, Manning Clark, when asked in an interview if intellectuals would explore Christianity more sympathetically in view of the weaker position of the church in Australia, said: 'Of course' (quoted in Bruce Wilson's *Can God Survive in Australia?* p. 48).

### **Democratisation**

The question arises: is boldness necessary at all? If one could devise the correct strategies, and use the techniques of Western democracies and of human management, should one have to take the risk of standing alone or of exposing one's zeal? This is related, of course, to the secularisation problem, but means, in this instance, that undue trust is placed in process for changing the way people live, rather than on the call of God to the consciences of persons.

Is it possible for the kingdom of God to be established

by foresight, clever management, and brilliant presentation? Can the problems that people have with authority, and the uncertainty felt by leaders, be overcome simply by ‘giving everyone a say’? This thinking appears to be prevalent. Of course, the accomplishment of great ends can be assisted by all these things, but dependence on them ignores the presence of evil in its many forms. It ignores the fact that the power of evil thrives on people’s unwillingness to become vulnerable. It ignores the stimulus to better work and alternative measures when an easy complicity is not forthcoming. It ignores, too, the fact of leadership mentioned earlier.

## **A PROBLEM FOR THE CHURCH**

Everyone who is eager to develop a relationship knows that friendship cannot be maintained by aggression. But acquiescent personalities are particularly aware of this. Their consciousness is so filled with the expectations and moods of people around them, that they sometimes forget what is important to themselves. In a similar manner, one could say that the church in the West has developed an acquiescent personality. The Bishop of London said recently ( 1982): ‘The Church today, having lost her nerve, shows at times an almost pathetic desire to be loved by the world’ (Quoted in *The Year 2000*, ed. John Stott, pp. 156f.).

Paul Tournier, in his *The Strong and the Weak*, says:

**We must recognise that in general the traditional Christian**

## THE MEEK AND THE BOLD

churches are more inclined in our day to the defeatist view; and it is for this reason that they have so little influence in a world which scarcely looks any longer to religion for an answer to the ills that beset it.

He quotes a Dr Dubois who claims to be an unbeliever. but says:

Religious faith could be the best preserver against the maladies of the world... if it were strong enough... In such a state of mind. unfortunately rare among right-thinking people, man becomes invulnerable. Feeling himself upheld by God. he fears neither sickness nor death.

None of the problems listed in the previous section need inhibit the church unless she chooses to have it so. That is not to say that some difficult problems will not remain. For example, in some places, timidity in talking about the faith is culturally patterned and inbred: suspicion of the church remains. But the church can rationalise her position and develop a stance which it may call meekness, but, in fact, may be a caricature of this, and an excuse for not facing the problems.

A meekness of human making may simply be an expression of the normal desire to be accepted, a desire not to be different from one's peers. It may be a running away from issues when they become painful. The church then needs to be pampered with recognition, to water down its truth, and to blame itself for any rejection by the world. Instead of being bold in belief and in declaration of the truth, the church poses as humble and keeps remote from contentious issues, quotes the opinions of worldly notables, equivocates ('this or that may be so'), defers to sincerity as being more important than doctrine (cf. Gal. 6:12-13). She develops a protected species mentality, thinking that everyone should care for the church, or a fortress mentality, using the church as a retreat. The

opinion of academics, or the findings of opinion polls, then have the power to make her doubt her own position.

Such a man-made meekness does not touch the spirit of the one who parades it; nor does it touch the consciences of those who observe it (see Col. 2:18, 23).

## **THE MANNER OF THE BOLD**

It would be impossible to prescribe patterns of behaviour that avoided all problems. Meekness and boldness are traits of character, not a code. Even more, they are the evidence of the presence of Christ forming his own character in persons as a response to all that life demands of them.

