

AUSTRALIAN

Presbyterian

THE MAGAZINE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

may 2007

*An elder must be blameless, the husband of
but one wife, a man whose children believe and
are not open to the charge of being wild and
disobedient. Since an office is entrusted with
God's work, he must be blameless - not
overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to
drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest
gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who
loves what is good, who is self-controlled,
upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold
firmly to the trustworthy message as it has
been taught, so that he can encourage others by
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editorial

When Moses was commanded to build the tabernacle as God's dwelling-place, the Lord said: "make this tabernacle... exactly like the pattern I will show you" (Exodus 25:9). From that moment onwards, Moses' efforts with respect to the construction of the tabernacle were governed by principled obedience. He was warned that there was no room for personal tastes or preferences.

How times have changed! Today the guiding principles behind much of church life and ministry are derived from the philosophy of pragmatism – the view that suggests that our plans and actions are only of value if they have "good" or "desirable" outcomes. As far as pragmatists are concerned, truth is defined by what is meaningful or useful and ideas that seem irrelevant and unworkable are treated as false.

The rise of pragmatism in the church has had a predictable effect on how many Christians approach issues of church government as well as how they conduct ministry. This has not always been so. The Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly were convinced that God had instituted a form of church government with divine sanction. Far from being a matter of indifference, they claimed that the Scriptures taught that God had established a system of church government under the New Testament which had the force of divine law (*jus divinum*). To suggest otherwise, they claimed, would allow the church to "become a mere Babel and Chaos of confusion".

It is this modern view that the government and the ministries of the church can be determined by pragmatic considerations that needs to be re-examined.

It seems clear from the New Testament that God has given us specific directions about many aspects of the church's structure and ministry. For instance, we find references to church officers (Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1), ministry (Acts 6:1-6; 20:25-28; 2 Tim. 4:2-5) and the administration of ordinances (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). The challenge for the modern church is to see that all God's provisions are also His obligations.

Peter Hastie ^{ap}

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Faithful in service

Who should be elders, and what should they do?



Dr Mark E. Dever serves as the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. He is also the executive director for 9 Marks (formerly The Centre for Church Reform, CCR) in Washington, D.C. 9 Marks encourages pastors of local churches to look to the Bible for instruction on how to organise and lead their churches.

Dr Dever has written several books. Perhaps his best-known is *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2000). He has also published *A Display of God's Glory – Basics of Church Structure*, and *The Deliberate Church – Building Biblically in a Haphazard Age* (2005), which he co-wrote with Paul Alexander, and *Promises Kept – The Message of the New Testament*, as well as a companion volume on the Old Testament.

Dr Dever received his Doctor of Philosophy in ecclesiastical history from Cambridge University, his Master of Theology from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.



Mark Dever
talks to
Peter Hastie

He and his wife Connie live and minister with their son, Nathan, on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. His ministry website can be found at www.9marks.org.

Mark, among many evangelicals there is a view that church government is relatively unimportant. Are you concerned by such an attitude?

It all depends on what you are comparing church government to. For example, if you're comparing church government to the gospel, I think everyone would agree that the gospel is supremely important. But if a person was to say the issue of church government is one that doesn't even warrant consideration, I'd have real difficulties with that. I think the apostles treat the issue of church leadership and government very seriously. Paul certainly did. His letter to Titus reminds us that elders are essential to each church because

someone has to adjudicate and guide a congregation between competing claims for how we are meant to understand and define the Gospel. It's certainly my experience within the local church that the issue of church government is crucial.

The New Testament speaks of plural elder leadership as well as strong individual leaders such as Titus. How do we reconcile these two realities in the area of decision-making?

It's certainly true that there were often dominant individuals who served as elders in New Testament churches. Paul writes to Timothy as if he is leading the whole church in Ephesus. Again, there are letters written to people like Titus, as you've already pointed out. We also see in Jesus' letters in Revelation 2 and 3 reference to a single messenger or angel in each congregation. So I think it's certainly possible that there may have been a single leader in some of the early churches.

However, I think it's clear from the New Testament that God's normal plan for the church is that there is a plurality of elders in each congregation. We know

from Acts 20 that the church in Ephesus had a plural eldership. How do we put all this information together? I think we can draw the various strands together by noting that while the Bible recognises a place for strong individual leaders within the church, it also insists that those leaders are responsible to other fellow-elders. There is parity amongst elders. While some who teach like Timothy and Titus might have more influence than others, they are equal in terms of office. This means that when it comes to decision-making, each elder gets a vote.

So you believe that each church should have a system of oversight by elders, which also includes the minister?

Yes, that is certainly the biblical model. Elders have an important role to play in safeguarding the gospel and making sure that the congregation hears it and can share and demonstrate it through their witness. The leadership of the church is definitely wider than paid full-time staff. What we have to realise is that references to elders in the New Testament are almost always in the plural. We find this in Acts 20, in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, and also in Hebrews. Unless the reference is describing the office of elder or an individual elder like John in 2 and 3 John, every reference to elders in the New Testament is plural.

The office of elder has disappeared altogether in some denominations and has been replaced by bishops, priests and deacons. What has happened where this has occurred?

Well, in the minds of the New Testament writers there was no distinction between an elder and a bishop/overseer. For instance, they used the word for bishop, "episkopos", and the word for elder, "presbyteros", interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28). That's a simple and straightforward matter in the New Testament. So elders are bishops in a New Testament sense.

Historically, what happened is that in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic circles, the office of "presbyter" evolved into the offices of priest and bishop. In the beginning bishops were not seen as an altogether separate office, although there were debates about whether or not they were the only ones who could ordain clergy. In the early stages bishops were regarded as an extension of the office of priesthood. The basic offices on this model of church government were the

diaconate, which was seen as a preparation for the priesthood, and the priesthood itself.

Unfortunately, Protestants have not had a common approach to church government themselves. Luther was fairly unconcerned about it. He was content to allow the secular magistrate to have a significant role in church affairs. Certainly Anglicanism followed this route under Henry VIII. Henry wanted the monarch to be able to control the Church of England and he was happy to leave the basic structure of the Roman Catholic system in place in the Anglican Church. Anglicans generally justify their form of church government of bishops, priests and deacons by saying that the New Testament doesn't really prescribe any particular form of government so we are left to some general Scriptural principles and common sense to figure out what works best.

Presbyterians have not been satisfied with this approach. What the Presbyterians said was, "Oh, no, no. The New Testament actually teaches more than you're saying it does about the government of the church. We see from the Bible that God wants a diversified leadership". For instance, we find a collaborative assembly of elders in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and the apostles Peter and Paul make it clear that local congregations are meant to be under the oversight of elders (plural). Now, how that's worked out in Calvin's Geneva or in Scotland or the Netherlands will obviously vary from place to place. And while Presbyterians in different cultures would not normally claim any kind of divine authority for their particular expression of the polity, they would all agree that the underlying principles are vital.

Other folks then came along, the Congregationalists, who said to the Presbyterians, "Yes, you're right. The New Testament does tell us how the church is to be governed by elders but it also tells us about the role of a congregation in the life and discipline of the church". So Congregationalists agree with Presbyterians in a plural eldership and in the place of deacons but they go further

by asserting a role for the congregation.

How do you distinguish the office of elder from deacon?

In the New Testament the term elder is the word that seems to be used for men who are given the responsibility for leading the church. Deacons, from the Greek word diakonos, which means "servant", seemed to be characterised by their involvement with "mercy ministries". Deacons in the New Testament were mainly concerned with providing physical support to people in need. Now it's interesting that the men who are mentioned in Acts 6 as being involved in diaconal ministry were known to be "full of the Holy Spirit". You certainly see Phillip going on and acting as an evangelist and Stephen doing the same. So we should not assume that the preaching of the gospel and the sharing of the good news in Christ is limited to elders. All Christians are to do it, as the apostle Peter reminds us (1 Peter 3:15-16). This obviously includes deacons. Nevertheless, the role of the deacons seems to focus on welfare and financial matters of the church. The deacons' contribution to the life of the church is important not only because it provides care for the needy, but it also promotes unity in the church and under-girds the ministry of those who teach the Word.

How should churches go about seeking elders and what sort of things should they be looking for as they assess men for this particular role?

Well, I think they should certainly start by considering the qualifications of elders as outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. They should ask, "Which men who are members of our church meet these qualifications?" Hopefully, there will be a lot of men whose lives are approaching the standards that Paul outlines in these letters. You will notice that most of the qualities that are listed are qualities that we would expect of ordinary Christians. However, the characteristic of being "apt to teach" is the only one in the list that isn't repeated as an injunction to other Christians in the rest of the New Testament. Therefore, I assume that as long as an individual is a reasonably mature Christian the important quality which will separate him from others is his aptitude to teach. Elders are people who should have a firm grasp of the essentials of theology.

Of course, within the Presbyterian Church you require elders to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. You expect them to believe and explain doc-

Most of the qualities that are listed for elders are qualities that we would expect of ordinary Christians.

trines like predestination and infant baptism. In the Baptist churches we are generally not as demanding in what we ask for. However, as a pastor I would certainly want to see basic matters of Baptist theology well understood by those who are seeking to become elders. I would also want to know that they have a keen grasp of those doctrines which make us slightly distinct from other churches. I would expect them to agree with us that the Bible does not permit women to be ordained as pastors or elders of churches, nor does it permit us to baptize infants.

Again, although someone might agree with us on all other doctrines, I would not appoint him to the eldership if he believed in the neo-Pentecostal doctrine that one needs to be baptized by the Holy Spirit as a second distinct experience in order to grow in Christ. I believe it's important that prospective elders can explain what it is that's distinct about evangelical Christianity. So I think it's important that elders are able to explain clearly what is so vital about evangelical Christianity as well as the distinctive doctrines of their own churches.

Then there is a third matter that I believe is crucial for elders to be able to explain and defend; I am referring to theological issues that are under intense cultural pressure at the moment.

Like homosexuality, for example?

Homosexuality would certainly be one such issue. But there are others. For example, there are gender issues, as well as abortion and a range of bioethical issues. Then there are controversial issues of a theological nature. For example, over the last few years evangelicals have been faced with the question of whether God knows the future. Many evangelicals are not sure. Well, I'd expect that elders in Capitol Hill Baptist would be agreed that God does know what's going to happen in the future. It seems to me that the elders are always under pressure to conform to the spirit of the age, and they need to be able to resist that spirit in whatever form it takes. I want to see them making a clear stand on issues like the nature of God when the world challenges the idea that He can be wrathful. Again, they need to be clear on such divisive matters as the role-relationship of men and women, homosexuality, euthanasia and a host of other issues. The eldership cannot afford to be divided on these issues. That would not help the church. So we need to think through those issues where the church is under pressure, particularly for the leadership.

Finally, I want them to be "apt to teach". This doesn't mean, incidentally, that they have all the pat answers to the theological and cultural issues that are creating controversy in the church. Rather, it means that they have a genuine tendency to teach others through their knowledge and quality of character.

I also expect the elders to be present at the meetings of the church. This is not because I believe it's their duty for them

Elders are always under pressure to conform to the spirit of the age, and they need to be able to resist that spirit.

to attend; rather, I want them there because it's an indication that they love the people and that God has placed a desire in their hearts to minister to them.

Does that mean elders should be coming to all the services in the church?

Yes. I expect to see elders caring for the flock both in the morning and evening services of the Lord's Day. Surely an elder would want to be among the flock? Mid-week meetings are a bit different. There it obviously depends on an elder's work schedule and family commitments. I think the important thing is that they should desire to be with the flock wherever possible. They should want to be with the congregation so that they can encourage, teach, and build people up in their faith.

If a minister doesn't have a group of people within his congregation that he'd have confidence in making elders, what should he do?

That's a very difficult situation. If a minister finds himself in that sort of situation he is effectively in a church-planting phase. I would regard it as only temporary. It's certainly not a long-term situation. Of course, the possibility exists that his standards may also be too high. For example, when Titus goes into Crete to plant churches he seems to be starting from scratch and yet it appears that he is appointing plural elders in every town. The possibility exists that both he and Paul may have had somewhat lower expectations of what an elder should be able to do before he was appointed to the office.

Could their candidates for eldership have been Jewish elders who were

already, in a sense, well-trained and would have had understood the Old Testament?

That's certainly a possibility. Nevertheless they still would not have been Christians so they would have been limited in their understanding of the faith.

What is the main function of an elder?

Essentially, it's to teach. Elders are to communicate the message of the Gospel verbally in all sorts of pastoral settings and they are to teach others through the example of their lives. They are meant to be people that the Lord uses to influence others.

How important is this notion of modelling for elders?

It's essential because although I have stressed that an elder must be "apt to teach", all the other 10 or 15 qualities that are mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 describe the kind of life that such a teacher should have to reinforce and exemplify the gospel. You know, is he a lover of strangers? Does he share hospitality? Is he someone who manages his own household well? We could go through all these qualities. These are things that reflect the Gospel. I would also add that all these characteristics are essential in commending the Gospel to outsiders. I am not sure that what we have in 1 Timothy 3 is an exhaustive list of qualifications for elders. Nevertheless, it is certainly a list of things that would cause the Gospel to be respected by those outside the church.

If you've got a list of men that you are considering for eldership and you can divide them up into "possibles" and "probables", what are the sort of characteristics that you are really looking for that would distinguish a "possible" from a "probable"?

Well, obviously the number of people that you would be putting in the "possible" list would be much, much larger. That "possible" list is going to be anyone in the congregation who would not be in some way prohibited. So it would include all of your male congregational members who have had good marriages, who are not too old for the additional burden of leadership, who manage their households well and if they are single, have an ordered and disciplined life. So this list of "possibles" is actually getting smaller as I add further criteria, but it could still be a fairly large list.

Now as far as the “probables” are concerned, they’re leaning way over on the other side. This group consists of men who are demonstrating leadership already. So one group would consist of potential leaders and the other group, the “probables”, would be already demonstrating pastoral leadership in a way that would call forth the congregation’s recognition.

When you select elders at Capitol Hill Baptist Church are you looking for a specific number?

