

PAUL COX

SIGNS ALONG THE WAY

A group course for exploring the Christian journey



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Introduction

When making a journey to a new destination by car or on foot it is helpful to have some guidance as to the direction in which to head and the possible difficulties that may be faced. Although we have new technical aids such as satnavs, even these on occasion can send people to the wrong place. So when planning a journey and during its undertaking we might turn to maps and guides, and if we are using the highway we need to be aware of the Highway Code and look out for helpful signs.

Life as a Christian is often spoken about as a pilgrimage or a journey of faith, and this too needs a guide book and aids. It would be simple just to say that the Bible is the guide book and to expect every Christian to use it on their journey. But the Bible requires some explanation, and some help in making best use of it, just as reading a map is a skill that needs to be acquired and practised.

In this book we will take some of the road signs used in the Highway Code, as well as others, and find that the Bible gives us its own version as a guide to how we might best live the Christian life following the signs along the Way.

In the Highway Code there are three types of signs: those which give orders that have to be obeyed and of which disobedience will be punished, those which give instructions and those which give advice or warnings. In this book we shall be considering examples of all three types.

For road users, the Highway Code acts as a necessary guide as to how we may make our journey safely. To journey along the Way of faith we need to be open to God and be sensitive to the signs along the Way. Reading the Bible and

prayer are the necessary means of enabling this, and there are also signs in what we encounter in others. As we journey prayerfully, some of these signs are merely nudges in our thinking. But they can happen at any time. A sentence read, a statement heard on a news flash, a passing comment made by a friend in a conversation: each of these, and many others, can be signs we need to note. They come as the gentle whisper of God, a mere breath, the Holy Spirit. These are the signs that may be as significant as traffic lights, making us stop, reflect, obey. Or they may be signs that advise when we are following the right Way but need specific guidance.

This course is aimed primarily for use in small groups of about a dozen people, but it could also be used for individual study. Each chapter provides information and discussion questions for a session that might last an hour and a half. It will be helpful if each session has a leader to facilitate the discussion to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and that the group neither gets bogged down nor slides over important contributions that need further exploration. The leader could be different for each session, if you wish. It will be helpful if all members of the group read through the chapter before the group session takes place. Some members may find that they wish to bring to a session and share particular thoughts or illustrations that fit in with the main theme presented by the chapter.

The group is envisaged as being relatively small so the choice of venue may be more appropriately a home rather than a church hall. But it is wise not to feel too cramped for space, as this can feel just as daunting as too large a room. It might be considered helpful to encourage a friendly atmosphere by having refreshments before the sessions begin. Some groups following courses of a few weeks such as this decide to share

a meal before the final session. The book provides an outline structure and ideas for discussion, and it is for each group to use what is offered in their own way and with imagination, using the various gifts and experiences that each member brings to the group.

Each session opens with a short period of reflection based upon sentences from a variety of Psalms, and short Bible readings.

Session 1: Choosing a destination – starting at the end

Session 2: Dead end or one way

Session 3: Trouble ahead – not an easy route

Session 4: Children and old folk – watching out for others

Session 5: Traffic lights and signals – obeying and listening to God (Psalm 119:1-8)

Session 6: Gradient – a slippery slope or a climb to Calvary

To ponder

The key by Amaryllis Bell¹

I thought I had my life mapped out.

A little dull, maybe, but safe.

Full of small duties, small rewards,
worthy ideals and worthy recompense.

Then you turned up.

Shattered my illusions, my complacency,
uncovered all the things I had been hiding
even from – especially from – myself.

You started to repair the cracks

I had been busily papering over;
to awaken the dreams and ideals,

I thought I had long buried.

1. A. Bell, *Aspects of Faith*, Arrival Press, 1992.

Session 2

Dead end or one way



Aim

To consider that the way we think about our end influences how we make our journey.

Preparation⁶

Voice 1: I said, ‘I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue;

Voice 2: I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse.

Voice 1: Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.

Voice 2: You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.

Voice 1: Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil.

Voice 2: And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.

