

Are GAFCON (The Global Anglican Future Conference) and the GMC (The Global Methodist Church) on the Right Path?

Revd Dr David G Palmer,

Research Paper for presenting at the Queen's Foundation, 18th November 2025

GAFCON and the GMC share similar views on human sexuality, the ordaining of LGBTQ+ clergy and same sex marriage. Their basic premise is that their churches have wandered from biblical truth. They want the Bible to have central place 'again'. Many, in both organisations, believe also that women should not be appointed bishops. Currently, GAFCON positions itself within the world-wide Anglican Communion and, while the GMC splits from the UMC (the United Methodist Church of the USA), it still promotes itself as a Methodist Church. It is estimated that there are 85 million Anglicans in the world and 80 million Methodists.

In my paper, we will be looking at how GAFCON and the GMC view the Bible and asking if scholarship can play a part in reconciling Christians.

THE FIRST PART:

Anglicans have long recognised the importance to understanding - of the Bible, Tradition *and* Reason. Methodists have added a fourth, Experience, and made a square of the triangle. This square can be viewed as a wrestling ring in which a person wrestles with what comes at them from each corner; I don't see it as a wrestling ring in which fellow believers, as such, wrestle each other. See Appendix A:



I use this model to help me in my understanding of the biblical writers' methods of thinking as they created their compositions for a mainly non-reading audience, experienced in listening and in memorising as the reader/reciter presented a text. Here, we take a look at Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 where he answers questions put to him by members of his church in Corinth. It is in his answering that he reveals his thought processes as well as his writing style.

This section of Paul's letter is actually introduced in 6.12-20, includes 7.1-40 and ends with 8.1-13. We note that this section, therefore, begins at 6.12 with a reference to (what was?) a commonly-known saying: 'Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial.' (The parallel section in Paul's letter begins in exactly the same way at 10.23. Paul's letter is chiasmic, even Homeric in its construction, like the *Iliad*.) This section's introductory part, 6.12-20, focuses much on 'the human body'. (For convenience, I'm reading from the NIV.)

In 7.1-7, though Paul says it is better not to marry, he acknowledges a role for marriage, given his understanding (his experience and reasoning and that of everyone else?) of people's bodily needs. He says (he reasons?), it is as 'a concession', not as 'a command'. But he wishes still that all were like him (his experience is that he is free of such need?). Each person, he reckons, is who he is, she is, they are, because they have received their *state of being* as a gift from God. (There's a door open here to new interpretation.)

In vv. 8-9, *to the unmarried and the widows*, he says, 'I say..., stay unmarried as I am, but better marry than *burn with passion*'. In the Greek, the word is *πυρροῦθαι*, from *πυρρῶ*, meaning 'to burn', here meaning 'being inflamed with desire'.

In vv.10-11, *to the married*, he says, 'I give this command', but then, 'no not I, but the Lord...' (He is reading Old Covenant scripture *and* reasoning too?)

In vv.12-16, *to the rest*, he says, 'I say this', but then, 'I, not the Lord...' he writes on belief and divorce in his terms, 'I say this (I not the Lord)...'

In vv.17-24, he argues that the Lord has assigned each person their place in life; God has called them to it; and each is to stay as they are. (Is this Paul's tradition, the teaching of the Pharisees?)

In vv.25-31, 'About virgins' he has no command from the Lord, but gives his own judgement 'as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy'. He is persuaded by 'the current crisis' to say what he says to 'marrieds' and 'unmarrieds'. (He reasons.) He goes on to say his advice is given 'because the time is short'. What he is experiencing in the world in which he travels persuades him an end is coming to life as they know it. People will be tested to remain devoted to the Lord. (He writes before the coming Jewish Wars, the Fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. His advice is clearly for that time.)

In vv.32-40, he wishes his readers/listeners to be free from concerns... and as he finishes, he reflects on scripture and the traditional practice of his day before saying that he *believes* he 'has the Spirit of God'.

In all of his statements, Paul employs scripture, tradition (as it was known to him, a Pharisee?), reason and experience. He demonstrates, even, what all the writers of the biblical texts did, as they built their compositions for reading aloud, to instruct their folk on things they needed to know in their era and time. But this passage, I Co. 7, I maintain, is a good place to go to fathom how Paul might have us reason with the same topics today, given what we experience and understand now about human sexuality and how bodily desires affect us all, including those of us who are LGBTQ+.