No, not really. The only thing that we do encourage is that the majority are not in the pay of the church; so the majority would be non-staff.

Don’t you say, “Well look, we think we need about four or five new elders”?

I mean, we might do that if we were in a church-planting situation of some kind and we had a minister who really needed pastoral help. In that case I would probably suggest that we appoint two non-staff members, so in that sense I think we would do just what you said. But apart from that, other than us trying to keep the majority as non-paid staff members, we are simply looking for brothers in the Lord who are suitable to be shepherds of the flock. Paul tells us in Ephesians that such people are gifts of Christ to his church – so He may give us 15 elders, or He may give us just six.

How many elders do you have in a congregation of over 500 members?

Right now we have 10 or 11, but we don’t have a set number. At the moment we have 523 members with maybe 700 people attending our services on Sundays.

Ten seems like a pretty small number for so many people?

That’s exactly what it feels like for us. We have got an elders’ meeting tonight and we are conscious of our need. We are always on the lookout for more elders. You know, so we are always looking and praying for suitable candidates.

Does that mean that Capitol Hill Baptist Church is very discriminating in who it chooses to appoint as its elders?

Maybe – although we are still getting the job done. We would always like more elders. We are constantly looking around to see if there are any men who could do the job. We are always conscious of the fact that we may be too discriminating.

For instance, I’m thinking of some Reformed Baptist churches I know that went through some big struggles many years ago over the office of elder. They established the office in their churches but they have never found anyone in 20 years they felt has lived up to it. And that’s where you start to think, “OK, that can’t be what Paul had in mind when he told Titus to appoint elders”. So maybe we are a little on the tough side. I’m not sure.

How important is the behaviour of an elder in terms of the impact that he has on elders’ meetings?



We try to model for each other a carefulness to listen and a slowness to speak.

I think each elder’s behaviour is very important as far as the quality of the meetings that we have is concerned. We try to model for each other a carefulness to listen and a slowness to speak, and when that is not done we attempt to speak with one another about that in private. And that’s a fairly regular part of the life of our eldership anyway.

Do you think elders should be elected for life?

Well, again, I think this is a matter of Christian prudence. I don’t think Scripture gives any absolute direction at that point. What we have decided to do in our congregation is to nominate men to serve for three years and then we can nominate them for a second three years. But then, unless they are staff and this is a part of their permanent calling and their livelihood, they have to take a year’s sabbatical from the eldership. Now the full-time staff in our church do receive extended leave from time to time, but as far as the elders are concerned we say to them, “Look, after two three-year terms if you haven’t already stepped away from the office to refresh yourself, then you need to. And then you have to be nominated again, you know, just like the first time”.

Why do you do that?

To give them a break! If you are an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist you will be working pretty hard. The work is demanding and the culture in which we live in Washington is full of stress. Washington is a very driven place and our congregation is full of a lot of Type ‘A’ personality business people, military and professionals. They all have young families. We often tremble at the thought of even asking some of these brothers to serve as elders. More than once we have told a fellow elder, “Look, we really love you, but you need to step down from the board. You need to go and love your family; we need you to resign right now”. And we haven’t done this because they were doing a bad job or were not meeting our expectations. It’s just because we love them and we love their families and we understand the pressure under which they work. At the moment we have several men serving us as elders who have already had a year off; now they are back on the board again serving as elders.

Tell me how demanding it is in terms of participation in the eldership here at the church. What do you expect them to do?

We expect them to be here Sunday morning and Sunday night. We expect them to be actively involved in caring for the members of the congregation. This means that when in our elders’ meeting we start saying “Hey, where is so and so, how is so and so doing?” we expect somebody, one of the 10 or 11 of us, to speak up and say something. And if we don’t, then that is a challenge to all of us. Then immediately we make a note that somebody is going to make contact with that person. We also expect elders to be hospitable with others in their homes. We expect them to be in church before services and afterwards meeting people. We expect them to do some public teaching occasionally. We expect them to be leading and teaching membership classes and core seminars. We don’t expect them all to preach Sunday morning sermons. Most of them don’t do that. We do expect them to be willing to lead Sunday morning services, which includes praying in public and we certainly expect them to be at the elders’ meetings and to participate in those meetings.

Can you tell me how you spend your elders’ meetings and why?

Well, Peter, you’re more than welcome to sit in on one tonight if you want to.

From 7pm till infinity! We spend our first two hours in saying hello to one another, in reading Scripture together and in prayer. That's usually 7 to 9pm roughly; we may have somebody come in at 8.30pm, but generally it takes from 7 to 9pm.

What normally happens is that we spend the first 10 minutes looking over the agenda while latecomers come straggling in and then the chairman will ask if we have anything else for the agenda. That takes us to about 7.15pm. Then we will sing a hymn and read a passage of Scripture. Then we will go around the group and praise God for something we see about Him in that passage of Scripture. Then we will share how we are doing in brief prayer points for ourselves, just as we would in a small home group. After that we go around and take it in turns to pray for each other. Then we will start to pray through the church directory, which will take about 30 minutes to an hour. Here we pray for the members who are listed in the directory as well as for the church as a whole. Finally, we close by praying for the business that is coming before us. This usually brings us to somewhere between 8.30 and 9pm. Then we launch into our business.

Do people ever get exasperated when you reach the business section of the meeting so late?

I guess we do from time to time, but we wouldn't have it any other way. It's just glorious work being able to have such meaningful fellowship and being able to spend such wonderful time in prayer for the people in our church. After we do that, we pick up the normal business of the meeting unless somebody is coming from outside to see us who interrupts the normal order. When that happens we try to have them to the meeting earlier so we don't disrupt their lives too much. We spend a good part of the meeting after that dealing with people in the church who have given us cause for concern. We discuss what's happening to them. Are they going elsewhere? How is so and so? Obviously in a church of over 500 people you can be sure that there are 50 who are struggling one way or another and 20 that might be having acute problems in their walk with God.

At this very moment we are involved in two very difficult cases of church discipline, which obviously are unknown to the wider church. They are quite different cases so that's going to consume a lot of time tonight. Then we have all kinds of memos about everything from

things having to do with staff to things involving budget process. Naturally, all these are important issues that require a clear understanding of biblical principles.

If the elders are spiritually committed to the oversight of the congregation how often should they be meeting?

Again that would depend on just how crowded their lives are, the kind of culture they are in the middle of, of the youth and the maturity of the congregation, whether they have many established precedents in the church or not, how much the church

Obviously in a church of over 500 people you can be sure that there are 50 who are struggling.

is growing, and how transient the congregation is. There are a lot of factors to be considered. It's a not a case of one size fits all. We don't have regular meetings here; our meetings are occasional. However, they tend to be every other week.

So, once a fortnight?

Roughly. Sometimes it's once every three weeks; sometimes it's once a week when we get near certain seasons, but once a week is a little rough on our families. That's why we try to stay away from weekly meetings if we can.

We have all been in meetings where things have wandered all over the place. What do you do to keep your elders focused on the important business?

We give our chairman amazing amounts of grief all throughout the following week if there has been a significant amount of wasted time. At the moment we have an extremely gifted chairman who is excellent at presiding over our meetings. He started out okay and he has been first-rate as he has grown into the job. We give him a lot of feedback outside the meeting about how we feel things are going. We require reports and memos at our meetings, so if you want to bring something up then you had better give us a memo so we can think about it ahead of time. If not, and it's not an issue that's urgent, then we will wait until the next elders' meeting to look at it, and we try to discipline the discussion. We do not believe that we have to have unanimity on everything. If we insist on that then the

meeting usually crawls and makes the discussion less free. It also prolongs the meeting while we go round and round the issue.

Have you got any suggestions as to how we can encourage godly communication in the decision-making process in the elders' meetings? Obviously, meetings can go into a tailspin if people don't communicate well with each other.

Yes, this is an important issue. If you see a fellow-elder on the losing side of an argument and he begins to get angry, then the chairman or the senior minister needs to raise this matter with him after the meeting. He needs to be told that in a collegial style of decision-making losing your temper or being unpleasantly disagreeable is unacceptable for a Christian leader.

The other thing I should mention is that rules of procedure in meetings are important. Published rules allow people to share their views and opinions in a manner that everyone has agreed is the way to do it. Here we use a rough version of *Robert's Rules of Order*, which was actually written by a Baptist deacon here in Washington originally for the use of parliamentary procedure in church meetings. He came from First Baptist Church in the downtown area near the White House. We use a rough version of that here in Capitol Hill. One of our basic rules is that every proposal must have a seconder. If there is no one who seconds the motion, then we won't discuss it. We have basic rules like that which our elders know and understand. We expect a high level of Christian communication and good manners from everyone on the board.

One of the things that we have decided which has been quite helpful to us is to use memos and reports ahead of time. This is a courtesy to everyone in the meeting. It gives them all the information they need beforehand so they are not surprised in the meeting. They also have plenty of time to consider an answer before they get to the meeting itself. They can pray about it, reflect on it and talk with other people about it as well. It also prevents wasting time in the meeting by providing a lot of information upfront. We also try to share discussions of the elders' meetings in email communications with each other as much as we can to begin getting people thinking about things. Often we will delay decisions to get a longer time to consider the matter outside the meeting. ap

To God's glory

Look to character, not worldly examples, for leadership.

Leadership is everywhere. We see it in our school playgrounds where it seems it is the same few children who are organising the games at lunch. Perhaps we catch our first glimpse of it in the home where we see parents guiding their children into making wise choices for life. That may be as they help their two year olds learn what it means to share with others or as their teenagers discover the intricate complexities of developing healthy relationships.

We also observe it in the boardrooms of our companies and multinationals as CEOs and directors chart the course of their business enterprises for years ahead. And it's in our parliaments, our workplaces, and our churches.

A few brief moments glancing along the shelves of a bookstore, reviewing postgraduate courses or searching the internet will quickly confirm that leadership is at the forefront of many people's minds and is the subject of a great deal of organisational reflection.

But what is leadership? Given all the recent research, it may surprise us that there is no agreed definition for the term. More than 350 separate meanings and descriptions now exist. As one writer noted, "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept". And many Christian writers have produced an array of books and materials, seeking to identify aspects of the Bible's teaching regarding the who, the what and the how of leadership.

Leadership is very much on the agenda of the world and the church, so it is important that we ask: What does the Bible say about leadership?

It is useful to observe that leadership is somewhat enigmatically portrayed in the Bible. On the one hand, there is often an extensive exploration of the character, events, lives and relationships of leaders such as Abraham, Moses, Paul and Timothy to name a few. Yet, from an exegetical standpoint, leadership is not actually the subject or main point of the narratives in which these leaders' lives and experiences are recorded.

As a result aspects of leadership are, at



Ian O'Harae

best, only discursively or tangentially unfolded. These narratives were not written with the specific purpose of either setting forth a particular theory of leadership or to outline specific principles of leadership as some modern writers tend to view them. Rather, they are to be understood and interpreted in the overall light of the flow of redemptive history, their specific positioning in the canon of Scripture, and in line with the overall purpose of the author or editor of the book or passage.

On the other hand, ironically, the nature of leadership per se is never comprehensively discussed. While the Bible notes various aspects of leadership, with qualities and characteristics for leaders outlined, and where the various authors make comments and judgments on leaders, nevertheless there is no sustained systematic or formulaic prescription for leaders or leadership. This observation alone is significant. It could be that part of the contemporary tendency for establishing "biblical leadership types" as paradigms for "today's Christian leaders" may be driven more by the forces of niche marketing than of appreciating the rich diversity apparent in the biblical text.

Leaders in the Bible emerge with differing personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and roles within redemptive history, such as Samson in contradistinction to both Joseph and David. This indicates that the profile of a biblical leader is necessarily both individual and fluid. Fluidity is inherent in a biblical understanding of leadership because of the diversity of persons as individuals created in the image of God as well as the variety of situations leaders confront.

Leaders are raised by God as individuals with unique personality, character, gift, ability and experience, all of which differ, in order to fulfil the specific space-time purposes that God has for them. As a result searching for a one size fits all profile for biblical leaders is an exercise in futility.

This is not to suggest that the Bible has nothing of substance to say about leadership. On the contrary, it has a great deal to say about who should be leaders and what they are to do. However, we cannot rightly understand leadership without first of all seeing God and His glory as its primary focus.

God established human leadership first and foremost for the promotion of His glory (Rom. 11:33-36, 1 Cor. 10:31, Isa. 42:8). It is God's glory that ultimately gives purpose, focus and meaning to human leadership.

Further, because God is sovereign in and over all things (Ps. 145; Is. 49:6), then human leadership can be viewed as:

- From God, as He alone is its originator, initiator and source;
- Under God, as He alone is the ultimate leader; so He is also the paradigm for all leadership which is derived from and determined by His lordship;
- By God, as He alone gives leaders the gifts, strengths, limitations, resources, and providentially determines their circumstances in terms of times, places, people and events;
- For God, because the ultimate end of all leadership is His glory.

Therefore one way to view a biblical leader is as God's person in God's place in order to fulfil God's leadership purposes.

So leadership is intentionally God-centred and God-focused and this has some profound implications, especially for local churches.

In Matthew 23:1-12 Jesus identified that many of the religious leaders of his day viewed leadership as being in a position of power and influence. They saw it as having status and respect evidenced by sitting in the recognisable places of authority; having prominence, prestige and control; as well as bringing special titles and status.

Searching for a "one-size-fits-all" profile for biblical leaders is an exercise in futility.

Against this view Christ delineated his radical alternative: that leadership is service. He did so first by the use of a series of strong negatives – “and do not” – indicating the antithetical nature of the alternative behaviour and attitude He espoused. Second, He outlined the major feature that was to characterise biblical leadership: servanthood, as evidenced supremely and perfectly in Himself and that was to be emulated by all those who were to follow Him as leaders.

It is this radical view of the leadership as servanthood which predominates in Jesus’ teaching on the subject of leadership (e.g. Mt. 20:20-28; Mk 9:33-37; 10:35-45; Lk 22:24-30; as well as His own example and exhortation in Jn 13:1-16. This understanding is further developed in Acts 20:17-38; Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Thess. 2:1-14; Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Peter 5:1-5).