6. Verses selected from Psalms 39, 90.

- Voice 1:** Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears.
- Voice 2:** For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears. Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more.'
- Voice 3:** You turn us back to dust, and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.' For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.
- Voice 4:** You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.
- Voice 3:** For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.
- Voice 4:** The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.
- Voice 3:** So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands.
- Voice 4:** O prosper the work of our hands!

Short readings

Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors. *Proverbs 1:19*

For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves, 'Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades.

Wisdom 2:1

Session 5

**Traffic lights and signals –
obeying and listening to God**

(Psalm 119:1-8)

Aim

To consider how we deal with commandments of God.

Preparation¹⁴

Voice 1: Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

Voice 2: My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.

Voice 1: I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.

Voice 2: Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O saviour of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.

Voice 3: The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts;
so I am helped, and my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.

Voice 4: Guard me as the apple of the eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings.

Voice 3: To you, O Lord, I call;
my rock, do not refuse to hear me.

Voice 4: Hear the voice of my supplication,
as I lift up my hands towards your most
holy sanctuary.

14. Verses selected from Psalms 17, 28.

Short readings

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

1 Kings 19:11-12

Now a word came stealing to me,
my ear received the whisper of it.
Amid thoughts from visions of the night,
when deep sleep falls on mortals,
dread came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones shake.

A spirit glided past my face;
the hair of my flesh bristled.

It stood still,
but I could not discern its appearance.

A form was before my eyes;
there was silence, then I heard a voice:

'Can mortals be righteous before God?

Can human beings be pure before their Maker?' *Job 4:12-17*

Spend a few moments quietly thinking about these short readings.



There are road signs that do not give a choice – they are commands, not advice. There are quite a lot of them and we need to see them as we journey along. They will be our guides to our own safety, and that of others. By and large they are there for mutual benefit – commands to be obeyed. Ignoring them may lead us to judgement and punishment.

The word ‘command’ is to be found in both the Old and the New Testaments. Although the Ten Commandments are most commonly associated with Moses, the first five books of the Bible are called the Books (Law) of Moses and contain more than 600 commandments. By the time of Jesus these had been further interpreted, and the Pharisees were trained in the Law and were most rigorous in keeping to it. Obedience of the Law was, for them, the way to righteousness.

If there are too many laws, we can be confused – but our own confusion and even ignorance of the law do not exonerate us from guilt when we break the law of the land. Neither did it for the Jews.

St Paul distinguished between being justified by living according to the Law and by living according to faith:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh

I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Galatians 2:15-21

We have a contrast between the laws that Moses announced and the commands that Jesus gave us. Many of the former are negative in format: ‘Do not . . .’. By contrast, Jesus’ commands are mainly positive: ‘Love God’, ‘Love your neighbour’. The negative approach is highly prescriptive and inevitably produces a large number of laws to endeavour to cover every eventuality. The positive approach provides guidance about keeping to a standard but feels more persuasive than an order. There is a sophistication about Jesus’ commands that is missing in the style of Moses.¹⁵

A personal story: As a young churchgoer, the services I attended included the reciting of the Ten Commandments followed by confession of our sins, often prefaced by the priest saying that we were confessing how we had broken those commandments. At the age of six I did not know how they applied. What was I to confess? I loved my parents, I hadn’t stolen anything, nor had I murdered anyone, and I did not know what adultery meant! I was being made to feel guilty about sins that were not mine.

As adults we may know something about the laws but can keep ourselves from committing illegal acts largely by doing what is right and not by just avoiding doing what is wrong. But that does presuppose that we have knowledge and acceptance of what is right and what is wrong.

In our journey of faith we should be aware of the signs that give us commands. Signs may not be just seen but also

15. For a fuller treatment of the contrasts between Law and the gospel see chapter 8 of Paul Cox, *A Day Away*, Kevin Mayhew, 2012.

heard – such as the sound made at a pelican crossing when it is safe for pedestrians to cross. Our conscience is such a sound signal. It is that subtle prompting that gives us pause to consider what we are about to plan, do or say. It is a sound signal that may be advice like the signs SLOW or GIVE WAY. If we are open to God in our lives then that voice of conscience may be his prompting, but it will also be based upon much that we have learnt from family and society as we have grown up.