The question becomes: Today, should we follow the text as it is, as GAFCON and the GMC want us to, or should we follow the method of the writer, to be like him and to be relevant like him in our time?

We may identify the three-legged stool of Anglicanism and the four cornered quadrilateral of Wesley, but Anglicanism and Methodism (*and* Pentecostalism) all uphold the doctrine of *prima scriptura*, whereas the formal principle of Protestantism, in terms of both Lutheran and Reformed traditions, is *sola scriptura*. To the latter, the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice. To the Catholic Church, of course, this is heresy. Scripture and tradition are equal. Differences appear across the board! The churches that have separated the Bible's writers from those that have followed them have built themselves unnecessary obstacles to understanding that undermine Christian unity. The Bible's writers were human beings just like us, weren't they, who were seeking their inspiration from God? Shouldn't scholars encourage GAFCON and the GMC to see this?

THE SECOND PART:

We now ask if the Bible is what GAFCON and the GMC say it is? We will ask also: is its rightful place central to the generating of the Christian Church and its Faith? Models will be explored. The best definition of the church that I have come across is that it is 'a circle with a centre and no circumference'. And my own best definition of the life of the church is that it is our 'IOU to God'.

We read in the literature of both GAFCON and the GMC that they want the Bible 'to have central place *again*'. GAFCON says it is steadfastly orthodox. GMC claims the same, in Methodist terms. Both stand by the founding principles and doctrines of the church which are rooted in Scripture. GAFCON appeals to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal, the GMC, more likely, to the Twenty-five Articles John Wesley presented, while an Anglican of course, in his Prayer Book of 1784. Both GAFCON and the GMC decry revisionists who would have the Church move away from its Bible-based roots and allow western secularism to dominate its world view.

With sorrow, GAFCON received the announcement of the appointment of Dame Sarah Mullally as the next Archbishop of Canterbury: 'the appointment abandons global Anglicans'. The Church of England is an already split Communion and now it has chosen a leader who will further divide it! Earlier Archbishops of Canterbury have failed to guard the faith. The office can no longer function as a credible leader of Anglicans, let alone as a focus of unity. The majority of the Anglican Communion, they say, *still believes* that the Bible requires a male-only episcopacy. And they do not like what their new Archbishop of Canterbury has said already - about marriage and sexual morality. GAFCON is needed, they say, 'to guard the faith' and the 'plain and *canonical* sense' of Scripture and 'the Church's historic and consensual interpretation' of it.

Both GAFCON and the GMC draw their beliefs about the Bible, they would say, from the Bible itself. To them, Biblical teachings demonstrate harmony rather than contradiction. The Bible Hub (Google it) declares that the different epochs of biblical history illustrate distinct aspects of who God is and what He requires. Yet these aspects, they say, do not contradict one another; they align comprehensively. Every progressive step of revelation retains respect for what came before, building upon it while advancing understanding. Any interpretation of Scripture remains anchored in the confession that all of it is God-

breathed and consistent within itself (see 2 Timothy, 3.16, of course). Each stage in the revelation reveals the same God inviting humanity into a covenant relationship with Him. Furthermore, the coherence of scriptural texts is reinforced by historical manuscripts and corroborating archaeology.

But the Bible is not oven-ready, is it? As a collection of works, written over long ages, it mystifies many today as it always has done. People do discern contradictions and difference all over the texts. In Sri Lanka (between 2000-2005) I produced and used a document, 'One-hundred-and-one Reasons Why I Don't Believe in the Inerrancy and Infallibility of the Scriptures'. It was a challenge to many.

And the Bible is not yet the helpful presenter of its texts that it could be! (See my latest book¹.) Bible presentations today still ignore the creative workings of the writers who wrote to the rules of composition in their era - to enable readers and listeners as well as all memorisers, to understand and appreciate *their* divisions and sub-divisions and so read their texts in the ways *they* intended. Keep with the Bible as it is today and no one in the next generation will be reading the texts as their writers wanted them to. 'Chapter and verse' stand in the way. Editorial sub-divisions and sub-titling too - destroy the writers' presentations. In my first book, *Sliced Bread*², in 1988, I drew attention to this, but to date few leading scholars have taken any notice. My doctorate on Mark in the 1990s opened up the subject still more³. In my latest summary on Mark (Appendix B), I expose the writer's (writers') plan:

MARK'S GOSPEL: the Writer's Conceptual Approach and Choice of Arrangement:

TITLE: 'A Beginning'

PROLOGUE: 'Jerusalemites and Judeans' are repenting; Jesus, God's Son, is 'called' and receives the Spirit; in turn, he calls disciples ('2' plus '2' brothers);

FOUR SERIES OF SEVEN DAYS:

SERIES A: Jesus' fame spreads quickly abroad because of his **authority** (in teaching) and his **power** (over evil, sickness, nature and death); demons know who he is.