So when people or churches are evaluating leaders or potential leaders, some important questions to consider are: in what areas have they demonstrated leadership through service? How do they serve? Are they seeking for a position in order to be seen as important, or do they constantly manifest a servant spirit?

Of course, having a servant heart does not mean the person is weak, spineless or obsequious. The Lord Jesus was the greatest servant of all, yet it is unlikely anyone would consider Him a doormat. Think of His courageous confronting of the Pharisees, or His casting out of the moneychangers from the temple, or His fearless embracing of the cross.

How is this servant spirit evidenced? Philippians 2 gives us the clearest indica-

tion. In this chapter Paul demonstrates its meaning by giving four specific examples of servanthood in action. The first is that of Jesus Himself in vv 5-11. Of the many things that could be said about these verses one thing is clear: notwithstanding His exalted position as God, Jesus chose to make Himself nothing and willingly took the form of a servant (v7). However, in case we excuse ourselves on the basis that Jesus was so different from us, Paul gives the example of himself as a servant,

We should not be surprised to see our leaders also wiping down tables, or cleaning toilets.



being glad to be poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of their faith (v17). He then goes on to buttress his argument with the example of Timothy who was genuinely concerned for their welfare (v20), then concludes with the example of Epaphroditus (v25) who served Paul in his need.

The implication is obvious, for those who are – or would be – leaders: no task is “below” them. So we should not be surprised to see those who preach to us or those who lead our churches or our denominations also wiping down tables, or cleaning toilets, or putting out bins, or ... because biblical leadership is service. It

is emulating the ultimate Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to serve and not to be served (Matt 20:28).

All of this strongly contrasts with another example of a leader given in the New Testament. In his third letter John writes about Diotrophes who liked to put himself first (3 John 9) and considered himself above others. We see this all too often in many churches where leaders give the impression that the church exists for their benefit, as a platform for their ministry, or a place to promote their ideas and agendas, together with an unwillingness to listen to others or work harmoniously in the context of a team. They are the ones who like to be in the centre of the photos, who are the name droppers, who constantly speak of “my ministry” and “my experience”. Is this Christian leadership? The apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23) did not seem to think so, and neither should we.

The Bible also makes it plain that there are certain characteristics required of those who would be leaders. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 outline the qualifications for those men who fulfil the important roles of pastor (elder) and deacon. Interestingly, all but one of these qualifications is character-related. The exception is that elders must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2).

Once again the biblical view appears to be deliberately contrary to the prevailing view. Many consider that to be a leader is to be strong, visionary, task-focused yet people-oriented, and committed to the principles of empowering, synergistic, transformational leadership. As helpful as all this may be, it is not the focus of these passages. They are indicating that we are to be primarily concerned about who the person is before we consider what they are able to do, or how well they have done things in the past.

It is possible that this is the reason for Peter reminding us that those who serve as elders are to do so as shepherds who care for the flock and as examples to the people (1 Peter 5:1-5). We should be able to look up to those who lead us as men of integrity and credibility, and not be ashamed of them because they are self-seeking or self-serving. Perhaps this is why we are told in 1 Sam. 16:7 that God’s preoccupation is with the heart of His leaders and not the externals.

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Rule and teach

Elders rule by teaching and teach by ruling.

In too many Presbyterian churches the eldership has been paralysed. This paralysis results from confused expectations. Elders have been ordained without understanding their role in the congregation. In addition, ministers and elders have been uncertain about their roles in relation to one another. Elders have seen themselves as the rulers of the church with the minister as the paid pastor. Ministers have seen themselves as teachers of the church with the elders as lay pastors.

But can these roles be so clearly defined? I want to suggest that ministers must be both teachers and rulers, while elders must be both rulers and teachers. I also believe that ministers must take the primary responsibility for ensuring that pastoral care is provided through a trained and equipped eldership.

Theorists never tire of writing books about the eldership. Tedious tomes have been written on the subject. In reality, the Bible tells us more about the character of elders and the skills they need than it does of the work expected of them.

This has been a difficult issue for Reformed churches. It should not have been. Our ancestors, in great wisdom, did not develop their practice of eldership from the New Testament alone; they also traced its origins into the Old. So, the Form of Church Government (1643) states: "As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ ... hath furnished some in His church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government ... who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders."

Within Presbyterian Churches, orders of service for the ordination and induction of elders have quoted this foundational statement for generations. We understand that eldership did not first appear in the New Testament. It began with Moses. Moses was told to appoint men to help him care for the people of Israel and was assured of God's pleasure in that arrangement (Num. 11:16-17).



Bruce Meller

Here we discover God's pattern for how He wanted his people to be governed, guarded and guided. This early instance of pastoral oversight required the anointing of God's Spirit to equip the new elders for their task. They were empowered by the Spirit to help Moses "carry the burden of the people".

The job of elders today stands on that same foundation. Their task is to cooperate with the minister in the oversight and government of the congregation.

But how do they cooperate? The work of the

eldership has been divided into teaching and ruling (1 Tim. 5:17). Those elders who teach we commonly call ministers. Those who rule we commonly call elders. This belies the fact that eldership involves both functions. While some elders might do more of one than the other, all elders must do both. Ministers are expected not only to teach but to rule. Elders must also add teaching to their ruling.

Some elders acknowledge the need to teach but shy from it in case they say something wrong. They see teaching as an up-front exercise primarily done in public. They do not see the potential for teaching in small groups or in personal conversation.

Some elders see their job only as ruling. For them, this simply consists in attending meetings and voting on resolutions. However, this is not really what the New Testament has in mind when it speaks about elders "ruling well". Ruling is not an isolationist exercise; it is unavoidably relational. Those who rule must do so in relationship with the people under their care.

The fact is that elders – all elders – must strive to rule as well as to teach.

They rule by teaching and they teach by ruling; and it is the minister's job – just as it was Moses' job – to ensure that the whole work of eldership is done well.

We tend to leave it to the Session to see that the eldership functions properly. The results are predictable. Everyone's responsibility becomes no one's responsibility and, when nothing happens, we make excuses for one another. We lower our expectations so that we avoid embarrassing anyone. The result is that nothing happens and no one cares!

What if the Session expected the minister to ensure that the team was organised? They couldn't expect him to do all the work of ministry, but they could expect organisation and, with that, training. That would produce what so many people talk about but so few actually enjoy: a captain-coach situation.

Perhaps some elders might still not pull their weight. Then let the minister and other elders address that fact in Session. The Session could then deal with an identified problem instead of hiding behind a protective screen that we all know exists but no one acknowledges. Ministers might be afraid of the consequences, but if the Session were serious they would receive the minister's report, call the non-performing elder to account and, just maybe, remove him from the Session if he was unwilling to lift his game.

Wouldn't that be a change? Imagine if a minister was actually going to be judged not only on how he exercised pastoral care, but also on the way he cultivated the gifts of others? Imagine what would happen if elders were actually going to be

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judged on whether or not they functioned as elders?

Two major causes of our failure in eldership are a lack of accountability and a serious lack of training. Typically, ministers do not take elders with them when they're about their pastoral duties. They don't give the elders on-the-job training. Even if they do, they don't debrief them after the experience. Many people think that caring for members is supposed to be intuitive. But it's not. In fact, it's a skill that needs to be developed.

Perhaps the minister is not the best person on a session to coordinate pastoral care or train elders and others for this work. That's fine. Let the minister find someone better to do the training and coordinate caring activities. His responsibility need not be to do these things, but he should at least have the responsibility to make sure that training and pastoral care are done, and done well.

Some elders might find that they are either unwilling or unable to carry out this work on such an approach. If they come to that conclusion then the sensible thing to do is to resign as an elder and allow someone who "is willing and eager to serve" to assume the responsibility (1 Pet. 5:2).

For those others who want to perform the work that God has given them, here are some practical guidelines that ministers should help to implement.

Ruling. Eldership involves much more

than merely making decisions for the congregation. Since the primary unit of the congregation is the individual member in his or her family, this is where elders must first direct their attention. We cannot have oversight of the church until we know the members as individuals and enjoy their respect and confidence. That is why ministers should ensure that particular elders are assigned to individual church mem-

bers so that everyone can be known and cared for.

Know the people. As elders we should know our people and visit them in their homes. We ought to practise hospitality so that they are able to visit us in our home. As we know them, we will love

Often, elders have the opportunity to encourage or even praise someone, which can be very motivating.

them. They matter to God. They should matter to us. We need to be available to them. We should make sure that they know our phone numbers and that we are happy for them to call us whenever necessary. It's in our homes that we demonstrate acceptance.

Guard the flock. Elders need to pray for the people in the congregation. It is also helpful, when we get the chance, to pray with them individually and to listen to their prayers. We should never think that prayer is a one-way street where elders are the ones who do all the praying. If people are hesitant to pray, we should encourage them regardless of how faltering their prayers may be.

Share the Scriptures. When elders visit church members their conversation should move naturally from ordinary affairs to matters of spiritual concern. Obviously, elders will be concerned about how even the most mundane matters impact on peoples' lives, but if all an elder ever talks about is stock prices or sport there is a problem.

An elder has a special opportunity to help others see God at work in all the circumstances of their lives. He wastes a valuable opportunity if he does not do so. Whenever he speaks with people it should be with the intention of building them up in their faith in Christ. It is always good, where appropriate, to read and discuss a relevant passage of Scripture.

Talk plainly. No purpose is served which disguises the spiritual aim of an elder's visit. Elders should be open about

their concerns for our spiritual well-being. They should feel uninhibited in talking about the temptations of the evil one or the progress of our faith. What have we discovered about God since we last met? What struggles have we faced, and how have we responded to them? If elders do this with genuine concern and sympathy, people are usually grateful for their care and interest. Often, elders have the opportunity to encourage or even praise someone, which can be very motivating. If they have a genuine sense of compassion and humility it is also possible for them to correct someone if he or she is in error. A word of encouragement can also be very helpful for someone who is struggling with some weakness and needs to redouble their efforts to obey God. Whatever the situation, plain and open conversation will generate many opportunities for growth that may otherwise be missed.

It should by now be apparent that teaching opportunities arise when elders rule well.

Encourage questions. Elders don't know all the answers but they do have an obligation to find them and then pass them on to those for whom they care.

Catechise where possible. The old pattern of formalised questions and answers is no longer in vogue, but that doesn't mean we can't still make opportunities to cultivate growth in our people. Instead of asking formally, "What is the chief end of man?", it's possible to ask in a conversational way, "Why do you think God placed us here?" An explanation of our role in the glorification and enjoyment of God can then guide a time of mutual discovery.

Every elder should be part of a small-group Bible Study. It might be that someone else in the group would make a better facilitator, or even a better teacher, but every elder should be involved in a group.

Set an example. Elders should be models of what it means to be a person who is striving to grow in Christlike maturity. This should be obvious in elders' activities in the church as well as in the wider community.

Keep the minister informed. Elders have a vital function in keeping the minister and other elders informed of people's needs and the challenges that they are facing.

Bruce Meller has been a minister in the Presbyterian Church of NSW for 27 years. He has held three pastorates and serves as the Superintendent of Ministry and Mission. 

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God's government

*20 daily Bible studies
in Haggai and Hebrews 1-7*

In 520 BC, after the Babylonian exiles had been back in Jerusalem for nearly two decades, God gave Haggai the job of telling them of His displeasure at their wrong priorities. They had spent all their energy building their own dream homes, but had no time to rebuild God's "house". How much time and energy do we devote to God's Church – to its spiritual life, to its good government, to its witness in the world?

The June theme will be Law and Grace. We begin this theme in Hebrews this month and finish it next.

The author of Hebrews is dealing with a very sensitive and important subject for Christians of every age. The gospel of Christ makes it abundantly clear that we cannot be saved by our works. Moses, and the Law God gave him – including the system of animal sacrifices – can show us what God requires of us, but the perfect obedience of Jesus – in His life and death – is required for the Law to have any currency at all. It is only by faith in Christ's sacrifice that we can be saved.

The problem is that when we are convinced it is only by grace that we are saved we too easily fall into the trap of thinking that therefore obedience doesn't matter. The author of Hebrews was writing to people who were in danger of losing their salvation on this very point. He had to warn them in the strongest possible way of the danger in which they were placing themselves. Obedience can never be the grounds of our salvation, but wilful disobedience is a sure sign that our professed faith and our dependence on God's grace are a sham.

Bruce Christian ▶

DAY 1

A time to wake up and act

THE PASSAGE

HAGGAI 1:1-15

THE POINT God has great love and concern for His Church; He therefore does not abandon it, but acts to call it to repentance, to purify it (Eph. 5:25-32). When the Church responds positively to His gracious action there is blessing and His name is honoured.

THE PARTICULARS

- God’s word through Haggai was firstly to the two post-exilic leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, but the prophecy is clearly for the ears of all the people (1).
- Like the other post-exilic prophets Zechariah and Malachi, Haggai uses the title, “Yahweh Tsebaoth” for God. It means “LORD of hosts/armies” (NIV: “LORD Almighty”) and

expresses God’s power over all Israel’s enemies, physical and spiritual.

- The returning Jews had not learned the lesson of the exile; they had settled back into their old ways, with little room for God. They were not even sensitive to God’s “warning shots” – drought and the subsequent loss of productivity and satisfaction.
- God controls all aspects of life – including the weather (10-11).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How do you rate the spiritual health of the Church today? Are we letting home, work, leisure crowd God out of our lives?
- Is God shouting at us in global warming and climate change?

DAY 2

I will build my Church

THE PASSAGE

HAGGAI 2:1-9

THE POINT Just seven weeks later God gives Haggai an amazing promise of what He intends to do. His description of the far greater glory of the new “house”, coupled with His mention of the coming in of “the desired [ones/things] of all nations” and the granting of peace, is clearly looking beyond the “bricks and mortar” of the Second Temple to something much more glorious and permanent – the Church which will include people of every tribe and nation.