Question 1: Are ‘positive’ commands less or more demanding than ‘negative’ laws? Choose some examples and discuss them.

Question 2: Consider times when you have responded to your conscience. Do you think it was of God? How did you know? If you are willing, share your experience with the group.

When Moses was given the Ten Commandments, it was at a time when the Hebrews were socially a largely disorganised group of tribespeople wandering in a strange land. As well as learning about their God, who they were to come to know as the only true God, they were to learn that their social cohesion would be greatest if they followed the will of their God as proclaimed to them by Moses and Aaron (and later the Levites). This would be a long process that would continue into the time of the prophets and down to the present day.

For Christians, the will of God has been more fully and explicitly expressed in a very profound way in the person of Jesus. It is in the Books of Moses (the Pentateuch) that we see the growing awareness of living under God where the

better. St Paul spoke about this, and he claimed that his difficulty was of Satan and not of God:

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Beware of fallen rocks



The boulders along the way might themselves be seen as temptations. They block our careful keeping to God's will, but boulders are clearly visible and obvious. More subtle is a gradual increase in the gradient that acts as a temptation. An easy example would be the telling of a lie. Small enough, perhaps, on its own, but once told it has to be repeated or lived out more completely. The gradient is steepening and the burden of guilt is making the climbing more difficult. There is only one way to find relief, and that is confession and repentance.

For Christians of some denominations, the making of their confession is a part of the Church's teaching and is a common practice before a priest. For other Christians, to confess in personal prayer to God is seen as all that matters. Confession has to be authentic, a result of real soul searching and an acceptance that we cannot hide anything from God, and we should not try to hide anything from ourselves. Confession is our acknowledgement of what we have done

that is sinful, that has gone against God's will. We are not telling God; we are opening ourselves to honesty and humility before God.

It is very easy to think that our own circumstances are special, unique. No, they are not – although they may be new to us! Nor should we think that the steepness we are facing is greater than we can manage:

No testing [temptation] has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:13

Question 4: What does the quotation from 1 Corinthians 10:13 say to you? How does it affect your understanding of temptation? What might you expect to be the ways out that God provides so that you can endure temptations?

'There is a green hill far away, outside a city wall.' These familiar words remind us that Calvary is up a slope. It is not a slope of temptation. It is not a slope strewn with boulders. It is a part of the Way. Calvary is an essential part of the wonderful story that is the Christian faith.

Calvary is not pleasant. But it cannot be avoided. The joy and celebration of Easter Day cannot deny the cruelty and the death of Good Friday. Yet, there is a growing trend to avoid Good Friday and the cross of torture and pain, of agony and dying. In my childhood I remember shops and factories closing on Good Friday, but that is not common today. Church attendance figures show congregations that may be quite large on Palm Sunday and even larger on Easter Sunday, but they are small for services on Good Friday. Yet we need to accept that our journey of faith on the Way

includes climbing to Calvary and making real for ourselves what God has done for us in Jesus. God took to himself all that leads to eternal death, took to himself the giving in to temptations and the sin. He drew it all to himself. That which separates us from God (sin) was bridged by God, expressed in Jesus' death.

Theologically, this is complicated and difficult for us to completely comprehend. It is given the title of 'atonement theology'. The cross is both a real act in time and place experienced by humanity and also a symbol of what God has done for us. It is a great gift offered to us. If we symbolically come to Calvary we are acknowledging and accepting that gift. We are accepting eternal life. Some people will use the symbolic act of climbing to Calvary as a part of their own spirituality and expression of their submitting their lives to Christ. So they say that they will 'take it to the foot of the cross'. The 'it' may be the burden they feel is pressing upon them. 'It' may be a guilt that they acknowledge. Their journey of faith along the Way uses the cross as a signpost to Jesus and of God's love.