SERIES B: Through the prophet Jesus, **BREAD** is provided for all; no one gets to eat scraps anymore (as gentiles did 'from the tables of the Jews'); all now get to eat BREAD from Jesus' hands.

SERIES B': As the Christ, Jesus holds a **CUP OF SUFFERING** which will be his followers' too; like him, they will not go to glory without facing suffering.

SERIES A': Jesus' **authority** is challenged; his death in **weakness** is 'a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'; he is 'Christ our Passover, sacrificed for us'; Jesus is also the temple's replacement; the centurion knows who he is.

EPILOGUE: Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (from whom he had cast out '7' demons); he joins with '2' on the road; then he joins with his disciples and commissions them; those who 'believe and are baptised will be saved'.

Mark's Gospel was written in the way that it was because of the events of AD 70. It was based on Paul's writings of the 50s and 60s. It's the meanings of the stories that are important. Here, Creed is set to story. Jesus' clearing of the temple is story. Because the gospels are stories, when they are re-presented their details are easily changed....

The writer chose to write in the ABB' Style of writing. For the Four Series of Seven Days he chose a Homeric Arrangement, ABB'XABB', in which X represents the Turning Point Day between Jesus' Days of Completing the Old Covenant and Jesus' Days of Establishing the New Covenant. For his Epilogue, he chose an Aristotelian approach.

© David G Palmer, 30.3.2025

As we read the Gospels in their order of production, we see how text begat text, how one idea led to another. I have summaries of Matthew, Luke and John which show how each writer in turn raised new ways of interpreting and understanding the good news. Given also the earlier letters of Paul, we have at least five theories of 'atonement' in New Testament terms. We have several different ways of defining Jesus' personhood. Paul's earlier letters informed the gospel writers. The gospels, in turn, provoked further letters. Three of them (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) argued they were myths. Another (2 Peter, the last to be included in the canon of scripture) argued they were histories. Paul established the first

¹ David G Palmer, *Challenging New Testament Scholarship, The Texts*...., 2023

² David G Palmer, *Sliced Bread*...., 1988

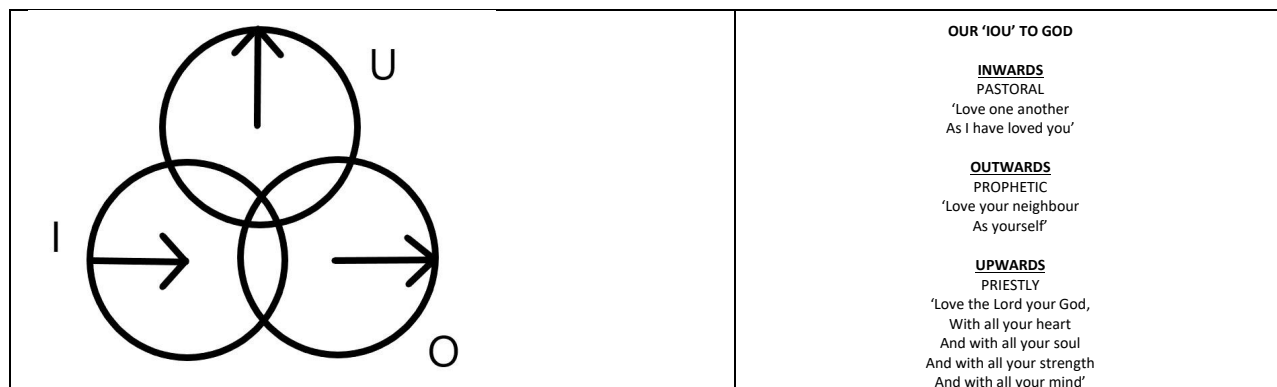
³ David G Palmer, *The Markan Matrix*.... 1999 and *The Gospel of Mark: Chapter and Verse* 2023

set of ideas about the Christian Faith; the gospel writers the second set and the pseudo- and later letter writers the third. The collection left readers to choose. Or it left them confused!