THE PARTICULARS

- Nostalgia (3) can be dangerous and give a distorted picture, but as we look back in history we see times when Christ’s Church was giving leadership to nations and impacting society

to an extent we have not witnessed in our lifetime. Such reflection should encourage us, not to long for the “good old days”, but rather to “be strong” and “work”, expecting Christ to do for His Church the things that He has promised (4; cf Matthew 16:18).

- God has covenanted with His people (5), and this covenant with His Church has now been sealed with Christ’s precious blood.
- We can trust God to provide all the resources needed for His Church to grow and prosper in our land for His glory (6-9).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you have an optimistic view of the future of the Church?

DAY 3

The turning point

THE PASSAGE

HAGGAI 2:10-19

THE POINT Another nine weeks have almost passed and God tells His people through Haggai to note the very day (18 December 520 on our calendar). The turning point in the nation’s economy, when affliction would change to prosperity, would be so clear-cut and so obvious that there would be no doubt that it was the LORD’s hand of grace that did it. In keeping with the people’s move to lay the new Temple’s official foundation stone, their covenant LORD would intervene on their behalf and bless them.

THE PARTICULARS

- The nation of Israel had been set apart as holy to the LORD. But holiness is not “catching” as sin is, a fact which is obvious

from even a cursory glance at all the laws concerning defilement and purification in Leviticus. It is also borne out in the de-yeasting requirements of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:15, cf 1 Cor. 5:6-8). No effort was needed to be contaminated by sin; but much effort was needed to remain holy, even though it was by grace they were made holy (11-14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How can the Church maintain the healthy balance of looking to the Lord’s grace alone for blessing while at the same time striving for the holiness He rightly requires of His covenant people?

DAY 4

Messianic hope

THE PASSAGE

HAGGAI 2:20-23

THE POINT Zerubbabel (“seed of Babylon”) was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the Davidic king who had been taken captive to Babylon in 597 BC. The adopted son of his uncle Shealtiel (cf 1 Chron. 3:17-19) he was heir apparent to David’s throne if the kingship had been reinstated. Haggai, on the strength of God’s promises and the political shake-up of the time, could well have expected to see the Messianic Age in his lifetime (cf also Zechariah and Malachi) and therefore Zerubbabel (with Joshua/Jeshua/Jesus) the high priest) would have been a significant figure. Haggai’s final remarks are therefore addressed to him personally. However, history will show him to be just another of David’s line who is included, unsung, among the

heroes of Hebrews 11:13 as they played their part in the true Messiah’s coming 500 years later.

THE PARTICULARS

- The language of verses 21-22 is apocalyptic: although Israel as a nation is only small, and in its position as a band of returning captives hardly a threat to anyone, her covenant God can speak confidently of victories that will conquer the whole world.
- Zerubbabel is God’s chosen “servant-king” entitled to wear the signet ring torn from his grandfather’s hand (23; Jeremiah 22:24).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you praying for strong, fearless leadership in the Church?

DAY 5

No greater name than Jesus

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 1:1-4

THE POINT The aim of the author of Hebrews is to prove God's intention of showing Jesus to be the crown of His whole self-revelation.

THE PARTICULARS

- Because we are made in God's image He can communicate with us in a clear and meaningful manner. At first He did this through the verbal propositions of the OT Scriptures; now He has done it through Jesus His Son (1-2; John was making a similar point by referring to Jesus as the "Word" of God – see John 1:1,14).
- We live in a Christo-centric Universe: it is He alone who is its source, its sustaining power, and its ultimate purpose (2-3).

- Everything there is to be known about God can be seen exactly, perfectly and fully in Jesus (3; cf John 1:14, 18; 12:44-45; 14:9).
- Having achieved God's purpose of dealing fully with the sin that separates Man from Him, Jesus now rules in heaven (3).
- Before the Fall, Man was next to God; because of the Fall, Man now looks up to angels. But Jesus ranks way above them (4)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- If God "spoke" to us through the OT Scriptures, and has now "spoken" to us by His Son, what does this imply about the verbal inspiration and reliability of both the OT and NT Scriptures?
- Is Jesus presented here as just one of many ways to God?

DAY 6

This is my beloved Son...

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 1:5-14

THE POINT By using 7 (the number signifying "completeness") OT passages to demonstrate Jesus' superiority to the angels the author of Hebrews wants us to see that this fact underlies the whole of Scripture. His Jewish readers held angels, as God's messengers, in very high regard; but Jesus, the Son of God who had come to earth from heaven, is far above all these "ministering spirits".

THE PARTICULARS

- The first (5a), fifth (8-9) and seventh (13) quotations are from psalms that the Jews see clearly as "Messianic" (2, 45 and 110), pointing forward to God's promised anointed King who will reign forever; the Scriptures never speak of angels in such terms.

- The second (5b) is from 2 Samuel 7, where David is told that the promised Messiah will be called the LORD's "son" as in Psalm 2.
- The third quotation (6) is difficult because the Greek (LXX) text it follows is quite different from the Hebrew (altered to avoid a reference to Jesus?). Like the sixth (10-12 – from Psalm 102) it openly equates Jesus with Israel's covenant God, the Creator.
- The fourth (7 – from Psalm 104) reinforces the fact that, unlike the Son/Messiah, angels are never more than God's servants.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you look for Jesus when you read the OT (cf Luke 24:27)?

DAY 7

...listen to Him!

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 2:1-4

THE POINT If all that has been said about Jesus in chapter 1 is true, then we can't remain indifferent in our attitude to Him. He came to earth for a purpose, to provide eternal salvation for lost sinners. If I choose to ignore this amazing gracious provision by a loving heavenly Father, it is impossible for me to escape the inevitable consequences. God has given more than enough evidence in history of the truth concerning Jesus so I am left without excuse.

THE PARTICULARS

- Hebrews is addressed to people who are familiar with all the evidence establishing Jesus' identity as the only Saviour, but who are in grave danger of just "drifting away" through lack of

attention to it (1). This is not the last solemn warning they will be given against failing to remain focussed on the Gospel.

- In the (OT) Scriptures, the idea that part of the "messenger" role of angels is to transmit God's law to Man is inferred rather than stated (cf Deuteronomy 33:2); but that disobedience incurs God's punishment is very clear. This being so, there is no doubt that to ignore the free offer of salvation provided in Jesus, and proved by signs, miracles and the Holy Spirit, is suicide(2-4)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are we warning people of the consequences of ignoring Jesus?

DAY 8

Jesus came down to lift us up

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 2:5-9

THE POINT As we have seen, Man was created to have a closer, better relationship with God than the angels: they are only His servants, we are His children, made in His image; we were to rule over all the rest of Creation. Through sin we spoil that relationship and fell to a position lower than the angels and our only hope was for Jesus, as Son of Man, to come from God, down to our low position and to lift us back to where we should have been. The author of Hebrews recognises this whole scenario in Psalm 8, equating the poetic use of the term "son of man" to the heavenly salvation figure of Daniel 7:13, in keeping with Jesus' own application of the term to Himself throughout His ministry, to the great annoyance of

the Jewish leaders (cf Mark 14:61-63).

THE PARTICULARS

- Jesus is superior to angels because He is "true Man" – the "second Adam", achieving at last what the first Adam failed to achieve.
- The "little" in verses 7 and 9 can apply either to time or space; the meaning here is better understood as time: "for a little while".
- The best commentary on verses 8b-9 is Paul's powerful words, either composed by him or quoted, in Philippians 2:6-11.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does "seeing Jesus" help make sense of our present world?

DAY 9

Jesus, a brother who understands

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 2:10-18

THE POINT Only Man should make atonement for Man's sin; but only God could: therefore atonement is only possible through a God-Man. Man's salvation is at the centre of God's whole plan and purpose in Creation. His love is overwhelmingly expressed by saving us through the sacrificial death of His own beloved Son, who first had to become one of us in order to die in our place. The perfectness of this Plan is seen further in the fact that, as our brother, Jesus is ideally suited to plead our cause as a priest before God.

THE PARTICULARS

• Suffering is the direct result of, and punishment for, Man's sin. It is necessary, therefore, for a just God who holds every-

thing in His hands, to rescue Man through suffering; for the "author" (cf 12:2) of salvation to perfect His work through suffering as a man, and so restore Man to his former glory and holiness (10-11).

• Hebrews identifies Jesus with the rejected Messiah in Psalm 22, and the rejected prophet in Isaiah 8 who entrusted his message to his children, just as the man Jesus did to His disciples (12-13).

• Jesus came to conquer death and the devil for God's elect people, not for His angels; He can help us because He was like us (14-18).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Do you really confide in Jesus as your brother when you pray?

DAY 10

Greater than Moses?!

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 3:1-6

THE POINT To the Jews there has never been anyone to overshadow Moses. Abraham stands as a great example of faith, and David as the ideal King from whom would come the Messiah. But through Moses God had revealed the whole framework and fabric of their religion. Without Moses there is no Judaism – no Law and sacrificial system as the basis of their covenant relationship with God; no Temple worship as fashioned on the Tabernacle God revealed to Moses in the wilderness. That's all well and good, says Hebrews, but now it is all overshadowed by Jesus!

THE PARTICULARS

• The time for the centrality of the Law is past; it is now time

for God's covenant people to focus their attention on Jesus. Moses had been God's apostle ("sent one") and high priest, bringing God to Man and Man to God, but now he must fade into the background as Jesus comes to replace shadow with substance (1).

• Like other OT heroes, Moses was a type of Jesus; his obedience and faithfulness were exemplary, and anticipated the One who would come. But he was only the "house" – Jesus is its builder; he was only ever the servant – Jesus is the Son and heir (2-6).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• How does verse 6 imply that the Church is now God's people under Christ as Israel had been God's people under Moses?

DAY 11

Warning upon warning

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 3:7-19

THE POINT Numbers 14 is a very sad chapter in Israel's history. They were ready to enter the land God had promised them within months of leaving Egypt, but when Moses sent the 12 spies to assess the situation, 10 reported back that conquest was impossible. The people rebelled, so God condemned that whole generation to die in the desert. Even a feeble attempt at repentance failed because their hearts were hardened. This rebellion only added to the "Meribah/Massah" one when the water ran out (Exodus 17:1-7). The psalmist used these events to warn the people of his own day of the result of disobedience; and our author used all this to warn Jewish believers of his day against rejecting Jesus as their Messiah. If

Hebrews was written just before 70 AD, ie 40 years after Jesus' "exodus" (cf Luke 9:31) in Jerusalem, we can see the point and the urgency of the author's application of "Today"!

THE PARTICULARS

• Hebrews accepts the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture (7).

• It was not sufficient to "belong" to God's people under Moses – a trust that led to obedience was required; it is not enough to be nominally associated with Christ's Church – a failure to walk in His ways is really unbelief and disqualifies us from heaven!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Is Hebrews teaching "justification by works" here? Explain.

DAY 12

A faith that works

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 4:1-11

THE POINT Our ultimate "Sabbath" rest is heaven, in the presence of God. Because the Passover-Wilderness-Canaan theme is a "picture" of the Christian's redemption-sanctification-glorification, the author of Hebrews can say confidently that the people under Moses "had the gospel preached to them"; it is the message of God's saving grace. Therefore, their failure to enter Canaan is a powerful warning to us not to be too complacent about heaven!

THE PARTICULARS

• This passage is helpful in balancing the tension between faith and obedience: the warning about missing out on Canaan/heaven is centred on faith/believing in verses 2-3a, but

on obedience in verses 6 and 11! Faith unaccompanied by obedience is useless (cf James 2:17), just as obedience without faith is useless (cf 11:6).

• The reality of rest in heaven, to which we can look forward with confidence, is verified by two important facts: God is now resting there after finishing His work of Creation (Genesis 2:2); and Israel's disobedience cost her a reality, not just an illusion (3-5)! It therefore must be a top priority in our thinking (11).

• Psalm 95 shows that Canaan was only ever a "shadow" (7-10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• How does 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 reinforce today's passage?

DAY 13

An “accuser” and an Advocate

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 4:12-16

THE POINT Will anyone be able to plead ignorance on the Day of Judgement concerning the warnings we have been looking at over the last two days? No, says the author of Hebrews. God has presented these things clearly in His Word, a Word that is written in such a way as to leave us without excuse. Lest we despair however, he reminds us of the One who pleads our cause in heaven!

THE PARTICULARS

• The Bible is not a dead old book that has no relevance to 21st Century man (as most who have never read it would claim!). In the Holy Spirit’s hand (cf Eph. 6:17) it is a powerful force that can get to the very heart of our being. There are times when we can’t really understand our own thinking and behav-

our, but even then it can reach down and illuminate our darkness (12).

- We cannot hide anything from God, and one day He will call us to account for every deed, word and thought in our lives (13).
- Jesus knows all this from His own experience: He knows all our struggles and failures; He knows our vulnerability; He knows the pressure of Satan’s attack. But He has won the victory over sin and death and is now our Advocate in heaven: why are we slow to turn to Him in prayer, seeking His mercy and help (14-16)?

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Can the Spirit’s Sword be “living and active” if we don’t read it?

DAY 14

Obedient to death... for us

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 5:1-10

THE POINT Jesus was God’s appointed high priest – of a whole new order.

THE PARTICULARS

• The function of the OT priest was to bring people to God (as it was the function of the prophet to bring God to people, and of the king to represent God among the people). He did this through a very elaborate system of sacrifices/offerings, and especially shedding the blood of animals as a substitute for the sinner. The priest was a sinner too, and so could empathise with the sinners He brought to God – although, like Church leaders in other contexts, Jewish priests too easily forgot this fact (1-3).

• During His earthly life, Jesus, who was not a sinner, identified completely with the suffering of sinful man, in obedience to His Father’s will (7-8). Ironically, this was why He attracted the ire of His priestly counterparts who should have but didn’t!

- It was God alone who appointed the priests (cf 2 Chron. 26:16-18); Psalms 2 and 110 made it clear that Christ was God’s appointed priest – He was not guilty of the sin of Uzziah! (4-6)
- Jesus’ perfect life of obedience earned our salvation. We will learn about the significance of Psalm 110:4 in chapter 7 (8-10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Leadership in the Church is a great honour – to humble service!

DAY 15

Growing in grace?