If the bold are bold, it must be for the benefit of the weak—that they may know the truth by which they can be bold before God and come to their true personhood. Boldness will be the fruit of the gospel, and portray the gospel in its action. Meekness assures the believer that he is not promoting himself, and so he is free in relating to others. His boldness is the power of love in action (II Cor. 6:3- 10), the simplicity of wisdom (Prov. 3:21 26), the uncomplicatedness of righteousness (Prov. 28: 1, James 3: 13), the eagerness of the forgiven (Ps. 51:10 13, Isa. 6:18), the irrepressibility of hope (II Cor. 3:12). He is confident of having true honour given to him by the Father and so is able to give what he has to others (Prov. 15:33.18:12.22:14.29:23). He is a true servant as was Christ (Matt. 20:25 28).

Boldness will be positive and confident in its overall

approach. Timidity may have ruled previously, but the kingdom breaks in on this to establish true confidence not a brassy reaction to timidity, not self-assertion or competitiveness, but the simple and joyful knowledge that the truth is true and that it is true in all circumstances. Such confidence is basically confidence in God's purpose to bless his people. Numerous examples could be given of biblical characters who overcame their natural fears through meditating on the promise of God (eg. Ezra 3:3, 7:28, II Tim. 1:6 7).

It may be observed that those whose upbringing has encouraged a sense of worth and capability have greater composure than others, Christian or otherwise. This may be so, but if a person comes to know the gospel, fear is dispelled. If they know the Father, they are secure. If they are filled with the Spirit, they are enabled to serve. All of this will certainly show itself in everyday life, and with time and faithfulness develop a genuine composure. However, such confidence can never be maintained humanly, as though it belonged to the believer. His true confidence is in dependence (eg. II Cor. 1:8-10). Religious certainty quickly becomes pious humbug when removed from the context of childlike trust in God.

Boldness will reflect the gentleness of Christ. It will not take pity on rebellion against God, but, by patience, reveal the long-suffering of God to those who are being saved (I Cor. 4:14 21, II Cor. 10:1-6). The latter passage reveals Paul defending his meekness against those who misrepresented his boldness. Paul's conflict with the Corinthians is an example of the complexity of exercising a strong ministry in a spirit of meekness (see I Cor. 4:21, II Cor. 1:15, 2:3, 7:16, 8:22, 10:1-2, 11:17, 21, 12:21). Gentleness may be called the outward action of the inner attitude of meekness. It has restoration in mind and is aware of

personal frailty, even while correcting (see Gal. 6:13, 2 Tim. 2:24-26. Also Acts 20:19, Phil. 3:4, 1 Thess. 2:1-8, 1 Tim. 6:11, Philemon. 8).

Boldness will be courteous and respectful, even to those who are evil- on the grounds that the believer has been treated compassionately (Titus 3:2).

Boldness will not deliberately cause disharmony or dissension, but work towards true unity. This will involve forbearance (Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12-15). Boldness will be exercised with wisdom, duly considering the many facets which go to make up a situation and the different persons involved (James 3:13). Love, with prayer, will be able to discern the time to act and the time to wait.

Boldness will extend inevitably at times to engaging specific issues. It cannot stop with a mere statement of principles (eg. John 2:14-17, Acts 6:10-7:60).

Boldness will be part of a commendable life that cannot easily be censured. Clearly, if a person is erratic or unreliable in life generally, their occasional flights of boldness will not be well received (see 1 Pet. 3:13-17).

Christian boldness must represent the kingdom of God rather than institutional expediency. The spoken word is very powerful, and if the people of God are to be truly helped, the word of the kingdom must not be tailored to the institutional requirements of churches. The same applies to evangelism. Its prime objective cannot be to raise the health of a nation, though, of course, that would be one of its consequences.

Boldness will not always be 'successful', and will feel the sting of rejection and rebellion. This is the moment in which true boldness will reveal its strength. It knows that the purpose of God is being worked out in the midst of turmoil and reversals. It must have been such a conviction which sustained Christ in the hours leading to his death.

In these times, the fact that boldness is nourished in meekness is apparent. and can continue to minister confidently to those who are open to the Spirit.