If the Bible is to be helpful to its readers, there is a good case for restructuring not only the presentations of the texts to the writers' requirements in both Testaments, but the way, therefore, that they are arranged as 'the books'. Paul's Letters should, surely, open the New Testament? This way, readers would the more likely see that the big events in the late 60s and in AD 70 gave impetus to new writings and new interpretations of God's doings in his world. When under the Romans, Jerusalem fell and the second Temple with it, so a new phase began in the church's understanding of Jesus, as in 722 BC, when under the Assyrians, the Northern Kingdom fell and in 587 BC, when under the Babylonians, Jerusalem and its Temple fell and the prophets and the law writers saw what they were called to do.

For good reason, the writer(s) of Mark's Gospel chose to present *the sun setting on the old Sabbath of the Old Covenant* at the opening of his gospel's narrative and *the sun rising on the new Sabbath of the New Covenant* at it closing. Events in biblical times moved writers to reconsider and interpret afresh what God was doing in His world. And since those times, happenings in the world and developments in science have had their undoubted impact too on human thought and behaviour. Happenings include the holocaust, wars, international charters and the like. For developments in science consider the pill. It has been the leading factor in women being able to take their place in the world in new ways. And I just have to mention 'dinosaurs'. Their phenomenal existence of nearly 200 million years requires us to add to Barth's (Karl Barth's) thesis on patience being essential to God's existence and character.

We read in the scriptures that pastors, prophets and teachers are needed in the church. Why is that, we ask? The scriptures, themselves, are not *oven ready*. Laid down in the name of the Old Covenant and then later, in the name of the New at its beginning, these texts give us, at best, only a model to follow. The texts are the 'wrestling results' of the writers of earliest Christianity, still waiting to be read and understood in the way they were intended. For my own best definition of the life of the church, I bring scripture, tradition, reason and experience together in the model, 'Our IOU to God'. (See Appendix 3)



As I say at the top of this section of my paper, the church can be likened to ‘a circle with a centre and no circumference’. **The Bible has to give way to Jesus at its centre, hasn’t it? The church has to give central place to Him; anything other than this is not Christianity, is it? Putting the Bible at the heart of the Church would be *bibli-olatry*, wouldn’t it?!**

THE THIRD PART:

I first heard about Progressive Revelation in a disparaging way at Bible College in the late 1970s. I was told at All Nations Christian College that it was not to be entertained because God’s Word was inspired (God-breathed), inerrant and infallible, every bit of it. At Theological College, at Cambridge University, I learned differently. And because of my ever closer reading of the Bible’s writers, I could see for myself how text begat text as the writers sought to help their readers and hearers understand the influence of the events and happenings of the times in which they lived. As it was with the Old Testament, so it was with the New. So, hasn’t progressive revelation stayed with us - over the last two-thousand years?

Paul’s Letter to the Romans is his Good News, his Gospel. He says so in his introduction. Mark’s Gospel, in turn, gives this good news a narrative. To Mark’s narrative, Matthew’s adds five blocks of teachings (of new law). Luke changes and restructures the contents of Matthew’s and provides a central eleven-part, chiastically organised catechism: What must I do to inherit eternal life? How am I to pray? Where is the Kingdom of God to be found, etc? John’s draws from all three earlier gospels and presents a Homerically arranged set of Christological portraits. The gospels begin in the telling of the first with Jesus’ baptism; in the second, with a genealogy linking Jesus to Abraham; in the third, linking Jesus to Adam and God; and in the fourth, introducing Jesus before creation. Many, here, would identify progressive revelation. The writers got there in the end, we might say, but left us a succession of worthwhile possibilities along the way.

Progressive revelation is viewed by both liberals and evangelicals alike as the unfolding over time of God’s revelation. God reveals his will in successive stages, where each stage is founded upon and further illuminates the earlier stages. To evangelicals progressive revelation is not an *evolution* of religion and doctrine, but that may be due to the dislike of many of them of the word, ‘evolution’! They say, God did not present Moses with a complete systematic theology, but He did in ‘nutshell’ form lay out, in the Law, all the *basic truths* of the Bible. Liberals will point out, however, that there is no continuity between the Old Covenant and the New when the New turns its back on one of the greatest doctrines of the Old, the one that places its people in a Promised Land, a piece of the planet Earth - that God has given to ‘His People’ in perpetuity. Rather, the New Testament promotes citizenship elsewhere, indeed a great ‘difference’ away, in Heaven! Disjunctions like this in the revelation have to be recognized. *They* cannot be glossed over. Paul’s revelation in Philippians about our citizenship is awesome! Thank God for the New Covenant!