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 5:11-6:3

THE POINT True spiritual maturity is about living a genuine Christ-like life while growing in knowledge/understanding of the doctrines of the Christian faith. Sadly, like many professing Christians today, the addressees of Hebrews were better at “theory” than at “practice”. The author of this letter wanted to take them beyond the “ABC” – the simple facts of how Christianity was the logical extension and fulfilment of their old Jewish rituals – to the much more difficult and spiritually challenging matter of Melchizedek as the forerunner of Christ. What he will say in chapter 7 will push them beyond the comfort zone of their Jewish pedigree into a much bigger picture of God’s redeeming grace. But is it worth the “risk” to lead them

into this new territory when they are so far behind in living out what they already know? Perhaps not, – hence the “Therefore” of 6:1 – because the challenge (God willing) might actually be a stimulus to more mature godly living!

THE PARTICULARS

- Righteous living is the real sign of spiritual maturity (5:11-14).
- All the things listed in 6:1-2 are Christian beliefs/rituals easily identified with OT teaching (cf 1 Kings 8:47f; Genesis 15:6; Ezekiel 36:25; Numbers 27:18; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 7:9-14; etc).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• What is your spiritual diet? Do others see real growth in you?

DAY 16

No place for complacency

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 6:4-12

THE POINT God wants His children to have assurance of their salvation (cf Isaiah 43:1-7). (I would be upset if my children ever thought I might stop loving them!) But there is a problem: assurance can easily lead to complacency (cf Jesus’ parable in Luke 14:15-24). For this reason God also includes strong warning passages in His Word, and this is one. We cannot lose our salvation (cf John 6:39; 10:27-30; Philippians 1:6), but the situation would be so irretrievable if we did that we need to beware! There is tension here, but successful Christian living – avoiding the 2 errors of doubting God’s promises or treating wilful disobedience lightly – requires us to embrace this tension (cf Philippians 2:12-13). Today’s passage holds this ten-

sion delicately in verses 9-12.

THE PARTICULARS

- Verses 4-5 must refer to born-again believers – Scripture uses these phrases consistently to describe Christians. Although other parts of Scripture assure us that as such they can’t fall away (eg John 10:27-30), the author of Hebrews wants to warn us in the strongest possible terms against disobedience: it is the honour of the Son of God, our Saviour, that is at stake (4-6).
- Good works are the fruit, but not the root, of salvation (7-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Do you work hard at keeping faith and works in proper balance?

DAY 17

We have an anchor

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 6:13-20

THE POINT There is just one more thing the author of Hebrews wants to do before his exposition of Psalm 110:4 concerning Melchizedek and Jesus: he wants to reassure us of the utter trustworthiness of all God's promises – good encouragement after the strong warning.

THE PARTICULARS

• Abraham passed the ultimate test of his faith in being willing to sacrifice Isaac (cf 11:17-19). God's resulting promise to him of countless descendants was absolutely watertight on 2 grounds: it was expressed in the strongest way (Genesis 22:17 translates literally, "blessing I will bless and multiplying I will multiply") by the God who cannot lie; and it was confirmed by

God's oath. There was no way God's promise could fail (13-14, 16-18)!

• God's promises aren't restricted by human timing or ability. Abraham had to wait patiently for Isaac's promised birth, for many years, and even beyond his use-by date, (15; cf 11:11-12).
 • Such proof of God's faithfulness is a great comfort to us as we struggle as aliens in a hostile world. He is our refuge in the storm; we cannot drift loose from His hold on us, keeping us in His presence through Jesus' ministry as our high priest (18-20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Are you trusting Jesus as your firm reliable "anchor" in heaven?

DAY 18

This Melchizedek

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 7:1-10

THE POINT There is a delicate balance in warning the complacent without discouraging the doubtful. Having negotiated that minefield our author is now ready to challenge his Jewish readers to re-think the place of the Levitical priesthood in salvation history. So basic is this whole system to their understanding of the Mosaic Law that he has had to introduce his exposition very carefully. Meet Melchizedek: known only from his brief encounter with Abraham in Genesis 14:18-20, and from the reference to him in Psalm 110:4 – he seems to be quite a forgettable OT figure!

THE PARTICULARS

• From Melchizedek's name and position we discover he is the

king of righteousness and peace, unquestionably a fitting combination for a forerunner of the promised Messiah – could he be He (1-2)?

• Is it possible to conclude from his most irregular failure to have a recorded genealogy that he is in some sense "eternal" (3, 8)?
 • But that's not all! Even the great, original Patriarch Abraham treated him the way all God's people were required to treat the Levitical priests – and Levi himself was taking part in this little bit of devotion by being right there in Abraham's DNA (4-10)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• What is implied here about the divine inspiration of Scripture?

DAY 19

New wine and old wineskins

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 7:11-22

THE POINT Psalm 110 has always been recognised by the Jews as one of the most obviously "Messianic", and verse 4 is pivotal. (It is not surprising that Jesus Himself used this psalm to point to His true Messianic identity – Mark 12:35-37.) The Messiah is going to be an eternal priest – but not related to Aaron and Levi! How can this be?! (Jesus had already mentioned another enigma in Psalm 110 of His being both David's superior [Lord] and his inferior [son] – Mark 12:37.) So Psalm 110 really upsets the apple cart!

THE PARTICULARS

• The declaration of the coming of a new and completely different order of priests in Psalm 110 sounded the death knell for

the old order of Levitical priests; it was only a matter of time before its imperfection and inadequacy became clear and it was pronounced obsolete. But this was unthinkable for devout Jews because if the priesthood went the whole Mosaic Law went too, leaving no basis for a relationship with their God (11-12, 18-19).

• The totality of the break with the past is further seen in the fact that Jesus, our new Melchizedekian priest, isn't even from the tribe of Levi, but from Judah through David, and Melchizedek himself appears from nowhere onto the stage of history (13-17).
 • The final proof of the superiority/perfection of the new order is God's oath (20-22; cf 6:16-17, Psalm 110:4, Genesis 22:16)!

DAY 20

Yes! He meets our need – perfectly

THE PASSAGE

HEBREWS 7:23-28

THE POINT From all that has been pointed out concerning the comparison between the "order of Melchizedek" and the old Levitical order, it should not surprise us that the new order does not require a long succession of priests as the old one did. Jesus has finished salvation's work for us: perfectly, appropriately and eternally.

THE PARTICULARS

• When the priests of the old order died they stayed dead and had to be replaced; the whole system was destined for failure. When Jesus died He conquered death, rose again, and now lives for ever as our high priest in heaven; this system works per-

fectly, giving us full assurance of complete and final salvation (23-25)!

• The Mosaic Law made 2 things clear: the whole rigmarole the priests had to perform was never finished, its repetition being built into the system; secondly, it had to deal with the priest's own personal sin as well. In contrast, Jesus was without sin, so His perfect, never-to-be-repeated, self-sacrifice was just what we needed, restoring our fellowship with God for ever (26-27).
 • There is an inherent weakness in the Mosaic Law's sacrificial system: it involved frail, sinful men at its heart; God's sworn promise of Psalm 110:4 was fulfilled perfectly in Jesus (28).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Do you see Jesus as the "author and perfecter" of your faith?



Across Australia

Anzac honour

The Rev. Stephen de Plater, Principal Air Chaplain and minister at Maitland (NSW) was involved in the commemorative services held to mark the landings in 1915 at Gallipoli. Mr de Plater was given responsibility for the service at Lone Pine which was attended by a large number of people including the Minister for Defence, Dr Brendon Nelson, and the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, Lt. General Ken Gillespie.

Now it's Dr Thomas

The Moderator-General, the Rt. Rev. Bob Thomas, has been presented with a Doctor of Theology by the Pacific International University in recognition of his writing and editing ministry over many years, including service as editor of the *Australian Presbyterian Life*.

Appointments

The Rev. David Brown was inducted as Minister of Pioneers Congregation, Cheltenham (Vic.), on 27 April.

The Rev. Robert C. McKean was inducted into Orange (NSW) on 2 February. The Rev. Dr. Granville Pillar was inducted into Wollongong (NSW) on 19 November. The Rev. Mark Reginald Powell was inducted into Cornerstone (NSW) on 21 November. The Rev. Lyle George Sims has become the Home Mission appointee at Gunnedah (NSW) from 1 February. The Rev. Rex Geoffrey Swavley, minister emeritus, was inducted to Toukley (NSW) on 20 November.

Sydney North Presbytery licensed Matthew James Ham and Peter Graham Tamsett on 19 December. Ken Rathbone was licensed by Sydney Presbytery on 12 December and translated to Central Coast Presbytery to become a graduating

student appointed at Woy Woy from 22 January. Timothy Scott Ravenhall was licensed by Sydney South Presbytery and translated to Wagga Wagga Presbytery on 12 December to become a graduate student appointee at Young. Mark Richard Glanville was licensed by Hawkesbury Presbytery on 12 December to become a graduating student appointed at Tregear.

The Rev. Jim Pearson has resigned from the PCA to take up a ministry position with the Uniting Church.

South to north

Pastor Ian Partridge of St Andrew's Church, Launceston (Tas.) is leading a mission team from Tasmania to help develop the ministry of the Darwin congregation in January. It is hoped that up to 20 people will "go north" to help the most remote Presbyterian congregation in the country. For more details, phone Ian on (03) 6331 5412 or 0439 394 564.

Special outreach

Ed Chandler has begun a year's service in a special outreach ministry associated with the St Andrew's Townsville (Qld) congregation. Mr Chandler had been serving in the Mareeba Charge which the Presbytery of North Queensland resolved to close and include within an extension of the Tablelands (Atherton) Charge.

Brazilians down under

The PCNSW through Ministry & Mission, has cooperated with Presbyterian Mission to the World (USA) to initiate ministry to Brazilians, Portuguese and other Portuguese speaking people here in Australia. The Fernandes family – Wilson, Zelda, Priscila and Will – have already spent two and a half years in the US, planting a still active church among Portuguese speakers from Portugal and Brazil and directed Christian Camps for youth in Brazil. The Presbytery of Sydney South has welcomed Mr Fernandes, an ordained

Presbyterian minister in the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, as Home Missionary to Brazilians and other Portuguese speakers in Sydney. Betesda Presbyterian Church is the first Presbyterian church in NSW for Portuguese speakers. Betesda began with seven people on 2 April 2006. Six months later, it moved from the Fernandes' home to a church site in Kogarah, now serving a church community of 24 people.

Youth conference

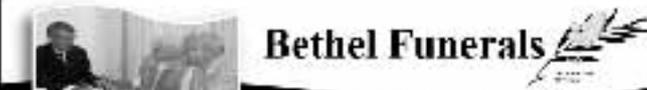
21C – the PCA's young leaders conference – is set to run from 7 to 10 September, the weekend before the general assembly, at Meroo Conference Centre. Paul Sheely from Dubbo church will be the main speaker. Dr Andrew McGowan (principal of the Highland Theological College, Dingwall, Scotland) will also be involved. Visit www.21c.org.au for more information.

Beat the rush

In recent years Presbyterian Youth has had to turn away young people wanting to attend the summer and winter camp programs. This year the camps (June 8 to 11 and December 26 to January 1) will be held at the Stanwell Tops campsite, with some 500 beds – an increase of 130 for winter camp and 230 for summer camp from past sites.

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At summer and winter camp each camper is in a small study group that meets to go through Bible studies related to the Bible talks given in the morning sessions. Indeed these small groups are critical in other aspects of the camp with activities, social events, and orderlies' duties all revolving around these small communities. The **Young Leaders Training and Internship** includes a one-week intensive, residential program held parallel to Summer Camp. It has been running since summer camp 2003 and has had some 59 participants through the program to date.

Ministry from afar

As part of a wider consultation process about distance and intensive modes of education the **Theological Education Committee** of the PCNSW hosted a consultation on 16 February at the **Presbyterian Theological Centre** in Sydney, attended by about 50 people from across the state. The program provided a chance for people to clarify their understanding of how the ordination course of training operates and to consider the advantages and disadvantages of distance and intensive modes of education. Speakers included **Andrew Reid** from **Ridley College** in Melbourne, **Maurie Cropper**, **Mark Adams**, **Gordon Coleman** and **John McClean**.

The TEC subcommittee is now examining the written responses from the consultation. It aims to submit a draft report

to NSW presbyteries and the PTC faculty for comment.

Equipped for ministry

EQUIP days are designed to provide practical support to local churches in NSW. They particularly emphasise equipping all types of church leaders – ministers, elders, leaders of ministries and future leaders within the church. Since 2004, **Presbyterian Youth** in NSW, in partnership with the **Committee for Integration of Leadership Training**, have been involved in running 22 Presbyterian Equip days around NSW, attended by more than 900 people. For more information, contact eQUIP day coordinator Lisa Whitbourn at lisa@pynsw.org.au or on (02) 8567 4700.



Around the World

Students murder teacher

On 21 March 21, **Christianah Oluwasesin**, a teacher at a secondary school in Northern Nigeria was beaten, stoned and burned by Muslim students over claims she desecrated the Koran. According to a *Compass Direct News* report, Oluwasesin was supervising a final examination on Islamic religious knowledge when she collected papers, books

and bags from the all-girls class and in accordance with school procedure and dropped them in front of the class to prevent cheating.

According to another teacher, soon after Oluwasesin dropped the bags in front of the class, one of the girls began to cry. She told her classmates she had a copy of the Koran in her bag, that Oluwasesin touched the bag and by doing so had desecrated the Koran, since she was a Christian. This led to a riot which was joined by Muslim extremists, resulting in Oluwasesin being beaten to death. They brought old mats to where her body was, placed dirt on her corpse and then burned it.

Vale Meredith Kline

On 14 April noted author and teacher Dr Meredith G. Kline passed away in the United States. Born in 1922, Dr Kline was ordained by the **Presbytery of New Jersey of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church** in 1948, and for more than 50 years taught at **Westminster Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**, and **Westminster Theological Seminary** in California. He earned a reputation as an influential theologian and respected scholar, especially in Old Testament studies.