## **THE MAINTENANCE OF MEEKNESS**

In this sinful world, we are accustomed to seeing holy intent somewhat splattered with personal ambition or a nervous bluff. On many of these occasions, we may be content to acknowledge the ministry because the purity of the intent still shines through. We may also be familiar with cases of pure personal ambition disguised as holy intent. Many times, people's motives are not clear until a crisis provokes them to expose their very heart.

Despite all of these possible. and even likely, shades of grey, the need for boldness remains and the servant of Christ should seek to distance himself from all his petty insecurities and resentful reactions. He should welcome the help of his friends—and his enemies—who may help him to recognise these foibles, and ensure that they are dissolved by receiving the grace of Christ and the love of the Father.

God acts in all manner of circumstances to ensure that his gospel is proclaimed strongly by those who are meek. These circumstances may include the pressure of opposition (I Cor. 2: 1-5, II Cor. 1:8-9), personal failure (John 18:25-27, 21: 15-17, I Cor. 15:9, I Tim. 1: 15), and physical suffering (II Cor. 12:7-10).

Because believers are, first of all, passive recipients of the truth, they can never be insolent or haughty or unteachable (James 1:21). They should take steps to humble themselves under God to see that this remains so (Zeph. 2:3, Dan. 5:17-23; cf. Matt. 18:4, 23:12).

Meekness cannot remain as an inward state—it must flow out into all relationships. Meek people rejoice when they are humbled, and associate with those of no repute (James 1:9-11, 2:1-7), judge themselves so as not to be judged by God (I Cor. I 1:28-32, cf. I Cot. 4:4 5), remain expectant learners, and strive for unity (Eph. 4:13). They do not seek for wealth (I Tim. 6:9-11), and put no confidence in merely human resources (Ps. 118:8-9, Phil. 3:3).

## CONCLUSION

Meekness is, first of all, humility before the Father who justifies his children. Self-justifying meekness is a contradiction in terms. Meekness before God is the true prerequisite for all true living, and given the grace of God, there is none who should not gladly be meek before him.

Meekness then flows out into human relationships. The meek gladly keep the commandments of God regarding others, honour others as better than themselves, and serve them, because they are called by God to do so.

Boldness is, first of all, boldness before the Father, who chooses his people to be holy and blameless before him, and who desires them to ask for all that is necessary for life and godliness. Where this does not come first, human

boldness will demand from people more than is reasonable to expect.

Boldness then flows out into human relationships as the willingness to play one's full part in the family, the church, and the world, believing that God has given all that is necessary for the discharging of human responsibility. Neither the failures of the past, appearances of the present, nor fears of the future, will be permitted to inhibit one's service.

Paul was convinced that he had such an unpolluted boldness when he wrote to the Thessalonians:

... though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi... we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the face of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness, nor is it made with guile; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts (I Thess 2:2-4).

## APPENDIX

The English word 'meekness' is defined as 'not easily angered, mild, patient', or, 'submitting tamely when ordered about or injured by others' ( *World Book Dictionary*).

In the Old Testament, 'meekness' originally signified distress, helplessness, or a servant status in society. It also came to indicate the spiritual quality of patient submission, or humility before God in particular. Those who were meek, therefore, thought deeply on the promises of God. Regardless of their outward circumstances, they had

great hope in God, and therefore, of course, personal dignity. This hope included the judgement of those who prospered by their own evil in the present. To be deprived did not inevitably lead to meekness. Deprivation may have been the context, but never the cause of meekness.

The Greeks had a word for meekness which meant 'gentle' or 'pleasant' (it is related to our word 'friend'). It was used to convey an active acceptance of unpleasant circumstances or people, as distinct from mere resignation. Among Greeks, gentle friendliness was highly prized as a social virtue, but with reservations. It did not need to include all people, and certainly did not have lowliness in mind. It conveyed the calmness of the self-consciously cultured and wise person in the face of abuse. Pagan writers generally showed greater respect for the self-confident man.

New Testament writers used the Greek word for 'meekness' but with its Old Testament flavour of lowliness of life and submission to God, and including, also, a gentle and forgiving attitude towards others.