A CONCLUSION:

We may all agree that the most important features of the Christian Faith were laid down in the period prior to the establishing of the Biblical Canon. The Council of Nicaea itself (in AD 325) may appear to have nailed many teachings to the floor in giving Constantine's Roman Empire a ready-prepared (*microwavable*) Faith, yet its creed excluded many! Bible writers who had made their individual points could be considered to have been excluded, writers, that is, like the writer (or writers) of Mark's Gospel who presented Jesus as an ordinary man coming from an ordinary family (Mk. 3.21) in a backwater of a town.

The Sixth World Conference of the World Council of Churches on Faith and Order met recently in Egypt and it followed, we read, in the footsteps of the first ecumenical council of 325. It addressed the damage that resulted when the western church decided from 1582 to use the Gregorian Calendar and the eastern church stayed with the Julian Calendar: since that time, of course, Easter has been celebrated on different dates. In trying to make good this difference, therefore, this Sixth World Conference has shown again, I think, a damaging interest in uniformity. There will be no unity *within* our churches or *between* our churches without an *acceptance* and a *celebration* of diversity.

We thank God for Constantine, but it is no longer the Faith of the Roman Empire we share. And we might add, it is no longer the Faith of Henry VIII that we share. Nor, for that matter, is it the eighteenth-century Faith of John Wesley. These expressions of faith all had their own *Sitz im Leben*.

As churches in 'connexion' around the world today, we promote Christian Faith in societies and nations which experience life in hugely different ways from each other. Shouldn't we be celebrating, therefore, rather than disparaging, the Spirit's working in diversity? And shouldn't we be letting go of the old structures and tenets that straightjacket truths that do not everywhere and at once serve God's cause? Why have, for example, only one male (or female) as leader of any worldwide communion? A New Testament team-leadership model could be considered! In two-thousand years, the Church has never gathered around the Bible, but it has at times gathered around the individual who is central to it.

Who thinks GAFCON and the GMC are on the Right Path?

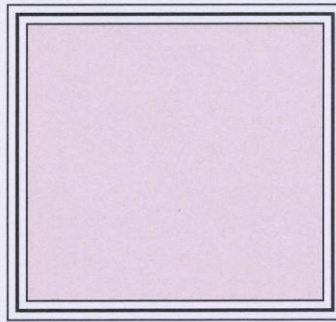
(3,356 words)

The Wrestling Ring of Faith

where you stand in the middle at any one time, wrestling with no one, but only with what is coming at you from each of the four corners

THE BIBLE

TRADITION



EXPERIENCE

REASON

This model comes from Methodist understanding, though I have given it this name and see its purpose in biblical studies. The writers of the New Testament were human beings who had to reason with tradition, the scriptures and their own experience of faith and life in their own day.

Our attention to the rules of ancient rhetoric gives us insight into any text and the how, what and why of a rhetor's work. This model takes us one step further - into his mind, to see how he engaged and indeed wrestled with what he was wanting to communicate.

A first exercise would be to visit I Cor. 7 and insert inside the appropriate corners of the 'wrestling ring' what you read. This way you will build up an understanding of something even deeper than is going on in the writing process. And then, in turn, try it on some other texts, as well as on yourself!

A black and white version of this can be found on p.225 of my book, ***New Testament: New Testimony...*** Illus. Exhib. Ed. (no.5), 2016

MARK'S GOSPEL: the Writer's Conceptual Approach and Choice of Arrangement:

TITLE: 'A Beginning'

PROLOGUE: 'Jerusalemites and Judeans' are repenting; Jesus, God's Son, is 'called' and receives the Spirit; in turn, he calls disciples ('2' plus '2' brothers);

FOUR SERIES OF SEVEN DAYS:

SERIES A: Jesus' fame spreads quickly abroad because of his **authority** (in teaching) and his **power** (over evil, sickness, nature and death); demons know who he is.

SERIES B: Through the prophet Jesus, **BREAD** is provided for all; no one gets to eat scraps anymore (as gentiles did 'from the tables of the Jews'); all now get to eat BREAD from Jesus' hands.

SERIES B': As the Christ, Jesus holds a **CUP OF SUFFERING** which will be his followers' too; like him, they will not go to glory without facing suffering.