Christian girl, 12, gang-raped

Cheena Masih, 12, went to the local shops near her home in Lahore. On her way she was attacked by four men who knocked her unconscious. Her abductors took Cheena to a factory warehouse, where they raped her, keeping her there for two days and then moving her to a private home.

Cheena's family received no help from the police but managed to find one of the kidnappers. That night Cheena was delivered back to her home, and was taken to

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hospital in a critical condition. The following day police arrested four men at the factory, but have since continued to obstruct the case.

The shameful act of rape is often used by Muslims as a weapon for harming and punishing Christians, and cases like Cheena's are sadly frequent in countries like Pakistan and Egypt, where authorities are reluctant to help them.

Lutheran lashes prosperity gospel

The president of the Lutheran World Federation has urged members to resist US evangelists who preach that following Christianity can bring wealth and success. The Rev. Mark Hanson, who is also presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said Lutherans must challenge what he called a heresy being spread in their countries.

"We are now exporting not only products," Hanson said about the United States, "we are exporting prosperity-gospel preaching evangelists to your countries who are beckoning Lutherans away from their Lutheran churches." He was speaking at an assembly for the 60th anniversary of the Lutheran group, which has 140 member churches in 78 countries, representing more than 66 million Christians.

Kidnapped boy returns

A Christian boy kidnapped in November by Muslims in Sokoto, Nigeria, who intended to convert him to Islam, escaped and has returned to his family home. After four months in captivity, 13-year-old Victor Udo Usen fled from his Muslim captors on 6 March and ran to a shop run by his mother in the Mabera area of Sokoto, capital of the northern state of Sokoto. Esther Udo Usen, Victor's mother, told *Compass* that she was in her shop when Victor came in. "He told me he escaped, and I had to contact his father immediately," she said. "We arranged through a family friend to take him out of the city."

Indonesian 'justice' biased

Justice dispensed in Indonesia's religious conflicts seems to favor Muslims over Christians following relatively light sentences given to three Muslim extremists who beheaded three Christian teenagers in Poso, Central Sulawesi. On 21 March, Judge Udar Siregar sentenced Hasanuddin (who goes by a single name) to 20 years, and Irwanto Irano and Lilik Purnomo to 14 years each, for the murders. On 2 April, less than two weeks after the verdict was handed down, 12

Christians went on trial for the murder of two Muslims. These murders took place during violent protests that followed the September 22, 2006 execution of Fabianus Tibo, Marinus Riwu and Dominggus da Silva – three Catholics whose roles in a 2000 Muslim massacre were far less clear than that of the extremists responsible for the beheadings. *WEA*



On the Agenda

UN protects Islam

By Elizabeth Kendal

On 30 March, the UN Human Rights Council passed a non-binding resolution urging a global prohibition on the public "defamation" of religion, "particularly" (specifically) Islam.

The resolution was presented by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). In 2005 the UN Commission on Human Rights passed the OIC-sponsored resolution entitled "Combating Defamation of

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Religions". According to that resolution the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance was to continue examining the situation of Muslims and Arab peoples in various parts of the world, monitor defamation of Islam, and report back to the commission at its 62nd session (April 2006) and make recommendations to improve the situation.

It was phenomenally convenient that the violent "cartoon intifadas" of February 2006, which erupted some five months after the controversial Danish cartoons were originally published, occurred only weeks before the UNCHR was due to reconsider the OIC's resolution on "Combating Defamation of Religion". You don't have to be too cynical to wonder if the OIC and Arab league sponsored not only the resolution but the cartoon intifadas as well.

On 15 March 2006 the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to replace the discredited UNCHR with a restructured, reformed, new and improved UN Human Rights Council. The OIC resolution was presented to UN Human Rights Council on 30 March 2007. The fact that the Council is supposed to be promoting the protection of

humans and their fundamental rights, not religions, was simply a non-issue with the majority of the council.

The council has no power beyond drawing attention to rights issues, and the non-binding resolution passed by 24 votes to 14, with 9 abstentions.

It would be fair to say that "defamation" as defined by the council in this context seems to mean any negative critique rather than slander or libel. The council expressed deep concern at attempts to identify Islam with terrorism, violence and human rights violations; and "the intensification of the campaign of defamation of religions, and the ethnic and religious profiling of Muslim minorities".

World Evangelical Alliance

Past imperfect

By Adele Horin

Living together before marriage is now so commonplace in Australia that couples such as **Anne Iskandar**, 23, and **Chris Malandris**, 30, are the exception. After a 19-month engagement they will marry in September, and then move in together.

"We've known each other long enough to realise we're happy with each other," said Mr Malandris, a race engine builder. "As for

surprises, we'll take the good with the bad."

New research shows the couple have a better chance of avoiding divorce than do their peers who live together before marriage. And this is about as true today, now that cohabiting is mainstream, as it was 20 years ago when it was confined to an avant-garde.

"A lot of people are surprised to find out living together before you marry increases the risk of marriage breakdown," said **Belinda Hewitt**, of the **University of Queensland**, the author of the study. "They think 'try before you buy' minimises the risk of divorce, that it's a good strategy. It's not really."

The explanation lies in the kind of people who choose to live together in the first place. They are less likely to be religious, or bound by traditional or cultural values. Dr Hewitt said they were likely to be more open to divorce as a way out of a bad marriage.

The broad population who live together appeared to have adopted the views on divorce once held by the avant-garde, Dr Hewitt said. As well, the small proportion of couples who do not live together before marriage are probably drawn from those with strong religious views, and from ethnic-minority communities.

Sydney Morning Herald



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Grief for sin

Sometimes we handle others' failures as badly as our own.

How successfully do you handle the sins of others? Observation suggests that the Christian family too often reacts with either hot indignation or cold indifference, without a proper sense of biblical responsibility.

Sometimes we seem as bad at handling others' failures as we are at overcoming our own. No doubt these two things are related. Yet, given the nature of the gospel, would we not expect that the church should be vastly different from the world on this point?

Scripture gives several principles which should govern our response to the sins of others.

1. Grief. A life has been marred. Christ's name has been shamed. Perhaps others' lives have been invaded by the consequences of sin. Things can never be quite the same again. Hearts will have been hardened, making repentance the more difficult. Knowing this, we will weep with those who weep.

2. Realism. Conversion does not deliver the saints from the presence of sin. We may have died to sin, but sin has not yet died out in us. The regenerate man is only in the process of being healed. Sin dwells in him still, and is deceitful still.

This does not excuse the believer's sin, but it underlines that it is possible for Christians still to sin. Scripture encourages us that there will be no fatalities, but warns us that we can still be critically wounded.

The strong-stomached authors of the Westminster Confession caught this balance when they wrote that "sanctification is throughout in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part, whence ariseth a continual and irrecconcilable war . . . In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome . . ." (XIV;ii,iii)

Such knowledge does not protect us from grief over others' sins, but it does help us to see that a single wound is not the end of the war, and thus preserves us



Sinclair Ferguson

from despair of ourselves or others.

3. Self-examination. We too are frail, we too may fall. Our sins may not have produced the same public consequences as those of our brethren, but may be no less horrible. We may have been spared the combination of sinful desire, the pressure of temptation, and the opportunity



Our sins may not have produced the same public consequences as those of our brethren, but may be no less horrible.

to act that has brought another to fall. Only those who know that they too are "subject to weakness" will be "able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray" (Heb. 5:2).

4. Mutual confession. We are to confess our sins to each other, and to pray for one another (Jas. 5:16). Why? Because mutual confession breaks the grip of Satan over the guilty heart.

Satan's paralyzing stranglehold depends on our acceptance of his winsome lies: 1) no other Christian could have sinned as you did; 2) no other Christian will accept you and love you now, so you must disguise your sin by any means you can. But in mutual confession we discover and overcome his lies, and break the blackmailing grip that Satan has gained over us. It brings us back into the fellowship from which we have withdrawn out of guilt and a fear of discovery.

5. Forgiveness and reconciliation. Those whom Christ welcomes we must welcome. He grants grace and forgiveness in order that there may be amendment of life. We dare not reverse that gospel pat-

tern by demanding rigorous rehabilitation before we extend forgiveness and reconciliation.

6. New discipline. Brothers and sisters who sin are to be restored gently (Gal. 6:1). There is a twofold emphasis here, on discipline and grace. Those who have failed need to drink long and deeply from the fountain of grace, learning again and again that we are not justified by our sanctification but by God's grace. They will need to be protected from Satan's efforts to overwhelm and cripple them with guilt, or to drive them to a sense of despair.

Moreover, they have sinned, as we ourselves have, and together we must help them to remodel and rebuild their Christian lives and testimony. The foundations must be strengthened, the ruins must be reconstructed.

It appears from our Lord's teaching that all this may normally be accomplished informally by fellow Christians, long before it becomes necessary for formal discipline to be inaugurated. Such discipline is for the intractable only (Mt. 18:15-17).

We must never lose sight of the fact that the New Testament church contained one who, after his regeneration, denied Christ with blasphemies. Christ prays for those whom Satan seeks to sift like wheat. He loves them still.

Who knows to what usefulness a brother or sister may be restored by those who have learned how to handle the sins of others as well as their own?

This article was previously published in Eternity Magazine. 

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Clinging to God

Disenchanted Christians are finding new ways of worship.

Virginia Moebus is paraphrasing the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and as she employs the Australian vernacular her language gets a little colourful.

Her account may lack the poetry and majesty of the King James Bible. But the 22 street people in a dingy city basement get the point powerfully.

This rather loose Bible reading from Matthew 26 by the young church worker is part of a weekly gathering in Credo Café run by Urban Seed, a Baptist Church outreach to Melbourne's homeless and drug-addicted city dwellers.

Most of these people would never set foot in church, but they come faithfully to the gathering, followed by the free lunch served every day.

"People see it like their living room, especially if they are on the street. It's somewhere they can come and sit down and be warm and safe," Virginia says.

But it's more than that – it is solace, spiritual comfort, connection. They sing confidently during the service, accompanied by an extremely competent bongo drummer, and talk freely about the Bible reading.

They are part of an extraordinarily diverse and fast-growing Christian movement catering to the multitudes who reject the institutional church but want to follow its founder, Jesus Christ.

They meet in cafes, clubs, homes, halls, parks or galleries. Rather than "church", they may meet as families, students, businesspeople or surfies. They may be affiliated to mainstream churches or they may be entirely independent. Most are small, committed and young.

At the 2004 Anglican general assembly, Sydney Archbishop Peter Jensen spoke about reaching niche groups reluctant to go to church. "There's a group of lawyers who meet every Tuesday evening in a Sydney café for Bible study," he said. "They don't know they're Anglicans yet – we'll tell them when the time comes."

Cheryl Lawrie, Victorian alternative worship project director for the Uniting Church, says that for many people the geography of church is too hard to enter, like an invisible brick wall.



**Barney
Zwartz**

"The church, rightly or wrongly, has quite a bad reputation in the community, partly deserved, of being disconnected, a relic, incomprehensible and unnecessary. People worry that if you go to church they will expect too much of you, they'll want you to convert or get caught up in a secret society you don't want to be part of."

The phenomenon has become important enough for the National Church Life Survey to put a team on to researching it, to "map the landscape," as principal researcher Ruth Powell puts it.

Getting people together to read Scripture and contemplating can only be good for their marriages and the perspective for life.

RICHARD O'BRIEN,
SCOT'S CHURCH

"Innovation is happening in a range of ways, right outside the traditional institutional structure," Sydney-based Dr Powell says. "Many disenfranchised people under 50, the generation that left the churches, say they still want to follow Jesus, and know they still need others to help them, but have to find a new way, new structures. So all sorts of variants are happening under the radar – they are difficult to spot."

At the same time, she says, mainstream churches understand the need to renew and are putting lots of energy and money into exploring new models.

So there are two distinct strands: mainstream churches trying new variations on a theme and a much more radical, iconoclastic reinvention of what it means to be Christian. This second group, a loose post-modern movement aimed at Gen X and Y, is called the emerging church.

In the words of a US leader, Brian McLaren, the emerging church aims to

"go back and get reconnected to Jesus with all of his radical, profound, far-reaching message of the Kingdom of God" without the institutional trappings and without the doctrine.

This part worries mainstream church leaders who fear that people who aren't taught something might believe anything. American theologian Don Carson says Christianity teaches truth. "If you start losing that, you really step outside what Christianity is. The gospel is something to be taught and to be believed. It is not something simply to be experienced."

Les Gray, mission executive officer for the Sydney Anglican church, strongly agrees. The church's ambition is to multiply Bible-based Christian fellowships, even if they are outside church.

"That's happening all over Sydney in different ways. We don't have much data because they are very independent fellowships. The idea is to have people focus on what the bible says about how to be a Christian and live as a Christian without tripping over the barriers many people perceive to be there."

Sydney Anglicans have met in a club, where worshippers had to compete with the roar of people winning at the pokies – what they in turn made of the Anglicans is uncertain. Another group takes over a café every Monday, including the kitchen, and cook each other meals, while there's a weekly barbecue meeting in Glebe.

At Maroubra, Gray says, there is a surfers' fellowship, run by "a young surferie minister with long blond hair and all the bits and pieces that go with it, and a surfboard".

In the Presbyterian heart of Melbourne, Richard O'Brien, CBD minister at Scot's Church, also has Bible-based Christianity at the heart of his ministry. He runs a dozen morning, lunch and evening groups to bring the gospel to city workers and dwellers, church-goers or not.

On Wednesday mornings a small group is working its way through John Bunyan's 17th century classic *Pilgrim's Progress*. "That gives people the hook into their own spiritual growth – it's like theology comes alive," says O'Brien.

There are also several EPTs – executive prayer teams – who meet at lunchtime in offices and boardrooms to study and pray and support each other.

“Up and down Collins Street I’m having the same conversation over and over again. We are all working too long hours and can’t seem to get off the train. Getting people together to read Scripture and contemplating can only be good for their marriages and the perspective for life.”

Contemplation is the way into the spiritual life for scores of small meditation groups, who focus on encountering God in stillness and silence, a tradition that dates back at least to the 4th century desert monks.