Calvary (or the cross) is not the destination of the journey, although for some it may be at the start of their journey. Calvary is on the Way. Further on is not just Jesus' resurrection but also the new life of eternity that is our destination. It is a destination that is both our hope in this world and our joy in the world to come.

Question 5: Discuss the way you use Calvary and the cross in your own spirituality. What does it mean to you?

Question 6: How do you balance your own responsibility in 'climbing the gradients' of your faith journey with your dependence upon Jesus to lift the burdens?

Question 7: Read through the words of the hymn ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’. In a few moments of quiet, consider what this means to you and then share your thoughts with others in the group.

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
spreads o’er his body on the tree;
then I am dead to all the globe,
and all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.¹⁸

18. Isaac Watts (1674–1748) (Public Domain)

Prayer

Lord God, as we travel along our journey of faith, we do not always find the path easy:

through ignorance we can wander from its path;

through accepting temptations we can try to avoid the rugged and steeper way;

through selfishness we can fail to help others.

Lord Jesus,

to your cross we come in penitence;

in acknowledgement of our sins we repent;

in supplication we ask for your forgiveness.

Holy Spirit,

reveal God's will to us;

strengthen our resolve against sinning;

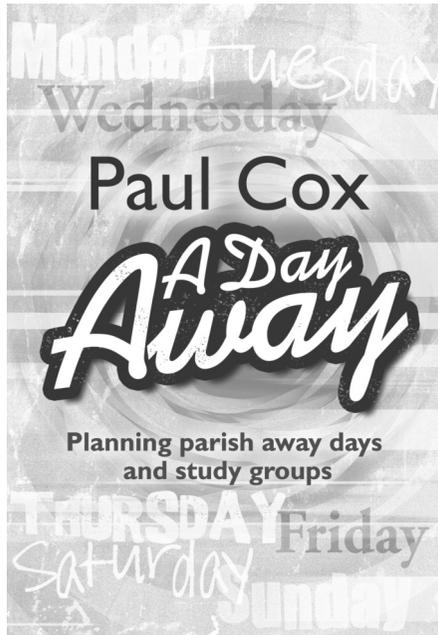
increase our love for all.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Let us go in the love and guidance of our heavenly Father.

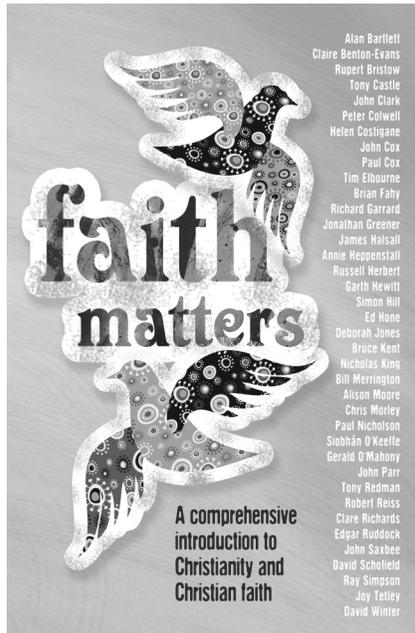
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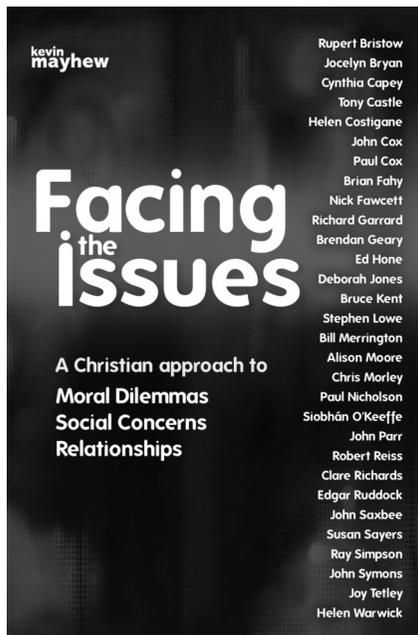


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