

## 519 GCHQ with us

The main theme of a recent Radio 4 'Today' programme involved the work of 'GCHQ', the UK government's sophisticated surveillance centre in Cheltenham, where all manner of signals from around the world are picked up, screened and assessed. To pick up on our Reflection from last week, we now live in times not just of "Emmanuel, God with us", but also of "Big Brother, GCHQ with us" as well. The existence of GCHQ poses a key question affecting us all: to what extent is it acceptable for this organ of state to know vast amounts of information about millions, if not billions, of people?

We are assured that GCHQ operates within the laws of the land, and is accountable to the democratically-elected politicians in Parliament, who are in turn accountable to the British electorate – "so there's nothing to be worried about". Unfortunately such a bland brush-off of our understandable concerns over GCHQ does not carry much weight these days! For a start, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.23), including GCHQ staff, politicians and voters; there is thus no guarantee at all that Right shall always and effortlessly prevail over Wrong, be that in GCHQ, Parliament or anywhere else. What is more, "democracy" itself, though now widely regarded as the ultimate source of moral and political authority, has no direct relationship whatever with actual "Right and Wrong": instead democracy is founded solely upon the morally-dodgy premise, "majority opinion prevails".

So how are we to react to this situation as Bible-believing Christians? Shrug our shoulders? For a start, in one sense "[there is] no new [thing] under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1.9b, KJV), for everything about everyone has always been seen by Almighty God Himself (II Chronicles 16.9a / Psalm 113.5-6 / I Peter 3.12), and unlike any sinful human agency, He, by character and nature, is utterly benign in His all-knowingness. This is not to say that He is a "soft touch" where sinfulness is involved, for within His love are holiness and righteousness, qualities which explain the need for His extraordinary gift of His Son as "the propitiation for our sins" (I John 4.8b-10).

Furthermore, everything that God currently sees and knows will be made public in times to come: all shall be revealed, made known and proclaimed (from Luke 12.2-3): everything I think, say and do, is seen and known by the Lord, and one day will be publicised - a sobering realisation; and meanwhile many of my expressed thoughts, words and deeds are likely also to be known by the State (and Big Business too).

In practice therefore, to maintain some privacy from prying eyes and ears should we so wish (which seems sensible these days), a few practical steps can be taken. First, though much less convenient, we can pay with cash whenever possible, for our payment cards create an obvious trail about our activities. Second, in any use of our mobile phones, computers, satnavs, etc, on which we are all now so dependent, we keep in mind that literally everything is or can be known by others, from even years ago. In one of our previous Reflections\* “the tabloid test” is mentioned – how would this or that feature of my life stand up to scrutiny if for some reason it ever became tabloid news? While ultimately we are answerable to the Lord alone, it is no bad thing to keep an eye on how we are generally perceived by others (eg., Colossians 4.5-6). Asking the Lord to appraise our inner and outer lives, along with our homes, possessions and pastimes, will help keep us “abiding in him” (John 15.1-8).

Through Paul to the Ephesians, the Holy Spirit gives us further scriptural guidance over our living lives free from criticism in the eyes of the Lord, of the State or of neighbours: “Walk circumspectly ... redeeming the time, because the days are evil ... be not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is ... be filled with the Spirit ... singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things unto God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (from Ephesians 5.15-21, KJV).

We have been thinking this time about who, and Who, possesses great knowledge about each one of us, with some brief “So what?” responses from our side. In finishing, we emphasise the one vital “key of knowledge” (from Luke 11.52) which everyone on the planet needs to possess for themselves, as in Jesus’ own words: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17.3 / and egs., Proverbs 1.7a / John 3.14-18, 34-36 / I John 5.20).

As we enter this New Year of 2023 AD, may Almighty God bless, keep, guide and protect all His Christ-redeemed people, as we abide in the Christ-Vine and bring forth fruit for the Father’s glory – whether GCHQ is listening or not.

[\* See Reflection 301 “Let your light so shine ...” in your Witnessing Subfolder, or via the This Week page on our website]

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