One of those groups is a collection of parents of students at a leading Catholic college, who meet on Thursday nights in the chapel. They lay down a purple shawl, with an icon of Jesus, candles and polished rocks, play some music, do some tai chi to relax, listen to a teaching tape, then meditate for 25 minutes. They are utterly still and silent.

Co-ordinator Annabelle Morgan was brought up a strict Catholic before getting interested in Eastern mysticism. “I tried Buddhism and others, but there was something missing, and I found it at home in my own tradition,” she says.

“In the silence, I’ve found the experience of being loved. It’s very experiential – you can’t get the feeling of being loved in your head.”

She was disenchanted with the church – “all the rules that went with being good and bad and the fear and guilt – but underneath she always knew the teachings of Jesus were undeniably true. She meditates twice a day at home as well, reading a short passage from the Bible and sitting with it in silence. Certain words jump out, she says, and she gets an insight into the deeper meaning.

Red Network began as a mainstream Church of Christ congregation, then divided into four groups that met in a café, a gallery and homes. Founder Mark Sayers says they dine together during the week, aim for “more creative” worship on Sundays (making it interactive, using multimedia and different rituals) and pursue social justice. One group helps people in high-rise apartments, others are involved with Sudanese refugees, others with the Micah challenge to “make poverty history”.

Most are under 35, refugees from churches where they didn’t fit, looking for something with a sense of mission. Sayers

says many people are interested in the intersection between Christianity and an “active faith that helps society, especially justice”.

Red Network’s teaching about Christianity is pretty traditional. Sayers suggests that’s generational: where Generation X were rebelling and defining themselves against the church, Generation Y grew up with church being contemporary and are more relaxed, including accepting core teaching.

“Gen X were more cynical and defining against. Y say, ‘hey, we’re here, this is who we are. They are not so angsty; they



Its strength is that it picks up the needs and insights of the people; its weakness is that it is governed by those things.

feel they can change things in society, they are happy to work with mainstream churches. It’s not as ‘them and us’. The big question I get asked all the time is how do I be a young Christian in a hyper-consumer world?”

Cheryl Lawrie is less traditional still. Though a Uniting Church employee, she doesn’t go to church herself: “There’s no home for me there, I don’t connect with it.” This Easter she is mounting a sound-space art installation in the church’s Collins Street head office carpark, looking at the great Easter themes of death, waiting and hope.

“The basement carpark is this great, grungy, dark canvas. It’s transformation art, a lot of it round the theme of ashes. So many people feel alone and like they are the only ones who have questions or worries, and we want to say ‘you’re not’. We hope maybe they will discover a moment of grace.”

All this is a long way from traditional Christianity, but conservative Anglican theologian Peter Adam is surprisingly accepting. He sees it as a reaction to “top-down” leadership, where the hierarchy or the tradition imposes its idea of church.

“It picks up something right in the Christian tradition, that ‘where two or three of you are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you’ (a quote from Matthew 18 in the New

Testament).”

Adam says the strength of the emerging church is that it picks up the needs and insights of the people in it; its weakness is that it is governed by those things.

“Often it’s for people who have been hurt by church. My hesitation is whether it’s enough to sustain people in the long term. It’s like crutches: good when you need them, but when you don’t they slow you down.”

Researcher Ruth Powell says the challenge for the church is not to expect more from the new models than the old. The church has got the message that it’s not connecting with a lot of Australian society; now old and new versions will continue together.

She compares it with Jesus’ advice not to put new wine into old wineskins, or the wineskins burst, costing both wine and skins. Rather, put new wine into new wineskins.

“We are finding other ways of gathering and exploring faith together, and they must be given permission for that. They must be given freedom to fail, to say ‘that didn’t work’.”

If that doesn’t happen, it may be that Australian emerging church leader Alan Hirsch will be proved right when he says: “the church has left the building.”

This article appeared in The Age and Sydney Morning Herald at Easter. Barney Zwartz is religion editor of The Age. 



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No surrender

If homosexuality is a sin, it should not be supported.

Last month, David Palmer argued that a register for same-sex relations could both advance justice and help Christians preserve the distinctiveness of marriage. This month, Peter Barclay disagrees.

The homosexual lobby has made impressive gains in their aim to portray homosexuality as a perfectly acceptable alternative sexual choice. La Trobe University's Sex in Australia study (2003) found that 1.6 per cent of Australian men identify themselves as homosexual and a further 0.9 per cent as bisexual, making a total of 2.5%. It is testimony to the power of the homosexual lobby that they can exert the influence they do with relatively few people. However some of these are in the media and the judiciary who, with the support of left-wing intellectuals, exert a disproportionate influence.

While attempts to introduce same-sex legislation in the Australian Capital Territory that mimics marriage have been vetoed twice by the Commonwealth, some Federal parliamentarians led by Warren Entsch are applying pressure to rectify perceived legislative injustices being visited upon the homosexual community.

In Victoria, the City of Melbourne is in the process of instituting a "Relationships Declaration Register", while indications are that the Bracks Government plans to introduce legislation modelled on the Tasmanian Relationships Act. This legislative activity has presented the evangelical Christian community with some choices.

1. Do we oppose any proposed legislation that gives implicit or explicit recognition of homosexuality?

2. Do we oppose only that portion of the proposed legislation that seeks to mimic marriage?

3. Do we support legislation that allows same-sex couples to make financial and other provision for each other?

The transparent attempt by the ACT government to introduce legislation that, in everything but name, legitimises homosexual marriage has led some to conclude that this is where the main battle needs to be fought. They believe as long as marriage

is not threatened, it is only fair on social justice grounds to allow legislation that removes the financial inequities same-sex couples are said to suffer. The proposed Civil Union legislation in the ACT and the Tasmanian Relationships Act, while notionally not exclusively applying to practising homosexuals, are seen by both the community and the homosexual lobby as giving recognition to same-sex relationships.

Societal recognition of their lifestyle is the main goal of the homosexual lobby.



Societal recognition of their lifestyle, rather than the desire to give legislative permanence to existing same-sex arrangements, is the main goal of the homosexual lobby. The small percentage applying for recognition of their relationships in all areas where pro-homosexual legislation has been passed indicates that legal rights are not being sought by a substantial proportion of the gay community. Only 13 heterosexual and 52 homosexual couples registered their relationship in the first two years in Tasmania. The impermanence of many same-sex relationships is anticipated in the Tasmanian Relationships Act by the requirement that only 90 days must be elapse before the intention to dissolve the union becomes final.

Surveys of men entering same-sex civil unions in Vermont in the United States indicate that 50 per cent of them do not value sexual fidelity. Sexual promiscuity is high among gay men. Good Process, a homosexual group in the ACT, says: "This

group is in favour of any scheme that improves the social and legal status of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex relationships."

Homosexuals see all legislative arrangements which explicitly or implicitly recognise same-sex sexual relationships, as state endorsement of their lifestyle and as a step in breaking down negative community perceptions. They hope that their way of life will be regarded as normal, and as one of several healthy choices that can be made in the area of sexuality. This, they believe, will support practising homosexuals and encourage those tempted to follow suit to succumb. Furthermore, the way will be cleared for the teaching of homosexuality in schools and the enactment of legislation directed against groups that oppose same-sex sexual relationships.

Family First Senator Steve Fielding says: "Just recently we learned that Victorian schools are being advised to dump the words "mother" and "father" in a campaign to promote same-sex parents. The new teachers' manual also says pupils as young as five should act out plays where they have two mothers."

Are we really doing the homosexual community any favours by giving in to their pressure? Promiscuity and STDs are common among homosexuals. Violence, mental illness, suicide, depression and alcoholism are more common in same-sex relationships. One third of child molesters are homosexual or bisexual even though they comprise only 2.5 per cent of the population.

Opposition to homosexuality has existed in all places and times. It is condemned by all the three monotheistic religions and in almost all cultures. The complementary design of our bodies and the creative purpose this serves, is a clear indication of the Creator's intent. The idea that Paul's opposition to homosexuality was actuated by prejudice rather than facts cannot be sustained. He had seen around him the destructive effects of the homosexual life style; as well as the wonderful change Jesus brought to these unhappy individuals.

The giving of legal rights to practising

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homosexuals has become a concern of the Australian Christian Lobby. They advocate this as the simple outworking of the words of Jesus, "Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets" (Mt. 7:12). The logic of the argument seems to be this: Because we have certain rights which marriage gives us, so the homosexuals deserve equivalent rights by virtue of their sexual relationship.

The problem many Christians have with this proposition is this: why should deliberate sin entitle anyone to rights? I would not want anyone to give me rights if I sinned, I would expect to have that sin pointed out, and I would pray for the grace to receive that criticism and repent. That is what I think "Do to others what you would have them do to you" would mean in that context.

Victorian schools are being advised to dump the words "mother" and "father" in a campaign to promote same-sex parents.

Same-sex couples already have the legal ability to make mutual financial and other arrangements. If it requires state recognition of homosexuality to further improve these arrangements, it should be opposed. If we believe that homosexuality is a sin, how can we support attempts to make those caught up in it, comfortable in their lifestyle?

In July 1998 homosexuals called for the banning of advertisements that offered to cure homosexuals. John Derry said, "I think its misguided and its offering false hope, and its damaging to the mental health of people who go through the program."

On 4 February 2000, Dr Robert Spitzer, a psychiatry professor at Columbia University who was a leading figure in overturning the American Psychiatric Association's listing of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973, after studying 22 homosexual cures said he wanted the association to re-examine its decision. According to him, religious conviction motivated nearly all the cures. Spitzer, who is not a Christian, said "highly motivated gay people can change their sexual orientation". I think this is where Christians should be directing their energies.

Dr Peter Barclay is minister of Brighton Presbyterian Church, Melbourne. 

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The life of praise

Christians find freedom in doing good and doing justice.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

Why do Christians bother? Why attempt to think Christianly about issues like euthanasia, pornography or gambling? Or poverty, hunger, or the environment? After all, it feels hard to bother sometimes. The evils in the world are just heart-breaking. We often feel helpless to stop any of them, clueless about where to begin, and hopeless about succeeding.

Even if Christianity does help with some social issues, we're not clear how to persuade an unbelieving world. In any case, most of us avoid the conflict that is inevitably involved.

Christians also fret about whether it is simply a distraction to bother. Some have felt that social concern and involvement detracts from "declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light". Indeed in comparison to the difficulties of social involvement, declaring those praises seems so much clearer, straightforward and *doable*.

But the Bible displays a joyful and easy-going cheerfulness about these matters. It does not share our sense of burden, and displays a seamlessness between declaring praise and caring for others. We see this joy and seamlessness in the biblical theme of doing good. That phrase can turn us off a bit (e.g. "do-gooders"); but in the Bible, to "do good" is a joyful expression of free-

dom. Here are three glimpses.

In a famous letter (Jer. 29:4-11), the prophet urges exiles in Babylon to seek the "welfare" or "peace" or "good" of their foreign city (v7) — which will also create good for the exiles. But they are never to forget their special identity and the special plans God has for them (v11).

When the other apostles accept Paul, they stipulate only that he should remem-

Our response to something as sad as the Murray-Darling drought can be seen as the life of praise at work.



ber to care for the poor — "the very thing I was eager to do," Paul recalls (Gal. 2:10). If we were to wonder "which poor?", he may answer "let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:9-10). Here is a neat balance between the special claim upon us of those who are close, and a genuine, outgoing concern for others further away.

In 1 Peter 2, the life of praise in v9 becomes a life of "good conduct" and uncomplicated cooperation with government (vv12-15). There are deep connections here between praising God, doing good for others, and assisting rulers. Verse 17 is an amazing summary of the people of praise: they "honour all people" (for all are precious to God); they "love the brotherhood" (for those close need special care); they "fear God" (because a relationship with God is central to all we do) and they "honour the emperor" (because even flawed rulers protect our neighbours).

A kind of freedom is also seen in the biblical theme of doing justice. Here is an even briefer glimpse.

Micah asks God's people, "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8). They had developed an unhealthy preoccupation with religious activities, but were forgetting others in need. But walking humbly with God brings kindness and justice with it.

The same theme reappears when Jesus declares "woe to you Pharisees! for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (Lk 11:42; cf. Mt 23:23-24). While His main point is explicitly to attack the folly of their anti-social blind-spots, it is interesting to see the way Jesus explicitly and seamlessly joins "the love of God" to "justice".

Peter Kell, CEO of Anglicare Sydney, quotes Archbishop Howard Mowll's 1947 comment: "As Christians, we are pledged to the service of all those who are hungry, or destitute, or in need; we are pledged to the support of every movement for the removal of injustice and oppression. But we do not conceive these things, good in themselves, to be the whole of evangelism, since we are convinced that the source of the world's sorrow is spiritual and that its healing must be spiritual, through the entry of the risen Christ into every part of the living world."

While we await the Lord's return, we can love our neighbour without losing the centrality of the gospel, pointing to Christ and helping others express the life of praise. We can respond even to difficult issues in praise of the one who creates and redeems the planet and its people.

For example, our response to something as sad as the Murray-Darling drought can be seen as the life of praise at work. Our prayers to God for rain are a form of praise to the God who sustains His world. We praise the One who loves drought-stricken rural neighbours better than we do, and His love for them gradually shapes our concern for them. Our initial attempts at wise uses of water, whether personal or communal, praise

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God for His goodness in giving water at all. Those who praise God need not be driven by fear of thirst or fear of rising prices.

But thinking Christianly about social issues is certainly hard. For Peter Kell, it is complex and difficult “to fully grasp and apply” how both to save the lost and to serve those in need. It is hard to understand the facts and arguments surrounding an issue; and even when we do, our minds can be blinkered in ways that prevent us seeing a gospel-shaped solution to it. Given these difficulties and the others noted above, it may help firstly to know your freedoms:

You are **freed to respond in praise** to God’s goodness. When we praise Jesus for His Lordship, we begin to find how to relate rightly to His world. We don’t earn our way to God and are not slaves to duty. We are those who are finding how to respond in praise to all that is good in creation, and to all that is good in God’s redemption of His world, all as part of one seamless life. (This is why we would never engage in social issues as a *substitute* for knowing and declaring Jesus, as people do when they get fed up with declaring the Lordship of Christ. That is a road to the most terrible slavery, because without the loving Lordship of Jesus over His world, we start to think that changing it is entirely up to us.)