SERIES A': Jesus' **authority** is challenged; his death in **weakness** is 'a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'; he is 'Christ our Passover, sacrificed for us'; Jesus is also the temple's replacement; the centurion knows who he is.

EPILOGUE: Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (from whom he had cast out '7' demons); he joins with '2' on the road; then he joins with his disciples and commissions them; those who 'believe and are baptised will be saved'.

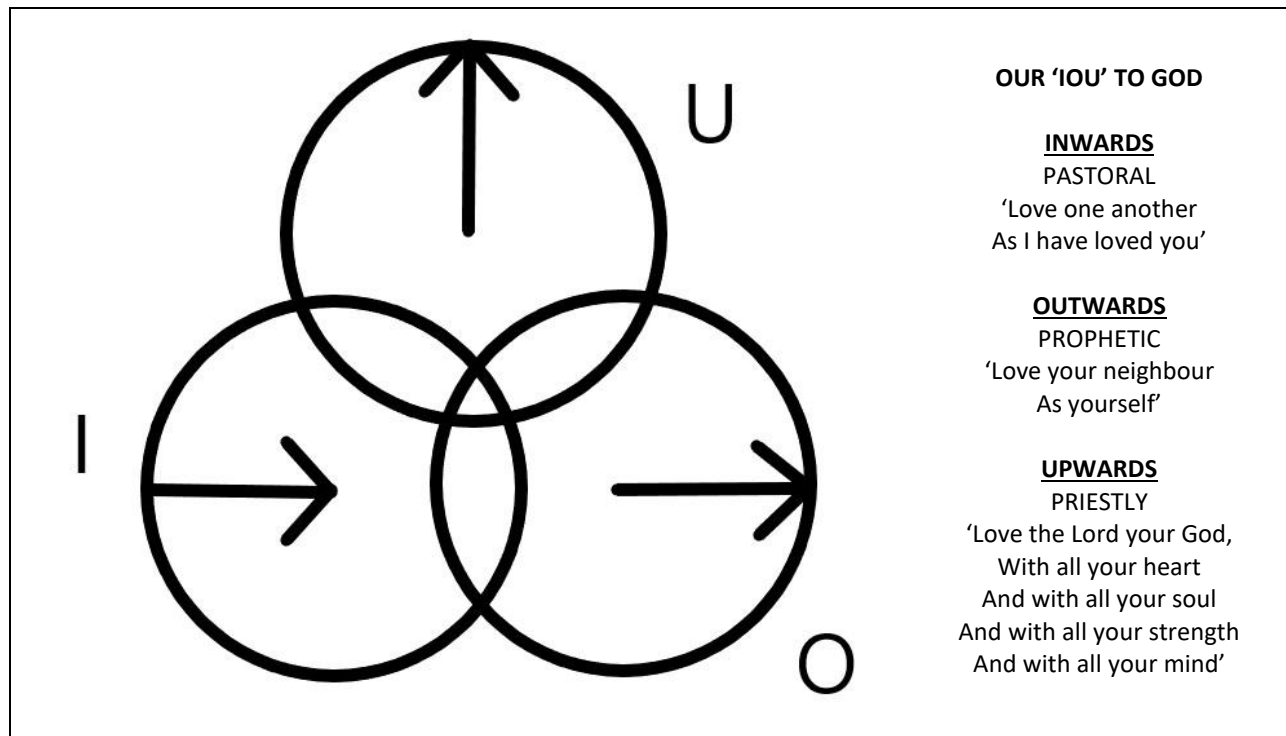
Mark's Gospel was written in the way that it was because of *the events of AD 70*. It was based on Paul's writings of the 50s and 60s. It's the meanings of the stories that are important. Here, Creed is set to story. Jesus' clearing of the temple is story. Because the gospels are stories, when they are re-presented their details are easily changed....

The writer chose to write in the ABB' Style of writing. For the Four Series of Seven Days he chose a Homeric Arrangement, ABB'XABB', in which X represents the Turning Point Day between Jesus' Days of Completing the Old Covenant and Jesus' Days of Establishing the New Covenant. For his Epilogue, he chose an Aristotelian approach.

© David G Palmer, 30.3.2025

For a fuller summary, see my blog on www.davidgpalmer.co.uk.
See the same also for my recent summaries of the other gospels.

Appendix C:



Unpublished, but shared many times during my Methodist Ministry over the years