You are **freed to listen and learn** for a while. There may be no problem in simply listening in to other people’s conversations about social ethics, before deciding who and what is right.

You are freed to subvert. The world falls into ways of doing things that have failed to notice gospel-shaped alternatives. We can sometimes be the ones who say “have you thought about doing it another way?” (For example, what might it look like to extend *grace* to prisoners?)

You are **freed to make mistakes.** God forgives people who mean well and fail. This is what Luther meant when he advised an anxious colleague, “Be a sinner and sin boldly; but believe and trust in the grace of God more boldly still.”

Secondly, it may also help to **pick a specialty.** If some of us became “specialists” on an issue, then over time, a variety of specialists in various fields will grow. This concept is helpful in a number of ways.

Specialties affirm the impulses of those Christians who cannot sit idly by while some terrible evil goes unchecked. *Someone’s* impulse to care for their neighbour is almost always worth affirming. Making it their specialty implies that a person can have significant involvement in combating some problem, while retaining their allegiance and praise to Christ.

Specialties stop us from thinking ill of others who do not have the same specialty. No one can be told that they must sign on to some cause in order to be truly Christian. We might see those who nurture family life alongside those who fight greenhouse gases. Some may help drug addicts while others support single moth-

ers. Although each might use friendly persuasion for others to join them, no one can claim that their cause is the cause of the whole church. Even those who disagree about social issues can then worship Jesus together at church.

A “specialty” helps a person become a well-informed agitator for change. The world is too complex for any one person to master every social issue. But over time, each specialist discovers and points to gospel-shaped solutions in their area of specialty.

The apostle Peter looks forward to an unbelieving world seeing our good deeds and eventually glorifying God (1 Peter 2:12). It seems that praise *declared and lived*, cannot help but bring others to praise God too.

Dr Andrew Cameron, lecturer in ethics at Moore College, is director of the Social Issues Executive of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. This paper is intended to assist discussion and may be corrected or revised in future. Short responses to socialissues@moore.edu.au are welcome, but the SIE cannot guarantee a reply. To access this free regular briefing, visit <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/socialissues> and to receive it by email, follow the link <http://your.sydneyanglicans.net/socialissues/1351a/> ap

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prayer

MAY 2007

- 21 Rob and Toni Smith *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Tamborine Mountain, Qld in Germany with Wycliffe Bible Translators involved in education of missionary children.
- 22 Presbytery of Torrens: Adelaide and northern SA – 4 parishes and 4 home mission stations totaling 9 congregations with about 380 c&a (communicants and adherents), 105 yf (younger folk – Sunday School and youth), 1 theological candidate, and 1 licentiate under jurisdiction. Reg Mathews clerk.
- 23 An end to the dreadful violence and destruction in Iraq, Darfur, Palestine and every other area of enmity.
- 24 Revesby parish, southern Sydney with about 75 c&a, 20 yf and 7 e (elders); Peter and Lynette Barnes.
- 25 Darren and Naomi *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Blaxland in South Asia involved in physiotherapy lecturing.
- 26 Students, staff and council of Scots School, Bathurst; Eric Bernard principal.
- 27 Alan and Faye Canavan *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Warburton Vic. Bwana Bwana translators with Wycliffe Bible Translators in PNG.
- 28 The leaders and members of PWA, PWMU and men's organisations in our churches.
- 29 Calvin and Ruth Mathys *mission partners* (APWM) workers also from Warburton Vic. in PNG with Wycliffe Bible Translators involved in aviation and language work.
- 30 St Andrew's Canberra parish including Forrest and Weston Creek with about 625 c&a, 20 yf and 43 e; Joy and Arnold Bartholomew.
- 31 Virginia parish including Banyo, north-

ern Brisbane with about 80 c&a, 25 yf and 5 e; Lindsay and Elizabeth Timms.

JUNE 2007

- 1 Pray for the Interim moderator Stefan Slucki, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Elizabeth parish northern Adelaide with about 40 c&a, 5 yf and 3 e; and for the Largs North home mission station; Raymond Brewer.
- 2 Presbytery of North Queensland: 7 parishes and 4 home mission stations totaling 15 congregations with about 750 c&a and 29 yf, 2 retired ministers and 3 under jurisdiction. Rudi Schwartz clerk.
- 3 Paul and Anthea *mission partners* (APWM) workers from South Yarra in the Middle East with Pioneers involved in nursing and physiotherapy.
- 4 Kangaroo Ground parish Melbourne with about 25 c&a, 5 yf and 3 e; Ivan Barker.
- 5 Andy and Rosemary Williamson *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Sydney with Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu involved in theological education at Talua Ministry centre.
- 6 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Cootamundra parish southern NSW with about 35 c&a, 15 yf and 5 e.
- 7 Jason and Renee Budden *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Dalby, Qld with WEC International involved in work among addicts in Spain.
- 8 Ministry to prisoners and their families and prison officers by chaplains including (in Vic.) George and Min Lee, Ruth Owen, Geoff Spedding, Grant Vayne, Chris Siriweera and Shane Cassidy.
- 9 Sunshine parish western Melbourne with about 50 c&a, 20 yf and 5 e; Cor and Joan Vanderhorn.
- 10 Patients and staff of St Andrew's Hospital, Toowoomba, Qld and all chaplains, visitors and spiritual ministry in all hospitals.

- 11 Graham and Sue Hammond *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Croydon Hills, Melbourne in PNG with Wycliffe Bible Translators.
- 12 St Giles Hurstville parish southern Sydney with about 215 c&a, 80 yf and 9 e; Kevin and Julie Murray, and Hurstville Indonesian parish with about 110 c&a, 25 yf and 5 e; Harrijanto and Sui Jun Han Rusli.
- 13 Presbytery of Sydney South 13 parishes and 2 home mission stations totaling 19 congregations with about 1190 c&a and 390 yf, 1 missionary, 3 mission administrators, 1 cross-cultural mission coordinator, 2 theological candidates, 5 retired ministers and 2 under jurisdiction. Richard Lee clerk.
- 14 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Dungog parish including Clarence Town NSW Hunter Valley with about 135 c&a, 15 yf and 12 e.
- 15 Ricky and Kaylene Manton *mission partners* (APWM) workers in Western Sydney involved in ministry among koorie (indigenous) people.
- 16 Scots parish Geelong West with about 65 c&a, 25 yf and 8 e; David and Tanya Assender.
- 17 Pray that the Lord will turn the hearts of Australians back to Himself and send drought-breaking rains (1 Kings 18:37; James 5:17f).
- 18 Pray that leaders and members in your own and neighboring parishes will increasingly have an outward focus on sharing the Gospel with those who are not yet believers.
- 19 Caboolture parish Qld with about 40 c&a, 20 yf and 3 e; Don and Lillian Kennedy.
- 20 Randwick parish eastern Sydney with about 160 c&a, 40 yf and 15 e; Grant and Sue Thorp; and Randwick Indonesian parish with about 450 c&a, 250 yf and 7 e; Joe and Mavis Mock including Kingsford with about 12 c&a; Johnnie and Ellen Li.

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Books

Christian Guide to Leadership for the Whole Church

Derek Prime
Evangelical Press, 2005.
Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington.

This book is a revision of a much earlier version first published when Prime was just starting his preaching/teaching ministry more than a generation ago. In the large paperback format it is very user-friendly, as are the contents which are very simple, straight forward, time-tested, biblical, wise, helpful and sane.

Prime covers the basic ground of all aspects of leadership within the church very competently, communicating the ethos of a pastor who has probably "seen it all and had to deal with most of it". This book would be of great use to those starting out in Christian leadership as well as those who have served for many years to bring as a constructive corrective to the bad habits in leadership which we are all prone to fall into.

Prime has a very clear syllabus of instruction based on 1 and 2 Timothy included. This book is highly recommended.

Stuart Bonnington is minister of Scot's Kirk, Fremantle, WA.

The Priority of Preaching

John Cheeseman
Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes.

John Cheeseman deals with three issues: Do we need preaching today, the preparation and delivery of a sermon, and the preacher. His advice is eminently sensible and biblical. He argues that each sermon must have one theme. If the preacher has uncovered two themes, then he has enough material for two sermons.

There is much practical advice here, along the lines of J. C. Ryle. Cheeseman urges preachers to preach in a plain and simple style, in short sentences. Indeed, to cite Ryle himself: "Preach as if you were asthmatic." Finally, Cheeseman points to the four essential characteristics of any preacher: sincerity and godliness; fearless-

ness; love; and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.

One cannot say everything on the subject of preaching in 25 pages, but Cheeseman gives it a good try! This is a punchy effort which should stimulate and awaken any preacher of the Word.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

Through the Year with William Still:

A book of Daily Bible Readings

Edited by David C. Searle
Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006
Reviewed by Mignon Goswell

The habit of reading the Bible day by day was one that William Still encouraged his congregation to develop in the very practical way of writing daily notes himself. David Searle has faithfully worked through 50 years of these notes to come up with a year's collection that make up a delightfully attractive and valuable book. The readings in the main follow systematically through the books of the Old and then New Testaments. Each day includes a Bible text which varies in length from one to 20 verses, followed by notes which have been edited from the

original manuscripts.

One can only be in awe at the time commitment made by William Still to produce these notes. Behind it stands the belief that church members are best served by a ministry that focuses on the preaching and teaching of God's Word. This belief is one that ministers and teachers must not lose sight of today.

This is a gift of great worth for those new to the habit of reading the Bible each day and for those who year by year want to try a different method. Within the scope of a year of readings the whole sweep of the biblical message of God's salvation is covered. The excerpts from each bible book are carefully chosen to follow the ebb and flow of our yearly lives. The majesty of Genesis 1 starts our year with renewed vigour and the final glorious words of Revelation end our year and give us new hope for that ahead. These readings act as great bookends to the day by day need for the grace and strength that we crave in our daily lives. The thoughtful addition of readings for special days adds to this helpful text.

Mignon Goswell is the manager of PTC Media at the Presbyterian Theological College in Melbourne.

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Booming blindness

Sorry baby-boomers, one size doesn't fit all.

Five years ago, the motivational lecture was all the go. Every couple of weeks, an American author would come to Australia and tell us all to work harder. We should always “go that extra mile”. We should strive to be “the best we could possibly be”.

Now, suddenly, it's all changed. The anti-motivational speech is the new thing. Every second week, another American author is in town telling us that we should all work less. We should make sure we smell the roses. We should remember that worldly success does not bring happiness.

Why the change? Presumably, it's just another sign of the ageing of the baby boomers – and their continuing ability to turn each of their life stages into a social movement.

First there was the grandly imagined Philosophy of Free Love, when they happened to be randy teenagers; and then the You Can Be Number One ethos, when they were building wealth and privilege. Now, just as the boomers hit their 60s, oh wonder of wonders, it's the Slow Movement.

In each case, a particular life-stage urge is dressed up as universal truth – a guiding principle for all ages and all times.

In the case of the Slow Movement, we are reminded that friendships and family bring more pleasure than anything else. We are told that “on their death bed, nobody said, ‘Wish I had worked harder’.”

This is all good advice – providing you are a well-off baby boomer. Wealthy boomers can afford to relax and smell the roses; they have all the benefits that come from working hard at an earlier stage of life. What's weird is the effort to peddle this philosophy as if it were appropriate to a 25-year-old.

None of this is an argument in favour of the motivational speeches of five years ago. They, too, were full of hypocrisy and baby-boomer idiocy. Audiences, packed into the Sydney Entertainment Centre, would be told that anybody could make a pile of money. The prime example was the speaker himself, who – proof! – had just made a very large pile from ripping off this very audience.

Richard Glover

It was like a magic trick in which you ask for somebody's wallet, steal all their money, and then demand they applaud you for your audacity.

The trouble about both these boomer philosophies – the “work harder” movement and its “slow down” twin – is the one-size-fits-all template.

Exhorting people in general to work harder, or less hard, is as silly as giving diet advice to a mixed group of the anorexic and obese.

Think about all the people you know: there'll be some who should work harder and some who should calm down. Exhorting people in general to work harder, or less hard, is as silly as giving diet advice to a mixed group of the anorexic and obese.

Both philosophies also have a lie at their core. The “work harder” movement proclaims that anybody can do anything, just by wanting it badly enough. Not only is that tosh, it's dangerous tosh. Recognising the role of luck is incredibly important in life – it allows us to forgive ourselves when we fail and to show some humility when we succeed.

The Slow Movement, on the other hand, contends that if we cut down on work, we will naturally focus more on family and friends. That's sometimes true. But there are also plenty of people who have lost focus and determination in their work or study, only to be rewarded with depression and lethargy, followed shortly after by poverty and bafflement.

Sometimes the more you throw yourself at life the more you can achieve – both in your working life and in your relationships. If you want proof, the successful lives of the Slow Movement authors might be a good place to start.

Most of the gurus of the new Slow Movement are incredibly successful people in their 50s and 60s. They worked hard in their younger years. They now have good careers, healthy bank balances and a status that allows them to go anywhere and do anything. They are shining examples of the pleasures that can be achieved by hard work.

The way they now argue against hard work is a little bit hilarious. Even more hilarious is the way they fail to take their own advice.

Does anybody work harder than these guys, these gurus of slow? Flying into town, they'll do a dozen radio interviews before sprinting down to a book-shop signing and then over to a literary lunch – all the time urging the rest of us to slow down. It's a glorious case of “do what I say” rather than “do what I do”.

Meanwhile, all I want is a slice of this self-help business. First you sell many millions of books telling everyone to speed up. And then a few million more telling us all to slow down.

How long can it be before they launch a third assault on the bookshops? Inevitably they'll recommend “the Goldilocks solution – neither too fast, nor too slow, but just right”.

If only I had a better work ethic, I'd type it out right now.

This article first appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald. Richard Glover presents the Drive show on 702 ABC Sydney. 

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